

22 June 2021		ITEM: 5
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Damp and Mould in Council Housing Properties		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key	
Report of: Susan Cardozo, Strategic Lead Assets, Repairs and Compliance		
Accountable Assistant Director: Tracy John, Interim Assistant Director for Housing		
Accountable Director: Ian Wake, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

This report is being presented to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny committee to provide an update on the occurrence and management of reported mould and damp cases within the Council's housing portfolio.

This document provides an overview of the causes of damp and mould, the number of properties that have been affected over the last two years and how we respond to damp and mould problems through our repairs contract and future capital investment programme.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to comment on the Council's approach and performance in relation to the management of damp and mould within the housing portfolio.

2. The Causes of Damp and Mould

2.1 Dampness within a building can be caused by building defects and housing conditions. Subject to the causes there are a range of repairs to tackle and remedy problems of mould and damp. Set out below are the key causes of damp that in turn can cause damage and mould to form within a property.

2.2 Rising Damp

2.2.1 Rising damp is caused by moisture rising up through the building structure causing the walls, and in some instances sections of the floor, to become wet. This will cause deterioration of the structure. One sign of rising damp can be a 'tide mark' where it is visibly wet up to approximately 1m high.

2.2.2 This form of dampness can be a result of a failed damp course membrane or the level of soil outside being above the damp course. Dampness to walls and floors will cause the finishes to decay causing wallpaper or paint to blister and ultimately lead to plaster spalling and crumbling away.

2.3 Penetrating Damp

2.3.1 Penetrating damp can be caused by an external defect such as leaking guttering, water getting in through cracks in an outside wall or through windows/door frames. It becomes more noticeable when it rains. This will cause damage to internal finishes if excessive amounts of water are allowed to get in to the structure over a prolonged period of time.

2.4 Interstitial Condensation

2.4.1 Interstitial Condensation is the presence of moisture build up within the structure causing building elements to become damp. Interstitial condensation occurs when warm air vapour passes through the part of a building structure and cools down in a void of the building structure.

2.5 Escape of water

2.5.1 This is caused by a failed service pipe within a building, it can be either a water feed such as a hot or cold water plumbing pipe / tank or this can be a waste pipe for either foul waste or rain water.

2.5.2 Escape of water is the most common cause of dampness associated to building defect. Most services are concealed behind building structural elements for aesthetic purposes and therefore small leaks can remain undetected for a period of time until a point when dampness becomes apparent.

2.6 Condensation

2.6.1 This is when mould forms in the home as a result of condensation.

2.6.2 Condensation mainly occurs on cold walls inside and other cold surfaces such as tiles and cold-water supply pipes under sinks and hand basins. It is usually worse during the winter. It is caused by humid air coming into contact with cold surfaces. The moisture contained within the air turns to water droplets that form on the hard surface. This is the point where the surface becomes wet and this is then associated with being damp.

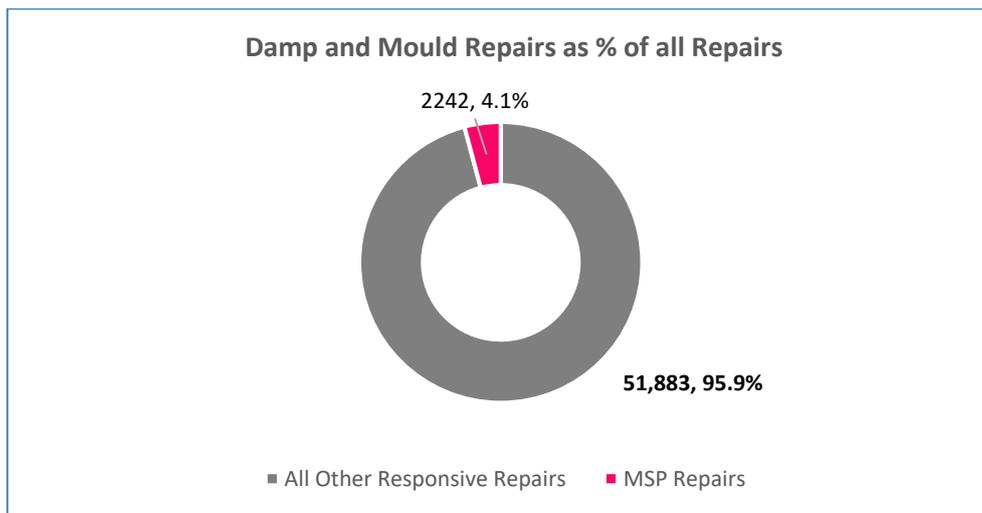
2.6.3 Damp caused by condensation is more likely to be a problem in buildings with poor levels of thermal-efficiency, typically older or poorly constructed buildings.

2.6.4 Over time if steps are not taken to reduce or prevent condensation occurring, black mould can form on surfaces such as walls, ceilings and furniture. Condensation will also allow mould and mildew to form on upholstery and

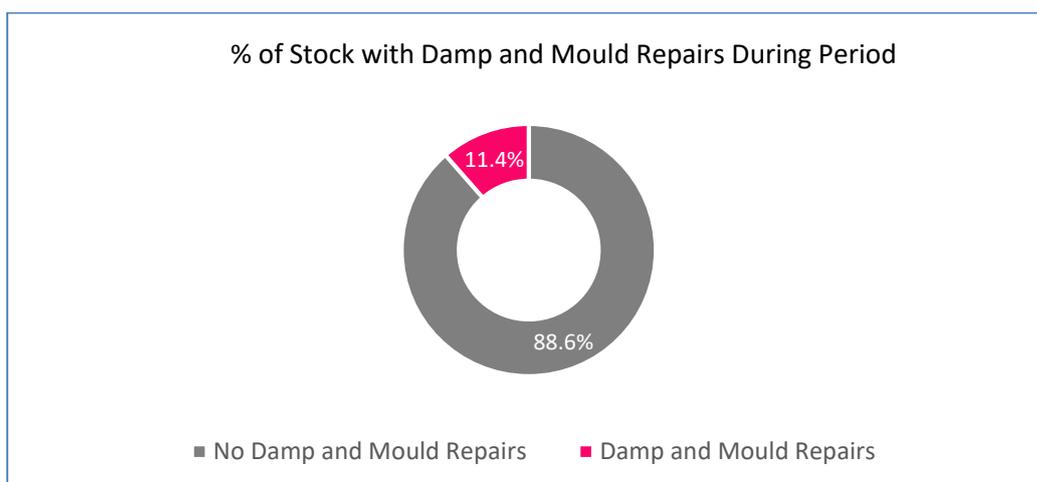
personal possessions stored in cupboards or other areas without sufficient means of ventilation.

3. Incidents of Damp and Mould

3.1 We have analysed the repairs data for the last two years (1 April 2019 to 31 March 2021). The repairs data shows that damp and mould repairs are relatively uncommon as a proportion of all repairs. 2,242 responsive damp and mould repairs have been completed representing only 4.1% of the total repair demand. 45 of these repairs were completed at properties that are no longer owned by the Council.

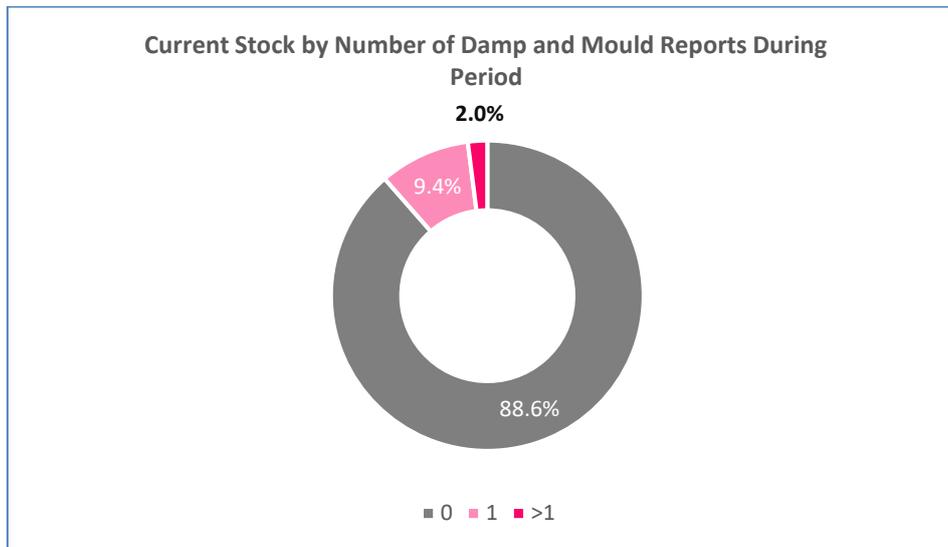


3.2 During the reporting period, 2,197 damp and mould related works orders were completed at 1,123 properties which are currently Council owned. As we can see from the graph below, this is 11.4% of the Council's housing stock.

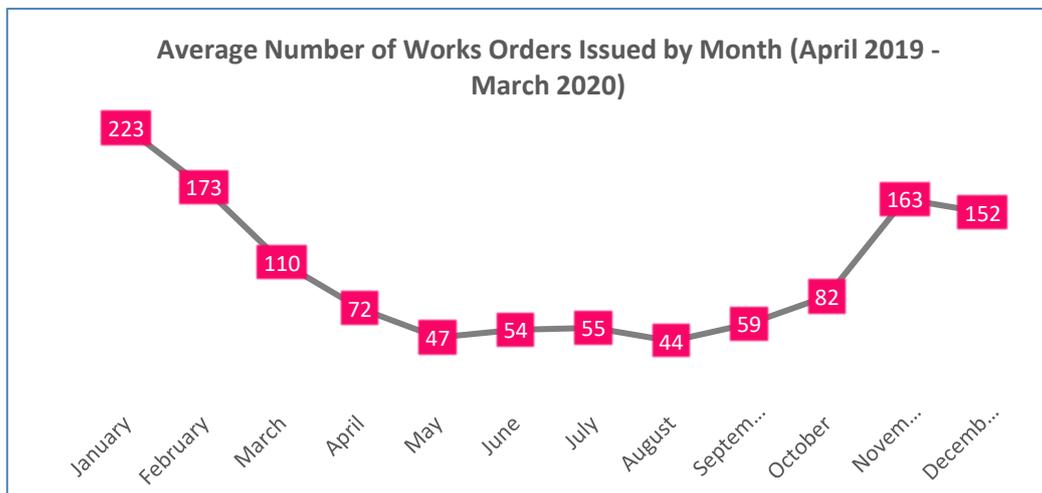


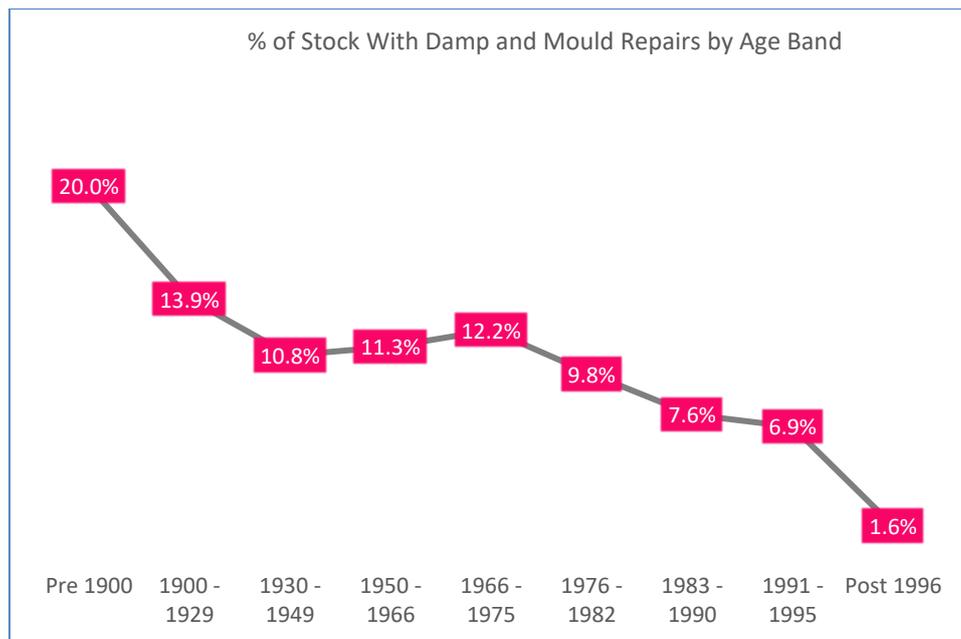
3.3 Further analysis of repairs data demonstrates that the majority of the properties have only reported damp and mould once during the two year

period. 2% of the Council's Housing stock have reported damp and mould more than once during this same period.



3.4 The following two graphs demonstrate the seasonality of damp and mould and its association with older properties. There are over five times as many damp and mould works orders completed in January compared to August and damp and mould issues are clearly positively associated with older stock which is less likely to be thermally well insulated. Both of these findings suggest that the primary cause of damp is condensation, where warm humid air inside the property condenses on cold walls (more common in older properties) during the winter months.





4. Dealing with Damp and Mould

4.1 Repairs and Maintenance

4.1.1 The Council work closely with its responsive repairs contractor Mears to ensure that reported occurrences of damp and or mould are remediated as quickly as possible.

4.1.2 In cases where it is the first report of damp and mould at the property, this is dealt with directly by the contractor Mears who will arrange for a survey to determine the cause and arrange the appropriate repair.

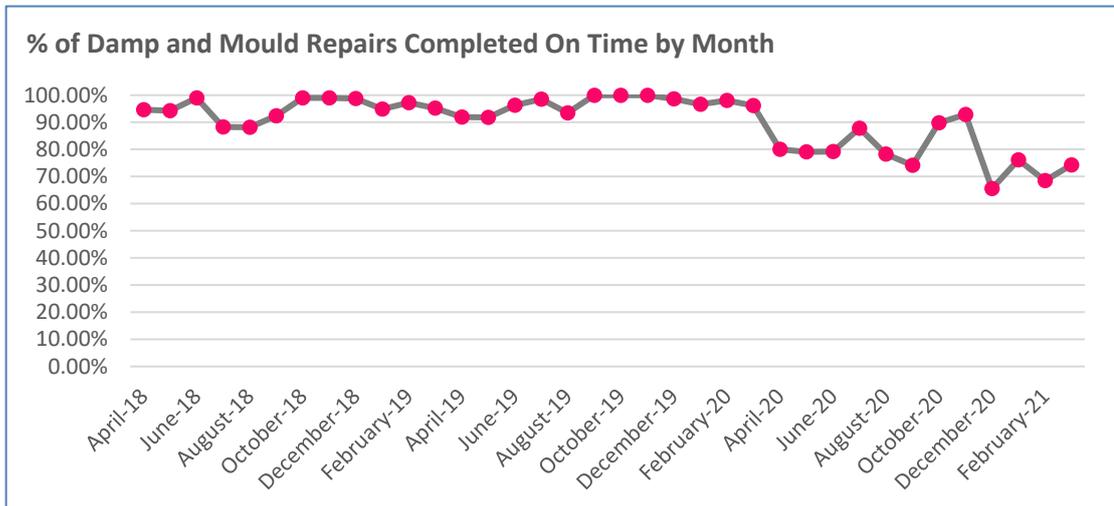
4.1.3 Cases that have had repairs of this nature undertaken within the last three years are automatically referred back to Thurrock Council. This prompts a detailed survey by a Thurrock Council building surveyor with appropriate remediation work then arranged.

4.1.4 Remediation work can include any of the following:

- Fungicide treatment and redecoration using appropriate products
- Improvement of ventilation by installing air bricks and upgrading extractor fans
- Upgrading building fabric to address thermal bridging in certain structures
- Repairing and renewing building facades and damp-proof courses to maintain a weatherproof structure.

4.1.5 The aim is to ensure remediation works are carried out in line with the housing repairs policy timeframe of 20 days. The graph below shows how the Council and its repair partner Mears have performed in this respect over the last three

years. It demonstrates that performance has been strong, but has dipped in the recent period where progress has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The repairs contractor Mears suffered an outbreak of Covid within their workforce during this period and progress was further impacted by the reluctance of some residents to allow access to their homes during the restrictions. We continue to work with our contractor to improve and further drive down the expected timeframes for this type of work.



4.1.6 Damp and mould and its impact has recently been widely reported by the media. There has been an indication that the number of cases are high and the Council are slow to respond. However as we can see from the graph above and those shown in section 3 of this report, housing repairs data demonstrates that the reality is in fact quite different. The position reported by the media has been challenged and statements have been retracted on this basis.

4.1.7 Every case that has been reported in the media has been thoroughly investigated. Of the 19 cases reported, four were not council housing tenants. All the cases that did relate to council owned properties had remediation works planned or already completed. The investigation showed that in seven of these cases the remediation works were delayed because the tenants did not allow access. Five of the cases were further delayed due to the tenants involvement with 'no win no fee' solicitors.

4.2 Ongoing Management and Resident Support

4.2.1 Condensation of warm, humid air onto cool walls is the single biggest cause of damp and mould issues within our housing stock. Condensation prevention can be achieved by managing the environment within the home ensuring there is adequate heating and ventilation. The aim is to ensure that the hot humid air that is produced through normal every day activities such as cooking, bathing, drying clothes, using appliances such as a kettle and tumble dryers and washing machines, is released from the property and fresh air enters the home. The number of people living in a property will generally

mean more activity and therefore will impact on the level of moisture produced in the home.

- 4.2.2 Residents who have suffered from damp and mould in their homes are given advice on the ongoing management of the home environment. This is delivered through resident liaison visits and the provision of printed information. The Council offer this advice in a supportive manner to help residents to live in their homes without the reoccurrence of mould and is alongside remedies to any structural defects, if found. In some cases residents have raised concerns because they feel that the responsibility wholly lies with the Council as a landlord, but to successfully eradicate damp in any home, some household management is required.
- 4.2.3 Our resident liaison officers (RLO) have been trained by the NEA (National Fuel Poverty Charity) so as well as advising on how to best manage the home environment, they are able to help residents to understand how to manage their resources and their heating systems.

Where necessary the RLO help can help residents claim fuel poverty grants and liaise with our financial inclusion officers to ensure they are accessing all the financial support they are entitled to.

5. Longer Term Solutions - Modern Fuel Efficient Homes Fit for the Future

- 5.1 Year on year, the council invests in the housing portfolio through the revenue and capital work streams.

5.2 Revenue Investment in Servicing and Repairs

Over the last two financial years £408,961 has been invested in servicing of mechanical ventilation and heat recovery units, repairing and replacing rain water goods and completing the repair works under the specific mould remediation and prevention programme. The number of properties that have benefited from these works over the last two years is 4820.

5.3 Capital Investment to Improve Energy Efficiency

- 5.3.1 The Housing capital investment programme continues to invest in measures to improve the performance and overall energy efficiency of the buildings. This includes specific remediation works to the buildings where structural defects have caused damp problems.
- 5.3.2 The following table details the relevant areas of investment over the last two financial years from April 2019 to March 2021.

Improvements	Property / Unit Numbers	Expenditure
Replacing Central Heating Boilers	1807	£1,240,301
Replacement Mechanical Ventilation and Heat Recovery units	236	£429,366
Window and Door replacements	331	£842,413
Roof Replacements including improved insulation	98	£1,730,114
Replacement of rain water goods	168	£43,918
Specialist remediation works relating to damp and mould	105	£933,195
Total Capital Investment improving the efficiency of the buildings		£5,219,307

5.3.4 We recognises that some property build types and particularly older properties, present more of a challenge in relation to the ongoing management of the home environment. Some construction details are more prone to cold bridging meaning that sections of the structure become very cold causing condensation to form, especially in winter.

5.3.5 In the past the Council have improved the thermal efficiency in many solid wall properties through the application of external wall insulation (EWI) with the help of grant funding. In recent years funding has been more difficult to source however the Council continues to review all available options to enable future programmes of this nature.

5.4 Future Improvements and Learning

- 5.4.1 A project is currently being developed to replace the electric storage radiators to 273 properties in three high rise blocks to provide a more efficient heating system linked to a ground source heat pump.
- 5.4.2 The Committee will also be aware of the current improvement works being implemented across nine of the high rise tower blocks in Grays. Whilst these works are not being delivered to directly address matters of damp and mould, the replacement of the windows and upgrade of the external wall insulation will have a positive impact on the overall thermal efficiency of the individual flats supporting the residents to maintain a warmer home.
- 5.4.3 The Housing Ombudsman have launched a ‘thematic review’ into the topic of damp and mould. They have asked for evidence submissions from both landlords and their residents to ensure they are able to make far-reaching recommendations that promote greater understanding of the complexity of tackling damp and mould and to share best practice across the sector, helping landlords to develop their policies and procedures with a view to improving the experience for all residents.
- 5.4.4 The Council have participated in this call for evidence to ensure we are in a position to learn from the review and benefit from any emerging approaches to further improve the service we provide to our residents.
- 5.4.5 As mentioned in 5.3.4 above the Council recognises that certain property archetypes within the housing stock will continue to present challenges due to their age or build type. Full stock appraisals of these archetypes would inform recommendations for either future investment or redevelopment of those assets in the future. Any major decisions arising from appraisals of this nature would be subject to Cabinet approval.
- 5.4.6 The Council are aware that damp and mould has featured as an ongoing problem for a number of properties in the three tower blocks in Grays Blackshots. Plans are in place to consult with the residents of these blocks about their preferences for either future investment or the possible regeneration of this estate.

6. Reasons for Recommendation

- 6.1 This report is being presented to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee to provide an update on the management of reported damp and mould cases within the Council’s housing portfolio.
- 6.2 The Committee are invited to comment on the Council’s approach and performance.

7. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 7.1 Housing carry out customer satisfaction surveys on individual repairs; and hold a bi-annual STAR survey. The performance data for these are reported to Housing Overview and Scrutiny.

7.2 The Resident Excellence Panel have regularly review the detailed performance on our repairs and maintenance contractor through participation in monthly contract governance.

8. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

The ongoing maintenance and improvement of the Council's housing assets supports the Council's key priorities through the provision of quality housing and estates people are proud to live on.

9. Implications

9.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**
Strategic Lead – Corporate Finance

The Housing Revenue Account Business Plan makes provision for the ongoing investment in the existing housing stock over the next 5 to 10 years to facilitate ongoing maintenance and improvements

9.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**
Deputy Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer

Given this is an update report and the nature of the recommendation to the Committee, there are no legal implications directly arising.

9.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

A full community equality impact assessment has been undertaken of the implementation of the Housing delivery of the investment programmes.

Many residents are experiencing high levels of fuel poverty. Fuel poverty has many negative impacts on physical and mental health. Fuel poverty creates a harsh choice for our residents to choose between a warm home or food. The provision of tailored advice and the introduction of further energy efficiency measures and heating systems are designed to address this financial exclusion.

10 Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- N/A

11 Appendices to the report

- N/A

Report Author:

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