

Meeting: COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Housing, Health and Older People

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REVIEW OF DAMP, MOULD & CONDENSATION IN STEVENAGE HOUSING STOCK

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1 PURPOSE

1.1 To consider the recommendations of the Scrutiny review into Damp, Mould & Condensation into Stevenage Housing Stock.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED

2.1 The issue of scrutinising damp, mould and condensation into Stevenage housing stock was agreed by the Select Committee as a scrutiny review item along with other scrutiny items when it met on 7 March 2016.

2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

2.2.1 The Committee met on 28 June 2016 and agreed a scope for the review of damp and mould of Council Housing stock, which it agreed should consider the following areas:

- *Establish the number of properties within the Stevenage Council Housing stock that suffer from damp and mould*
- *Establish if there is a root cause that has been identified for damp and mould in Stevenage Council Homes, such as building construction; ventilation; how well the property is heated?*
- *Look at what measures are taken to alleviate the problem of damp and mould in Council properties – What programme of works are there to address this problem?*

2.2.2 At the same meeting Members agreed that the review should address some of the following questions:

- What advice and measures does the Council provide to tenants who suffer from damp and mould?
- Can the Council provide a dehumidifier to Council tenants?
- What checks are carried out on the Council's housing stock for problems of damp and mould?

2.2.3 Throughout the review Members raised further questions about the current and historical way that damp and mould cases have been handled. This included:

- What should be the acceptable response time to tenants contact re damp and mould?
- Are there minimum standards for habitation for damp and mould that once breached are not acceptable in the SBC housing stock?
- Can standardised performance indicators be established for dealing with damp and mould?

2.3 **Process of the review**

2.3.1 The Committee met on five occasions to undertake the review, on 28 June, 9 September, 19 October and 29 November 2016 and finally on 11 January 2017 to sign off and agree the report and recommendations of the review. Some members of the Committee also met informally to carry out site visits to tenant's homes during August 2016.

2.3.2 The Committee received written and oral evidence from the following people:

- Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People, Cllr Jeannette Thomas
- Strategic Director, Community, Matthew Partridge
- Head of Asset Management, Neil Wilson Prior
- Tenants who had experienced problems with damp, mould and condensation agreed to attend as witnesses – Mrs Nichols and Ms Pomroy

3 **REVIEW FINDINGS**

3.1 **Conclusions of the Community Select Committee**

3.1.1 Based on the input provided to Members conducting the review by Officers supporting the review, and through their own investigations and evidence gathering, the Committee have made the following conclusions.

3.1.1.1 Overall the Committee were of the view that with regards to the complaints received, about how officers in Housing had handled some cases of damp and mould, which was considered as evidence in the review, past performance was not acceptable. Members acknowledged that although performance in these cases was well below what they considered to be acceptable, given the low number of cases recorded, criticism of the service needed to be measured although there was room for improvement which is detailed in the report. However, Members will be closely monitoring the

improvements that the new Damp, Mould and Condensation Strategy will deliver linked to new business practises, including better customer care, better recording of cases, collection of data and investment in flat blocks.

3.1.2 Improved handling of tenants who report damp, mould and condensation in their properties – Officer Training

3.1.3 During the review interviews it became apparent to Members that there was not a consistent approach to how tenants were handled when they reported problems with damp and mould. Therefore Members would recommend that all officers who come into contact with tenants who report damp, mould and condensation undergo adequate training to mitigate some of the previous inappropriate initial responses to tenants. Members were of the view that the suggested training should include moving away from the perceived previous position of citing tenant's lifestyle as the primary cause of damp, mould and condensation without recourse to accepted building science and that officers should be sympathetic when dealing with tenants.

3.1.4 Scale of the problem of Council stock that suffer from damp, mould and condensation?

3.1.5 Members were keen to establish the scale of the problem with damp and mould in the housing stock. Officers from Asset Management, who have recently taken over the responsibility of this service from Housing Repairs and Voids Team (formerly the BMO, Building Maintenance Operation), provided some analysis of the scale of the problem from the data they had at their disposal. That said, the amount of data is limited in its specificity as damp and mould is not recorded from external stock condition surveys nor does it appear on repairs data, as damp and mould is the symptom not the cause e.g. a leaking flat roof, missing damp proof course etc. therefore officers were reliant on tenant complaints and repairs data as a guide.

3.1.6 From September 2015 to August 2016, the number of complaints recorded through corporate channels as a percentage of overall stock was 1.29%. Across the whole stock 3.15% of tenant repairs contained data relating to damp and mould.

3.1.7 It is therefore currently not possible to accurately predict the scale of the number of the 8,000+ properties within the housing stock that potentially are prone to suffer from damp and mould, as this would require internal inspections of the whole stock. However this matter is now receiving more attention and officers are keen to get diagnosis and remedies right following the first visit in line with the new Damp and Condensation Strategy.

3.2 Whether there is a single cause of damp, mould and condensation in SBC housing stock?

3.2.1 Following the officer presentation and interview sessions it is clear that there is no one single cause of damp and mould. However, the build design, construction materials and age and condition of the property can all be

contributing factors in making the property more prone to damp and mould. Officers stated that there were known to be particular problems with non-traditional housing, including some flat blocks which were designed to older standards causing issues such as thermal bridging, that are difficult to rectify. However, the proposed HRA £45M Flat Block Renewal Programme will help alleviate some of the problems in the Council's flat block element of its housing stock.

3.3 Improved communications

3.3.1 Members suggested that as part of a Communications Strategy to promote the new damp and condensation strategy, officers should invite tenants to come forward with current and historical cases of damp and mould to help the authority tackle this maintenance issue in its Housing Stock.

3.4 Agreed timescales to respond to tenants

3.4.1 Based on the small evidence base of the witnesses that Members met and the case histories provided by the Customer Service Centre, Members were of the view that it is not acceptable to allow these cases to drag on for as long as the examples provided.

3.4.2 Members were aware that these cases did not reflect the performance of the entire previous repairs service. However, it was agreed by Members that there needed to be some formally agreed timescales for officers to respond to tenants regarding cases of damp, mould and condensation in their properties.

3.5 Improved process following the first visit

3.5.1 In line with the evidence provided by the tenant witnesses as well as the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People, it was agreed by Members that there should be an improved process following an Officers first visit to a tenant's property, to avoid unnecessary delays and repeat visits.

3.6 Measures to record damp and mould including by property

3.6.1 To avoid a situation where a tenant may be moved from a property that is suffering from damp without the primary cause of the damp ingress being addressed, Members indicated that they were mindful to recommend that as the tenant should be provided with a case number linked to the property serial number.

3.7 Health Impact linked to Housing Allocations

3.7.1 One of the considerations that Members wish to see addressed relates to the impact living in a property that suffers from damp and mould can have on an individual's health. Vulnerable people with underlying medical needs require careful consideration, especially infant family members of tenants. Members

are keen that advice is given to all Housing officers so that there is an awareness of the possible impact on those who suffer with respiratory problems such as asthma. Members would also wish to recommend to officers that this issue be taken into considerations regarding Housing Allocations.

3.8 Comparison with other local authorities

3.8.1 The Scrutiny Officer approached two new town local authorities for comparative data including Harlow and Basildon. Both authorities provided a verbal update on the position of damp and mould within their Housing Stock but neither authority provided written data that had been requested. Based on the verbal update the officers at the two authorities echoed the problems that SBC housing stock encounters with damp and mould, based on an ageing, non-traditional building style housing stock.

3.9 Equalities & Diversity issues

3.9.1 Equalities and diversity issues were not directly addressed in the review, but there are wider equalities issues regarding socio economic pressures encountered by tenants living in social housing whether this be in the public sector or those living in private sector housing. The problems in the UK housing market are well publicised. Acute problems with supply and demand for renting, in both private and social housing sectors, linked with very insecure tenure in private sector housing, have created a market where tenants from families on low incomes feel they have to put up with low quality housing and are worried about complaining to their landlord. Members were of the view that they did not want this to be the case with the housing provided by the Council, therefore as an authority the Council should be open and responsive to tenants reporting issues such as damp and mould.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 That the Community Select Committee considers the findings of the review, contained within this report and the recommendations below be presented to the Portfolio Holder and the Strategic Director (Community) and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of the publishing of this report. In addition, the Community Select Committee will consider an update report on the performance of the service following improved monitoring arrangements and delivery of the Damp and Condensation Strategy (which largely was instigated a result of the review investigation) in the autumn of 2017.

4.2 That officers who come into contact with people who report damp, mould and condensation all undergo adequate training to mitigate some of the previous inappropriate initial responses to tenants, this training to include moving away from the previous default position of citing tenants lifestyle as the primary cause of damp, mould and condensation in properties. Officers must demonstrate a sympathetic approach to tenants who report problems with damp and mould, following a corporate, agreed script.

- 4.3 As part of a communications strategy to promote the new damp and condensation strategy, officers should invite tenants to come forward with current and historical cases of damp and mould to help the authority tackle this maintenance issue in its Housing Stock. This data to then be recorded/classified for stock condition data.
- 4.4 That the issue of damp and mould be included in housing matters events publicising how tenants can mitigate the effects of damp and mould in their properties, this should be linked to a Communications campaign with appropriate information and reporting on the web site. Tenants who suffer from this problem need to know it's appropriate to highlight concerns (and expect that something will be done about it where possible) and they should also know what to expect with transparent procedures in place.
- 4.5 That officers all work to an agreed timeframe for responding to reports of damp and mould from the initial response and for a realistic timeframe for resolving these issues.
- 4.6 That through the HRA Budget process appropriate levels of resources are allocated to invest in repairs to alleviate cases of damp and mould and specific housing blocks that officers are aware that suffer from structural defaults and cause these conditions, are systematically worked on to alleviate the problems, with particular emphasis during the void process, which would avoid subsequent complaints issues.
- 4.7 That officers record the problems and state the process of repair following the first visit and identify the cause rather than the symptom to be addressed.
- 4.8 That officers establish a tangible system of recording data which illustrates the priority/severity of each case.
- 4.9 We recommend that a system of allocating serial number/case number/customer/property unique number reference be used to record first time complaints to avoid follow up complaints being logged individually and to avoid customer/tenants having to re-explain case/issue.
- 4.10 That the housing department recognises the impact of damp and mould on people with respiratory conditions, particularly those with young children and the elderly, and this be considered as part of the planned forthcoming Housing Allocation Policy review.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

The are no direct financial implications for this report.

5.2 Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications for this report.

5.3 Equalities Implications

The Equalities implications have been addressed within the report at paragraph 3.9.1. There are no further equalities implications for this report.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Minutes of the Committee meetings held on 29 June, 7 September, 19 October, 29 November 2016 and 11 January 2017.

APPENDICES Appendix A – Scrutiny scoping proforma document