

To: Housing and Homelessness Panel
Date: 02 March 2023
Report of: Executive Director of Communities and People
Title of Report: Damp and Mould Briefing

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To provide background and update to the status of damp and mould in Council owned and managed housing stock in response to the Panel's request
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing
Corporate Priority:	Deliver more, affordable housing and Supporting Thriving Communities
Policy Framework:	
Recommendation(s): That the Panel resolves to:	
1. Note and comment on the report.	

Overview & Background

1. In November 2022 the Coroner published their report into the tragic death of Awaab Ishak, who died in December 2020 after suffering respiratory failure caused by exposure to damp and mould in his home.
2. As a result the Secretary of State asked for an urgent response from all social housing providers detailing the extent of the issues in their properties and how they were assessing their properties and responding to tenants concerns.
3. Oxford City Council (OCC) responded within the timeframe set out, providing details of damp and mould history and data which was available.
4. Like most Social housing organisation and local authorities OCC had not previously gathered specific data on damp and mould issues, other than via descriptions within reactive jobs via Oxford Direct Services (ODS). From the information available OCC could provide the information being asked but clearly required a new approach and more focused effort directed to damp and mould issues.

5. For many years damp and mould issues have been attended to as reactive works and viewed across the whole social housing sector as a decorative issue. Surveyors have installed bathroom extraction and improved ventilation for condensation related issues, primarily in kitchens and bathrooms.
6. The approach has mainly been about washing down affected areas and redecoration. This has a short term effect of resolving the symptom but rarely resolves the underlying causes of the damp and in turn the mould.
7. A traditional view has also been held that resident behaviour is mainly to blame for the 'lifestyle' causing condensation.
8. In reality there has been a misconception that these are the issue or in fact that there is any one specific cause. In truth there are a number of possible causes of damp and potentially a combination of these in any one property.
9. Whilst condensation is the most common it is generally caused by modern living standards versus the construction design of the property.
10. Modern white goods such as microwaves, fridges and washing machines create condensation. The properties built in an era where people had a different work life pattern and more generally 'aired' homes.
11. Ventilating the home goes a long way to help resolve issues but a balance of warmth and ventilation is required. In the current fuel crisis and cost of living crisis it is notable that more people have closed vents and reduced heating – both of which will give rise to greater risk of damp and mould.
12. Other causes should not however be simply over looked. Breaches of damp proof courses (DPC), cold bridging (where a wall is exposed to colder elements) hygroscopic salts (salt saturated brickwork often shown with white stains which attract moisture) cavity wall breaches and others.
13. The approach to simply wash down mould and redecorate does not resolve the cause of the problem. At times it can be difficult to directly identify the root cause, even for a surveyor; several remedies may be needed before one is successful.

Reporting & Data Knowledge

14. OCC were aware that since 2015 there had been around 7800 reports of damp and mould in 3300 properties. 2000 of these were recurring issues in the same properties. Approximately twenty properties have made more than twelve reports since 2015.
15. An increase in the request for treatments was expected for this winter, even prior to the publicity around the Coroner's report, due to the fuel poverty issues unfolding. There has been a significant increase in reports.
16. A change of strategy was being considered before November 2022 by OCC Property Services and it was noted that better data knowledge was required on OCC housing stock and properties generally. Since December housing services and property services have developed an action plan identifying key actions required to tackle damp and mould and have had regular meetings.
17. OCC have commissioned a stock condition survey to begin in March 2023 and provide better detailed knowledge of condition across the housing portfolio.

18. This stock condition survey will go further than simple component parts such as roof or kitchen condition but will look at all aspects of decency and condition including damp and mould.
19. OCC has also asked ODS to become more proactive in their approach to identifying damp and mould issues whilst visiting properties for other repairs and Housing Services have supported this by writing to tenants asking them to report damp and mould issues. This has been by way of a controlled geographic lettering in order to manage areas according to resource.
20. ODS now have been monitoring damp and mould calls and responding as a priority. The number of calls has significantly risen due to a better reporting by operatives when visiting properties and tenants responding to the letters encouraging them to report issues.

Proactive measures to address issues.

21. Whilst the stock condition survey will assist in the medium and long term planning to resolve the causes of damp and mould, OCC have also taken some more immediate and proactive steps.
22. Work has begun on implementing the strategic action plan which includes some of the following actions
 - a. A team comprising members from tenancy, property services, ODS and the contact centre meet weekly to discuss approach and cases.
 - b. Housing services are engaging in proactive comms with residents.
 - c. Ensuring damp and mould cases are recorded and can be tracked.
 - d. Ensuring all reported cases are attended to with a full survey and works arranged via ODS for resolving the underlying causes and remedy the symptoms (chemical wash down and decoration)
 - e. Commissioning expert damp specialist where causes of damp and mould are not clear and require an experienced expert opinion for diagnosis. This has been made available for ODS to call upon directly as required.
 - f. Improved training to staff and operatives to understand damp and its causes and what to look for and how to identify different types of damp; such as brown mould indicating penetrating damp from leaks or black mould indicating condensation or rising damp
 - g. OCC Area Surveyors being more aware of ventilation and cold remedies when they are involved in complex cases where ODS request assistance.
 - h. OCC's Technical Engineering team are reviewing improved specification of extraction and ventilation units, to ensure OCC are utilising the latest models, both improving performance and reducing running cost for residents.
 - i. The damp team are working with the contact centre to look at their triage tool "Locator +", to see if more detailed scripts will help contact centre staff identify the more urgent cases of damp and mould and be able to assist ODS in deploying their resources more effectively in severe cases.

- j. Property Services through its Area Surveyors are considering monitoring equipment for the most severe cases as an exception, whilst they are being resolved. A wide scale monitoring programme is not being considered as OCC and ODS agree that solutions to the damp causes are better than simply monitoring cases.
23. In the medium and longer term plan, Property Services will include damp issues and resolving (and preventing) in the annual investment major works programmes it is developing and based upon the stock condition survey being undertaken. This will deal with ensuring roofs, windows and brickwork is maintained in good condition and reduces the likelihood of damp occurring.
24. The Property Services Energy & Carbon Management team is also considering damp and specifically condensation issues in their work related to retro-fitting properties in line with Council targets in this area. When retro-fitting properties the property becomes much more insulated and cheaper to heat. This can contribute to damp issues by way of condensation and therefore both the heat source and ventilation need serious consideration as part of the works being undertaken.

Resident engagement

25. Housing Management have been actively lettering residents to encourage reporting of damp and mould issues. This has seen increases in reporting and of jobs being raised for ODS to attend.
26. Housing management also include advice and guidance documents as part of new lettings and the guidance on the council website has been reviewed and updated.
27. Training has been agreed for all tenancy management officers to ensure they can support tenants with managing condensation.
28. The extended training of staff also has enabled better communication with residents and advice on damp and mould issues and whilst not apportioning blame it is possible for residents to actively assist in reducing the risk of damp and mould in their home. Staff are better equipped with training to give simple advice and encourage reporting of cases.
29. The website and newsletters have been updated and provide information for tenants to report and how to get help with damp and mould issues in their homes.

Financial impact

30. There has been an additional funding requirement recognised and an allowance of £250,000 has been confirmed in the budget year 23/24 in response to the proactive approach to damp and mould in homes.
31. ODS have managed existing resources internally by planning works related to decoration programmes to divert them to respond to the increase in damp and mould works.

Conclusion

32. Property Services will continue to work closely with Housing Management, the Contact Centre and ODS to ensure there is a holistic and focused approach to resolving damp and mould with a zero tolerance strategy in relation to responding to cases and preventing the causes.
33. The Major works programme, informed from the stock condition surveys and the works on Energy and Carbon Management will all actively contribute to improving the quality of homes not only in regard to decency but in the prevention and resolving of damp and mould cases.
34. Improved monitoring and reporting by ODS on jobs being attended and their first time fix approach and culture will enable regular reporting and monitoring of this issue.
35. Property Services now included the damp and mould cases within their monthly building compliance report as a compliance, health and safety issue; giving it the attention and consideration equal with all other areas of compliance where there is a health and safety risk.

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Background Papers: None

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