

## **1. Why we chose the area of damp and mould**

The Independent Housing Ombudsman (IHO) Report on Damp and Mould was published in October 2021 and made 26 recommendations for landlords to consider.

Whilst undertaking our review, we were shocked and saddened that a Coroner's inquest concluded that the tragic death of two year old Awaab Ishak was a result of prolonged exposure to mould in his family's social housing property.

Since the inquest we have noted that more cases are being published regarding long term issues of damp and mould and that there has been a lack of action from some landlords on these cases. This has focused our review on how effective Stockport Homes (SHG) are in responding to reports of damp and mould from customers.

Whilst our review has focused on the customer experience of reporting damp and mould; we note that SHG has delivered large scale capital investment for customers to make their homes warmer and more economical to heat. As a result, a high percentage of the housing stock (96%) has an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of C or above. Plans are in place for future capital programmes so that 100% of the housing stock has a minimum EPC rating of C by December 2025.

## **2. Scope of the review**

Considering the IHO'S recommendations and following a briefing from staff on the service we identified the following scope for our review.

- The quality of information available to customers on damp and mould
- How effective SHG are in responding to reports of damp and mould.

In particular we felt the scope above would take in to account the following recommendations from the Ombudsman.

*'8. Together with residents, landlords should review the information, materials and support provided to residents to ensure that these strike the right tone and are effective in helping residents to avoid damp and mould in their properties.*

*11. Landlords should review, alongside residents, their initial response to reports of damp and mould to ensure they avoid automatically apportioning blame or using language that leaves residents feeling blamed.*

*17. Landlords should ensure that they clearly and regularly communicate with their residents regarding actions taken or otherwise to resolve reports of damp and mould. Landlords should review and update any associated processes and policies accordingly.'*

## **3. Our approach to the review**

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We focused our review on the customer journey of reporting issues relating to damp and mould. To understand how customers use the service we:

- Received a briefing from staff on how the service is delivered
- Assessed the communications customers receive when they report issues
- Analysed data relating to the number and resolution of damp and mould reports
- Reviewed information that is available on the website
- Conducted a survey with customers who have reported an issue in the last twelve months

Our findings underpin our judgements and recommendations detailed below.

## 4. Overview of CSP findings

We have found that customers can easily report issues relating to damp and mould and that there is a clear process in place for responding to initial reports. A range of services are in place to respond to reports of damp, condensation and mould and additional support is provided to customers where required. We have found that improvements are required regarding communication processes with customers whilst actions are undertaken. Responses to our survey indicate that customers are not always clear that their issue has been classed as resolved.

### 4.1 Customer Survey

We were surprised at the level of the response to our customer survey. During our review we sent a survey to 288 customers who had reported issues of damp and mould in the last 12 months. We received 46 responses which is a 16% return rate. We were concerned about some of the responses on the survey and we passed these immediately for SHG to consider. This resulted in all 288 customers being contacted by SHG to encourage them to arrange an inspection if their issue was still unresolved.

## 5. Our Findings

Our findings are detailed below in relation to our scope.

### 5.1 Quality of information available to customers on damp and mould

We reviewed the website and customer leaflet on mould and condensation.

#### 5.1.1 Strengths

The information on the 'mould and condensation' webpage is clear and useful.

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We note that a new leaflet and video are being developed to enhance the information available to customers. We welcome this and we have provided feedback on the proposed leaflet.

## 5.1.2 Areas for improvement

The webpage on mould and condensation does not encourage customers to contact SHG if their mould problem persists and / or they need further support and advice.

There is no information regarding damp on the website or in the customer leaflet. Customers cannot access any information relating to this issue.

## 5.1.3 Recommendations

1. Review and update the webpage and ensure that it is clear that customers should contact SHG if they have a persistent problem. We would like to see what you propose to put on the webpage before its published.
2. Include information on damp in customer communications (website, videos, leaflet etc) and advise tenants on what to do if they have a problem. We would like to see the information updates before you publish them.

## 5.2 Effectiveness of the SHG response to reports of damp and mould

We considered how SHG responds to customer issues relating to damp and mould. We considered how customers are communicated with, what information they are provided with and actions that are taken. We asked 288 customers to complete a survey on their experiences and we received 46 responses.

### 5.2.1 Strengths

One Number provide an easily accessible first point of contact for issues relating to damp and mould. Using a script, the team determine whether an inspection or condensation kit is required. This ensures a consistent approach at the first point of contact and customers know what to expect after their initial report (an inspection or a kit).

Whilst completing property inspections, surveyors are trained to identify additional customer needs that are not property related. Surveyors have received safeguarding and customer care training, which enables them to identify support needs such as housing, money or debt matters and to make referrals to relevant teams. This enables customers to receive support such as energy grant payments or rehousing.

Staff are trained on how to respond to reports of damp and mould. Surveyors have received advanced training which enables them to identify root causes and to specify what action is required. An external audit in August 22 examined 25 cases of

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reported dampness and found that all cases had been actioned. This ensures that customers receive action to their reported issue.

SHG customers receive a range of services that are beyond statutory obligations with regard to damp and mould. These include improving ventilation and installing mechanical fans where they do not currently exist or, installing full house ventilation systems where required and treating mould and sterilising affected surfaces. Improving ventilation within void properties is part of the lettable standard.

Few formal complaints are received from customers with regard to damp, mould and condensation. From April 2021 to March 2022 eight complaints were received and all were resolved at Stage 1. SHG use complaint information to consider how services can be improved for customers.

### 5.2.2 Areas for improvement

Customers who receive a condensation kit<sup>1</sup> do not receive an accompanying letter explaining how the customer should use the kit. The hygrometer that is provided has instructions in the box which are difficult to read due to the small font. Customers are verbally advised by SHG to make contact after six weeks if the issue is not resolved. As this is not confirmed in writing, customers may be unsure of how to use the kit and when to contact SHG if their issue is not resolved.

SHG do not contact customers who have received the condensation kit to see if it has resolved their issue. Our survey showed that 96% of customers did not think that the hygrometer helped to resolve their issue. By not contacting customers who have received the kit, SHG do not know if they can class the issue as resolved and no feedback is received on the usefulness of the kit.

If redecoration is required as a result of damp and mould treatments and / or repairs, customers are not offered assistance with this.

SHG do not confirm with the customer that SHG have classed their damp and mould issue as resolved. From the 46 responses we received to our survey, 42 (91%) customers felt that their issues were not resolved. Customers may not be aware that from SHG's perspective their issue is classed as resolved, and no further action will be taken.

The service does not collect feedback information specifically on how cases of damp and mould have been dealt with. Customers do complete the repairs satisfaction survey if work is undertaken, but the repairs satisfaction survey does not identify if it relates to damp and mould issues. As a result, the service has no feedback on the effectiveness of the service it provides in relation to damp and mould.

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<sup>1</sup> Condensation kit contains the leaflet 'A guide to dealing with mould and condensation' and a hygrometer to measure humidity in affected areas.

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SHG does not analyse the data it has on reports of mould, condensation and damp to see if any are repeat reports of issues. Repeat reports may indicate that customer issues are not resolved and that a different approach is required.

### **5.2.3 Recommendations**

5.2.4 Complete a full review of the service taking in to account the above findings to:

- Ensure that customer concerns are listened to
- That SHG clearly communicate what actions they will take
- Consider what support can be provided to customers regarding redecoration following treatments / repairs.
- Inform customers when SHG have completed their actions
- Seek customer feedback on the service
- Advise what the customer needs to do if they remain unhappy at the end of the process (i.e. make a formal complaint).

## **6. Support provided for the scrutiny**

We would like to thank Chris Hannon and Jonny Kelly for their support and assistance with this scrutiny review.

We have been assisted by Jayne Boote from Engage Associates who has acted as our independent mentor. Jayne has provided advice and guidance on scrutiny activities and facilitated the production of this report to ensure our independence.