

Tackling Damp and Mould

Introduction

In November 2022 a coroner's report attributed the tragic death of toddler Awaab Ishak in December 2022 to respiratory problems caused by prolonged exposure to damp and mould in his family's social housing managed by Rochdale Boroughwide Housing. Awaab's family had repeatedly reported problems with damp and mould in their home, dating back to 2017, but their landlord failed to remedy the problems. National attention has since focussed on poor housing conditions relating to damp and mould in both social and privately rented housing.

In October 2021 the Housing Ombudsman issued a Spotlight report on damp and mould. This report provides guidance to social landlords on taking complaints about damp and mould seriously, responding promptly and deplores some landlords' tendency to blame tenant lifestyles for damp and mould.

The Government has announced that it is reviewing Decent Home Standards and the Housing Health and Safety Rating System to focus more attention on damp and mould.

Damp can have a number of causes. These include penetrating damp, where moisture results from a problem such as a broken gutter, rising damp where damp proofing has failed, and condensation. All types of damp are associated with mould growth. Black mould spores can cause or exacerbate a range of health problems, particularly respiratory problems such as asthma.

Condensation occurs when cold, moist air meets a cold surface. Condensation is an inevitable part of domestic living, as daily living activities such as cooking, using the shower and doing laundry all produce moisture. Occupants' breathing also produces moisture, and overcrowding is likely to raise the risk of condensation and mould.

In order to reduce condensation, it is necessary to maintain a background temperature of about 18 degrees, and to ventilate homes. Using lids on pans, ensuring that any tumble driers are externally vented, shutting the kitchen and bathroom doors when cooking and washing and opening windows and/or using ventilation units will all help to reduce condensation and avoid mould growth. Ensuring that there is sufficient air circulation, by keeping furniture away from walls, avoiding cramming a lot of

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furniture/possessions into a room or a lot of clothes into drawers and wardrobes, will also help.

The national cost of living crisis, and in particular the very large increases in utility costs, mean that many tenants are cutting down on their use of heating and turning off electrical ventilation. While this is completely understandable, it creates a dilemma as low temperatures and inadequate ventilation will exacerbate problems with damp and mould.

Stroud District Council Homes

The majority of Stroud's Council homes are older properties. Expected standards of thermal efficiency have increased over these homes' lives. The Council has a programme of asset management, upgrading and retrofit. This includes work to fit external wall insulation, and upgrade doors and windows. We also employ a stock condition surveyor and undertake rolling surveys of the housing stock.

In some cases, a simple mould wash treatment and advice to the tenant about preventing and reducing condensation is effective. However, since damp and mould can have a variety of causes, and more than one may be present, it can take weeks or even months to identify why a tenant is experiencing problems with damp and mould. This often results in frustration, as tenants often expect a rapid resolution. Tenants' anxiety about the health risks from mould have understandably heightened since the coroner's report last November and the subsequent publicity.

Incidence of Damp and Mould

Service and repair requests relating to damp and mould have increased greatly since the publicity surrounding the coroner's report. This is the case with all social landlords. This has increased pressure on staff in property care, asset management and tenancy management. At a time when the cost of living crisis is impacting on tenants' wellbeing it is another trigger which has resulted in increasingly tense and abusive attitudes towards staff.

Between 1 April 2022 and 19 January 2023, we received 11 Stage 1 complaints and 3 Stage complaints relating to damp and mould, comprising 11.5% of all complaints during the period.

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We are proactive - advise, investigate, and invest

All Property Care operatives carry information leaflets about damp and mould which they distribute to tenants. They also actively look out for any problems with damp and mould when attending to undertake routine repairs or servicing work, to help catch problems early and ensure that tenants know what they can do to tackle problems with condensation.

As part of our review of damp and mould policies and procedures (further details below) we intend to provide basic training to all Housing staff who visit tenants' homes to help to identify and tackle damp and mould.

Property Care has invested in remote monitoring equipment, which can monitor a range of indicators including room temperature, moisture levels and whether ventilation equipment is in use. This equipment helps to identify the causes of damp, and what can be done to resolve it. It is necessary to leave the equipment in place over a period of weeks rather than days in order to obtain the necessary information.

In response to Government requirements for social landlords to give additional priority to damp and mould, Housing Services has set up a working group to review our current damp and mould policy and procedures, including additional checks as part of the void process. This group comprises officers from Property Care, Asset Management, Tenancy Management and tenant representatives.

Housing Services will continue to review and upgrade our response to damp and mould, and follow recommendations from central government, the Housing Ombudsman and the Social Housing Regulator. We will continue to prioritise tenants who are more vulnerable to the effects of damp and mould due to ill health, and to follow fair and transparent procedures to respond to requests for repairs and transfers. It is likely that there will be budget pressures, as additional work to tackle damp and mould will involve additional costs.

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