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# HOUSING AND COMMUNITY

## Overview and Scrutiny Committee

<b>Report for:</b>	Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee
<b>Title of report:</b>	Damp and Mould – Dacorum Update and Response
<b>Date:</b>	11 <sup>th</sup> January 2023
<b>Report on behalf of:</b>	Councillor Margaret Griffiths, Portfolio Holder for Housing Services
<b>Part:</b>	I
<b>If Part II, reason:</b>	N/A
<b>Appendices:</b>	Appendix 1 – Letter for Secretary of State Appendix 2 – DBC Response Secretary of State Appendix 3 – Letter from RSH Appendix 4 – ‘As Is’ Process Map Appendix 5 – Condensation Leaflet Appendix 6 - Net Zero Innovation Programme (NZIP) proposal
<b>Background papers:</b>	None
<b>Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:</b>	Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) Dacorum Borough Council (DBC) Osborne Property Services Limited (OPSL) Stock condition surveys (SCS) Housing Health and Safety Rating (HHSRS) Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) University of Bedfordshire (UoB) University College London (UCL) Senior Leadership Team (SLT)

### Report Author / Responsible Officer

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<b>Corporate Priorities</b>	A clean, safe and enjoyable environment Building strong and vibrant communities Providing good quality affordable homes, in particular for those most in need
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	Ensuring efficient, effective and modern service delivery Climate and ecological emergency
<b>Wards affected</b>	All Wards
<b>Purpose of the report:</b>	1. To provide an update on damp and mould and the DBC approach.
<b>Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s):</b>	To note the recommendations set out in section 4.
<b>Period for post policy/project review:</b>	Proposed annual report

## 1 Introduction

Housing Secretary Michael Gove, has launched a crackdown on poor housing conditions by demanding every council and housing authority provide details of how they plan to tackle damp and mould following the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in December 2020. The inquest ruled that Awaab died due to severe breathing problems caused by mould fungus in his blood and lungs.

**Appendix 1** - Since the inquest's conclusion Mr Gove has written to every English council leader and social housing provider stating that the country needs to 'raise the bar dramatically' on the quality of social housing and 'empower tenants' to ensure 'their voices are truly heard'.

The letter directs local councils to supply his department with an assessment of damp and mould issues affecting their privately rented properties, as well as details of how it is being tackled. Additionally Councils have also been asked to list the number of civil penalty notices and successful prosecutions pursued in relation to dangerous damp and mould.

**Appendix 2** Dacorum Borough Council (DBC) have provided an initial response to this on the on the 28 November.

**Appendix 3** - A further letter has been received from the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) dated 22 November 2022 entitled, **Assurance on addressing risks relating to damp and mould in tenants' homes**. The RSH is seeking assurance from all providers that they have a clear understanding and strong grip on damp and mould issues in their homes and are addressing risks to tenants' and residents' health.

The requested information is:

- The approach to assessing the extent of damp and mould issues affecting properties, including how you assess the prevalence of category 1 and 2 damp and mould hazards
- The context of that approach, most recent assessment of the extent of damp and mould hazards in your homes, including the prevalence of category 1 and 2 damp and mould hazards
- Given those findings, the actions being taken to remedy any issues and hazards, and ensure that homes meet the Decent Homes Standard
- How we ensure that individual damp and mould cases are identified and dealt with promptly and effectively when raised by tenants and residents.

This information was submitted online on the 18 December before the deadline of the 19 December.

## 2 Current Position

It is important to note that Damp and mould are not the same thing, however where there is damp, mould will usually follow. This is because mould needs moisture to grow.

Reports of damp and/or mould are seasonal with an influx during the winter months, anecdotally Osborne Property Services Ltd (OPSL) have experienced an increase in reported cases following the media headlines of the ITN news story and more recently following the reported death of Awaab.

In Quarter 2, 2021/22 there were 88 cases associated to damp and/or mould in the system. We have seen a steep increase for the same period in 2022/23 with 166 live cases of which 90-95 cases are specifically regarding mould, this represents an increase of 88.6% this year and we are only marginally into the winter period.

### 2.1 Reporting Lines

**Appendix 4** – ‘As Is’ Process map, demonstrates 2 ways we capture and respond to Damp and Mould issues, these being;

1. Reported by a Tenant into the Contact Centre or via email
2. The outcome of a Stock condition Survey

#### **Reported into DBC –**

Upon discovering the presence of damp and/or mould the resident makes contact with the Housing Repairs team to report the issue, there are two channels for the resident to do this, via a telephone call or they can download and email a repair request form.

If the resident opts to call in, they are taken through a ‘triage’ style process which allows the call handler to gather as much information as possible regarding the issue. (The same information request is required via the email route). In both cases a self-help condensation leaflet **Appendix 5** is sent out and photographs are requested. These photographs are reviewed by the OPSL repairs team and corrective repairs raised.

This approach can lead to serious cases being misdiagnosed and dismissed as condensation without visiting the property to assess the pathology of the building. This is due to historical ways of working driven by capacity. It is also important to note that surveyors are not trained to investigate, diagnose and specify correctly.

There has been a recent instruction to OPSL by DBC repairs staff to use the correct products and processes to treat the mould. However whilst this is a positive step, there is currently an 8-week lead time for a mould treatment appointment. This is dictated by current resource levels with only one operative carrying out the mould treatment.

This excessive delay is having an impact on the tenants living conditions and in some cases will be allowing the mould to migrate to other areas that a quicker response may prevent.

### 2.2 Stock condition surveys (SCS)

DBC have 102 property archetypes generally Flats, Houses, Bungalow and Bedsits categorised by property type and the number of bedrooms.

DBC has set a target of 100% of its properties to have a stock condition survey within the next four years. Once the survey has been booked. The surveyor attends the property to carry out the survey, and a report is produced including detail if damp and/or mould was present.

The survey includes a Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) review and hazards are categorised as 'cat 1 or cat 2' as per current guidance. The HHSRS is quite a complex rating system and open to interpretation - different surveyors are likely to come back with different ratings. Therefore DBC have broken the categorisation down further into a rating system based on three levels of risk - high risk (Cat 1 and 2), medium risk and low risk. Once rated, the DBC Asset Manager reviews the output of the surveys and escalates as appropriate to OPSL.

DBC have completed 3078 stock conditions surveys to date. Out of the survey's undertaken, 84 cases of damp and/or mould were identified in the survey, equating to circa 2.7% of these 6 were identified as High Risk which were sent to OPSL w/c 21st Nov 22.

Of the 84 cases the largest cohort of identified archetypes are 2 bed flats built between 1950-66 (15 cases) and 3 bed houses 1950-66 (16 cases). This would at first appear to be a pattern but these two archetypes also represent the largest amount of stock, 464 units and 1675 units respectively. Not surprisingly the majority of Energy Performance Certificates (EPC) for these properties were rated as D's and E's, which further supports the drive to achieve the government target for all social housing properties to EPC C and above by 2030.

To articulate some sort of scale. SCS have been completed for 3078 (30% of the total stock), in which mould/damp problems have been identified in 84 (2.7%), the archetypes with the most cases identified combined equate to 31 cases (37%). The total number of properties in this archetype is 2139 (21% of total stock) and the total number of these properties surveyed is 763 (170 flats and 593 houses).

Of the 763 properties 31 have problems – 4%

763 represents 36% of the properties in this combined archetype just over a third, crudely modelled up 12% of these properties could have problems which is circa 256.

### **3. Options to address the problem**

There is a missing managerial loop within our current process. The SCS survey can highlight issues, the surveyor hands over to DBC Asset manager who escalates the cases based on the identified risk, a resident can identify an issue as can front line visiting officers and elected members, however there appears to be no follow up or update on progress once passed to OPSL. Additionally there are no current reporting mechanisms or governance in place which increases the risk for cases to be missed or remain unresolved.

Every property is unique and a bespoke strategy and process is required. Experience and training are key to evaluating the many connotations that cause condensation and mould-related repairs and the subsequent remedy.

The panacea solution is to upgrade all DBC properties thermally with adequate ventilation and an affordable heating source which is clearly not realistic in the short to medium term. However we can do more now as highlighted below.

#### **3.1 Initial response**

- Compile a high level action plan to focus actions and accountability – **Appendix 6**
- Desk study to review all known cases – age, stage in the process, ascertain previous repairs, property layout, archetype, heating system etc.
- Use this and the cloned stock condition data to plan the strategic approach to remediation.

#### **3.2 Increased agile response and on-site presence**

- Change process to introduce a physical survey of all properties upon receipt of damp / mould report as standard.

- Visit to include a thorough assessment of air quality, humidity, lifestyle, presence of loft insulation, function of humidistat extraction fans and trickle vents etc. Determine if the cause is a building defect or excess condensation. If a defect instruct a repair to be completed in a timely manner.
- Capture reports from visiting officers, repairs staff, tenancy audits etc.

### **3.3 Condensation Response**

- Specify mould wash to be completed by DBC contractors using appropriate chemicals such as; Bacdet and Halophen to affected areas.
- Carry out thermal calculations to determine structural gradient and dew point (factors that provide an indication of condensation forming) of affected areas and the property in general.
- Consider if any thermal improvements are possible or practical, if so determine revised structural gradient readings to specify remedial works.
- Install data loggers to record heating, humidity levels, readings and /trends.
- Resident interaction and education – spending time with residents discussing measures to be undertaken by them are vital to achieving long term positive results.
- Free issue a simple to read hygrometer to all properties with damp and mould to allow tenants to self-help by regulating humidity and room temperature.

It is known how mould forms and it can be predicted when it is likely to form, but diagnosis and treatment are difficult due to the many factors that influence mould growth. Interaction with the resident is key to successful treatment, thermal and ventilation improvements alone will not suffice.

## **4. Recommendations**

To continue improving the DBC response to reported cases of damp and or mould the following recommendations are proposed;

- Create a specialist team including a lead surveyor with enhanced knowledge of damp and mould, mirroring the structure for regulatory compliance.
- Continuation of Stock condition survey to identify and rank HHSRS damp and mould issues. This process may also highlight archetypes that may need more radical solutions such as remodeling/disposal etc.
- Plan to tackle and resolve the situation promptly.
- Tenant education through website, leaflets, tenants newsletters, estate days,
- Officer and contractor training.
- Contractor toolbox talks for them to identify and report damp and mould issues back to DBC.
- Team to track all cases of damp and mould with follow-up physical inspections and review of those identified as high risk.
- Self Help - Specifically for properties with small mould patches, supply kits containing biocide fungal wash down solutions, gloves, goggles and a container along with an additional inhibitor that can be added to paint/grout. Combined with education and instruction on how to use correctly.

## **5. Research Project**

In conjunction with the University of Bedfordshire (UoB), DBC has submitted a proposal for funding to the University College London (UCL) to carry out research into 'Condensation in Social Housing, Engagement and Net Zero'. The aim is to tackle condensation in social housing by engaging with tenants to improve their understanding of perspectives, behaviours, motivations and needs. The project will enhance knowledge sharing across social housing tenants and local authority professionals to develop collective approaches to reduced condensation in housing.

The team will specify a 'toolkit' including the development of an App to support local authority staff in accurately diagnosing the causes of condensation for different property types and constraints. Knowledge sharing and education will cross multiple stakeholders including tenants, surveyors, local authority technical staff, managers and chief executives. Ultimately, knowledge exchange around factors contributing to condensation (insulation, heating and ventilation) will also support zero carbon targets.

The emphasis will be on enabling tenants to discuss attitudes and lifestyle factors that can affect the successful avoidance and eradication of excess condensation in their homes. Understanding perceptions, concerns and issues is a main element of the research. (**Appendix 7** - proposal).

Targets (research project):-

- 1) Short term - educating council staff and providing support/tools.
- 2) Medium/longer term – toolkit specification.
- 3) Short/medium/longer term - working collaboratively with tenants (sharing knowledge with them. establishing a better understanding of their perceptions/behaviours/perspectives) to better inform council initiatives around condensation/mould.
- 4) Medium/longer term - work collaboratively with other regional local authorities around condensation/mould action.

## **6. Consultation**

It is important to demonstrate that DBC are a 'Listening' organisation and that our tenants are assured their voices are heard and the DBC response is tailored to their needs. Once the resource is in place to provide a swift and consistent approach to reports of damp and mould it is proposed that a comprehensive promotion of the service will be undertaken.

This approach will include, revised literature and infographics, sign posting for those able to help themselves, organisational wide awareness and collaboration and tenant inclusion to review, improve and shape the services we provide.

## **7. Financial and value for money implications:**

Senior Leadership Team (SLT) have approved an increase in surveying capacity of 2 – for the next 6 months. Indicative market trends of the appropriate staff appointed via an agency are £45 - £50 per hour, leading to a staffing cost pressure over the period of circa £86,400 - £96,000.

DBC will also purchase specialist equipment for accurate diagnosis, i.e. damp meters, air monitors, thermo-detection thermometers, data loggers, thermal imaging cameras, ladders for investigating officers at an estimated cost of £5,000.

The repairs cost to address the known cases and those yet to be reported is estimated to be in the region of £100,000. Whilst OPSL may have some capacity to respond it is highly likely that additional capacity will need to be established from a highly competitive market.

The longer term strategic consideration will be to form a bespoke team focused on the cradle to grave process for all damp related issues, including resident reporting, in house referral and stock survey escalation. The team would consist of;

- 2 x additional surveyors with a comprehensive condensation/damp training/knowledge
- 2 x operatives as a minimum normal operating level but with additional resources during the winter months. The same team would undertake proactive preventative work in summer.

## 7 Legal Implications

The failure to protect the health and wellbeing of our tenants carry a number of legal implications along with significant reputational risk.

## 8 Risk implications:

Key risks are considered in **Table 1**.

**Table 1**

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>	<b>Evidenced by</b>
RSH Intervention	Supply RSH requested information and supporting information by due date.  Continued oversight and Strategic intent to improve approach	Online submission completed and additional information uploaded on LADR portal.  SLT and Corporate reporting including measured metrics such as case numbers and case outcomes
Financial	Regular reporting of associated financial implications  Awareness of commercial environment and escalating costs and agile response  Comprehensive business planning to include funding sources.	Monthly management accounts and performance reports  Articulation of reactive action plan to address identified issues.  Business cases
Reputational	Promote and demonstrate a listening response to residents.  Deal with complaints quickly and comprehensively.	Do what needs to be done in a timely manner to address concerns  Respond to complaints within policy timelines and ensure all elements of the complaint are addressed.

## 9 Equalities, Community Impact and Human Rights:

An impact assessment will be carried out to inform the longer term strategy to address the condition of the property portfolio and the life chances of our residents.

## 10 Sustainability implications (including climate change, health and wellbeing, community safety)

There are no direct sustainability issues arising from this report however, a fabric first approach to improving the thermal performance of a property to reduce damp and mould, will add additional financial pressures whilst also contributing towards the Council's pledge to meet government targets of net zero housing stock by 2050.

## **11 Council infrastructure (including Health and Safety, HR/OD, assets and other resources)**

Addressing damp and mould issues places the safety of our tenants and leaseholders at the centre of asset related decision making. There is a need to enhance understanding, competence and oversight to ensure continued compliance with legislation such as but not limited to Decent Homes standard, HHSRS etc.

## **12. Conclusions**

Like many social housing providers DBC are reliant on tenants reporting issues of damp and mould. To date these reports have been treated with some specialty via the submission of photographs and associated triage approach, however there is a need to develop a more bespoke and comprehensive approach.

Through SLT there is a longer term commitment to the provision of a comprehensive, proactive service with explicit and continued oversight that includes a structured review of cases identified as high risk. Collaboration across all departments will be key for early identification and intervention leading to the prevention of serious cases.

In addition the strategic approach to asset management via the now forming Asset Management Strategy and associated categorisation of the housing stock, will provide granular intelligence/data to assist when making key investment decisions.