

**Homes and Neighbourhoods**

**Islington Council**

**222 Upper Street**

**N1 1XR**

**Report of: Matt West, Director of Housing Property Services**

**Meeting of: Housing Scrutiny Committee**

**Date: 25<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

# **Damp, Condensation and mould programme Draft Recommendations**

## 1. Recommendations

- 1.1. This report aims to provide the Housing Scrutiny Committee with information and progress made to date on the damp, condensation and mould programme since the previous update to the Housing Scrutiny Committee in July 2023.
- 1.2. Officers encourage the Housing Scrutiny Committee to appraise this work and make suggestions of how the council's work in this critical area can be improved.
- 1.3. Members of the committee are asked to amend add and approve the draft recommendations for presentation to the council's executive committee

## 2. Introduction

- 2.1. It has been just over ten months since the publication of the coroners report investigating the tragic death of Awaab Ishak due to damp and mould in his family's home, and also the Councils response to damp, condensation and mould was accelerated. Since then there have been focussed energies on improving awareness, how damp and mould is reported, a joined up partnership approach, activities related to net zero carbon, resident engagement and critical reviews of key policies and processes which scaffold the programme and endeavour to improve the lives of residents living in Islington Council properties.
- 2.2. The Government has published new guidance on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2023: [Understanding and addressing the health risks of damp and mould in the home](#). The guidance is for social and private sector landlords and sets out a clearly the health risks of damp and mould, regulation on damp and mould, what is damp and mould and root causes, how to respond to reports, taking a proactive approach to reduce the risks, collaborative working with other professionals and building relationships with tenants. The guidance states "This guidance is a direct response to the Coroner's report, and has been developed with a multidisciplinary group of experts in housing and health. Members of the government's expert [Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants](#) were also consulted. It makes sure that social and private sector landlords have a thorough understanding of their legal responsibilities, and of the serious health risks that damp and mould pose". Islington is assessing itself against this best practice guidance.

## 3. Activity overview

- 3.1. Current position against Islington Council's five-point action plan to tackle damp and mould:

### 3.1.1. Reviewing all damp and mould cases from the last three years – contacting to make sure issues are resolved, and taking more action if needed

Update: All tenants on this list have been contacted via multiple communication methods. From the phase two of contact via letter. The remaining no access cases have been passed for priority tenancy audit The dashboard created for this activity has been used to design an operational damp and mould dashboard for new and live cases.

### **3.1.2. Investing an extra £1million every year for a new damp and mould action team, including specialist surveyors and more funding for ventilation and insulation**

Update: Islington have invested over £2 million this year on damp and mould activities. This includes additional works, additional surveying resources and increase number of administrators and operatives.

### **3.1.3. Training non-specialist staff - for example staff carrying out gas compliance checks - to identify damp and mould when visiting homes.**

Update:

An extensive training programme has been rolled out to all housing staff, including damp and mould awareness and its importance is embedded in the departmental induction for any new staff.

The pilot for the tenancy and property visits has been extended to 450 households and is over halfway through.

### **3.1.4. Managing a dedicated line for calls from council tenants concerned about damp and mould, so the council can book a survey and tackle the damp**

Update:

Since the creation of the dedicated telephone option for damp and mould, on the 6<sup>th</sup> December, there have been 4017 calls and Diagnostic Surveyors have completed 2732 damp inspections.

A dedicated email inbox was also created to receive reports, there have been 2,101 emails.

### **3.1.5. Working more closely with other local partner agencies to give joined-up help and support to residents including finance, housing needs, medical conditions and repairs**

Update:

- a. The damp, condensation and mould framework was co-designed with local partner agencies which remains to be a strong structure to tackling damp, condensation and mould.
- b. The Islington Council damp and mould webpage was updated with up-to-date information on damp, condensation and mould, referral information to SHINE for tenants who are having difficulty heating their home or managing their heating bills and information for non-council tenants and leaseholder in December 2022 and

- c. The programme and updates on its activity has attended multiple meetings including partnership roundtables, Children Social Services and Adult Social Care boards, Health and Wellbeing Board and Islington Housing Group (attended by registered social landlords in Islington).
- d. Data has been shared with Housing by Children Social Services and Adult Social Care to support the prioritisation of cases.
- e. Currently, Islington Council is working with Health colleagues to improve sharing health and housing data to identify tenants who may be vulnerable to ill health due to damp and mould being present in their homes.
- f. The partnership referral form has been piloted with one GP medical practice, there has been a limited number of referrals. Further work is required to understand how to improve referrals.

#### **4. Key performance indicators**

**4.1.** The damp and mould Power BI dashboard will be available in Q2 2023. This dashboard will provide real-time updates on damp and mould performance, monitor data over time, identify 'hotpots' and look at damp and mould through an equalities lens.

**4.2.** There is still ongoing work to quality assure the figures in the dashboard.

**4.3.** The data and insights team are in the process of scoping a project to match health and housing data. Currently the team is meeting with health colleagues to define a minimum dataset. Next steps are to work with information governance colleagues.

The aim of this project is to:

- Understand the prevalence of clinical conditions in different housing tenures that can be exacerbated by poor housing conditions, particularly damp and mould.
- Flag in the housing system Oneserve a household that has someone present with a clinical condition, that evidence suggests can be exacerbated by poor quality housing.

#### **4.4. Current TA / property availability**

*The Council will decant residents to temporary accommodation if the prevalence of damp and mould or household risk factors are sufficiently high. Since December 43 households have been decanted. The supply of temporary accommodation especially large specialised units are under considerable pressure due to increases in homelessness and other housing pressures. The council continues to take all actions available to have the widest variety of properties available for temporary accommodation.*

#### **4.5. UCL and Net Zero Carbon and capital works.**

*University College London have been commissioned to provide three reports over the next six months. A report on the academic basis use and validity of methods to detect and quantify damp and mould, A report of the academic basis use and validity of*

*remediation methods and a report cross referencing UCLs work on insulation and net zero carbo opportunities with damp and mould data.*

#### **4.6. Training**

Training for surveyors is completed and training for non technical staff continues. We are also developing a package of bi-annual refresher training and training for new starters.

### **5. Winter preparedness**

- 5.1. The service has been contacting residents with individual gas boilers encouraging them to test they work to avoid peak demand when the weather turns cold.
- 5.2. Boiler renewals, most reported boiler repairs identified. Property letter to agree visit to check boiler and replace where needed, has started.
- 5.3. A roof and gutter program has been reinstated for rainwater pipe and gutters where they are checked, cleared and repaired.
- 5.4. Restocking electric heaters at Brewery Rd has started.
- 5.5. Meeting with current Gas contractors to confirm resources/remit & escalation points will start pre-October.
- 5.6. Additional gas contractor procedure - currently being contracted being finalised and in place pre-October.
- 5.7. Additional front end call centre staff will be in-place October/November.

### **6. Joint working**

- 6.1. Since the Damp and Mould Casework Board Taskforce was established, in February 2023, there have been 109 cases managed through the boards process and currently there are 32 cases open. The casework board is where leads from relevant services meet weekly to discuss high priority cases related to damp and mould, providing an overview, setting actions and tracking progress.
- 6.2. *This panel has highlighted the complexity of some cases and the key risks remain access to properties form decants of complex families and the need for access injunctions in some cases. At Least five of the open 32 cases are progressing towards access injunction to ensure Islington complete the required works*

### **7. Housing Ombudsman**

- 7.1. The Paragraph 49 special investigation by the Housing Ombudsman is still underway.
- 7.2. Since the beginning of August 2022, the Housing Ombudsman has issued 23 determinations of Severe Maladministration, within 15 cases relating to Islington Council, of which two are related to damp and mould. The Ombudsman will usually

consider a number of key points or issues within a case and issue a determination on each one.

## **8. Scrutiny Recommendations**

- 8.1.** Over the course of the scrutiny the panel has considered a number of reports from officers and presentations by several registered social landlords below are the recommendations of the Draft Housing Scrutiny Panel based on these reports. It is acknowledged that as the service is developing its approach some recommendations below may have already been adopted or underway.
- 8.2.** Officers have captured recommendations made by the committee over the course of the scrutiny set out below. Some of these actions have already been set in place but are included for completeness

### **8.2a Access and Reporting of Damp and Mould**

#### **Establish a dedicated online and phone channel for residents to report damp and mould and receive support and advice**

The committee noted issues residents had alerting the service to damp and mould. The benefits of a dedicated reporting system for advice and to arrange damp and mould will help residents get the level of response required.

#### **Ensure technical staff are trained and competent to identify and manage root cause of damp**

The committee noted occasions of poor or incorrect diagnosis in some damp cases and were concerned that surveyors could on occasion default to blaming tenants lifestyle as a cause for condensation. Technical training is important to ensure correct diagnosis and remediation of damp and mould

#### **Ensure technical staff have sufficient equipment to conduct diagnosis**

In addition to correct training the committee seeks reassurance that all available techniques and equipment pursuant to the investigation of the root cause of damp and mould is available to technical staff. Including but not limited to Thermal Imaging equipment, moisture meters and water tests. It is also imperative staff are fully trained on the use of these techniques

#### **Train nontechnical staff to recognise and report damp**

The committee notes that it is important that all staff recognise the signs and impacts of damp and mould and understand what action is required to report that issue to ensure it is swiftly dealt with by the correct department. Nontechnical staff who enter homes should receive basic training and signposting to dedicated referral pathways for damp and mould

### **Undertake property audits to identify damp and mould**

The committee noted the risk of residents not reporting damp and mould and suffering in silence particularly disabled and vulnerable residents. The Committee recommend the tenancy management service undertake routine audits of tenancies on a periodic basis noting any concerns including damp and mould. The service should consider embedding these visits with other routine visits such as gas servicing

### **The service should try to deliver a rapid response to all cases but develop a prioritisation tool to prioritise cases in period of high demand.**

The Committee expects all damp cases to be assessed as quickly as possible but notes that there may be periods of high demand. It encourages the service to develop a detailed prioritisation tool based on knowledge about the resident to ensure at times of high demand the most vulnerable and at-risk residents receive help quickest.

The tool could also be used to identify priority for remediation work or rehousing

### **The service continues to develop referral pathways for other services such as GPS and Health Practitioners**

The committee note the good work undertaken by the department working with health partners to identify cases and risks. The service is encouraged to further develop this information sharing and create a joined-up approach for residents suffering damp and mould.

## **8.2 b Process of Managing Damp and Mould**

### **Ensure cases are tracked to completion**

The committee noted the work undertaken by the service to ensure each case is recorded and tracked until the damp and mould issue is full resolved. The Committee would like to see this process further strengthened and developed to ensure good initial diagnosis and response and long lasting benefits of the councils interactions. Data from the tracker should also inform trends in damp across the estates and performance feedback for staff

### **Ensure the risk of damp and mould is removed as a first stage and repeated until root cause is dealt with**

The committee noted that historically damp cases failed to quickly remove the risk of mould while other work was being conducted. It notes the Changes to the service but recommends that this approach is embedded as standard ensuring that resident's exposure to mould is minimised as a matter of priority in every case.

### **Improve communication with residents on process setting out the actions the service will take for each root cause**

The committee noted that the councils web pages and policy information combined with information provided by staff failed to clearly set out the various stages of addressing damp and mould. This has on occasion led to frustration and complaints by residents who feel that the council is not addressing the root cause of the issue. The committee note that the approach will vary dependent of the cause of the damp and mould but feels better communication and documentation is required to make this clear to residents and manage expectations

**Consider review process and ensure that returning damp and mould is escalated in response to returning cases or long term failure to address the root cause.**

The committee noted that on occasion dealing with damp and mould can be difficult or that the issue returns after works are completed. The committee welcomes the service introducing a three month review period however expressed reservations if this period was over the summer months. The committee would also like the service to ensure that an escalated response is shown to cases that return or that take an excessive amount of time to resolve leaving residents exposed to damp and mould for long periods. This should be set out in the new damp policy.

**Develop and report KPIS for tackling damp and mould and its root causes**

The committee note the work the service has done developing specific monitoring statistics for its response on damp and mould. The committee would like to see regular feedback on this performance ensuring the service maintains its focus on addressing damp and mould. The committee would also like to monitor the extent of damp and mould in the borough and the distribution of the various root causes to inform further investment and scrutiny.

**Ensure cases where overcrowding is a root cause are suitably prioritised**

The committee note the particular challenge of damp and mould in overcrowded homes and note the work reflecting this in the allocations policy. The committee would like to ensure that assessment and deployment of these priority points is embedded in the process

**Ensure senior management escalation for ongoing cases where root cause can't/has not been remedied**

The committee approved the establishment of a Damp and Mould Taskforce reviewing the high profile and hard to remedy damp and mould cases. The work of this group in tackling the hardest cases is noted and the committee encourage the service to embed this approach with clear processes for escalation and referral to this group.

**Deploy additional ventilation as appropriate to the situation**

The committee note the importance of ventilation in tackling damp and mould and recommend the service install appropriate ventilation to remedy cases and ensures existing ventilation is properly serviced and maintained. The service should consider install as standard in high risk estates as part of any investment program or void works.

**Ensure record keeping for cases is robust**



The committee note the feedback from the ombudsman that the services record keeping does not always support all of the actions taken in a case. It notes the new case management process and changes to the Oneserve system but encourages the service to constantly review its process and staff behaviour to ensure accurate detailed records are kept for all cases.

## **8.2 c Strategic Response to Damp and Mould**

### **Ensure Damp and Mould Remediation is a focus for asset strategy and capital investment planning**

The committee note that long term reduction of damp and mould cases is only possible through investment in the housing stock improving insulation and ventilation in homes. The committee notes there are a range of competing pressures such as building safety, decent homes and carbon reduction but encourages the service to ensure that any future investment strategy and asset plan specifying recognises and addresses improvements targeting reduction in damp and mould.

### **Ensure mapping of damp and mould identifies estates for investment**

The committee note the work the service is doing geographically mapping cases of damp and mould. It encourages the service to further develop this approach using data about high prevalence areas to target investment and capital works

### **Undertake outreach work in estates where there is a high prevalence of damp and mould**

The committee would like the service to regularly review the geographical data on damp and mould and on estates with a high prevalence undertake outreach work writing to residents and setting up drop in sessions to ensure no resident with damp and mould is unidentified.

The committee notes the service has started trials of this approach on several estates and received good feedback.

## **8.2 d Other Recommendations**

### **The service to complete and evaluate its remote monitoring pilots**

The committee noted the work done to establish pilots for remote and advance monitoring of homes for excessive humidity. The service should continue to develop and assess the pilots and consider the benefits of wider investment and use of this technology.

**The committee expects further recommendations following the publishing of the Housing Ombudsman section 49 report**

The committee notes that further recommendations will be required to ensure compliance with the section 49 investigations recommendations. The committee also expects briefings on all future maladministration findings on a quarterly basis along with details of the learning actions and changes made by the service as a response.

**The Committee expect further recommendations following the governments adjustments to decent homes.**

The committee notes that the Regulator for Social Housing and Government are reviewing and updating the decent homes standard and would like information on how the service will address these changes once more details are released.

Members of the committee are asked to amend or add to the draft recommendations.