association for public service excellence

Briefing 23/16
March 2023

Local Authorities Building Maintenance Services - Tackling damp and mould in social housing

To: All APSE main contacts

Executive Summary

The issue regarding damp and mould in social housing was highlighted by a coroner, following the tragic case of Awaab Ishak in Rochdale in a social housing property managed out-with the local authority.

This prompted the respective UK governments to re-issue guidance to social housing providers in respect of addressing the issues and preventing future tragic cases.

APSE held a roundtable discussion as part of the APSE Housing, construction and building maintenance advisory group that highlighted the approaches that councils are adopting to tackle to the issue.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary **1**

1 Background **2**

2 Key themes raised at the roundtable discussions **2**

2.1 Expert advice *2*

2.2 Damp and Mould Taskforce *2*

2.3 Engaging with frontline staff. *3*

2.4 Communication with tenants *3*

2.5 Response of the service *3*

2.6 Products and technology *3*

3 Summary of the key points raised at the roundtable **4**

4 APSE Comment **4**

1 Background

Following the tragic case of Awaab Ishak, who died of a respiratory condition caused by mould in his home, attention focused on the responsibility of all registered housing providers both private and local authority, to ensure that the homes they provide are well-maintained and of a decent standard.

On 22 November 2022, the Regulator for Social Housing wrote to all registered providers of social housing in England. A copy of the letter can be accessed via the following link but similar measures have also been undertaken in other Administrative areas.

Letter to Social Housing providers

The Regulator for Social Housing requested that providers owning 1,000 homes or more provided evidence of:-

1. Their approach to assessing the extent of damp and mould issues in their homes
2. Their most recent assessment of the extent of damp and mould hazards
3. The action they are taking to remedy them,
4. The process they have to identify and deal promptly with damp and mould cases when they are raised by tenants.

Providers with fewer than 1,000 homes have been instructed to inform the regulator immediately if they are not taking action to remedy damp and mould issues, or do not have a comprehensive understanding of the extent of potential damp and mould issues in their homes.

2 Key themes raised at the roundtable discussions

There was a variety of key themes that emerged from the discussions which included: -

2.1 Expert advice

Local authorities advised that they had brought together a group of experts to provide evidence-based advice, including air quality specialists and academics.

2.2 Damp and Mould Taskforce

Councils highlighted that tackling the issues required a cross-agency and multi-service approach. Therefore, taskforces have been established that include representatives from services and agencies that enter people's homes. Examples of these included adult social care, social services, and health visitors.

As a result of the task forces training has been developed to assist in identifying damp and mould in properties and the mechanisms for reporting the problem.

Some councils also reported that they had adopted a change to the approach that had been used in the past, for example, rather than ask the tenants to clean the mould themselves, they are now asked to leave it as is to allow the inspector to assess the full extent of the issue.

2.3 Engaging with frontline staff.

Training has been provided to all employees who enter people's homes to identify potential issues regarding damp and mould and they have been provided with mechanisms for reporting the issue to the building maintenance service.

Call centre staff have also received additional training to highlight the increased priority of the issue and the information that is given to the tenants when reporting the issue.

2.4 Communication with tenants

There was conscientiousness at the roundtable regarding the importance of communicating and providing clear messages to the tenants. It was reported in the session that councils had used a variety of channels to engage with tenants and to encourage them to report any issues that they were experiencing regarding damp or mould problems. It was commented that the approach of encouraging tenants to proactively report issues would cause an increase in the volume of calls and jobs. However, it was deemed important to ensure the scale of issues could be understood and the relevant action could be taken.

In addition, information has also been circulated to tenants regarding measures that could be taken to mitigate the risk of damp and mould becoming a problem in the house.

2.5 Response of the service

Various examples were provided in relation to how councils were responding to the reports of damp and mould in tenants' properties. The most common approach centred around the tenant reporting the issue online and supplying photographs of the affected areas. A trained operative then follows up and attends the property to assess the extent of the issue and the potential causes. This type of assessment was typically undertaken within days of the report being made to the council.

Following the initial assessment being undertaken, in addition to cleaning the mould, an appointment is then made with the tenant to undertake maintenance work to rectify the underlying issues such as repairs to the property, tenant education and assistance with fuel poverty.

2.6 Products and technology

The roundtable attendees provided a variety of products that they used throughout the process including thermal cameras and moisture meters for the initial assessments.

To protect properties from mould returning after remediation work had been undertaken, councils used iso-therm and thermos dry paints and installed atmos units.

It was reported that councils are now looking at using technology to be more proactive than reactive when it comes to the issues of damp and mould in properties and were piloting or currently drawing up plans to install monitors that are linked to software that would monitor and highlight any issues within the tenant's property. These technologies are being developed to

integrate with fire alarms and carbon monoxide monitoring system with the added benefit of being able to monitor room temperatures and moisture in the atmosphere, thus highlighting potential issues before damp and mould forms.

The attendees commented that pilots were being used to identify the most effective approach, develop effective tenant engagement strategies and provide tenants with assurance with regard to privacy issues and also to ascertain the data that can be collected and how this can be used in the future for asset management purposes.

3 Summary of the key points raised at the roundtable

The key points raised at the roundtable can be summarised as follows:-

- Expert and evidence-based information is key at the outset to develop an approach.
- The issue is not just a building maintenance problem, collaboration with multiple services and stakeholders is required to identify damp and mould problems in homes and report details back to the council.
- Political buy-in and strong leadership are required to enable an effective approach being adopted and for the adequate resource to be made available.
- Tenant engagement is essential to raise awareness of the need to report any issues and how to mitigate the problems from occurring.
- Training is required for all staff that are involved in the process.
- A range of products are available to detect and assist with alleviating the damp and mould from reoccurring in properties
- Data is key to identifying properties, identifying vulnerable tenants and to inform asset management strategies.
- Innovative products are being developed that can monitor the levels of moisture in properties and highlight potential issues. Local authorities are currently looking at piloting, and installing monitors in the future.

4 APSE Comment

Clearly these issues will be ongoing for some time and highlight the importance of effective repairs and maintenance strategies to the health and wellbeing of social housing tenants. The sharing of ideas in response to the new guidance, and more importantly avoiding future tragedies, such as that of the little boy, Awaab Ishak, will remain an area of concern within the sector. The sharing of information and best practice in how best to respond to concerns of damp and mould was made possible through APSE's Housing and Building Maintenance Advisory Group. These networking events are free to attend for APSE member councils. More details on joining the networks are provided below.

About APSE Advisory Groups

Advisory groups are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and facilitate networking with peers in other councils, and the sharing knowledge and best practice. If you do not currently receive details about APSE advisory group meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national advisory groups include:-

- Building cleaning
- Catering
- Cemeteries and crematoria
- Commercialisation network: Local authority trading, charging and income generation
- Cost of Providing / Cost of Living Network
- Housing, construction and building maintenance
- Parks, horticultural and ground maintenance
- Renewables and climate change
- Roads, highways and street lighting
- Sports and leisure management
- Vehicle maintenance and transport
- Waste management, refuse collection and street cleansing

Visit www.apse.org.uk for more detail

Vickie Hacking
Principal Advisor
Email Vhacking@apse.org.uk