

# **Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk**

## **Housing Spotlight: Damp & Mould**

Every person deserves to live in a home that is safe, warm and dry.

Private sector landlords should have a thorough understanding of their legal responsibilities, and of the serious health risks that damp and mould pose.

Landlords must ensure that the accommodation they provide is free from serious hazards, including damp and mould, and that homes are fit for habitation. They must treat cases of damp and mould with the utmost seriousness and act promptly to protect their tenants' health.

Tenants should not automatically be blamed for damp and mould. Damp and mould in the home are often not the result of 'lifestyle choices', and it is the responsibility of landlords to identify and address the underlying causes of the problem, such as structural issues or inadequate heating or ventilation.

### **Health risks**

Damp and mould primarily affect the airways and lungs, but they can also affect the eyes and skin. The respiratory effects of damp and mould can cause serious illness. The presence of damp and mould can also affect tenants' mental health. This could be due to worries about the health impacts of damp and mould, unpleasant living conditions, and destruction of property and belongings, among other concerns.

Everyone is vulnerable to the health impacts of damp and mould, but people with certain health conditions, children and older adults are at greater risk of more severe health impacts.

### **Housing conditions that increase tenants' risk of living in a home with damp and mould**

In England, housing stock varies significantly in age, design and building materials, each with different challenges in relation to damp and mould. There are a variety of housing conditions that put people at increased risk of exposure to damp and mould. They include:

- homes where residents feel unable to open windows due to concerns about security, noise, or high outdoor air pollution
- homes that are poorly or inadequately insulated
- homes with inefficient or ineffective and expensive to run heating systems
- homes that are poorly ventilated
- homes without adequate damp proof courses
- homes that are poorly maintained
- homes that are overcrowded

Landlords should proactively investigate their housing stock for damp and mould issues, particularly when homes meet any of these criteria.

## **Responding to reports of damp and mould**

When responding to reports of damp and mould landlords should:

- respond sensitively and assess the issue with urgency to identify the severity of the damp and mould and potential risks to tenants
- always tackle the underlying issue promptly, and act with urgency when concerns have been raised about tenant health. Landlords should not delay action to await medical evidence or opinion - medical evidence is not a requirement for action
- ensure tenants are informed about the steps that will be taken to remove mould and address any underlying issues and the timeframes for the work
- prior to the removal of the mould, photograph and document the location of the mould, to help identify the source
- remove the mould, to address the health risk to tenants, using a qualified professional when appropriate
- identify and tackle the underlying causes of damp and mould, including building deficiencies, inadequate ventilation and condensation. Simply removing surface mould will not prevent the damp and mould from reappearing
- inspect the home at least 6 weeks after remedial work has been carried out, to ensure that the issue has been fixed and damp and mould have not reappeared. If damp and mould have reappeared, further investigation and intervention should be pursued

## **Taking a proactive approach to reduce the risk of damp and mould**

Landlords - irrespective of whether they own one or multiple homes - should adopt a proactive approach to the identification and tackling of damp and mould. This should include:

- having clear processes in place to document, manage and act on reports of damp and mould and to identify common issues and trends in their housing stock
- understanding the condition of their homes and using this to adopt a preventative approach to dealing with damp and mould, making the necessary interventions to ventilation, energy efficiency and building deficiencies before damp and mould occur

- understanding that some homes are more difficult to heat, either due to their energy efficiency or cost of living pressures, and that this can make damp and mould more likely to occur. Landlords should consider what support they can provide or signpost tenants to
- supporting tenants to understand what they can do to reduce damp and mould, where applicable and appropriate. This must never be a substitute for addressing the underlying causes of damp and mould
- building relationships with tenants, ensuring that tenants feel encouraged to report damp and mould

## **Understanding damp and mould**

Damp is the build up of moisture in a property. It affects building materials (such as walls, floors, ceilings, foundations) and/or home furnishings and belongings (such as carpets, curtains, wallpaper, furniture and clothing). In addition to causing damage, damp can also lead to the growth of mould and other microorganisms.

Damp can occur in homes for a variety of reasons. Irrespective of the type of damp (condensation, penetrating, rising or traumatic), landlords are legally responsible for addressing damp and mould and should work with qualified professionals where appropriate.

### **1. Condensation damp**

Condensation damp happens when moisture generated inside the home cools and condenses onto colder parts of the buildings (for example window frames, corners and low points on walls behind sofas or wardrobes). This is the most common form of damp.

### **2. Penetrating damp**

Penetrating damp is water that gets into the building from outside due to defects in the walls, roofs, windows or floors.

### **3. Rising damp**

Rising damp is moisture from the ground that rises up through parts of the buildings in contact with the ground (walls and floors); it is usually found in older properties and is often misdiagnosed. It can be identified through visual inspection; however chemical testing is the most appropriate way of confirming it. Often it is due to defective damp proof courses and membranes.

### **4. Traumatic damp**

Traumatic damp can be caused by leaking water from waste and heating pipes, overflowing baths or sinks, burst pipes or defective water storage vessels inside the building. Traumatic damp can also originate from outside the property, for example from another building or from environmental flooding.

## Removing mould

Once damp and mould have been identified, it is essential that the mould is removed promptly, reducing health risks for tenants. If an assessment of the source can be established quickly by an appropriately qualified professional, such identification could be done before mould removal, but under no circumstances should mould be left for long periods. The priority should always be to protect tenant health.

Mould can be removed from hard surfaces with an appropriate cleaning product and should be left to dry completely. Mould and mildew products should be used in preference to bleach, for health and safety reasons. Absorbent materials such as carpets, soft furnishings and ceiling tiles may have to be thrown away if they become mouldy, as it may be difficult or impossible to remove the mould completely.

While most tenants could reasonably be expected to remove condensation and very small amounts of mould using an appropriate mould and mildew cleaner, larger areas of mould should only be addressed by qualified professionals. When identifying an experienced contractor, landlords should check training, qualifications and references.

Regardless of the extent of mould, the person removing the mould should wear protective equipment, such as a mask, gloves and goggles, in order to avoid contact with mould spores or cleaning products. Doors should be shut to help prevent mould spores from being spread to other areas of the house, but windows should be left open during and after the clean up activity.

Protective equipment and clothing should be washed or carefully disposed of afterwards to prevent contamination. Any materials removed should be bagged and disposed of safely. The cloth or sponge used to remove the mould should also be washed or disposed of. Product guidance should be followed during application to protect those undertaking the work and the tenants living in the home.

Tenant management of condensation and small amounts of mould should not be a substitute for assessing and addressing the underlying issue, which should always be the priority.

Landlords should work with tenants to understand how best to address the issue collaboratively and prevent future recurrence. Landlords should note that some tenants may struggle to live independently and therefore may also struggle to support a cleaning regime after mould has been identified. Building relationships with other professionals supporting tenants may therefore be helpful.

## Addressing building deficiencies

Moisture can enter the house from leaks and other building deficiencies. Repairing the source of water intrusion, such as fixing leaking pipes, blocked gutters, defective roofs, faulty damp proof courses, flood damage and other structural deficiencies can therefore be effective in removing the source of moisture and reducing risk of damp and mould, and also in avoiding more expensive repairs later (such as rot treatment). Water-damaged or damp materials are prone to the development of mould. If they cannot be cleaned or completely dried, they should be removed. If they are removed, it is important to dry the surrounding area to remove residual moisture.

When the source of damp is coming from another property, landlords should work with the freeholder or owner of the neighbouring property. Landlords may be able to identify the owner using the Land Registry. Landlords can also speak to their local council, who can take

action under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, if one property is causing nuisance to another. In all instances, landlords should seek the guidance of specialist contractors and involve building control where required.

## **Addressing condensation**

Condensation is one of the most common causes of damp and mould in homes. Moisture from normal occupant activities, such as showering, drying laundry and cooking, builds up in the air around a home if it cannot be removed. Over time, condensation can lead to damp and mould growth.

There are several means to address condensation:

- addressing building deficiencies (as above)
- improving ventilation
- improving energy efficiency and addressing inadequate heating systems
- working with tenants to make small, reasonable adjustments to their behaviour, if appropriate, to reduce their damp and mould risk

The exact approach will depend on the specific conditions of the dwelling.

## **Improving ventilation**

If a dwelling is inadequately ventilated, moisture in the air cannot escape the building and is therefore more likely to cause condensation. It is particularly important that rooms that inevitably involve a lot of moisture production, such as kitchens and bathrooms, have adequate ventilation.

Ventilation systems, such as extractor fans and mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MVHR) systems should be regularly inspected and maintained by qualified professionals, who will be able to advise on a suitable schedule of maintenance.

## **Ventilation checklist**

### **Kitchens**

Do kitchens have ventilation systems (for example, extractor fans, cooker hoods) that are fully operational and sufficiently powered to remove moisture from cooking?

If not, look to service, repair, replace or install an appropriate system if ventilation is inadequate. Landlords may wish to consider humidity-controlled fans, which automatically activate when humidity reaches a certain point. Another option is ensuring the extractor fan is connected to the light within the room and has an 'over-run', which means the fan continues for a period of time after the light is switched off. Installing ventilation is classified as controlled building work and should be undertaken by someone competent to do so.

Where possible, kitchens should have an extractor fan linked to the outside or to a central unit. To be most effective, they should be installed close to the hob. In addition to a kitchen extractor fan, it is advisable to provide an overhead cooker hood. Where gas-fuelled cooking is used, it is particularly important to ventilate to remove the products of burning gas.

## **Bathrooms**

Do bathrooms have ventilation systems (for example extractor fans) that are fully operational and sufficiently powered to remove moisture from showering and bathing?

If not, look to service, repair, replace or install an appropriate system if ventilation alone is not adequate. Landlords may wish to consider humidity-controlled fans, which automatically activate when humidity reaches a certain point. Another option is ensuring the extractor fan is connected to the light within the room and has an 'overrun', which means that the fan continues for a period of time after the light is switched off. Installing ventilation is classified as controlled building work and should be undertaken by someone competent to do so.

### **Do tenants know how to use ventilation systems and are they making use of them?**

If not, ensure tenants are provided with guidance on how to use the ventilation system in the property and try to understand why they might not be using them. Tenants may have concerns about running costs. If so, landlords should consider signposting tenants to sources of advice and support.

### **Can windows be opened and are tenants making use of them?**

If not, look at what can be done to ensure windows can be opened and are used. Where feasible, consider encouraging tenants to keep windows in 'vent position', that is partially open but locked, taking particular care not to compromise the security of the property.

Landlords may wish to encourage tenants to ventilate when cooking and after bathing. For example, opening the window wide and closing once there has been sufficient air change within the room. As part of this, it is important to understand any barriers that tenants might face, such as worries about safety, noise or losing internal heat.

### **Do windows have trickle vents and are these kept open and free from blockages?**

If not, address blockages, consider changing the windows, and/or talk to the tenants to explain the function of the vents. Installing windows is classified as controlled building work and should be undertaken by someone competent to do so. Under building regulations, all replacement windows are required to have trickle vents. Trickle vents should be controllable by the tenant, rather than permanently open, as this may encourage tenants to block them.

### **Do tenants understand what they can do to improve ventilation and moisture control?**

If not, talk to them about the importance of leaving a gap between furniture and external walls, using extractor fans in kitchens and bathrooms, closing internal doors when they cook or shower, covering pans when cooking, drying laundry outdoors (if possible) and opening windows periodically.

### **Do tenants have access to secure spaces to dry laundry outdoors?**

If not, consider whether this is possible. Ideally, covered spaces should be provided. Tenants may be reluctant to use shared spaces in case items are lost or stolen, so landlords should consider how to make them secure, if possible.

### **Are roof and under floor spaces properly ventilated to ensure timber remains dry?**

If not, consider whether this is possible. Landlords may wish to consider air bricks, which are a cost-effective and easy means of addressing inadequate under-floor ventilation. Existing air bricks should be kept clear and free of debris and obstruction.

## **Improving energy efficiency and inadequate heating**

Homes that are insufficiently insulated and heated are more prone to the build-up of moisture and condensation on the inside of external walls and windows. Increases in the cost of living may make it more difficult for tenants to heat their homes. Investment in energy efficiency measures (such as improvements to heating systems, loft and wall insulation and glazing) can be an effective means of increasing indoor temperature but must be undertaken with consideration for any necessary additional ventilation.

## **Guidance for individual landlords with a small number of properties**

As an alternative to having a formal system to report damp and mould, landlords should as a minimum make their tenants aware of the health risks of damp and mould and the importance of tenants reporting damp and mould quickly. Landlords (or any property management companies or letting agents that they work with) should make it clear how best to notify them and should deal with reports in a prompt and positive manner and with urgency in cases of severe damp and mould or when concerns have been raised for a tenant's health. It is good practice for landlords to consider proactive maintenance rather than reacting to disrepair when it occurs, protecting their tenants' health and saving time and money.