Leeds Tenant Scrutiny Board Report:

The Advice and Support for Residents with Damp and Mould.

October 2023

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Introduction

This report describes the work of the Tenant Scrutiny Board and its review into the advice and support Housing Leeds gives to residents with damp and mould in their homes.

This review took place between April and October 2023, during the Spring and Summer months so that the board was able to make recommendations to Housing Leeds for their consideration ahead of the colder, winter months.

The topic of damp and mould was selected following the Board receiving a number of updates from senior officers in Housing Leeds, who shared some of the existing priorities of the service and the importance of Housing Leeds as a landlord in effectively managing damp and mould and the advice and support they give for residents.

The Board also selected damp and mould as a topic to review as has been an issue raised nationally, with large numbers of tenants having some experience of damp and mould in their own homes. The Board is also mindful of the cost of living increases in recent years, which may mean many tenants are less able to heat their homes, which may make damp and mould problems worse.

The board intentionally undertook a more ‘bite-size’ review, looking a specific aspect of the services work into damp and mould so that the review can be both timely (ahead of winter) and manageable to allow other residents to also take part with an interest.

The Tenant Scrutiny Board are a group of volunteer tenants who are supported to review any aspect of the services given by Housing Leeds. For this review, they were joined by members of the Tenant Voice Panel, strengthening the membership and tenant input into the review and allowing more tenants to take part in the process.

Scope

The Board's review into damp and mould focussed on:

- The advice and support given to residents to help prevent and reduce instances of damp and mould. a
- How do we know actions to prevent damp and mould are effective, and what follow up contact and information does Housing Leeds give?
- How does Housing Leeds inform and train staff about damp and mould (including teams in the Community Hubs, Contact Centre and within Contractors) to be able to respond well to residents' queries and take action.

By undertaking this review the Board have worked collaboratively with Housing Leeds to achieve:

- More tenants being aware of how they can report damp and mould
- More tenants being aware of what they can do to help prevent damp and mould
- Improved customer satisfaction with how Housing Leeds respond to reports of damp and mould.

This report is focussed on the experience and wish to help improve services for Housing Leeds tenants, however, there is the potential to share the learning in the report with those teams or services who support those living in the private rented sector, or more widely.

What the Board did and what we learnt:

At the beginning of the review the Board received and reviewed copies of the damp and mould policy, and a recent Executive Board report into Housing Leeds activity related to managing damp and mould for background information. The Board subsequently also heard from the Deputy Head of Repairs and Service Manager for Disrepair, who gave an overview of the work of Housing Leeds and helped the Board understand the work that was currently in place. This included talking

through the Housing Leeds actions in response to the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight Report into Damp and Mould and the 26 recommendations made, 19 of which Housing Leeds had so far completed.

The Board noted:

- The creation earlier in the year of a dedicated Damp and Mould team within the service, and some of the steps taken to share with residents how this team can be accessed.
- The Board also heard about current work to use the growing amount of information about damp and mould cases and how profiling this was being used to help inform communications to residents.
- How all staff, in the forthcoming staff appraisals, will be set an objective on damp and mould to support the commitment to a 'zero tolerance' approach.
- How Housing Leeds is working with other landlords across West Yorkshire to combine resources, share good practice and to develop a shared e-learning staff training package.
- How the service was sensitive to the cost-of-living increases, and how this had an impact on damp and mould cases. To help with this, the team has engaged with other agencies, for example working with British Gas to give fuel vouchers to those on pre-payment meters and distributing mould spray to tenants.
- How the service has also developed a range of communications for residents about damp and mould and will be developing this further in the year ahead.

The Board spoke to officers about how we support any tenants who were vulnerable or who have a disability or impairment. Officers described how this would be an important aspect of the 'triage' by the damp and mould team so that there is a better understand of what a tenant may be unable to do themselves and what actions Housing Leeds can support with.

The Board asked officers leading on damp and mould prevention activity what areas or issue they would like to improve on. Officers described that the majority of cases (around 70%) had an element of condensation and so there was a view that more could be done to communicate with residents about how to help tackle condensation, which may help reduce damp and mould in some cases, or existing problems becoming worse.

Officers also advised how some instances of damp and mould have a link with other factors such as overcrowding and rehousing and fuel poverty, so the development of future communications needed to be sensitive to this.

The Board received an overview of the Annual Tenancy Check In (ATCI's), and New Tenancy Checks (NTC's). The board were informed how questions related to damp and mould were included in these important conversations with residents as a way to help identify any damp and mould issues and as an opportunity to give advice to residents.

The application of these were supported by the Team Leader for the Morley Housing Team. She described how housing staff are supported to carry out these checks with residents, the advice and support given and how damp and mould was a priority for all teams, not just those within Property Management. The Team Leader confirmed that all her staff had received training to be able to identify and give advice to residents, and that local housing teams were able to add value by also seeing the 'whole picture' so that any other needs or issues can be dealt with – and not treating damp and mould in isolation.

The Morley Housing Team, like others, had a damp and mould champion, and the Board would like to praise the Morley team in their leadership and culture around damp and mould, with an aspiration that all staff are damp and mould champions. The Team Leader also gave a considered account of how damp and mould can be worsened by the cost of heating homes and described what further support the service gives to help maximise tenants incomes.

A number of the Board attended the staff training on damp and mould, which is currently being rolled out to all staff teams, prioritising those teams who have the most customer contact. The training was thorough and helped staff identify the types of damp and mould and included practical advice and steps tenants can take to help reduce it. It also described how non-technical staff can escalate any cases to the damp and mould team and how condensation can arise and how this can be dealt with. The board felt this was accessible and useful training content, however, the sessions attended by Board members had a number of practical constraints such as access to a projector or other room facilities that may help create a more effective training environment for staff to learn.

The Board also reflected on the content of the training and how the issue of trickle vents could be emphasised further. The experience of some of the Board being there is less awareness of trickle vents amongst tenants (for those who have windows with them). Part of the training included making available to staff free bottles of damp and mould spray. The Board are supportive of this and imagine this will be very useful for a number of tenants. However, the Board observed that the directions for use of the spray wasn't clear, and the writing very small. The Board would therefore like the service to consider what additional advice could be given to tenants when receiving the spray.

The Board undertook a review of the literature on different council and housing association websites, including online/web content and 'pdfs' or leaflets for residents advice. The Board had a number of observations about what content was most accessible and engaging for residents, and also looked at some different damp and mould short videos. For example, the Board welcomed the use of images to help explain the different types of damp and mould, but felt any communications shouldn't always show the 'worst case' image, with a risk that some tenants may interpret this as 'mines not that bad so I won't ask for help'.

The Board watched the Housing Leeds damp and mould advice video, along with other landlords. The Board welcome the use of videos to help inform residents, and felt the content of the Leeds video was useful. However, other examples (for instance that produced by York Council) that was in an animated style, the Board felt was more engaging and memorable in terms of the messages it gave.

The existing damp and mould leaflet in use by Housing Leeds was reviewed, and considered to be accessible and useful for residents. That the service had provided this in community languages for the local Community Hubs was positive and that the service was incorporating the use of QR codes to link to further online information was also welcomed.

The Board noted that some landlords acknowledged that some property types, often older homes, were more at risk of suffering from damp and mould. The current communications in terms of advice and support do not appear to be targeted at any property type or customer group who may be more at risk. There may therefore be an opportunity to develop the services communications materials to take into account more specific customer circumstances.

In August, the Board undertook a survey of residents who had received a general surveyor's inspection related to damp and mould between March and May 2023. This was to ask questions from tenants themselves about how easy it was to report damp and mould, if advice from Housing Leeds had been followed, and if so, had this helped make a difference and what the overall experience of tenants was when asking for help.

The survey was responded to by 139 tenants. A number of positives came from the survey including a relatively high proportion of tenants saying it was easy for them to report their issue to us. The board were also pleased to see that a large number of respondents had seen the damp and mould video. The Board recognise that the survey was a sample of residents, and that those residents perhaps with ongoing issues may be more motivated to reply, however, the key theme emerging from the results was the theme of communication and a need to keep more tenants better updated with the progress of their repair or inspection.

The survey also identified that a large proportion of tenants were finding it difficult to heat their home in the winter months. We know from other evidence that Housing Leeds are sensitive to this and the board are supportive of the work to both support tenants in terms of their income, any grants or benefits, as well as providing advice about heating and ventilating their homes. We also expect that the experience of tenants currently is improving in part to the training and support being given to staff to help them identify damp and mould and give tenants appropriate advice.

Finally, the Board reviewed recent maladministration findings from the Housing Ombudsman related to damp and mould. In particular, the learning statements from different landlords. The Board were generally reassured in that the learning from other landlords mirrored the actions and commitments from Housing Leeds, such as the creation of a dedicated damp and mould team which was already in place.

Acknowledgements

The Tenant Scrutiny Board would like to thank:

- The 139 tenants who responded to the Board's survey about their experiences in reporting and receiving some form of damp and mould advice.
- Members of the Tenant Voice Panel (Jackie and Terry especially along with Rebecca) who helped the Board with their review
- Councillor Jessica Lennox, Executive Member for Housing
- Rob Goor, Deputy Head of Responsive Repairs
- Tina Markey, Service Manager (Dis-repair)
- Lauren Steward, Team Leader, Morley Housing Team
- Jenny Dixon, Neighbourhood Services Officer
- Andy Holroyd, Callum Ricketts and Roisin Donnelly who helped support the survey work
- Peter Greenwood, Trish Parker and Ian Montgomery from the Tenant Engagement Team who supported the review.
- The staff from other services who the board interacted with throughout the course of their review.

Recommendations

Tenant Scrutiny Board Recommendation	Response from Housing Leeds	'Accepted', 'Partially Accepted', 'Rejected' or Further Information requested'.
1. That the service enhance existing communications materials to include more information about condensation and ways residents can help tackle this.		
2. That the service puts into place an updated forward communications plan related to damp and mould, taking account where possible of how some residents will find heating their homes unaffordable and the use of trickle vents.		
3. That the board continue to roll out damp and mould training to staff, but consider the best possible learning environment (rooms and technology used) to help make the training as effective as possible for staff.		
4. The service are asked to consider the future use of images in their damp and mould communications. Whilst the board welcome the use of images to aid understanding, these should be typical or every-day images, not the 'worst-case' scenario.		
5. The Board ask Housing Leeds to review it's existing website content on damp and mould, observing that the majority of other landlords websites had dedicated pages related to damp and mould, advice on how to treat and who to contact. The Leeds website content, whilst useful and clearly written, felt more fragmented in comparison.		
6. Housing Leeds consider the commissioning of further advice or information videos for residents on damp and mould (using York as an example) and understanding that further video's may be expensive to commission, think imaginatively about who and how this could be done (e.g. with input from		

local universities or colleges, contractors etc). Whilst this takes place to continue to promote the existing video as widely as possible.		
7. Housing Leeds consider implementing a forward plan of more bespoke/targeted communications that are more relevant to specific tenants living in certain types of homes or circumstances.		
8. The Board compliment the service on the approach to training it's staff on damp and mould. However, the Board would like confirmation on how the training and awareness raising is being shared with contractors and other customer facing teams outside of Housing Leeds – e.g. the Contact Centre and Community Hubs.		
9. Housing Leeds consider including a short leaflet or advice slip on how to use the spray and any other useful information (perhaps about condensation) that could be handed to residents at the same time as the spray. Otherwise, some tenants may find the direction on use inaccessible, and this may be an opportunity missed.		
10. A theme of the survey feedback is around needing to improve communication and better updates to tenants on the progress of a repair or survey in response to damp and mould. The Board ask Housing Leeds to clarify it's processes in terms of the 'after care' or follow up communication for those tenants who have reported damp and mould.		
11. That the service consider how it will measure the future quality of the customer experience related to damp and mould to test if these recommendations and other work being led on by the service, is making a positive difference on the ground.		