

Tenant Scrutiny Review- Dealing with Damp and Mould



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1. Reason, Scope, and Aims of the Scrutiny Review

1.1 Reason for the review

The team agreed to carry out a review of the Homes First damp and mould process, introduced in November 2022, to establish its effectiveness. The Customer Experience team had also reported an upturn in complaints and negative comments in transactional and perception surveys regarding damp and mould, in recent months.

It was agreed that the scrutiny team would trial a new “boot camp approach.” This approach enabled the team to complete an in-depth review of the service over two whole days, with a break in between the days, rather than by holding regular two-hour meetings over a much longer period of time, which has been the practice to date.

1.2 Scope of the Review

In scope- Review of the Homes First process for dealing with tenants reports of damp mould in their homes. Extracts from the Housing Ombudsman’s follow up “Spotlight on Damp and Mould Feb 2023” report, that relates to the process above, and identifies best practice for dealing with damp and mould, to be considered.

Out of scope- In depth analysis of both Housing Ombudsman’s “Spotlight on Damp and Mould” reports. Other spotlight reports Knowledge and information (KIM) / attitudes respect and rights were also not considered.

1.3 Aims of the Review and Potential Outcomes.

Aims: to look at the procedures for dealing with damp and mould, to review its effectiveness and make recommendations for improvements.

Potential outcomes of the review are:

1. Improved customer satisfaction with the damp and mould process
2. Less complaints of damp and mould.

2. Thanks, and Methodology

2.1 Thanks to Those Involved

This Tenant Scrutiny review has involved the following tenant volunteers:

Peter Noble, Debbie Twitchen, Colin Lockyer and Sue Wells. Many thanks to the team for all of their hard work.

Also, thanks to the following staff members and contractors who have made contributions to the review. Their insight, honesty and co-operation have been greatly appreciated and we hope has led to a mutually beneficial report: Peter Bowley, Jess Kelsey, Marie Cooper, Natalie Killian, Stephen Geer, James Cryor, Kevin Donovan, Katrina Gray, Thomas Fitzgerald, Harry Hillery, Ruth Tahsin.

2.2 Methodology

For every scrutiny review the team looks to identify the services strengths and weaknesses with the service in the following areas:

1. What are the policies and procedures, how are they applied and how effective is the service?
2. Are communications with tenants effective?
3. Have equalities issues been considered?
4. Does the service make best use of resources? (Value for Money)
5. Are staff well trained and supported?
6. Are tenants involved in shaping the service? And do we learn from any feedback they give us?
7. How does the service compare with other landlords?

Prior to the bootcamp

As this review was to be a “boot camp” review Tenant Involvement Staff requested that the service lead provided information to them in advance of the first day of the review, to evidence how the service works and meets criteria 1-8 above. In addition to this information the team also obtained the views of tenants who had experienced damp and mould during the last year via:

- **Customer Journey Mapping-** The Customer Experience staff held interviews with eight tenants- four who had reported damp and mould in the last year, (but who had not made an official complaint) and four tenants who had made complaints about the Damp and Mould service. They went through the various stages of the D & M process, with each tenant to see if the councils had complied with their procedures and to identify where issues of concern may arise.

- Analysis of Accuity transactional and perception surveys When tenants take part in surveys and make a comment about D & M, details are passed to the councils to be investigated/resolved. The Customer Experience team downloaded a report of D & M comments made during the last year. They investigated the first 12 comments made (from a total 32) by looking on CX to see what D & M repairs works had been undertaken and also whether any D & M cases had been entered and updated by surveyors on the CX system.
- A Housing Ombudsman complaint re D & M - redacted report, detailing what happened and recommendations provided.

All of the information was assembled into folders for the scrutiny team to review and provided in advance of day one.

Day one of the review

On day one the scrutiny team:

- Agreed the scope of the review and potential outcomes.
- Had a presentation from Service Leads on current procedure- and Q and A
- Identified all staff/stakeholders who are involved in the process.
- Carried out a desk top review of the information provided in advance of the meeting.
- Identified possible strengths and weaknesses with the service
- Identified follow up questions they would like to ask at staff/contractor interviews and which staff they would like to interview.

In between meetings the TI staff arranged with service leads for interviews to take place on day two with six staff/contractor members. TI staff also collated the questions to be asked and sent out to scrutiny team members in advance of day two.

Day two of the review

On day two the scrutiny team:

- Interviewed Repairs Customer Services Advisor
- Interviewed a Mears Operative
- Interviewed a Mears Supervisor
- Interviewed a Property Services Surveyor
- Interviewed a Repairs Officer
- Interviewed the Service Lead
- Discussed the results of staff interviews and the desk top review and agreed list of recommendations, based on evidence.
- Discussed findings with the service lead, with a view to taking recommendations to the Senior Leadership Team.

Following day two, the TI staff wrote up details of the evidence and recommendations into a draft report for the scrutiny team to approve.

3. Findings and recommendations

<p>1. Policy and Procedures and Effectiveness of Service- findings from desk top review and interviews</p>	<p>Recommendations From Scrutiny Team</p>
<p>There is no Damp and Mould (D & M) policy/strategy in place.</p> <p>The team appreciated that a lot of work had gone into introducing the current procedures for dealing with D & M. As part of their review they looked at a recent council internal audit of D & M and noted that further attempts had been made to improve the service as a result.</p> <p>However, the team still feel that process is too complicated and does not appear to be working effectively. The team feel that there are still too many points of contact where things can go wrong or delays occur e.g. Mears report having to wait, often for some time, for permission to carry out works over £150.</p> <p>Customers report in nearly all of the CJM reports and Accuity feedback frustration at not knowing who to contact, lack of action and problems getting worse over many months causing more damage to their homes.</p>	<p><u>1.1 Policy</u></p> <p>There is no damp and mould policy in place. A short policy or strategy should be written to set out Homes First commitment to dealing with damp and mould in their properties.</p> <p><u>1.2 Procedure and Effectiveness of Service:</u></p> <p>To simplify the procedure. The scrutiny teams preferred option is that CSA’s should request for a surveyor to attend all cases where damp and mould is reported. To save time CSA’s should not ask for photos to be sent in. Mould washes should be arranged if the tenant is concerned about mould spores.</p> <p>Consider employing a specialist surveyor to deal purely with Damp and Mould cases.</p> <p><u>1.3 Surveyor visits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These visits could be combined with an annual inspection, which the team believe will be a compulsory requirement of the new consumer standards. • At the visit, the surveyor to do a basic risk assessment of tenants households circumstances, e.g. v young babies, asthma sufferers, frail and elderly and afford a higher priority for works to be done if necessary. Surveyor to make a note of this when setting up D & M case on CX. • If appropriate, surveyor to give information on preventing damp and mould and give out literature to help with this (see the recommendation 2.1) • When the surveyor identifies what action to take, they should either request works from Mears, (authorising spend over £150 if necessary) or arrange a specialist contractor visit.

Staff also report that with the current process there are often delays such as multiple mould washes and ineffective works carried out, before the surveyor is requested to do an inspection of D and M. Properties can deteriorate in this time, costing more money to put right.

Customers reported in Customer Journey Mapping interviews, in complaints and via Accuity feedback that they are requested to send photos at the initial point of contact, that more photos are taken by contractors and then by surveyors, but at times, no actions are taken. Staff also reported that multiple photos taken by operatives, tenants etc, can confuse the situation and often don't tell an accurate picture.

When reviewing Accuity red flag reports and results of the customer journey mapping interviews. The team were shown details of damp and mould reports entered onto CX by surveyors and historic D & M repairs reports on CX. Most times, where a damp and mould case had been opened on CX by a surveyor, little, if any details had been entered to say what action had been taken, and on occasions cases were closed with no details. In some instances, there were no D & M cases raised on CX, even if a tenant had made several reports of D & M. Because

- Surveyor to note down works agreed and who the customer can contact if they have any queries. (This would be the Repairs Contact Centre for any Mears work and the Surveyors contact details for any specialist works). Customer to be given a copy of agreed action and contact details at the visit. This should remove the need to send out standard letters. Ideally an IT solution should be available to surveyors to enable them to do this on site, or, as an interim measure provide surveyors with a carbon copy notepad.

Following the visit, the Surveyor should open a D and M case on CX saying what action has been taken and, if possible, when works should be completed. Also, if a customer is deemed vulnerable this should be noted. Updates should be added as and when necessary, e.g. if further specialist visits arranged, or works completed.

If it is **not** deemed possible for surveyors to visit every D& M report, CSA's to ask any customer reporting D and M if they have previously reported the issue. If yes, to be referred immediately to a surveyor. Do not ask for photos to be sent in or spend time looking through previous repairs reports. If no refer to Mears for an initial visit.

1.4 If Mears continue to carry out initial visits:

During the visit, if it is obvious a problem is serious, or a member of the household has vulnerabilities to damp and mould (such asthma etc) The Mears Operative should request for a surveyors to visit asap. Do not take photos. The customer should be left with a contact number of whoever is going to organise the Surveyor visit (possibly Mears Supervisor). Surveyor visit to be carried out as 1.3.

If Mears arrange for their own contractors to complete works, Customer to be contacted with a job number, details of works to be undertaken, estimated completion date and a contact number, for queries, within a week of the visit. If the Mears supervisor needs to seek agreement for works costing over £150- a method needs to be introduced to fast track permission, so jobs can be raised within a week of the visit. If Mears need to arrange a surveyor, see above.

of the lack of information staff report having to access multiple systems (MCM, Spreadsheets etc) or search through historic repairs reports on CX, to try to find out what's happening with a case.

When investigating Accuity feedback, there appears to be a number of repairs raised on CX, relating to D&M where jobs were raised for Mears that were either cancelled, without reason being given, or are still open but not done within priority timescales.

The Housing Ombudsman spotlight report states that all reports of damp and mould should consider tenants' individual circumstances. Whilst the CSA's do make efforts to point out of tenants who have issues, such as asthma, etc, it would appear that no additional priority is given to vulnerable tenants by surveyors/Mears when arranging for works to be done.

The procedure states that all cases of D and M reported on CX should be monitored and a follow up call made to the tenant 3 months after the case is closed. Staff reported this is not currently happening.

Tenants reported during CJM interviews and complaints that works carried out by specialists are not always to a good

1.5 Works being carried out.

All open D and M cases on CX, entered by a surveyor, should be monitored regularly and checks made to ensure works (Mears or specialist works) have been carried out within the priority timescale. If works have been classified as Priority 3 or 4 need to ensure they do not get put into the list of repairs that are being held back because of funding issues. If repairs are not carried out the reasons should be investigated further, necessary steps taken and CX updated. If there are unavoidable delays to works e.g. because of leaseholder consultation etc, this must be noted on CX, and the customer advised what's happening.

If any contractor cannot make an appointment for any reason, they should contact the tenant direct to re-arrange.

Any staff member accessing CX damp and mould cases should be able to see a timeline of what's happening without the need to access other systems.

Cases should only be closed when works have been completed. If several attempts have been made to contact the customer, but no contact made, a letter should be sent, with details of who to contact before closing the case.

1.6 Monitoring

Follow up calls are not being done 3 months after the case is closed. The team felt that this is impractical anyway, as often damp and mould reappears in colder weather some months after the work has taken place. A better approach may be to contact the tenant when closing a case to say please re-contact us should the problem recur.

A Method to monitor a proportion of specialist works carried out should be put in place.

<p>standard. E.g. contractor supposed to remove and replace cavity wall insulation, they just pumped in new insulation on top of existing damp insulation. Team was advised that one specialist contractor Envirovent is not being used by some surveyors as works have been a poor standard, or they haven't turned up to jobs.</p>	<p>If a contractor is not performing well a system should be put in place to ensure they are removed as a contractor, and all surveyors made aware.</p>
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<p>2. Communication with tenants- Findings from DTR and interviews</p>	<p>Recommendations</p>
<p>The team were shown two different leaflets that can be given to tenants to try to help them to prevent damp and mould occurring and giving advice on how to deal with minor problems. The team felt that both leaflets were not fit for purpose were extremely complicated, and neither was a "Homes First" branded leaflet.</p> <p>Staff reported that they are unsure what they can/cannot say in relation to advising tenants about dealing with D & M which is caused by condensation. They don't want to "blame" tenants but there is a need to offer clear advice and support.</p> <p>The team reviewed a "standard letter" that should be sent out to advise tenants of any works agreed.</p>	<p>2.1 Produce a simplified Homes First leaflet using infographics, to give basic advice on the main things tenants can do to prevent or treat D and M caused by condensation. Tenants on the Homes First Communications Panel to be consulted before printing.</p> <p>2.2 Consider producing a short video on the same theme above, to be linked to the website.</p> <p>2.3 The standard letter given, included a paragraph about dealing with moisture. If standard letters are to continue, remove this paragraph as it implies that condensation is the cause of the damp issue, which in many situations will not be the case.</p>

3. Equalities- Findings from DTR and interviews	Recommendations
<p>As mentioned earlier in the report, individual circumstances are not currently considered. By asking the Surveyor/Mears to afford additional priority to tenants who are vulnerable to D & M this should be addressed.</p>	<p>See recommendation 1- relating to additional priority for vulnerable tenants</p>

4. Value for Money- Findings from DTR and interviews	Recommendations
<p>No information was provided regarding how the council seeks to ensure that service provides good value for money. Current approach seems to be to try lots of low-cost quick fixes rather than investigate properly and resolve effectively. Not good VFM</p> <p>CJM, acuity reports, feedback from tenants and comments from staff at interviews, showed the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In many cases mould washes are carried out multiple times, at a cost to the council, before the issues are eventually investigated/resolved. • On occasions basic tasks such as blocked gutters/drains have not 	<p>4.1 Consider providing vouchers to tenants to enable them to purchase their own effective damp and mould solution, to carry out ongoing mould washes.</p> <p>4.2 Introduce regular guttering clearance, targeted at properties that are prone to blocked gutters.</p> <p>4.3 Advertise to tenants to contact the council if their gutters are blocked. Mears now have an effective way of clearing gutters and can do this on request.</p> <p>4.4 Consider using money held in the Major Repairs Reserve (LDC only) to do a blitz on outstanding D & M works for worst affected properties, or those likely to deteriorate if works not completed.</p> <p>4.5 When planning which properties to include in the next application for retrofitting homes to improve energy efficiency, consider including properties with moderate or severe D & M</p>

<p>been dealt with for many months this has led to serious problems happening, which are far more expensive to resolve.</p> <p>The data report provided to the team showed 250 moderate cases of damp and mould being investigated and 16 severe cases. The team were concerned at the high amount of cases on file and that investment should be made immediately as the properties will deteriorate further and potentially cost far more to the HRA to repair.</p>	
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<p>5. Staff training and support- Findings from DTR and interviews</p>	<p>Recommendations</p>
<p>The team were pleased to learn that CSA's their supervisors and leaders were situated within one office space, so able to receive on-site training and support.</p> <p>Staff reported receiving adequate training to enable them to assist with damp and mould enquiries. Service leads reported that steps are in place to ensure that training is ongoing and updated as new methods for dealing with D & M put in place. There was a recognition from service leads that this training needs to be ongoing.</p>	<p>None</p>

<p>6. Learning from tenants’ feedback and tenant involvement in shaping the D & M service- Findings from DTR and interviews.</p>	<p>Recommendations</p>
<p>The team were advised that quarterly data on current D & M cases is supplied to EHL Board.</p> <p>Currently transactional survey information provided by Acuity is not analysed to see if there are any common D & M themes emerging to identify potential areas of concern.</p>	<p>6.1 To supply details on ongoing D & M cases to TOLD and Residents Voice or TSIP for their quarterly meetings.</p> <p>6.2 To devise a method to monitor Acuity feedback and complaints about damp and mould to identify where the service may be failing and take steps to address the issues.</p>
<p>7. Learning from other Housing Providers- Findings from DTR and interviews</p>	<p>Recommendations</p>
<p>The team reviewed an extract of the Housing Ombudsman’s “Spotlight on dealing with damp and mould.</p>	<p>The full Housing Ombudsman reports- “Spotlight on Damp and Mould” and the one year on follow up report were not considered as part of this review. A full gap analyses against both Spotlight reports should be undertaken by the Health and Safety sub group”</p>

4 Next Steps and lessons learnt

4.1 Next steps

Steps to be taken	When	Who
Submit report to SLT. Agree with Service Lead which recommendations to go into a Service Improvement Plan and who will deal. Scrutiny team member to attend.	July/August 2024	Ruth T/member of scrutiny/Service Lead
Draft Service Improvement Plan and send with final Scrutiny report to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scrutiny team • All staff with Actions in the Service Improvement Plan • All staff involved in the review. • Relevant councillors. 	September 2024	Ruth T/Service lead
SLT to report back to TOLD/Residents Voice or TSIP progress of actions in the Service Improvement Plan every 3 months until completed. This could be via the newly established Consumer Standard subgroup.	3 monthly	SLT/Consumer standard subgroup
Publicise the report and SIP via <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenants Voice/Open House • Website/Facebook 	October 2024	Ruth T

4.2 Lessons Learnt

- The team all felt that the boot camp approach had been successful and are keen to continue this method for future reviews, as long as the subject matter is concise and lends itself to this approach.
- Ensuring all attendees come in person was also greatly beneficial to the process.

5. Glossary of terms

CJM - Customer Journey Mapping

CSA's - Customer Service Advisors

CX - the councils database, containing information on all tenants' properties, housing repairs etc

SIP - Service Improvement Plan

D & M - Damp and Mould

DTR - Desk Top Review- Scrutiny team reviewing all paperwork provided by the councils

EHL - Eastbourne Homes Ltd

Homes First - LDC and EHL housing service is called "Homes First"

LDC - Lewes District Council

MCM - Mears repairs database

Mears - The councils' current day to day repairs contractor.

Residents Voice - tenant and EHL staff group discussing strategic EHL housing issues.

SLT - Senior Leadership Team- all service leads within Homes First

Tenants Open Voice/Open House - tenant newsletters for LDC and EHL

TOLD - Tenants Organisation of Lewes District- tenant and LDC staff group discussing strategic LDC housing issues.

TSIP - Tenant Services Improvement Panel – New tenant/staff group being introduced to consult with tenants across Lewes district and Eastbourne on potential service improvements arising from the new Consumer Standards and other less strategic tenant issues.