



Wythenshawe
Community Housing Group

Scrutiny Group review findings - Damp and Mould

September 2023

Summary

During August and September our tenant-led Scrutiny Group conducted a review of WCHG's approach to damp and mould. This report details how the review was conducted, its findings and its recommendations.

In summary, Scrutiny Group found that the service is run well and in a mostly person-centred way. However, Scrutiny Group voiced concerns over the lack of availability of what they regarded to be some key information.

Some areas were identified as requiring improvement, namely what information is kept about the reporting of a damp and mould case, how WCHG consults and communicates with customers about damp and mould and how WCHG works to obtain access to properties through its Tenancy Audit Team.

The Review

In 2023, Scrutiny Group was requested to carry out a review into damp and mould by members of the WCHG's Leadership Team. The review was particularly necessary because:

- Damp and mould are important issues for residents, landlords and the regulator.
- Damp and mould have become a more prevalent issues since the death of Awaab Ishak.
- Directors are particularly interested to find out if our approach to gaining access to properties is being achieved in a person-centred manner.

Members sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the experience of the customer when notifying WCHG about a damp and mould issue in their home? What happens? How long does it take for a resolution to the matter? How long are customers waiting?
- What is the experience of colleagues who wish to report a damp and mould issue in a customer's home? What happens?
- Are customers appropriately consulted about WCHG's approach to damp and mould?
- Do we have appropriate mechanisms in place to gather and understand customer feedback?
- What are we learning from customer complaints and other customer feedback in relation to damp and mould?
- How are we gathering and using information relating to the number of properties which are experiencing damp and mould issues?
- How do we identify properties which might be experiencing damp and mould issues? And what are we doing about it? (heatmap)
- How does our approach to obtaining access to properties and working on damp and mould compare to other social housing providers?
- Are the communications to customers about obtaining access to their properties fair and person centred?

In completing the review, members of the Scrutiny Group carried out the following activities:

- Desk top review of key information:
 - Postcards to customers
 - Letters to customers
 - Workplans
 - Damp and mould related content in newsletter/ online
 - Complaints
- Interview with Living Well Manager (Martine Boschat) and Senior Property Surveyor (Colin Prentice)

Findings

What is the experience of the customer when notifying WCHG about a damp and mould issue in their home? What happens? How long does it take for a resolution to the matter? How long are customers waiting?

Finding: WCHG takes a “zero-tolerance approach” to damp and mould. Customer properties are visited within 10 working days of a report for an initial inspection. Remedial works are completed within 40 working days of the first report. Severe cases are prioritised. Customers are given a date and time and some choice is available through a “avoid the school-run” option. Customers are treated with empathy and respect. The cause of the damp/ mould is not prejudged.

Areas for improvement:

- Key data regarding the transactional customer satisfaction is not currently available. Such data is important for transparency in relation to showing customers how their landlord is performing in a specific area. This should be rectified through current on-going work with Pulse.

What is the experience of colleagues who wish to report a damp and mould issue in a customer's home? What happens?

Finding:

Colleagues who may raise damp/ mould concerns include: Tenancy Audit, technicians/ surveyors, gas inspectors, Savills when completing Stock Condition Surveys, Neighbourhoods Team. Those colleagues using Accuserve are also encouraged to upload a photo with information on location, size and severity. In each case, information is fed back, raised on Orchard and the usual process is followed.

Where access to properties is challenging, multiple attempts at access are made and letters are sent. In especially sensitive circumstances, the Living Well Team support with engaging customers.

Areas for improvement:

Key data relating to how often damp and mould is reported by colleagues vs customers should be available. This would allow members and WCHG to see how significant the issue of customers not reporting is. This could feed into wider community education.

Are customers appropriately consulted about WCHG's approach to damp and mould?

Finding:

No. Not enough is done to include customers in policy development work. It was agreed that the Great Places/ More Homes Panel is not well enough attended to be seen as a meaningful consultative body.

Areas for improvement:

WCHG needs to consult with more customers and a greater diversity of customers about its approach to damp and mould.

WCHG also needs to be more proactive in its overall communication with and education of customers in relation to damp and mould. This might include more online/ newsletter content, flyers and in person drop-ins/ information stands.

Do we have appropriate mechanisms in place to gather and understand customer feedback?

Finding:

Broadly, yes. WCHG gathers transactional satisfaction data through text messages and phone calls once a job is completed. After this, the Customer Hub asks customers if damp and mould issues have been resolved, using different communication channels.

However, the response rate from the sample SG examined between January and April 2023 was 49 per cent. This could perhaps be higher, given the seriousness of this issue.

Areas for improvement:

Management to work on improving the proportion of customers who respond to phone-calls about whether damp and mould issues have been resolved.

What are we learning from customer complaints and other customer feedback in relation to damp and mould?

Findings:

SG is happy with this area.

WCHG understands that speed of service delivery is important to customers in relation to damp and mould. As a result, WCHG has increased capacity for 23-24, with two surveyors from the Adaptations Team assigned to support with general repairs from 1/10/23. Four Environmental Services colleagues have also been trained to undertake mould removal.

Surveyors have also learnt from customers that the provision of adequate ventilation and heating are affordability concerns. The Living Well Fund (£250k) is thus open to applications for the provision of heating vouchers and insulation improvements.

How are we gathering and using information relating to the number of properties which are experiencing damp and mould issues?

How do we identify properties which might be experiencing damp and mould issues? And what are we doing about it? (heatmap)

Findings:

SG is happy with this area.

External consultants have completed modelling on households and demand drivers such as property types and demographics.

This data has been used to create a heatmap of where we might expect to see damp and mould.

As a result, £850k extra funding has been accessed for external and internal insulation, upgrades to fans and positive input ventilation units.

How does our approach to obtaining access to properties and working on damp and mould compare to other social housing providers?

Finding:

Where access to properties is challenging, multiple attempts at access are made and letters are sent. In especially sensitive circumstances, the Living Well Team support with engaging customers.

According to the recent Damp and Mould Audit, some but by no means all organisations have similar processes for accessing properties which lead up to legal action where required.

The audit report identified good practice in other organisations related to a specific no access policy for damp and mould work.

Are the communications to customers about obtaining access to their properties fair and person centred?

Findings:

Repairs & Maintenance:

Tenancy Audit: No. While SG was complimentary of the initial “Sorry we missed you” leaflet, it felt that the tone of the follow-up letter was too much of a step up in severity and harshness of tone. Members felt that customers would likely feel overly intimidated and anxious upon reading this letter.

Areas for improvement:

Members would like to know the scale of the issue of missed appointments for D&M remedial works.

(Tenancy Audit) Management should reconsider the tone of the early follow-up letters and redraft the letter accordingly. This should be brought to SG at a future meeting for sign-off.

Recommendations

Scrutiny Group recommendations

3 main recommendations were identified by Scrutiny Group

1. Management to keep data relating specifically to satisfaction with damp and mould services, how common customer vs colleague reports are and how often surveyors/ Works colleagues are denied access to properties.
2. WCHG colleagues to make more of an effort to communicate and consult with customers regarding its approach to damp and mould through the website, social media and engagement/ pop-up events. These should be used to both educate customers on damp and mould/ WCHG's approach to it and gather their views and feedback.
3. Management to reconsider its tone of communication with customers who do not provide access to their properties and potential mental health implications. New letters to be brought to Scrutiny Group once drafted.



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