



Wythenshawe
Community Housing Group

Scrutiny Group review findings - Damp and Mould

September 2023

Summary

During August and September the 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 **follows up** with customers after work is completed; 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

Scrutiny Group was commissioned to choose an area to review on the topic of Safety. The Scrutiny Group members decided to focus on damp & mould because:

- Damp and mould are important issues for residents, landlords and the regulator.
- Awareness of damp and mould has increased since the death of 2-year old Awaab Ishak in Rochdale.
- 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:

1. 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?
2. What is the experience of colleagues who wish to report a damp and mould issue in a customer's home? What happens?
3. Are customers appropriately consulted about WCHG's approach to damp and mould?
4. Do we have appropriate mechanisms in place to gather and understand customer feedback?
5. What are we learning from customer complaints and other customer feedback in relation to damp and mould?
6. How are we gathering and using information relating to the number of properties which are experiencing damp and mould issues?
7. How do we identify properties which might be experiencing damp and mould issues? And what are we doing about it? (heatmap)
8. How does our approach to obtaining access to properties and working on damp and mould compare to other social housing providers?
9. 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:

- Reviewed damp & mould Customer Complaints log
- Reviewed communications to customers
 - Postcards to customers
 - Letters to customers
 - Damp and mould related content in newsletter/ online
 - Damp and Mould Policy
- Interviewed Living Well Manager (Martine Boschat) and Senior Property Surveyor (Colin Prentice)

Findings

Q1: 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. There is no evidence to show that cause of the damp/ mould is 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.

Q2: 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; (volunteer) service inspectors. 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 a 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.

Scrutiny Group suggested that WCHG needs to ensure and track that colleagues carrying gas/ health and safety checks are asking about outstanding repairs (including damp and mould).

Q3: 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.

Q4: 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.

As a one-off activity, the Customer Hub also contacted 575 customers at least 30 days after the appointment to ask if damp and mould issues had been resolved. 279 (49%) customers responded to this contact. Of these, 84% reported that the damp and mould had been resolved. Surveyors inspections were raised for the those homes where the damp & mould issue had reoccurred or where customers reported a new incidence.

Area for improvement:

Management should consider a permanent mechanism to check with customers whether a damp & mould issue has been resolved.

WCHG should aim to improves its rate for resolving damp and mould issues in customer properties.

Q5: What are we learning from customer complaints and other customer feedback in relation to damp and mould?

Findings:

Scrutiny Group 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.

Q6: How are we gathering and using information relating to the number of properties which are experiencing damp and mould issues?

Q7: How do we identify properties which might be experiencing damp and mould issues? And what are we doing about it?

Findings:

Scrutiny Group is happy with this area but acknowledges it is a work-in-progress.

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.

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

Q8: 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.

Accessing properties in relation to damp and mould is also conducted by WCHG's Tenancy Audit Team.

Q9: Are the communications to customers about obtaining access to their properties fair and person centred?

Findings:

Repairs: There is a lack of distinction between letters received for missed appointments that concern minor works and those which are more important to customer safety.

Tenancy Audit: While Scrutiny Group 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 WCHG being denied access to properties.

Management should consider the possibility of special letters for missed appointments which concern works where customer safety is at risk.

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

Recommendations

Scrutiny Group recommendations

Four recommendations were identified by Scrutiny Group

1. Management to keep and ensure customer access to data relating to the meeting of inspection and repairs timescales; satisfaction specifically with damp and mould services; how common customer vs colleague reports are and how often surveyors/ Works colleagues are denied access to properties.
2. Management to find a permanent solution which enables follow-up calls to check that damp and mould issues have been resolved.
3. 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.
4. Management to reconsider the letters which are sent out to customers when appointments are missed. Repairs Management to introduce a letter which highlights the risk to customer safety after a damp and mould appointment is missed. Tenancy Audit to consider softening the tone of its letters to customers who miss appointments.



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