

CHS Scrutiny Report on Damp and Mould.

For: TW, Director of Homes

Author: CHS Scrutiny Panel: Chair TL, MM, RD, LB, PS

Purpose:

Is to see if CHS's new damp and mould procedure is working for tenants and responds to the 4 conclusions given in the Ombudsman's report.

The Panel have referred to the issue throughout as 'damp and mould', but it is recognised that excessive condensation is a component of the problem and could be a cause of damp and mould. The Housing Ombudsman's spotlight report recommended that landlords avoid blaming residents for causing condensation and not ventilating their homes. Therefore, The Panel have not made it the focus of the report. The need for CHS to consider condensation as part of their damp and mould strategy is recognised but this should not be focussed on in the information they provide to tenants.

Background:

The Housing Ombudsman did a Spotlight report on damp and mould in 2021. Tenants' concerns have increased following the tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak due to mould in his home. The Regulator for Social Housing required providers to send them information describing how they deal with damp and mould. The Scrutiny Panel felt that this was an issue that tenants would like them to investigate. The Board agreed this would be a suitable topic for a scrutiny review. Property Services have recently reviewed their damp and mould procedure and want to further develop their approach on how they manage damp and mould cases. Director of Homes TW asked the scrutiny panel to analyse and challenge their past performance to help influence decision-making going forward. She wanted to learn from the experience of CHS tenants, best practice from other housing providers and industry experts and give customers a voice in formal procedure setting. In addition, she wanted scrutiny to review the new damp and mould procedure and comment on whether it responds to the 4 conclusions given in the Ombudsman's report. (Page 53).

<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Spotlight-report-Damp-and-mould-final.pdf>

Property Services emailed tenants who had reported damp, excessive condensation or mould in their home in the last 4 years. They asked whether the work that was carried out, or the advice they gave, had resolved the problem. They received a large number of responses. Property Services gave the scrutiny panel contact details of 23 of these people to survey.

Excluded from this review:

- CHS's past performance in this area.

Method:

Meeting with TW, (Director of Homes), MW (Contracts Manager), and MW (Interim Asset Manager) from CHS. See Appendix 1a and 1b for minutes.

Questions put to Foster Property Maintenance (FPM). See Appendix 2

Compared CHS's procedures with the 4 conclusions given in the Ombudsman's report. See Appendix 3a and 3b.

Compared CHS's procedures with other housing providers. See Appendix 4.

By an online survey and telephone interviews the panel analysed the feedback. See Appendix 5 Analysis of Survey and Telephone Calls.

Results of the Survey Appendix 6

Feedback from telephone calls to tenants. Appendix 7

A Case study of Swallowtail Close leak (JM) Appendix 8

A Case study of Stanley Road (FW) Appendix 9

Amended answers to questions put to Foster Property Maintenance (FPM) for information only Appendix 10

Meeting with TW, (Director of Homes), MW (Contracts Manager), and MW (Interim Asset Manager) from CHS

In the meeting of 13.01.2023 TW, the Director of Homes, gave background to the new damp and mould strategy and the purpose of the scrutiny project to assess if the new procedure meets tenants' needs.

In the meeting of 11.05.2023 MW the Contracts Manager explained how the new procedure works. He outlined how many cases there were and how CHS had come to know about them. He said he has asked our repairs contractor Foster Property Maintenance (FPM) to share damp and mould cases with CHS. The Scrutiny Panel raised the issue of checking that the work that was carried out by Foster has resolved the problem and MW the Interim Asset Manager explained as part of our existing repairs process, 5% of works are post-inspected by a CHS surveyor. The Scrutiny Panel expressed concern that the 8 week wait before CHS got in touch with the tenant to ask if works had resolved the problem was too long. MW the Contracts Manager took this on board and suggested they consider a follow-up call at the point the repairs are completed to ask the tenant 'Is the job complete, and are you satisfied?'.

Questions and Answers from Foster Property Maintenance (FPM)

The Panel tried to arrange a face-to-face meeting with Foster but unfortunately it didn't happen for several reasons including one of the staff members having to take unexpected leave. The Panel did receive answers to our questions by email.

The Panel felt that the answers that were given were just standard, generic answers and they didn't get the depth that was hoped for.

According to the original answers the Panel received, the Panel were not impressed. The Panel felt that Foster are not treating damp and mould cases differently from any other repair. The Panel didn't receive assurance that Foster are taking damp and mould seriously. They have not yet trained most of their operatives to identify damp and mould and there is currently no timeframe for training.

The Panel believe Foster are not setting the right culture for complaints. In the opening sentence to their complaints procedure they say 'FPM try to avoid any complaints from becoming official' The Panel believe FPM should welcome complaints as a chance to learn and improve. The Panel want them to log complaints correctly and not under-report them, so CHS have an accurate picture of how many complaints are made and what the trends are.

Does CHS's new damp and mould process respond to the 4 conclusions in the Housing Ombudsman's report on damp and mould?

1. CHS does have a plan to be proactive by addressing cavity wall and loft insulation. They are also looking at prioritising areas with lower EPC scores or cases of damp and mould. These are still to be put into practice. Newer window designs will help by being more thermally efficient when they are fitted.

2 CHS have a good process in place to respond in an effective and timely way and resolve reports on damp and mould.

3 CHS is being proactive in identifying and managing all cases including complex ones. They are using a specialist contractor McBains to deal with these complex cases. The panel believes they are being proactive in getting the message across but they could still do more to find other ways to contact tenants who do not respond to surveys.

4 CHS as an organisation does have a culture of being eager to listen with respect to tenants and they are happy to take any lessons to improve their learning from complaint data. It would be good to increase the amount of case studies they use to learn and improve.

Comparison of CHS's damp and mould procedures with other social housing providers

When comparing with other Social Housing Providers the Panel found that some didn't have a single point of contact for damp and mould cases. CHS does have one (the Contract Manager) and that should give CHS a good overview and provides a consistent approach to CHS tenants. In other Housing Providers the Customer Services Team diagnose damp and mould over the phone, in comparison CHS sends a surveyor to make an assessment, which is better as they have the expertise and they go in person to look at the house. One Housing Provider triages cases based on tenants' vulnerabilities and health conditions; CHS should consider doing this. Currently CHS sends a surveyor to evaluate every damp and mould case within a week of a report, so all tenants are receiving a fast response. However, the Foster

repairs are dealt with in the normal time-frame and the Panel found that tenants' cases went on for many months. The tenants who responded to our survey and our case studies all had relevant health conditions that could have made them at high risk from mould.

A summary from the survey and telephone calls

A survey was sent out on email to 23 tenants. 9 responded and 4 agreed that one of the Panel could ring them. Although this is a small sample there were some things that stood out from it. The Panel would like to acknowledge how helpful it was for us to receive the feedback from tenants and how this helped shape this report.

- 1** Most tenants seemed to be unhappy with the way their damp and mould case was handled.
- 2** The main problem is the situation is not resolved. When asked to rate the time taken to resolve the repair everyone either said it wasn't repaired/ there's an ongoing problem with damp and mould, or that it took too long to sort it.
- 3** The tenants didn't believe CHS had got to the root cause of the damp and mould.
- 4** The tenants felt that CHS did not appreciate how it was affecting their health and wellbeing and this caused worry because a lot of them had health conditions: 'I was very worried it might have serious effects on our health'.
- 5** The tenants' feelings about the way they were treated by CHS were negative: 'This has upset us a lot', 'really hurt and upset', 'fobbed off', 'had to fight and fight'. 6 out of 9 tenants said CHS was not sympathetic towards the problem.
- 6** Most tenants said CHS were in contact during the work. They received information and knew where to find more. They understood the landlord's and tenant's responsibilities, but none of this seemed to matter as much to them, because they felt they were already doing their bit to prevent the problem. But they were dissatisfied with the work that CHS and their contractors had done to resolve the problem and the time it had taken.
- 7** A theme from the telephone conversations is that it was not a smooth co-ordinated process. There were multiple issues, a lot of visits by different people (including a few where the operative didn't attend) and the tenant had to make many phone calls to find out what was happening. Mixed messages were given, for example one operative saying there was a leak and the next operative saying there wasn't a leak, or one operative saying roof repairs were needed and the next operative said roof repairs were not needed. The tenants are left not really knowing what work has been carried out, whether the problem has been fixed and whether they are to expect further work to be done.

JM and FW very kindly allowed us to use them as case studies for this scrutiny project.

The Panel have included photos taken by them and a short video so the board can see and hear from these tenants and the anguish they endured.

JW first reported a problem with her guttering in February 2023 she finally got it fixed in September. She had 6 visits from FPM initially for 1 leak which ended up being 3 leaks! The

original leak was over her porch/door the second after work had been done was at the bottom of the drain pipe and the third leak then started in the middle of the guttering between the two houses. The Panel feel this is not acceptable and this tenant will not have faith that CHS will be able to make repairs on a right first time basis. Appendix 8

FW first reported a leak in her bathroom 6 years ago! There were several failed attempts to repair this including refitting flooring under an unstable toilet and a complete refit of the bathroom. Approximately 1 month later the ceiling fell into the living room which was being used by FW to sleep in as her house is overcrowded. Appendix 9

Conclusions:

A co-ordinated, joined up approach with a clear procedure should improve the service to tenants. The new procedure has clearly defined stages and timelines. Monitoring is in place.

It is useful to have a single point of contact MW (the Contracts Manager) through which all the reports of damp and mould go, so that he has an overall picture of the damp and mould situation in CHS homes and he can provide a consistent approach.

It's good that the Contracts Manager is erring on the side of caution and sending a surveyor to assess most of the new reports of damp and mould. This should prevent the problems tenants had in the past, where they felt that their concerns were not taken seriously, and issues dragged on for long periods without being resolved.

CHS seem to now be taking damp and mould seriously. They are now taking a whole house approach, rather than treating each repair report separately. If works to repair leaks have not resolved the damp and mould issue, then ventilation and insulation improvements are considered.

Communication with tenants still needs to be improved. Tenants are still feeling frustrated about lack of communication and having to chase to get updates on their repairs. Tenants need to be fully kept informed. They need to be given clear and consistent messages. CHS plan to contact the customer 8 weeks after the works have been completed to check if the works have improved things. Tenants were saying this is not early enough. CHS need to check that customers are happy that the work is actually completed and has resolved the problem at the time it is marked as complete.

The timeline for works needs to be tightened up. For most tenants that the Panel spoke to the issue had been going on for more than six months. It would be interesting to see figures for length of time that these issues are taking to resolve, and then that could be monitored to see if there is any improvement by next year. Could this be a Key Performance Indicator (KPI)?

The CHS process is focused on property issues, it doesn't include any assessment of the tenant's vulnerabilities, such as respiratory or heart conditions that can be seriously affected by damp and mould. The majority of the tenants that responded to our survey reported extra vulnerability and conditions.

Recommendations:

These have been grouped under the Ombudsman's 4 recommendations:

1. Do we have a proactive, zero-tolerance approach to damp and mould and a comprehensive, consolidated policy or framework for responding to these cases? Are we considering damp and mould as part of our net zero strategy?

1. CHS should be more proactive in trying to identify homes that may be at risk of developing damp and mould. For example, 1) by flagging homes that are in proximity to a leak or a report of damp and mould, particularly in a block; 2) Identifying homes where the age, condition, structure design and building materials are the same as properties that have damp and mould. **ACCEPTED**

2. CHS should be more proactive in trying to identify homes that have damp and mould. For example, by sending annual surveys to all tenants asking if they have damp and mould. Ensure that tenants that CHS don't have emails for are contacted by other means. **ACCEPTED**

3. CHS may benefit by improving the information it provides to tenants about damp and mould. The information in the tenancy handbook is ok but it is hidden on page 27. The panel suggests a dedicated page on the website. This could contain a video, a leaflet or text and photos. An instruction leaflet could be given to tenants experiencing damp and mould. **ACCEPTED**

4. The Panel would like to see information given to tenants or pointers letting them know there will be no consequences of them complaining if the job is not completed properly. **PARTIALLY ACCEPTED**

Property Services Response:

We have completed a desktop analysis of all repairs which flagged homes that had historic reports of leaks and damp and mould. We extended this data to properties within the same scheme codes. This formed the basis of our initial contact with customers in December 2022. We will analyse our repairs data, annually, to specifically include properties with leaks. We will produce a specific annual comms piece to contact those customers in addition to a wider annual comms piece, which will promote the damp and mould service.

Our handbook includes damp and mould advice, and this document is linked to the website search function the works damp and mould. In addition, damp and mould comms are circulated through our newsletter. We provide a specific area for damp and mould on our website alongside the wider comms review of CHS' website. In the meantime, we will engage with customers to produce damp and mould leaflet, working together with them to co-design meaningful advice. The ombudsman report suggests providing information at tenancy sign up, which we can also do.

Customers have the right to complain without consequence. We will avoid any reference to consequences and instead promote the complaints handling procedure within our damp and mould communications inc website, leaflets and follow up emails/ letters.

2. How effective and timely are we at responding to and resolving reports and complaints concerning damp and mould? How do we know we are providing meaningful information and support to our residents?

5. The Panel suggest that CHS contacts the tenant on completion of work to ensure satisfaction. A further call to check everything is still ok within the following 8 weeks.

ACCEPTED

6. The Panel would like to see more communication with tenants if there are any delays to the repair such as parts availability and contractors' absence. **ACCEPTED**

7. The Panel would like to see more use of tenants in communication when trying to reach those who have not responded to other forms of contact. This could be by offering contact with an involved tenant rather than an employee in the first instance. **PARTIALLY ACCEPTED**

Property Services Response:

We will contact customers 3 weeks after an inspection to review works completed. Further assurance checks then set at 6 weeks after the works completion date to assess success. Details of the named point of contact will be shared and any issues reported by customers in the meantime should be acted upon promptly and comms will provide contact details. If damp and mould have reappeared, further investigation and intervention will be pursued.

Contractors will communicate regularly with customers. At the 3-week review stage (above), if works aren't completed the named point of contact will communicate this with the customer and set a new review date. Trends and performance will be fed into contractor meetings. Within communications, Customers will be told how to contact us about our contractors' performance.

Refer to Customer Involvement Team in the first instance. This service needs to be clearly set out within the volunteers' role. We will incorporate "cold properties" into our data analysis and contract management procedures. This will highlight properties with little to no contact with CHS and targeted other forms of contact such as calls, home visits and stock condition surveys.

3. How do we identify and manage complex cases, complex situations and/or those involving legal disrepair claims? Are we promoting our complaints processes enough and does our approach allow the complaints process to continue alongside pre-action claims?

8. The panel suggest a copy of the surveyors report identifying the problems and the proposed solutions should be given to the tenant. A timeline of work to be completed should also be given. This will also improve the communication, as would a phone call during work process. **ACCEPTED**

9. Tenants health issues and vulnerabilities should be recorded, and these should be communicated to contractors. This should be taken into account when triaging or prioritising cases. The Panel would like to suggest that there should be a shorter than standard timescale for repairs if there are high health risks. Tenant's requests for reasonable adjustments eg phone calls to assist the tenant in being ready should be listened to.

Consideration and respect should be given for cognitive and sensory, as well as physical conditions. **PARTIALLY ACCEPTED**

Property Services Response:

At the initial survey, we will complete a checklist to demonstrate a thorough inspection has been completed which looks at the root of the cause and document items agreed and discussed. We will consider an automated form on mobiles which can be emailed to the customer.

Data protection team to determine if this level of customer 's personal details should be recorded and shared with contractors. We will use the above checklist to speak to customers about any reasonable adjustments that they may need following an explanation of the work. We will communicate all reasonable adjustments with our contractors.

4. What is our organisational culture with respect to learning? Are we making the most of our complaint data and case studies to learn and improve?

10. The Panel would like to see some training on autism and other vulnerabilities including communication with people hearing difficulties. **ACCEPTED**

11. Heating the home is a vital part of the solution and if tenants can't afford to put their heating on it may exacerbate the problem, so tenants who experience damp and mould could be offered a referral to Money Matters. **ACCEPTED**

12. All customer-facing staff that visit properties, including Housing Officers, should be trained to spot damp and mould and report it for further investigation. **PARTIALLY ACCEPTED**

Property Services Response:

Refer to HR. Links to equality and diversity and the wider communication and training objectives of CHS. We will review customers' needs at survey stage and aim to incorporate reasonable adjustments.

We contact customers via email to check the work is completed and that it has made a difference to the damp and mould situation. We have updated our email comms to promote the Money Matters team, example wording as follows...

CHS understands that customers may be struggling with household bills, and this can contribute towards problems with mould. Our Money Matters service can offer free advice on different ways to increase your income and is open to all CHS customers. If you think that our Money Matters team can help you, contact us on 0300 111 3555 or email moneyadvice@chsgroup.org.uk to speak to one of our advisors over the phone, via email or through a home visit.

We will include similar wording in our website and letters. Our damp and mould policies and procedures will also link to training in identifying referral opportunities.

Our surveyors are attending advanced training for damp and mould. We will create an internal damp and mould training session, to be rolled out alongside the new policy, for non-technical staff.

Note for information

The Panel did receive a second set of answers after MW (CHS Contracts Manager) spoke to JJ, Regional Director at FPM, with some amendments to the original answers. The Panel were disappointed that FPM had been given the opportunity to alter these answers given both SV the Head of Sustainability & Business Assurance at FPM, and JJ had written and checked the original answers before sending them to us. The Panel believe FPM had been given ample time to respond as they received the questions on 16/08/23. The Panel understand KC, Director of Operations T FPM was on unexpected leave from the 28/08/23 and suggested these be answered by email then, we received the answers on the 05/09/23. The Panel do not believe they would have been amended if the CHS Contracts Manager had not spoken to JJ about the answers so the Panel feel these are then doctored and are therefore not included for consideration in this report. A copy of their second response will be included in the appendices. This will be used for monitoring purposes in the future.

Appendices

- Appendix 1a. Minutes Scrutiny Panel Jan 2023
- Appendix 1b. Minutes Scrutiny Panel May 2023
- Appendix 2. Foster questions and answers_05.09.2023
- Appendix 3a. CHS Process for damp and mould cases - updated Apr 2023
- Appendix 3b Housing Ombudsman Spotlight on damp and mould 4 conclusions
- Appendix 4. Comparison of CHS's procedures with other housing providers.
- Appendix 5. Analysis of Survey and Telephone Calls
- Appendix 6. Results of the survey on damp and mould_14.04.2023
- Appendix 7. Feedback from telephone calls to tenants.
- Appendix 8. Case study_Swallowtail Close leak
- Appendix 9. Case study_St Stanley Road leak
- Appendix 10. Amended answers to questions put to Foster for information only