



Your Voice Forum

Mould and Damp

The latest Mears Customer Forum examined the issue of Damp and Mould. We were joined by TPAS and the Housing Ombudsman who have looked at the issue in detail. To support this work Mears surveyed members of the Your Voice online customer community asking them about their experience of Damp and Mould. The results very much mirrored the results from the Housing Ombudsman investigation.

Housing Ombudsman Findings

The Ombudsman representatives shared a summary of the 'Spotlight on Damp and Mould' report they carried out in October 2021 regarding this subject where it showed some figures to help understand the extent of the problem:

- ▶ 3% of the social housing in the UK is affected by damp/mould
- ▶ 12% of the social home in the country were classified as 'non-decent'
- ▶ Effects on Health and wellbeing

Damp and Mould is a very impactful problem for the sector that causes distress, inconvenience and affects people's physical and mental health. And it also causes embarrassment for some people.

The impact on children or people with respiratory illnesses is huge and the longer it is left the worse those conditions will get. 'Fitness for Habitation' legislation determines that a property should be habitable before it is let and should be kept habitable throughout the duration of the tenancy.

National Media Coverage

The issue has been picked up by the media and it is the most common resident complaint, so the report generated a lot of interest from different parties. This included television documentaries which looked at the issue in social housing blocks and led the sector into a period of reflection on how to combat the issue.

The cases featured had not been reported to the Ombudsman which provided further evidence that this is a hidden problem. The report led to 555 responses from residents and landlords telling them about their experiences. All the cases were investigated, and they produced the report findings and recommendations to show 'good practices' mainly to landlords.

A role for landlords

The first issue highlighted by the report was the need to encourage landlords to be more proactive, to actively go out to their own properties to check and examine the state of stock to check whether there is damp and mould and if so to fix it or to take preventative steps. Many times, landlords had missed the opportunity to identify the issue early on and by the time they did it became more difficult to identify the root cause – e.g., an egress from a neighbouring property

Landlords don't have one single policy to tell them how to manage damp and mould, so this causes confusion and late reporting of the problem. It is also clear that landlords should not rely on complaints or reports from tenants who will not have the expertise to recognise the problem in its early stages.

Landlords should proactively engage or survey residents to find out what the extent of the problem.

The report also highlights the way we use our homes. This has changed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and lockdown periods where we have made more use of our homes, which is going to have an impact on risks.

The UK has the oldest housing stock in Europe and many of these properties are not built to modern living standards. For example, residents might have no option other than to dry their clothes in their living room due to lack of access to a tumble dryer or outside space.

This will contribute to the potential existence of damp and mould in the property. Landlords have to work with residents to find a solution rather than to apportion blame. This will enable both parties to find a solution together.

TPAS View

Asking landlords to be proactive instead of reactive to take responsibility rather than inferring blame on residents. Fabric focused instead of resident focused.

TPAS is a non-for-profit and independent organisation that works with landlords' organisations, councils, social housing, tenants and resident across the UK. TPAS is a membership organisation and currently they cover 3,5 million homes across the country. Mears are one of their members.

TPAS works alongside many national organisations including the Housing Ombudsman in the social housing sector not just with members but with a broader public.

TPAS has put together a briefing paper about damp and mould following the Ombudsman's report. This looks at how these issues of mould, damp and condensation should be tackled from the root of the problem and the responsibility of who should be tackling them.

TPAS backs the statement from the Housing Ombudsman when they say that landlords should be more proactive rather than reactive and need to listen more to residents and tenants as first point of contact to solve the issues.

There are some learning opportunities and good practices within this report and also some real cases where we can learn lessons from.

A guide to solving Damp and Mould

- ▶ Avoiding blame (holistic approach) – not just look in the room where the damp is but all other rooms to check where the problem comes from
- ▶ Record keeping – Lots of landlord's struggle with keeping records and its very important to know when works were carried out, etc
- ▶ Timely response needs to be much quicker
- ▶ Missed appointments (or ineffective due to lack of expertise)
- ▶ Appropriately skilled staff – appropriate equipment and skills
- ▶ Minimise missed or ineffective visits
- ▶ Keeping residents informed
- ▶ Clear ownership of case
- ▶ Appropriate remedies



From disrepair claims to resolutions

- ▶ Identifying complex cases which might be more difficult to find a solution, which can lead to residents taking formal action
- ▶ Decanting – considering whether or not a decant will be appropriate. Housing residents in a different property to reduce health effects
- ▶ Encourage residents to use complaints procedures as opposed to legal action (less costly and quicker process, fair)
- ▶ Pre-action protocols exist to enable dialogue between both parties. Resolve the issue before legal action is initiated

From complaints to learning culture: findings and recommendations

- ▶ Establish an empathetic learning culture
- ▶ Complaints are a valuable source of feedback
- ▶ Identify themes, trends, risks and areas of improvement
- ▶ Provide feedback on learning complaints to:
 - ▶ Residents
 - ▶ Boards/councillors senior staff
 - ▶ Staff across organisations
 - ▶ Contractors and third parties
 - ▶ Learn from and benchmark with others
 - ▶ Ombudsman, other landlords and landlord network
- ▶ Use Ombudsman website resources

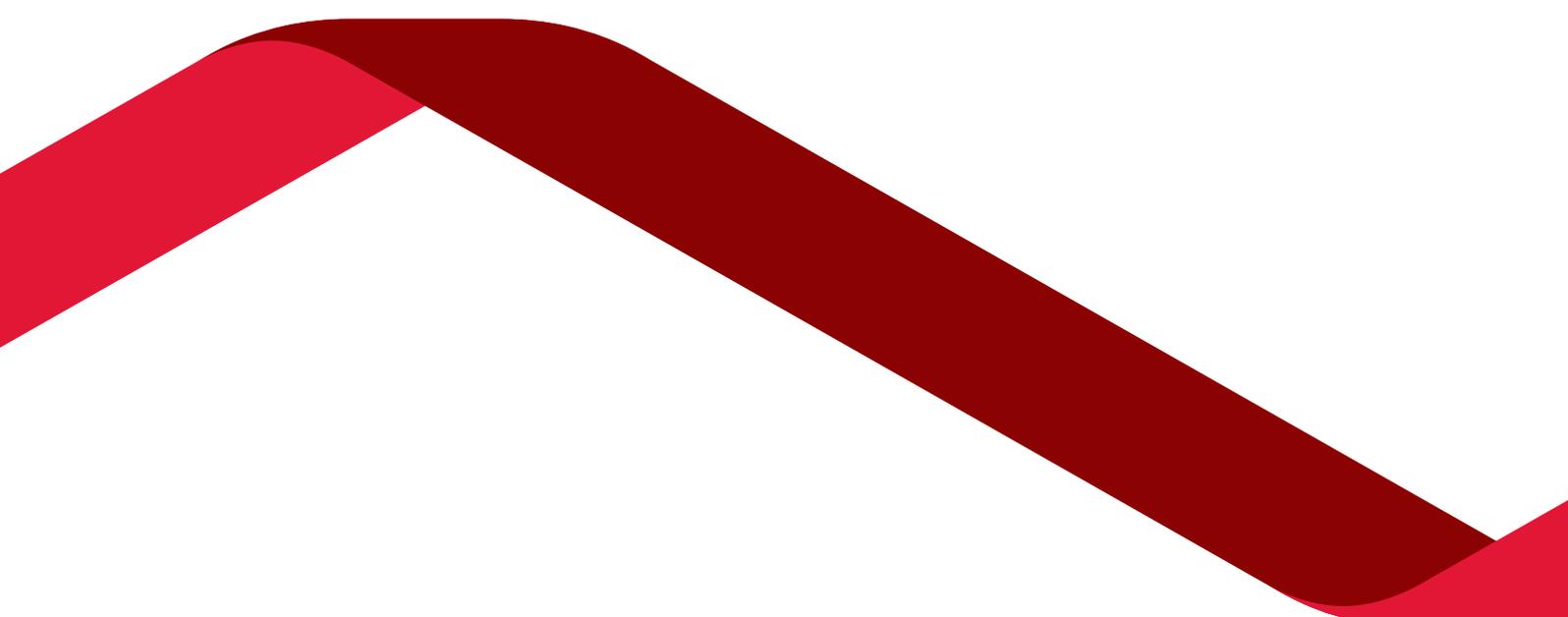


Recommendations/Considerations

All recommendations will be reported to the Mears Scrutiny Board for further action:

- ▶ Mears to review working standards of sub-contractors to ensure that they are operating at the same level as Mears employees
- ▶ Mears will review operating systems to ensure that operatives have a knowledge and understanding about a property beforehand to ensure they know what they might be dealing with and how they can prepare for a repair
- ▶ Mears will look at whether we can provide our employees with a better understanding of previous repairs before they attend a property. This will enable them to get things right first time
- ▶ Mears will undertake an evaluation of our customer processes which enable everyone involved to take ownership. From the person answering the phone in the customer service department to the operative visiting the property to carry out the repair and also the landlord
- ▶ Mears will review how our internal systems link up – for instance the out of hours system and daytime system – to ensure that issues do not get lost
- ▶ Mears will ensure the development of our customer portal supports recommendations on damp and mould contained in this report

Mears will report the response of the Scrutiny Board at the next Forum to ensure these actions are taken.



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