

**Agenda No:**

**Report Title:** Resident Scrutiny Panel – review of damp and mould

**Board:** Town & Country Housing (TCH) Board

**Action:** For discussion & consideration

**Date of Meeting:** Thursday 25 January 2024

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**Presenters:** Valerie George (in person) and Kirsty East (on Teams), resident scrutiny panel members

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**Documents in the Board Pad Reading Room:** Action plan (appendix one)

**Executive Summary**

Following a review of the damp and mould service the resident scrutiny panel have developed 20 service improvement recommendations. These are detailed in section five of this report and in the action plan (appendix one).

**Recommendations**

The Board are kindly requested to consider the findings & recommendations detailed in section four and five of this report and in the action plan (appendix one). The action plan also contains the management response.

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The resident scrutiny panel was established in October 2013 and is designed to fulfil Town & Country Housing's (TCH's) commitment to enable residents to directly influence service provision, as well as exceed the Regulator of Social Housing's regulatory requirements. Since April 2014, the panel has undertaken twelve service reviews of customer services, responsive repairs & maintenance, the void standard, the grounds maintenance service, the money support service, responsive gas services, planned repairs & maintenance, leaseholder & shared owner services, service charges, the 'resident voice' phase one (digital services and service standards) & phase two (staff recruitment, induction & training and resident involvement in procurement), tenancy sustainment and community safety.
- 1.2 In April 2023, the panel commenced a review of the damp and mould service. This was undertaken by resident scrutiny panel members: Natalieann Leadbetter, Paul Evans, Teresa Godden O'Callaghan, Valerie George, Adam Field, Alex Tuckwell, Steven Hill, Kirsty East, Kevin Dodds, Sue Masters and Abdul Kader.

## **2. Rationale & aims**

- 2.1 Following ongoing government and media focus about damp and mould in the social housing sector, the panel were keen to examine TCH's approach and processes. In addition, the cost-of-living crisis, and the impact this continues to have on the ability of residents to heat their homes effectively, thereby potentially exacerbating damp and mould issues.

## **3. Methodology**

- 3.1 The service review was undertaken using a structured process developed during previous reviews. This included a desk top review of evidence and information, followed by a reality check phase culminating in several recommendations for service improvement.
- 3.2 The desk top review phase involved the gathering of relevant evidence and information. This was analysed and considered by the panel over several weeks and included the following:
- A presentation and discussion with Elspeth Brown, Head of Contracts and Compliance and Helen Charles, Assistant Director of Customer Experience
  - An extensive exercise to compare TCH's approach with that of 23 other registered providers and local authorities (including those present at the Tpas National Tenant Conference) to identify good practice
  - Shared information from presentations and discussions at Kent Housing Group and from Four Million Homes webinars
  - Northamptonshire Partnership Homes scrutiny review report.
- 3.3 The activities outlined below were undertaken as part of the reality check phase, it provided an opportunity to clarify and affirm provisional findings resulting from the desk top review phase.
- Complaints data and cases from the preceding six and nine months respectively (after the TCH approach changed – please see 3.4 below)
  - Email survey of residents who had recently used the service

- Focus group/telephone conversations with six of the survey respondents
  - Presentation and discussion with Justin Clarke, Town and Country Housing Repairs (TCHR's) service manager for damp and mould, about upcoming changes to the reporting and monitoring process
  - Mystery shopping of the TCH customer services centre
  - Shadowing with the Head of Development, the Damp and Mould Officer and attendance at a TCHR estate day event in Rusthall
  - Other case studies of residents known to the panel (TCH tenants and tenants of other registered providers)
- 3.4 Following the death of Awaab Ishak, the panel were aware that new guidance issued by the Regulator of Social Housing requires registered providers to adopt a more pro-active approach to tackling damp and mould and desist from blaming lifestyle factors. They wanted to understand the extent of the TCH problem and to test the shift in emphasis. The panel appreciate that additional dedicated damp and mould staff have recently been recruited to deliver the change in approach and to meet the additional workload generated as a result. They also noted that staff 'volunteers' had played an important role in contacting vulnerable and hard-to-reach residents.
- 3.5 Five stage one and five stage two damp and mould complaints were analysed from first report to final resolution to identify any recurring themes. Residents who had recently received a damp and mould intervention were approached on the understanding that any feedback given would be anonymised to evidence overall improvement recommendations.

#### **4. Findings**

- 4.1 The panel welcomed the improved tone and quality of information available to residents about damp and mould. However, they felt that further, ongoing education is needed on causes and prevention, to ensure staff did not insinuate blame, and to ensure that residents do not inadvertently exacerbate issues.
- 4.2 The panel were surprised by the Damp and Mould Officer's large workload (she has since left TCH and been replaced). At first glance, it appeared to be overwhelming. Also the sheer complexity of causes, lengthy investigations and range of resolutions often required. As stated above and assuming enough resources, they would like to see an even greater emphasis on preventative and pro-active solutions that deliver first time fixes and avoid the need for multiple visits.
- 4.3 The email survey responses highlighted the time taken to resolve issues and the frequent discrepancy between TCHR and the resident's perception of a completed job. The panel felt that there should be a future check undertaken by TCHR after completion to properly establish that the problem has not returned. For example, in Autumn and Winter when damp and mould issues are most likely to reoccur.
- 4.4 The focus group revealed that sometimes the remedies offered to residents such as damp and mould washes were not welcome due to the household disruption caused. Therefore the panel would like to see residents better informed about the importance of early interventions and assisted where necessary to enable these to take place.

## 5. Recommendations

### Prevention in homes

- 1) Continue to improve the specification of new builds, like that of Westwood Lodge where an EPC A rating is achieved, to eradicate and minimise future damp and mould issues.
- 2) Ensure that the presence of working extractors and functioning heating systems are checked as part of the stock condition survey or at the void (empty property) stage.
- 3) Could a hygrometer, datalogger or protimeter be issued to every household in the same way as smoke detectors, as these give readings of moisture?
- 4) Ensure residents receive a more thorough 'induction' when moving in, so they are aware how their home works, e.g. where the thermostat is, how to use the boiler and trickle vents, how to report small damp and mould issues as they are found

### Information for tenants/shared owners on prevention and management

- 5) When the condensation, damp and mould policy is reviewed, consider the use of more empathetic language to better reflect the joint responsibility approach.
- 6) Improve written and digital information about the prevention and management of moisture, such as handbooks at sign up, allowing tenants to troubleshoot their issue. Examples include Cadwyn, Echelon, Clarion, Orbit, London Borough of Croydon, aimed at social housing providers. Outline a simple and visual step-by-step process, about 'controlling condensation mould' or treating damp and mould as separate things. Specifically adapt and make available a similar version of the Cadwyn leaflet, explaining moisture generation in pints. Consider that some residents may not be aware that their actions could be causing damp.

Also acknowledge through information that drying clothes indoors may be the only option due to space, lack of outdoor drying space or cultural beliefs. Better articulate landlord responsibilities and accountability. In addition, express recognition that damp and mould can exacerbate ill health.

- 7) Make information available in different formats such as video, audio, easy to read, infographic for general information and self-help, e.g. how to check grout on tiles. Northampton Partnership Homes produce an excellent, animated video. The London Borough of Hackney produce a video with contractors explaining how moisture and mould occur and tips for reducing it. The resident scrutiny panel/other residents could make a similar version about damp and mould or TCHR could be used.
- 8) Ensure similar advice is available for shared owners in the Home User Guide (HUG), on the 'Love Living Homes' (LLH) website or by directing to the TCH website. There appears to only be one line on the TCH website for shared owners, and it is vague. There is currently nothing on the LLH website, whereas other websites contain more information for shared owners and leaseholders. The panel felt that the leasehold management team still need to give advice on how and where to seek help, even if it is down to the resident to resolve. They would be worried if they got a damp and mould issue in their property as they wouldn't know what to do.

## Responding to and resolving issues when they occur

- 9) Consider having damp and mould as an option on the customer services telephone menu to allow TCHR to better prioritise and assign a named person as a point of contact to ensure ownership is taken. From the first conversation, assure residents that a joint approach will be taken to dealing with damp and mould. For instance, a database accessible for any member of staff dealing with a case to record when a resident is satisfied with progress towards a resolution. Consider publishing the damp and mould protocol (stages) so residents know what to expect and when, avoiding unnecessary delays with contractor visits or because of internal system changes, such as the migration from Countrywise Repairs Ltd to TCHR.
- 10) Develop better information gathering about properties (age, layout, insulation, heating type) and household makeup (numbers of occupants, age/health vulnerabilities), possibly within the stock condition survey or via regular census (overall) type mailing. Ensure more accurate record keeping and cross-system information sharing so staff can understand all factors. Consider retrofitting properties where the design does not meet modern needs and expectations (e.g. daily showering).
- 11) The panel are aware that where residents are given no or the wrong information about the type of heating in their home from the outset, this could be a cause for escalation, when and if future damp and mould issues occur. Likewise, ensure that TCHR/other contractors are made aware before they arrive about the type of heating in each home and the number of occupants.
- 12) The panel greatly appreciates that some staff have voluntarily undertaken welfare calls to identify potential damp and mould issues. However, concerns were reported around expectations of the same staff to then deal with issues that arose, which they were not necessarily equipped to do including timewise. The panel are aware that some social housing providers have dedicated teams allowing them to check on all vulnerable tenants even if no damp and mould had been reported, with a follow up in six months after an intervention (London Borough of Croydon) and to clear their backlog of cases in six months (Swindon Borough Council). The panel were concerned that without the staff volunteers, checks on vulnerable tenants may not be as feasible. Reconsider resources and the work needed to identify other vulnerable tenants with unreported issues.
- 13) To facilitate damp and mould interventions, the panel are aware that TCHR sometimes must remove décor such as wallpaper that residents have funded themselves (often at considerable expense). Can TCHR better signpost these residents where they cannot afford a like for like replacement, such as through Dr Peetes charity in the Thanet area or via the Turn2Us website? If feasible, give residents the option of having TCHR replace wall coverings if they may struggle to do this themselves e.g. due to disability.
- 14) Publish the compensation policy on the website for transparency. Can a small panel of staff decide the amounts awarded for consistency? The panel felt there could be room for potential subjectivity when awarding compensation as individual complaint handlers are required to decide what they deem appropriate on a case-by-case basis.
- 15) The panel are aware that in the region of 6-7% of residents can miss appointments, meaning their damp and mould issue cannot be resolved. Can this be improved through better communication and the use of tech for reminders? This could then

mean that resources are directed at other residents who require an urgent intervention. For example, Swindon Borough Council reacts the next day for residents with vulnerabilities and ten days for anyone else, improving overall satisfaction and mitigating the need for legal involvement.

- 16) Publish advice about disrepair (like Beyond Housing) about some solicitors illegally advising residents to not give landlord's access. This could reduce the numbers of missed appointments and help to prevent exploitation.
- 17) Consider changing how damp (including from leaks) is dealt with, with structural problems being ruled out first, e.g. cleaning away damp before re-rendering. Also, ensuring work is completed to a standard which does not create further problems, e.g. leaving gaps for water to get in or sealing moisture in with new windows. Contractors taking more time to find the causes and checking back afterwards that the problem has been resolved. Consider giving financial assistance to help residents with fuel poverty instead of unsuccessful insulation.
- 18) Deliver another resident focus group in 2024 to get feedback from recent users of the damp and mould service. Or consider using another forum such as a coffee morning or a digital chat service to hear about individual experiences and gauge whether residents feel that damp and mould is better viewed as a joint responsibility. The focus group held by the panel presented a mixed picture around perceptions, so would be useful to test this again to check progress. Also consider providing mental health support to residents who continue to have or have experienced long standing damp and mould issues.
- 19) The panel undertook a survey and resident focus group (as mentioned above) and there was still some perception of blame directed towards residents e.g., due to lifestyle factors. Could more discussion about social housing stigma assist with this and can TCHR receive the same annual equality, diversity and inclusion training as TCH?
- 20) In the case of Awaab Ishak, his family were advised to take him to a specific hospital for treatment but instead attended another one due to language and translation issues. The panel would like to see video conferencing employed when using language line (or the equivalent) for translation services as it is easier when face to face to check the recipient's understanding of the message. Given the government and media focus on damp and mould in social housing, how do we report our performance to residents and demonstrate that we are consistently and effectively tackling it?

## **6. Next steps**

- 6.1 Before this report was submitted to Board, it was submitted to the appropriate managers and executive management team for comment. The management response to each of the recommendations is included in the 'management response' column in the accompanying action plan (appendix one).
- 6.2 The panel requests that the Board considers the recommendations & proposed timescales and provides a formal response, detailing the process by which the approved recommendations will be implemented. The resident scrutiny panel constitution states that *'where recommendations are agreed by the Board, an action plan will be developed and implemented by the head of service. He/she will provide the panel with a progress update every six months. Where the Board does not agree*

*with any of the panel's recommendations, the reasons will be explained in their formal response to the panel'.*

- 6.3 The approved recommendations will also be summarised and published on the TCH website to enable residents to understand the impact of the resident scrutiny panel on service improvement.
- 6.4 The panel wish to extend their sincere gratitude to Elspeth Brown and Justin Clarke, for their transparency, openness and positive approach to the scrutiny process.