

## **Damp and Mould**

### **1. SUMMARY / INTRODUCTION**

- This briefing sheet is to present an update to our current response to damp and mould within the SDC housing stock and introduce elements of a new policy to go to consultation and be presented to the next Housing Committee in June
- It is proposed that a Working Group comprising officers and tenant representatives is established to lead consultation on a revised damp and mould policy.

### **2. BACKGROUND**

- The Council's previous Damp and Mould Policy was due for review in September 2021.
- In October 2021, the Housing Ombudsman published a Spotlight Report into damp and mould in social housing, entitled It's Not Lifestyle. This was followed in February 2023 by a follow up report. These two reports made a number of recommendations for social landlords, which have been incorporated into drafts updated policy and our initial responses.
- In November 2022, a Coroner's report into the death of Awaab Ishak was published. Awaab was a toddler who died of respiratory disease caused by severe and prolonged exposure to mould in his home. The Ishak family had repeatedly reported damp and mould, but their landlord took little or no action in response.
- This tragic and avoidable death resulted in considerable media coverage and political interest. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has requested information from all local authorities about their actions to identify and tackle damp and mould in homes and has indicated that he intends to revise the Decent Homes Standard, Housing Health and Safety Rating System and impose timescales in which local authorities must respond to complaints of damp and mould in social and privately rented housing.
- A request for information and subsequent request for further information was made from the Regulator of Social Housing to Stroud District Council. Significant points regarding these responses are detailed in this report.

### **3. MAIN POINTS**

- Currently we have made some interim operational changes to strengthen our response to damp and mould cases. This is to ensure that prior to policy change we continue to prioritise our tenants safety while considering updated guidance from the regulator. We aim to formalise these new arrangements within our new policy.
- We currently inspect our properties prior to tenancy termination and use this inspection to identify defects or repairs required to return the property to our lettable homes standard. This process involves the identification of any damp or mould within the property and the scheduling of any works required to resolve the issue. As a standard part of the inspection all tenants are asked about their experience of living in the

property, including if they have had any disrepair issues such as damp and mould so that operatives are able to remedy this prior to relet.

- Within the new policy it is proposed to work to improve this process further by creating a specific damp and mould checklist in addition to the current inspection. This will include a further range of testing including testing the moisture content of walls in all properties, regardless of any apparent damp or mould. We are also proposing to recruit tenant voluntary empty homes inspectors to review and inspect the works being undertaken on our empty homes to provide a different perspective from representative tenants
- When tenants take out a new tenancy with Stroud District Council, they are visited by their housing officer in the first 6 weeks, at 3 months and at 9 months of tenancy or more frequently as required. The aims of these visits are to ensure that the tenant is settling into their tenancy and highlight any concerns or issues early in the tenancy so that they can be swiftly resolved. We have added the topic of damp and mould to the questions asked and requested observations by housing officers. This is to review the prevalence of any early indicators of damp and mould. Should these be observed, these will be reported for further investigation.
- New tenants are provided with advice on condensation within the home which has been recently updated. We highlight the steps that tenants can take to reduce condensation. This updated information is also included on our website for ease of access for our tenants.
- We advise tenants to contact our repairs service if they find that they are having issues with condensation so that further investigations can be undertaken. When our properties are tenanted, we use the skills of our repairs operatives from our in-house repair service to report back any instances of damp and mould that they observe when they conduct repairs or regulatory servicing such as annual gas servicing. We also use the skills of housing officers when they enter a property to speak with a tenant on any matter to report back any early signs of damp and mould.
- Reports back to us regarding early signs of damp and mould are logged and followed up.
- We are currently investing in additional training for our frontline staff to ensure that any staff who visit our properties are upskilled in reporting back cases of damp and mould and are better able to judge the severity of initial cases.
- Reports of damp and mould within a property can be made by either our tenants via our repairs service, or by our staff. We have updated our process so that now when we receive a report, we initially fill out a set of screening questions with attached photographs, which aims to identify the severity, likely cause and any specific building defects. The current proposal is to include this in the new policy with an additional update to include scoring in line with the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) once this has been updated by central government. This may mean a two-stage approach with the initial screening system to be included in the forthcoming policy review and then a separate minor amendment following the modification of the HHSRS.
- Depending on the outcome of the screening, we may give specific advice to tenants regarding the responsibilities of both tenant and landlord. We then schedule an

inspection by our surveyors or repairs team leaders. Our surveyors and team leaders have a variety of tools at their disposal to identify the causes of the damp and mould to ensure that we are dealing with the root cause and not merely the symptoms. Should the initial screening or survey identify a serious issue, this is escalated, and all options are thoroughly considered, including emergency moves.

- During our inspections we review the construction of the building and asset data, and check for defects and deficiencies. Our assessments include using damp meters and humidity monitoring equipment. Where we are unable to find a defect with the building, we can now ensure that we engage with our tenants in using new digital monitoring equipment. This helps us to identify when humidity levels spike and can help us to identify causes where they are not immediately apparent. The use of this new equipment will be considered in the updated policy.
- Should our inspection reveal building defects the report would generate a list of works required and these are booked in with our internal repairs service for repair works or added to current planned programmes as a priority. During this process we assess whether the property is safe to inhabit. We liaise with the tenant, tenancy management, and housing advice team to ensure that a solution can be found for any severe issues. A solution can include temporary alternative accommodation pending the completion of works, or a permanent move if works will take a longer time, to minimise disruption to our tenants as far as reasonably possible.

#### **4. WORKING GROUP AND TENANT INVOLVEMENT**

- As the damp and mould policy affects a wide range of other policies and procedures as well as being an important topic for our tenants, it is proposed to set up a working group.
- It is proposed that the working group comprise of officers from Property Care, Housing, Asset and Housing Advice and tenant representatives.
- The objective of the working group is to review and advise on the creation of the new damp and mould policy. This will be a significant revision of the policy from the existing Damp and Mould policy approved by committee in 2017
- The updated policy will be presented at the June 2023 Housing Committee for Approval