

**Meeting** Community Select Committee  
**Portfolio Area** Housing  
**Date** 30 November 2021



## DAMP AND CONDENSATION TEAM UPDATE

### NON KEY DECISION

#### 1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To apprise the committee of the work that the Damp and Condensation Team have been doing to improve SBC's response to reports of Damp and/or Mould with its housing stock.

#### 2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Committee support the current approach which is in line with the Housing Ombudsman Service Report: *Spotlight on: Damp and Mould – It's not lifestyle* which focusses on moving from a reactive to a proactive and more holistic approach than has been common practice in the past.
- 2.2 That the Committee continue to support the team to deliver on its promise to tackle Damp and Mould issues by ensuring that sufficient funding is available.
- 2.3 That the Committee review the attached draft Mould Leaflet and Animation and communicate any changes they wish to see in the final versions.

### 3 BACKGROUND

3.1 The Damp and Mould Team was formed as a specialist service to address Councillors concerns that there was a particular issue within the borough and the response was unsatisfactory. Progress was being made prior to the Covid 19 restrictions but the lockdowns and self-isolation of many of our more vulnerable clients – those who paradoxically might be most affected by damp and/or mould - meant that cases backed up.

The team only really started to resurvey and issue works from April 12<sup>th</sup> and with only a limited pool of contractors' available progress was initially slow.

As at the time of writing this report, the backlog has been cleared and cases are coming through but these are fewer than would normally be expected at this time of the year meaning that staff have more time to carry out post inspections and to develop a more customer focussed, case management strategy. This combined with the more holistic, healthy home approach means we are not getting the same volume of reports as the table below illustrates:

**NUMBER OF ENQUIRIES RECEIVED FOR DAMP AND CONDENSATION**

2019/20		2020/21		2021/22	
Apr-19	36	Apr-20	7	Apr-21	29
May-19	29	May-20	10	May-21	29
Jun-19	31	Jun-20	22	Jun-21	36
Jul-19	31	Jul-20	25	Jul-21	35
Aug-19	31	Aug-20	23	Aug-21	30
Sep-19	38	Sep-20	32	Sep-21	30
Oct-19	50	Oct-20	45	Oct-21	43
Nov-19	90	Nov-20	59	Nov-21	18
Dec-19	54	Dec-20	58	Dec-21	
Jan-20	119	Jan-21	65		
Feb-20	66	Feb-21	49		
Mar-20	41	Mar-21	25		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>616</b>		<b>420</b>		<b>250</b>

Table 1: 3 year comparison of reports to the Damp and Mould Team<sup>1</sup>

3.2 A new contractor called Mouldex, a specialist ventilation and mould treatment company was brought on board which has seen cost of fans reduce by approximately 45% while offering a 5 year warranty on mould treatment<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Low volumes in April and May 2020 can be attributed to the first lockdown. November 2021 is the first month that suggests reports are reducing indicating that the team are being effective.

<sup>2</sup> When used in conjunction with their fans

In August we entered into a 12 month framework agreement with Quality Eradication Services Today Limited (QEST) – a specialist topical treatment company.

More recently Envirovent have been taken on for their ventilation solutions following a CPD seminar that the company delivered in which their superb fans and Positive Input Ventilation systems were demonstrated. These have the added benefit of long manufacturer warranties and low maintenance requirements. Improvements in roof ventilation and dealing with localised plumbing issues have also delivered benefits to our residents' homes.

#### **4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS**

- 4.1 The current strategy is proving to be an effective one in recognising the causes of damp and mould particularly in the creation of and management of the conditions that are at the root of most condensation issues.
- 4.2 The team have developed the skills and confidence to identify issues affecting the housing stock and residents' enjoyment of their home while being bold enough to own each case, dealing with the delivery of repairs such as leaks etc. that would normally be referred to our R & V team.
- 4.3 The team has developed strong interdepartmental relationships with other teams such as Project Support Team, Residents and Estates, Supported Housing, Lettings, MRC etc. which has helped with access issues, supporting tenants with mental health or other vulnerabilities, resolving cases that cross departments/teams and improving communication.
- 4.4 Once final versions are approved the new leaflet and animation will be available online to further inform residents on what they can expect from our service.

#### **5 IMPLICATIONS**

##### **Financial Implications**

- 5.1 Currently the original budget of £250,000 for 2021/22 is overcommitted but this was predicted and a further £200,000 has been sourced to continue the work of delivering real solutions rather than just painting over the problem.

The costs reflect the backlog of work from the Covid restrictions as orders from 2020/21 that were unable to be carried out so had to be cancelled and reissued. Also, surveys were put on hold while we were unable to visit residents in their homes and/or while residents were self-isolating. The condition of some properties therefore worsened during this hiatus increasing the remedial work required.

Coupled with the new holistic approach to the problems of damp and mould with Surveyors owning every part of the solution including most repairs has increased the costs of some jobs however, this has made for a better result.

In addition, the newer contractors are more cost effective and offer warranties on their work.

Year	Inspections completed	Work Orders completed	Budget Outturn (Integra)	Original Budget	Budget Variance
2019/20	293	225	£218,992.11	£150,000.00	-£68,992.11
2020/21	230	142	£214,267.74	£250,000.00	£35,732.26
2021/22 (YTD)	307	168	£176,743.85 <sup>3</sup>	£250,000.00 <sup>4</sup>	£73,256.15

Table 2: 3 year comparison of completed inspections and work orders

The above table clearly demonstrates the impact of Covid 19 on the deliverable inspections and work orders in 2020/21 and accounts in large part for the increases shown in both volumes and costs for the current year to date. In addition to the 168 orders completed by our contractors there are another 140 or so in the pipeline i.e. issued but not yet shown as complete and not paid. These are currently being reviewed by the team as part of our general housekeeping however it is believed that a much of this may be down to a lag in invoicing hence the next table should be viewed as indicative only.

TOTAL ENTRIES ON TRACKER	
SUMMARY OF D AND C CASES	
STATUS	TOTALS
Acknowledged	0
Appointment Booked	34
Contractor Instructed	140
Decant Required	2
Enquiry Closed	866
Enquiry Completed	1198
In Progress	85
Missed Appointment (staff)	0
Need to Rebook	1
No Access (tenant)	7
No Response	5
Received	1
Referred to Repairs	3
<b>TOTAL ACTIVE ENQUIRIES</b>	<b>222</b>

Table 3: Snapshot of Tracker information

<sup>3</sup> This figure only represents actuals in Integra at the time of writing. Within Northgate the total commitment is in excess of £300,000 hence the requirement of additional funding to support the work of the team.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the £250,000 original budget the team have been granted a further £50,000 in September and £150,000 in November which should see the team through to the end of the financial year at the current rate of new and review cases.

## Comments:

- Appointments Booked, Contractor Instructed and In Progress are all currently being reviewed.
- Need to Rebook, No Access and No Response are all being followed up with either the tenant directly or via the Project Support Team and/or Housing Officer
- Received will become Appointment Booked once we can get hold of the tenant.
- Decant required relates to two properties – one is currently being followed up with the HO as an emergency case and the other is to be presented to Housing Panel on the 24<sup>th</sup> November for rehousing due to overcrowding.
- The latest position will be shared at the meeting.

## Legal Implications

5.2 While the new Housing White Paper and Housing Ombudsman Service Report: *Spotlight on: Damp and Mould – It's not lifestyle* have the potential to increase the Disrepair Claims, if anything the new approach improves our position in that we will be able to better defend our position. Our current caseload is coming down and our exposure is reduced due to the records we have been able to access and the robust manner in which we have responded to some of the more spurious claims from claimants experts as well as those Solicitors who have not followed the correct protocol. The team have identified a project for the New Year working with both our Repairs Team and our Legal Service to develop a consistent Disrepair process. In addition, the Legal Service have agreed to provide regular reports on our costs for legal services so we can understand the aggregated costs of any compensation to a claimant, their legal costs and our legal costs. Where possible any compensation to a claimant is offset against any rent debt.

Lastly, where we are required to pay the claimants legal costs, we have the option of using a legal costs draftsman whose job it is to check that these are “reasonable” and where excessive we will refuse to pay inflated costs. This strategy should reduce the speculative claims that we have seen emerging from some Solicitors.

## Risk Implications

5.3 Again risks are reducing as we move from a “wait and see” responsive service to one that is able to analyse data and pre-empt calls by revisiting previous cases, carrying out “belt and braces” interventions and developing better case management focussing on the customer rather than just the property. Exercising options such as more paint choices and introducing wallpaper options to previously papered and treated walls will improve customer satisfaction as well as reducing the chance of the problem recurring. Ensuring that where a problem does recur we recall the contractor under warranty will further improve both our success and reputation while protecting the Council from additional costs.

### **Service Delivery Implications**

- 5.4 The Service Delivery is and will continue to improve. Already we have seen a reduction in new reported cases allowing staff to spend more time on the softer elements of customer service – Work In Progress inspections, Post Inspections, Customer Liaison, Review of Previous Cases, Data Analysis etc.

Our contractor QEST has provided useful management information (available separately if required) which they are developing further to give more detailed breakdowns by month, quarter and YTD as well as helping identify those properties most at risk using computer modelling.

### **Information Technology Implications**

- 5.5 IT is crucial in further improving the way the team records and analyses data. We have already redesigned the survey form which captures the inspection record and we are working at getting this available through a tablet as a precursor to moving to RAPID.

### **Other Corporate Implications**

- 5.6 Ideally, the work that the team has been doing should filter into other teams such as the Void and MRC teams when specifying fans for example. We already have this in place with the Aids and Adaptations team who have negotiated preferential rates for Elta Mori dMEV fans saving over £100 per unit a saving the contractor can pass on to SBC so we get a better product for our money. The Investment Programme Manager ensures that all CPD seminars are offered to colleagues in other teams to broaden the cross departmental knowledge base with the intention that these will help to influence the choice of products in future.

## **6 Main body**

### **6.1 Damp and Condensation In Stevenage**

It has long been acknowledged that Damp<sup>5</sup> – particularly in the form of condensation within dwellings is an issue in Stevenage. It is for this reason that the decision was taken a few years ago to establish a specialist team to tackle the issue – a welcome response uncommon among housing providers.

### **6.2 Retrofit Improvements and their contribution to Damp and Condensation issues**

- 6.3 In attempting to improve the energy performance of existing properties from the point of view of thermal comfort (a HHSRS requirement), energy efficiency (SAP ratings and EPC's) and tackling fuel poverty, planned programmes have "sealed up" dwellings, reducing the air changes to a point where the internal environment can be quite unhealthy. We need to factor air changes/air quality and product reviews into our Major Works specifications.

### **6.4 Traditional Response**

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<sup>5</sup> Statistically Rising Damp is rare and probably accounts for only one or two cases per annum. Penetrative damp from leaks probably accounts for less than 20% of cases most of which would be down to Repairs to remedy the source of the leak.

Surveyors have generally focussed on encouraging residents to change their behaviours in order to reduce and control the amount of internal moisture produced by normal day to day activities which is a major factor in the formation of condensation which creates the conditions for mould growth.

Where interventions have been specified these have been largely limited to the introduction of air bricks or through the wall passive ventilators and sometimes topical treatments such as a simple mould wash.

While these interventions may provide short term relief, experience shows that they are a sticking plaster and a more holistic, whole house solution is a far more effective strategy where a combined treatment and ventilation approach greatly increases the chance of a successful outcome.

Occasionally and more recently, changing traditional purge ventilation fans in the kitchen and bathroom operated by switch (either light switch or dedicated switch/pull cord) for ones operated by a humidistat wired to the permanent live of the lighting circuit has had some success particularly when combined with topical treatments.

These humidistat controlled fans respond to an increase in humidity and are employed to provide both purge and trickle ventilation so as to encourage air movement thereby reducing migration of moisture to areas of cold or low air movement within the dwelling where it [the humid air] could condense and form mould colonies. These too are only effective some of the time and an experienced surveyor will be aware that fan isolators may be switched off by the tenant often due to either the noise that some produce (particularly at night) or because of concerns about running costs which with rising fuel costs and fuel poverty on the increase is a real issue.

#### 6.5 **SBC Position at the start of 2021.**

Although the specialist team had been in place for a while, the effectiveness of the team was questioned. Too many live cases, too many repeat cases and too many cases referred to Councillors by residents frustrated with their living conditions. A different way of working was required meaning new specialist contractors and a different mindset of the staff who needed to take charge and own each case.

#### 6.6 **New ways of working**

A review of the old project plan was carried out and found that it too needed reworking. The attached Damp and Condensation Project Plan provides more detail but in short a strategy of working with residents and tackling the issue by prescribing a series of interrelated remedies and ensuring that residents are fully engaged with these proposals together with reviewing repeat cases has proven to be effective.

#### 6.7 **Achievements to date**

- \* New Contractors specialising in ventilation and mould remediation
- \* New Plumbing and Roofing Contractor dealing with leaks and roof ventilation
- \* A more customer focussed service approach working with and around customer needs

- \* A more interdepartmental approach working with other teams<sup>6</sup>
- \* Regular In-Team case reviews.
- \* Regular checks of Surveyor Reports (QC and QA) and providing of feedback
- \* Referral to Housing Panel for severely overcrowded properties
- \* Review of Surveying Equipment and new purchasing
- \* New Report Format Created
- \* Mobile Tablet on trial
- \* New and improved paint choice and wallpaper option being developed
- \* New contractor management information report being created
- \* Weekly contractor job status reports being submitted by Mouldex and QEST
- \* New job completion pack being developed by QEST
- \* CPD seminars delivered.

## **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

**7.1 All documents that have been used in compiling this report, that may be available to the public, i.e. they do not contain exempt information, should be listed here:**

- BD1 CSC Action Update November 2021
- BD2 Damp and Condensation Project Plan

## **APPENDICES**

- A Condensation Mould Leaflet
- B Condensation Mould Video Draft

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<sup>6</sup> Project Support Team for access issues, Residents and Estates Team for enforcement and tenancy issues, Support Team for vulnerable clients, Repairs for defects unrelated or directly causing D & M issues unless we are able to resolve ourselves etc.