

Thursday, 16 February 2023

Assistant Director, Assets

Damp and Mould in Council Housing Properties

Exempt Information

Not exempt

Purpose

This report provides an update on the Council's review and general approach to dealing with reports of damp and mould in council properties.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. Note the contents of this report
2. Support the purchase and deployment of monitoring equipment where appropriate.

Executive Summary

Following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak in which the Coroner attributed prolonged exposure to severe damp and mould as a cause of death there has been a significant amount of activity in the media, from the Government and from the Regulator for Social Housing focussed on the causes and impact of damp and mould in the home.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (Michael Gove) contacted all social housing landlords setting out the Government's stance on Damp & Mould in properties, the Regulator for Social Housing also made contact with all social housing providers seeking information on the approach taken to understanding and tackling damp & mould and the underlying causes with a very clear position that damp and mould could not simply be written off as 'tenant lifestyle'

In order to formulate our response to the Regulator for Social Housing we completed a desktop review of damp and mould cases reported to us over a period of time, it is fair to say that prior to the recent media attention the volume and frequency of reports have been generally consistent and not significant in numbers. We have previously issued advice leaflets to tenants on how they can help in controlling condensation in their homes, this leaflet has been reviewed and updated.

The Council has always treated reports of damp and mould as repairs in line with the repairs policy, any reports are subject to an inspection and a course of action agreed. In some cases the causes are obvious, such as leaks from pipes or damage to the structure; in these cases the underlying cause is addressed and then the arising damage can be treated. Where there are no immediately obvious causes further investigation will be carried out, often there will be some immediate action taken to deal with any mould that may be present, advice on how to reduce the likelihood of condensation and mould will also be given.

Unfortunately, on reviewing our data in relation to reported incidents of damp and mould there are no immediately obvious patterns in terms of property location or property type and it appears that it is not uncommon to have two identical neighbouring properties where one has reports of damp and mould and the other doesn't. This makes formulating a plan to address particular property types difficult.

Actions taken since contact from Regulator for Social Housing: -

- Review of historic repairs reporting relating to damp & mould.
- Review and re-issue of information leaflet for tenants.
- Repairs staff have received some training from an external contractor on controlling condensation and mould.
- Equans have carried out 'toolbox talks' with operatives to identify and issues in properties and also advise on any issues that may cause or contribute towards condensation so that tenants can be supported.
- New SOR codes have been added to Orchard to specifically capture reports of damp, condensation and mould to make trend analysis simpler.

Planned actions: -

- Formal training for staff on damp, condensation and mould booked for 18th April, HQN will be conducting this training.
- Review of repairs policy to take account of Regulator For Social Housing comments on causes and treatment.
- Purchase of monitoring equipment for use in properties where the causes of an issue aren't immediately obvious.
- Consideration to be given a specific policy setting out the approach to dealing with damp, condensation and mould.

Whilst the Government and Regulator for Social Housing have made it clear that landlords can't simply attribute damp, condensation and the arising mould to 'tenant lifestyle' the undeniable fact of the matter is that there are cases where the way in which a property is occupied can contribute to the build-up of excessive moisture in the air which under certain circumstances can condensate on cold surfaces such as windows, if this condensation is allowed to accumulate it can go on to result in mould growth. The usual advice given where this is thought to be the case is to ensure proper ventilation and heating in the property. Unfortunately, with the increased pressure on household finances many are now struggling to adequately heat their homes and may typically heat just one room in the house; this will almost certainly result in an increase in condensation related issues being reported. Where it is made known to us that tenants are struggling to afford heating their homes this will be reported to the Tenancy Management Team who will seek to identify any support that may be available to the tenant to assist.

Monitoring reported incidents, identifying any trends, early action and early intervention will continue to be important going forward.

Options Considered

This report provides an update on the current position and planned actions. No specific options have been considered at this juncture. The current approach and repairs policy will be applied when issues are reported.

Consideration is to be given to the purchase and use of specific monitoring equipment where it is felt that it would be useful and appropriate to do so.

Resource Implications

The cost of dealing with any issues arising will be met through the housing repairs budget. The cost of purchasing and operating monitoring equipment is negligible and can be met from the housing repairs budget

Legal/Risk Implications Background

There are no new legal or risks arising from this report as dealing with repairs relating to damp, condensation and mould have always been a landlord responsibility.

Given the level of recent exposure on the issue the risk of reputational damage has increased and there is the likelihood that the number of complaints, disrepair claims and Ombudsman Complaints will increase.

The Regulator For Social Housing is likely to be keeping a watching brief on the issue and any failure to respond could risk intervention.

Equalities Implications

None specifically identified from this update report.

Those with existing health problems are more likely to be affected by mould in a property. Those on low incomes are more likely to have difficulties in adequately heating their homes.

Environment and Sustainability Implications (including climate change)

No specific items identified as a result of this update although it should be recognised that by improving the thermal performance and ventilation in properties to address climate change there will be positive benefits in relation to damp, condensation and mould.

Background Information

N/A

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List of Background Papers

N/A

Appendices

Updated condensation leaflet.

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