

The NFA asked its members' views on the five questions the Housing Ombudsman set out in its recent call for evidence for its investigation into damp and mould.

Our members' responses highlight that while it's clear some social housing residents have had to endure terrible living conditions and terrible service from their landlord, this is not representative of the sector as a whole. NFA members do not claim to be free of such problems, but stress that they are committed to responding to such issues swiftly and to residents' satisfaction.

This brief summarises the responses from NFA members to the Ombudsman's questions.

The [often interlinked] causes of persistent damp and mould

- *A long history of under-investment in social housing;*
- *homes that have poor thermal efficiency;*
- *poor design or build quality that hampers upgrade and retrofit;*
- *chronic countrywide lack of social housing to solve overcrowding issues or house residents while major remedial works are underway;*
- *stock shortages, aggravated by lack of policy or resources to replace affordable rent homes lost to Right to Buy;*
- *poverty, which puts solutions such as consistent home heating or adequate ventilation beyond the reach of some households.*

Members' practical solutions

- **Many say well-coordinated and responsive repairs services are the key to resolving damp and mould issues.**
 - The foundation of an effective repairs response is well-trained staff across the whole service – from call centres to on-site officers and surveyors, all motivated by a 'how can we help?' culture.
 - The aim is to make sure all staff recognise issues quickly and know how to respond effectively.
 - They recognise the value of logging data fully and carefully and know how to analyse it to identify trends such as common problems in certain property types.
 - A well-coordinated repairs service will be able to take this information, test solutions and then roll out what works across the stock as standard practice.
- **Sharing of information and data across the housing management service ensures that:**
 - customers are really listened to
 - tenants' views and particular circumstances are built into solutions
 - recurring problems are identified so that specialist teams or staff can get to grips with common, widespread or intractable issues.

- **Information and education**

- Well-written information packs and home visits by specialist officers help tenants manage condensation in their homes – some NFA members report a decrease in complaints after introducing such schemes.
- Home visits, as part of a targeted information programme, can also help identify the most vulnerable: those who cannot afford to follow 'lifestyle' advice to heat their home and run extractor fans; and those who have a hoarding problem or other social care or health need that is a barrier to changing behaviour. Other housing-related services may be more appropriate.

- **Innovation**

- NFA members increasingly look for solutions that address damp and mould problems when conventional repairs, information and education alone cannot address them.
- For instance, some aim to fit as much stock as possible with MVHR - passive ventilation powered by natural air current flow, rather than electric fans. Combined with heat recovery technology, moisture is driven out but warmth is retained.
- As work – and, hopefully, funding streams – to meet climate change targets come online, members are planning how they can address the targets and, at the same time, tackle issues such as fuel poverty and persistent damp.

NFA members' case studies

Your Homes Newcastle

The experience and knowledge of the surveyor is a key factor in successfully identifying and solving problems; and some problems are hidden – under floors, in cavities or ducts.

- All technical staff and operational managers **have comprehensive training** and must also complete 10 hours of CPD each year; and sometimes 'staged' remedies help to isolate difficult-to-diagnose problems.
- **The Homes Act** which came into force in March 2019 has helped YHN develop a renewed focus on aligning services to collaborate more effectively. The repairs team works closely with those in the assets, technical project and design teams. The four teams work together to resolve issues on an estate basis.
- **Information is shared.** This means that projects to install external wall insulation, promote fuel switching programs, improve domestic heating and help reduce fuel poverty are implemented in a joined-up way that draws on all relevant expertise within the organisation.
- **Recent projects** have included fitting radiators where the original build spec did not allow for them; fitting bespoke mechanical ventilation systems in multi-story mid- and high-rise blocks; installing PIV (Positive Input Ventilation) units in homes that are suitable for them. During YHN's Modern Homes Programme, ensuring adequate ventilation was a key focus for teams delivering upgrades such as new doors and windows in older properties that were not designed to be draught-free.

Solihull Community Housing

- **SCH's own leaflet**, *A guide to reducing condensation and mould in your home*, is given to every resident who has any kind of damp problem, advising them on how best to heat and ventilate their homes and other preventative measures such as wiping down windows. Seasonal information also goes out in tenant newsletters and on the website.
- **Monitoring devices** can be briefly installed in homes to help customers see for themselves how their daily routine increases or reduces damp and condensation.
- **Future capital project planning** includes: installation of MVHR units to reduce humidity while retaining heat in homes that are suitable for them; and a Decent Homes 2 programme which will look at improving the thermal efficiency of our stock and reducing condensation.

Wolverhampton Homes

Identifying current or likely future damp and mould issues is a key objective of preliminary **whole-estate surveys** for WH's major improvement projects and programmes. An example is the Heath Town regeneration project which is investing £120 million in upgrading 1000 low, medium and high-rise flats and houses. Better thermal insulation and ventilation are among the key improvements.

- WH's **building improvement programme** is upgrading flats across the city to improve fire safety and, we are taking that opportunity to improve thermal efficiency, and replace flat roofs with pitched roofs to improve water run-off and prevent future damp problems.
- The organisation is **upgrading its repairs reporting system** so that customers can let the landlord know quickly and easily when they have a problem.
- WH runs around ten **open energy advice surgeries** each year across the city (online during the pandemic) and these include educational leaflets and sessions about preventing damp and condensation.
- **A free home energy visit** is offered to customers who tell us their homes are cold or damp or cost a lot to heat. A Money Smart team helps customers review utility tariffs for the most affordable options or other support. The Energy and Climate Change Officer determine whether there are any practical measures that the landlords might offer, such as thermal insulation plaster boards on external walls to address cold spot and thermal bridging.

Barnet Homes

Barnet Homes **brought its repairs service back in-house** in mid-2020 after struggling to consistently record information on damp and mould through its third-party repairs service.

- A **new repairs management IT system** has improved the management of information. It includes a new pre-inspection process of forms with compulsory fields a surveyor must complete, such as moisture readings in affected rooms, results of external inspection, review of mechanical extraction, and ruling out of other potential causes such as leaks, damaged roofing.
- The team is reviewing **technology options** for surveyors such as relative humidity readers.
- A **new audit process** will require managers to check a sample of inspections to ensure quality follow-through on commitments.
- For condensation issues, **follow-up inspections are booked** three to six months later, depending on the time of year, to assess the effectiveness of earlier work or advice.
- The aim is more robust pre-inspection regime with a focus on damp and condensation, and the creation of a clear and auditable process in line with our landlord responsibilities.

Tower Hamlets Homes

Complaints of damp and mould have decreased in the last three years, during which THH has focused on a programme of decent homes work and general capital investment.

- THH **raises awareness of the causes** of damp/mould/condensation with advice on our website, campaigns in our residents' newsletter, and specific detailed information in our new tenant pack.
- **Additional expertise has been brought in** to the THH supply chain to enable quicker diagnosis and solutions.
- **A leaks group** offers an end-to-end solution when leaks happen, setting out clear responsibilities and minimum timeframes for action. This service is also open to leaseholders so that emergency and making safe work can be done quickly, and it also offers follow-up advice on permanent remedies.
- THH has **upgraded the standard of new plumbing** installations to make leaks less likely.

Cornwall Housing

Cornwall has a mild climate with high humidity. A lot of the area's social housing stock is also older and relies on electric heating. Cornwall is also an area of high deprivation and a lot of residents are in fuel poverty.

- A high number of reports of damp and mould has prompted the organisation to use **a specialist contractor to survey** and quote for a solution. This speeds up the process because specialist advice is available on each problem from the start.
- The **complaints team now manages the disrepair protocol** and has directly employed a surveyor.
- A programme to **install Positive Pressure Systems** in CH homes is underway, where the original construction and design makes this possible. PIVs are highly effective at reducing atmospheric moisture and preventing black mould growth.
- CH has employed an **Energy Advisor** to help tenants access grants and lower their fuel costs. **Inclusion Advisors** make sure tenants are receiving the financial support and benefits they are entitled to.

Cheltenham Borough Homes

- Cheltenham Borough Homes introduced **specialist training** for staff five years ago which radically changed the way they identify the cause of damp, condensation and mould in CBH properties.
- Further training enhancement is underway in response to recent publicity around damp and mould issues in social housing.
- The Property and Communities team has also produced this video for customers: *Top tips to avoid damp and mould in the home* [youtube.com/watch?v=FqXmf7PtW7s&t=18s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqXmf7PtW7s&t=18s)

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