

Damp and Mould: The big picture

12 - 13 June 2023
A 24 hour Think Tank
at Trafford Hall

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Headline Report from: Damp and Mould: The big picture

On 12 -13 June 2023, representatives from social housing providers, charities, professional bodies, and residents came together to discuss how to tackle damp and mould. The 24-hour Think Tank was undertaken in a spirit of 'mutual inquiry' and amicable exchange of ideas, to share good practice and develop a cross-sector understanding of damp and mould, its impacts, and how it can be tackled holistically.

1. *Setting the scene*

The tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak, from extensive and prolonged exposure to damp and mould that had not been dealt with by the landlord, and numerous other high profile news stories have woken the sector up to the extent of the damp and mould crisis in social housing across the country. In February 2023, the Housing Ombudsmen calculated 160,000 social housing homes were impacted by notable damp and mould, with a further 8000 having damp and mould so severe that they "pose a serious and immediate risk to health"¹.

2. *How did we get here?*

A number of factors have led to the current situation:

Stock condition: The UK has some of the oldest housing stock in Europe, and the second worst performing stock for energy efficiency. A lack of investment in existing homes, and the pressure on organisations to build new homes, means that many social housing properties have had no investment since the Decent

Homes Programme. Existing social homes need to be prioritised for investment, and a national programme like the Decent Homes Programmes needs to be set up. This will help to tackle damp and mould, alongside other disrepair, and energy efficiency measures.

The cost of living crisis: The cost of living crisis has had a serious impact on levels of under heating, and therefore on damp and mould. Residents cannot afford to heat their homes sufficiently, and there are rising numbers of residents requesting that their gas be capped to stop them being charged. The cost of living crisis has forced some residents to take actions that may exacerbate damp and mould, such as turning the heating off because they cannot afford the bills. This is not a 'lifestyle choice,' it is a response to systemic challenges. Social landlords should be mindful of this when engaging with residents, and not blame them for exacerbating damp and mould.

Social landlords also need to communicate the dangers and harms from damp, mould, and cold, and provide more holistic support and advice to residents that are in fuel poverty.

Climate change: More extreme weather in the UK has increased the risk of damp and mould, with wetter hotter summers, and colder winters.

3. Awaab's Law

In reaction to the death of Awaab Ishak and to tackle the damp and mould crisis the government have introduced Awaab's Law as part of the new Social Housing Regulation Bill. Under the new law, social landlords will have to investigate and fix reported health hazards within specific timeframes. The rule will form part of all tenancy agreements so tenants can hold landlords to account by law. A consultation is planned to take place later this year to agree the timescales.

4. The Ombudsman's Response

The Housing Ombudsman have produced a number of recommendations on how damp and mould can better be tackled within the sector. These include:

- Taking a proactive approach to tackling the problem, including seeking out people who don't complain
- Producing information in a clear way in multiple formats
- Treating all residents fairly and avoiding assumptions about people's lives
- Improving record keeping
- Knowing your residents
- Focusing on the fabric of the building and understanding your stock
- Having a dedicated damp and mould strategy
- Empowering staff to have the right skills and knowledge to deal with problems
- Using the complaints process to deal with problems, and use complaints received to identify emerging themes and trends

5. Solutions

There is no single solution to tackling the damp and mould crisis, it is a multifaceted, intensive process that cannot be tackled in a silo. Avoiding damp and mould, and being proactive in your approach, is better than dealing with damp and mould. There are measures that will bring about more efficient, more effective resolutions against damp and mould, and ways to be more proactive in managing damp and mould in the long term.

I. Early treatment of damp and mould

As soon as possible after a damp and mould report is made, a full property survey should take place to identify the type of damp and mould and possible causes.

Where there is black mould in the home, it should be removed as a matter of urgency, as it can be very harmful to people's health, even if it will come back in a short period of time. Mould washes and shield products are not long-term solutions, but they can buy maintenance teams and surveyors time to develop a plan to resolve more deep-rooted problems.

Where damp and mould are the result of a one-off issue, e.g., a leak, this should be rectified as soon as possible. Damp and mould that requires more intensive solutions will require a more proactive case management approach.

II. Buildings first

Social landlords are increasingly moving to a 'building first,' approach when investigating reports of damp and mould. This means that landlords first assume that there is a problem with the building/structure that is causing damp and mould, and check for any structural problems or hazards in the first instance, rather than assuming that the residents' use of the building is the problem. If the building is found to be structurally sound, they will then work with residents to understand how they use their home. This follows on from the Ombudsman's report into Awaab Ishak's death, which is very clear that landlords should not put the blame on resident's lifestyles.

III. Holistic case management

Damp and mould cases should be treated holistically through a case management approach that draws on the expertise of multiple teams, as and when they are needed. Damp and mould cases will always require an element of housing management and resident engagement, even where the cause of damp and mould is fully structural. Tackling damp and mould involves both asset management and housing management.

Some organisations are now recruiting people based on 'soft skills' e.g., communication, personality, and empathy, rather than the technical know-how of dealing with damp and mould, which can be taught.

Having a case manager that will take ownership of the problem, can advocate for the tenant with contractors and technical surveyors, relay information in an accessible way, and keep track of timelines and work, can make a significant difference to how easily a damp and mould problem is resolved.

IV. Monitoring of internal conditions

The 'danger spot' for a house developing damp and mould is where it is 'cold but humid'. There are different types of systems that can monitor the conditions inside a home, and highlight any potential concerns, such as a Switchee or a humidity monitor. These have an upfront cost but can save the landlord money in the longer-term by informing a proactive maintenance approach. They can also be used to identify households that may be in fuel poverty, as the monitoring data will show if the temperature in a home is constantly low, especially in winter, which may indicate that the resident cannot afford to put the heating on. As well as providing information about specific homes at risk, it can help landlords understand if any particular blocks or style of build are more at risk of developing damp and mould.

Monitoring software and devices can be very helpful for social landlords and residents. However, greater monitoring and data collection is likely to lead to an increase in damp and mould related reports that need actioning. Landlords must reserve sufficient resources and teams to respond to reports that are generated by the additional monitoring and data collection. Data collection without action is almost meaningless.

V. Data, data, data

Data is key in tackling damp and mould, with the Housing Ombudsman describing data as a 'silver bullet' against damp and mould. Multiple strands of data need to be collected, compiled, and stored in an accessible way, to ensure that it is available to all relevant parties. Data such as:

- Type, age, and repair/maintenance history of properties, seeking to identify patterns across the stock
- Residents, household make up, any health conditions or vulnerabilities, whether there are children in the home
- Information about damp and mould problems specifically – proportion of home affected by damp and mould, the length of time it has been a problem, type of damp/mould, previous damp and mould treatment
- Conditions in houses, such as the temperature and humidity

VI. 'Find your silence'.

Social landlords need to 'find their silence' and contact the silent majority to understand the true extent of damp and mould in their properties. Some residents may not want to report a problem or may put up with damp and mould when they don't need to. This can be for many reasons, including some residents fearing

what might happen if they do report it, or coming from a culture where making a complaint against someone in authority can have serious consequences. Tenants who have fallen behind on rent may fear being found out and evicted if they come forward reporting a problem. This has become a particular challenge in the cost of living crisis. Landlords need to be proactive, and go out and find where the problems are, rather than simply relying on residents to make reports themselves.

VII. Every visit counts

An 'every visit counts' approach means that any time a staff member has an interaction with a resident inside their home, they perform a check of the home for any signs of damp and mould, or disrepair. Officers and operatives, including contractors, should be trained to pick up and identify damp and mould issues, even if they are not sent to a property for a specific damp and mould issue, and report the problems back through a clear chain of command.

Some organisations are taking a similar response to the safeguarding of children, making it everyone's responsibility to identify problems, and giving staff a duty to report. However, it is important this is carefully managed to ensure a "blame culture" or a culture of mistrust is not created.

Social landlords should also partner with other support agencies working within their areas, such as social services, adult support services and carers, and ask them to let the landlord know about damp and mould issues.

VIII. Assessing priority

Landlords need a clear process and criteria for assessing the priority of different cases. Social landlords need to have good data, be aware of all cases of damp and mould, and be able to assess a case against the agreed criteria.

Criteria and their prioritization should include health vulnerabilities, particularly where they can be exacerbated by damp and mould, e.g., asthma. Listing out the aggravating factors into a scoring matrix will help to determine priority, and help operatives to act quickly, rather than be overwhelmed by cases. Aggravating factors should be sure to include mental health impacts, and the proportion of the home affected by damp and mould. But social landlords should not be too rigid about prioritisation and need to think holistically about each case.

Having robust prioritisation and assessment criteria can be particularly pertinent in cases that are raised in the media. The way a case has been assessed and prioritised should be communicated to the media, so that there is a clearer understanding of why the case hasn't yet been dealt with, explaining plans for how it will be solved, timescales etc.

IX. Engaging with residents

Engagement with residents must be effective, respectful, and empathetic. It must be

both proactive teaching residents about the dangers of damp and mould, how to identify it, and what to do when they spot it; and reactive when a damp and mould case is raised,

One suggestion is that social landlords create a priority needs register, similar to energy providers' priority needs register, so that vulnerable tenants can access additional support and advice and have a priority support line to contact when dealing with damp and mould, or other disrepair issues.

Some social landlords are taking an organisation-wide approach to damp and mould and mandating that all staff take part in damp and mould training so that if an issue is raised, they will be informed and able to help, whether this involves caretakers, resident engagement officers, housing officers, or the Chief Executive.

Tackling damp and mould means working in people's homes, and understanding and being empathetic to the way people live. Where people are involved, situations can be complex and complicated. Data can tell part of the story, but a person-centred approach is needed to get the solution right for the property and for the person living in it. Social landlords need to be realistic about people's use of their home, and not put unrealistic expectations onto residents e.g., advising people to move beds away from walls, which restricts space for other furniture or living area.

Communication around damp and mould needs to involve a range of engagement methods, there is no 'one size fits all' way to communicate. Social landlords need to check that the residents understand the messages they are sending out, that messages are clear and straightforward, and that they aren't using puzzling acronyms or technical jargon. Social landlords may find it useful to engage with a trusted, independent charity to support communication with residents and provide third party advice. This can offer a fresh perspective and can be particularly valuable in reaching out to residents who are less trusting of the landlord.

X. Retrofit is part of the longer-term solution

Retrofit, when done well, contributes to the damp and mould solution, as well as increasing the energy efficiency of buildings. Climate change is a factor in damp and mould: the UK is a cold and wet country generally, but the changing climate mean that we are also facing rising humidity. This is a recipe for damp and mould (Cold + Humid = Damp).

Net zero plans offer an opportunity for retrofit measures that will limit damp and mould, so social landlords should look at their net zero plans with a 'damp and mould lens.'

There are several things that can be done through retrofit which reduce the likelihood of damp and mould occurring:

- Insulation
- Ventilation
- Reducing moisture e.g., in walls and basements, or through windows.

Alongside the physical retrofit, residents need to be educated in the new technology installed to make the most of their retrofitted home, and to avoid problems further down the line. A full handover, with accompanying information sheet, easy to use videos, and other useful information can make a major difference to how well a retrofit project works. Retrofit projects need to be monitored and measured, to understand the full impact of the measures taken.

There is some funding available for retrofit through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, but not enough. Architects like Energy Conscious Design (ECD) can support the social housing sector by explaining to social landlords what 'archetypes' they have within their stock. They can use the template to follow and adapt, without being overwhelmed by the quantity of homes that need retrofitting. The archetype homes can be used as a pilot, to show what is possible on a home of that type, and then the plans can be adapted for wider roll-out based on funding and resources available.

6. The challenge of disrepair claims

The numbers of legal disrepair claims by tenants are growing and pose a significant challenge to social landlords. A housing disrepair claim involves a tenant taking legal action against their landlord for failing to fix disrepair or damage to their home. Some legal firms are knocking on tenant's doors and encouraging them to submit a legal disrepair claim against their landlord. The tenants often end up with very little of the money that is allocated to them following the legal disrepair case, with the legal firm taking a high proportion of the settlement.

Previously, when a legal disrepair case was in process, some landlords would simply stop working on the case. However, good practice now suggests that if a legal disrepair claim is underway, the landlord should continue trying to engage the resident and find an amicable resolution to the problem.

Residents should be made aware of the complaints process, and the potential for being awarded compensation when undertaking a formal complaint, instead of making a disrepair claim. The money received as compensation will often be higher than any remaining settlement from a legal disrepair case after the legal firm has taken their high cut.

7. Competition for skills and resources

A challenge for social landlords is that there is so much competition for skilled operatives and contractors that can deal with damp and mould, particularly technical experts, and surveyors. Social landlords are often competing for the same organisations and contractors. The shortage of skills is causing delays for residents. Damp and mould can be seasonal, with more reports in winter than

summer. This means that social landlords with direct labour teams either have to redeploy their staff or reduce their workforce in the quieter season.

8. Tackling damp and mould alongside other challenges

Housing providers are facing a number of other pressures including fire safety, the climate emergency and the cost of living crisis. Landlords must think creatively and holistically to ensure these problems are not tackled in silos, creating more work further down the line. For example, if work is going on to fix mould problems, this may provide a good opportunity to improve the insulation in a property.

Organisations need to consider the bigger picture to ensure we are not heading towards another housing tragedy.

9. Conclusion

Damp and mould aren't problems that will go away quickly, as the scale of the issue is huge and will take time to get under control. It also will require active, ongoing maintenance.

Social landlords know the solutions and know that they have to get better at applying them, but there is a worry about what will happen in the meantime while things are being brought under control. The sector needs to communicate clearly what it is doing, what it plans to do and share successes and good practice.

With new legislation coming in, it is important that the social housing sector is aware of the dangers of damp and mould becoming a 'tick box exercise' that is target driven, as this will miss the full picture. The sector needs to be outcome driven, not target driven.

It is clear what success in tackling damp and mould looks like: the resident is able to live in a decent, healthy, happy home. We should keep this outcome at the front of our minds, whatever approach we take.

References:

- ¹ <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/notable-damp-and-mould-affects-up-to-160000-social-homes-in-england-says-regulator-80079>

About NCRC:

Since 1995, the National Communities Resource Centre (NCRC) has existed to empower local people to create positive change where they live and beyond. Our Trafford Hall home provides a place for people with different backgrounds to come together as equals and solve problems facing their communities.

There is a seat at our table for everyone, with participants at our events sharing their experiences, learning new skills, and forging connections that help create vital change for communities in stress. We have organised, supported, and hosted many events and workshops run by housing associations, charities, community groups, and public/Government organisations alike.

The work of NCRC also provides essential support to families under pressure, and young people looking to build their confidence, skills and resilience.

About the Housing Plus and Energy Plus Academies

Through our partnership with the London School of Economics, we deliver the Housing Plus and Energy Plus Academies. These are a series of think-tank events designed to tackle some of the key issues affecting low-income communities, like welfare reform, financial pressure, climate change and energy saving. Discussions from these events guide our research, creating briefings that influence high-level stakeholders to drive change.

View our upcoming events [here](#).

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