

THE DAMP AND MOULD DEBATE

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS

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The Issue

Communities and Housing Investment Consortium Ltd (CHIC) is a consortium of social landlords that procures frameworks and operates a dynamic purchasing system for asset management, professional and development services. CHIC promotes and supports collaborative partnerships between its members and the wide range of supply chain partners which they access via CHIC.

In May 2022, CHIC hosted its first 'round table' thought leadership discussion to seek its members views on current disrepair challenges. More recently, Damp and Mould problems have come to the fore in the sector and focused the Regulators interest on how landlords manage these issues.

CHIC thought it was therefore timely to run its second set of discussions in this series specifically to understand how CHIC's members have responded to the Regulators questionnaire and what new initiatives are emerging.

The event was held on 9th February 2023 and attended by 81 stakeholders. This included 63 delegates from 37 Housing Associations and Local Authorities, together with 18 supply chain representatives and CHIC colleagues.

Richard Blakeway, Housing Ombudsman, provided an overview of the issues facing the sector. Kieran Colgan, Director of ARK Consultancy (CHIC's Managing Agent) provided an appraisal of the sectors responsibilities to "build better lives" for its customers.

View the presentation content [here](#)

Stakeholders then contributed to some vibrant roundtable discussions, centred around the topics below:

- Landlord culture
- Sector culture
- Strategic asset management
- Supporting tenants
- Innovation

A summary of the conclusions reached are set out in this document.



Q1 Landlord Culture

How can we instil the right attitudes in staff and contractors, at all levels?

This proved to be the most popular question and was considered by three roundtable groups. Some common conclusions were reached:

LEADERSHIP

- Despite common sets of organisational values across the sector, with a core focus on customer service excellence, the sector just does not deliver.
- We are reactive, not proactive; the responses to the recent regulatory focus serve to emphasise a lack of leadership on the things that really matter to residents.
- As the sector has become more commercial, and landlords have become larger, leadership has lost its way. The commercial head is intact, but the social heart is weaker.

OPERATIONAL SERVICES

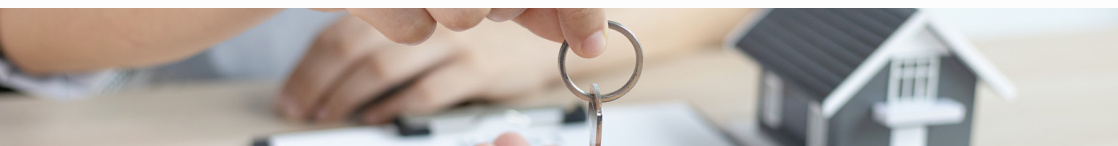
- We have become driven with a focus on quick resolution – often influenced by KPI and productivity targets – so tend to want closure of a repair order instead of finding and solving the root cause.
- There is a systematic failure in many landlords, where services are driven by a silo structure and with poor communication between teams.
- The value of visiting and talking to residents has been lost. So much has been pushed into remote, digitised ‘back office’ functions where the visits that are made, often miss the opportunity to see, hear and report back what the landlord needs to understand.

ASSET MANAGEMENT

- We still fail to learn from what our data can tell us. If we analyse it sensibly, it will point us to repetitive failures so we can invest proactively.
- When modernising properties we need to consider the ‘whole house’ effect. Better insulation and air tightness needs to go hand in hand with an appropriate ventilation solution to expel moisture.
- Many investment strategies are still just too reactive. We need to understand asset performance and invest for prevention not cure. Customers need advice and support on the benefits of unseen investment (like roof insulation) – to reduce bills – as well as the nice to have new kitchen.

MAKING THINGS BETTER

- Different organisations take different approaches – some with dedicated Damp and Mould teams and some without. All are agreed though that everyone who will visit a property – landlord and contractor staff – must be trained to identify and report back on tenancy and property concerns, including damp and mould.
- It has become too easy to blame tenant lifestyle as the cause. Understandably, customers have lost faith in the landlord promises – all words and no action. We have a duty as a sector to regain their confidence.
- So, how do we do this? Perhaps we need Housing Officers who are allowed to work as Housing Officers – knowing their patch and their customers and influencing their organisation to do the right thing.



Q2 Sector Culture

How can the Regulator and professional trade bodies help the sector to achieve an acceptable level of service?

This group discussion was focused on how, together, the sector can work to resolve the Damp and Mould challenge.

SECTOR FOCUS

- Despite the constant focus on repair services and satisfaction, the regulatory interest in Damp and Mould in late 2020 created widespread confusion. “We all know we have numerous cases but we don’t really measure it.” So, should the compliance BIG 6 become the BIG 7, measured in detail and on a constant basis?
- We have lost the trust of many tenants and so need to drive the right culture across all social landlords, to proactively address customer issues at their root cause.
- There needs to be collaboration across the sector to establish a required standard of training for all front line staff, to be able to identify and understand damp and mould and in how to respond to and resolve the problem.

PROFESSIONAL BODIES

- We need leadership from the CIH and NHF to encourage sector wide collaboration to promote best practice across the housing profession.
- We also need other professional bodies – for Architects, Surveyors and Contractors – to encourage their members to recognise damp and mould as a problem to be solved and to ‘design and build’ appropriate solutions.

REGULATORY ‘HOT BUTTONS’

The Regulator must:

- Ensure that the right data is used to measure the right things, to deal with rather than record damp and mould.
- Promote a more robust and direct engagement with customers, instead of transactional ones.
- Demand a high standard across the sector. Will the BIG 7 create this focus?



Q3

Strategic Asset Management

Will a good asset management strategy resolve or enhance damp and mould problems?

Two groups engaged in informative discussions around how a landlord's approach to delivering their asset management strategy and programme can resolve damp and mould problems, or not:

DECENT HOMES

- The Decent Homes Standard does not help to focus on and resolve damp and mould. It encourages landlords to focus on home improvements (kitchens, bathrooms etc.) rather than looking holistically at property condition and performance, to ensure the health and wellbeing of the resident.
- Although HHSRS should identify damp and mould occurrence and risk, in reality it is treated as a bit of a 'bolt on' and is not front and centre in asset management work. The methodology is seen as over complex and there is a need for simplification.
- There was a concern that the sector chases funding – like SHDF – trying to complete work to a deadline. We need to stand back, survey and model a whole range of archetypes properly, complete more pilots and learn and share the outcomes.

RETROFIT

- Decarbonisation works will, inevitably, be the next extension or addition to Decent Homes. In theory, all such work should be to the benefit of residents, improving thermal comfort to reduce heating costs. But asset managers need to understand wider building performance issues if new damp and mould problems are to be avoided.

- Investment plans need to factor in a whole house approach, where better ventilation/heat recovery go hand in hand with enhanced insulation and air tightness.

- Landlords will also have a duty to work more closely with their residents, to ensure they understand how to optimise building performance and their thermal comfort once changes to the fabric of their home have been made.

ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- If approached and structured correctly, an asset management strategy will be a force for positive change. But investment decisions must be based upon a comprehensive assessment of property performance, considering construction type, building safety, customer profile and aligned with other priorities, particularly around repairs history and the organisations damp and mould policy.
- A stable and effective repairs service can help to manage and reduce damp and mould – but it is the asset management strategy that should address the cause, so both are intrinsically linked.
- As a sector we have a lot to learn as new investment strategies with a focus on retrofit change how buildings perform. Now, more than ever, sector wide collaboration is essential, so we don't build tomorrow's problem from today's solution.



Q4

Supporting Tenants

What can we do to help tenants to prevent (and manage) damp and mould problems?

Two roundtable discussions were held to understand how tenants could be better supported to prevent and manage damp and mould challenges.

CALL CENTRES

- There was a unanimous view that call centres generally do not ask the right questions to identify damp and mould problems at the first point of contact.
- Non-technical, generic call handling staff are less effective than dedicated repairs lines, with appropriately trained staff asking 'funnel effect' questions.
- Performance measures can be counter productive, driving calls to closure, when more diagnosis is needed. Staff must be able to consider the repairs (and damp and mould) history and seek specialist advice or inspection if in doubt.

GUIDANCE

- Landlords need to recognise the diversity of their customer base and have systems, support and guidance that suit a wide range of expectations. Many tenants still find web based portals difficult to use or access, but equally may have language barriers with a call centre.
- When moving into new homes, or having their existing home retrofitted, residents need guidance on how to operate the heating and ventilation systems. There was perhaps surprising concern about the scale of damp and

mould found in new homes, perhaps needing a different approach to heating and ventilation than a tenant may have been used to.

- Effective use of data is key to understand who may need support and guidance. No contact or repetitive 'no access' should signal the need for tenancy support or intervention.

SUPPORT

- As concluded in other discussions, regular visits to all homes, by appropriately trained staff, are a must to identify damp and mould problems and concerns.
- All visits should be seen as an opportunity to gather intelligence on the condition of the home or in respect of repair or damp and mould issues. Most homes will have a heating engineer visit annually and on average three repairs per annum; all access should be seen as an added value fact finding opportunity.
- The sector needs to support and advise tenants in how to manage their home and, when problems arise, how to report these for resolution. The landlords should 'make every visit count'.



Q5 Innovation

Do new innovations help us to solve damp and mould issues – or just to monitor and manage them?

This group had an interesting discussion around the pros and cons of new innovations helping to resolve damp and mould issues.

NEW TECHNOLOGY

- There is agreement that new technology is potentially beneficial to landlords and tenants to monitor asset performance in relation to resident lifestyle. In turn, the data captured can support the tenant to manage their home more effectively and avoid potential damp and mould.
- However, the discussions identified concerns that, for some tenants, new technology is seen as 'big brother' landlord control, rather than being there to help them.
- Retrofitting homes will also introduce useful new technology, to reduce the carbon footprint. But for it to work it must be proven, save money and be simple to operate. It was felt we have some way to go on all these fronts – more pilots are needed.

DATA

- With new technology capturing real time information comes lots more data. Landlords have to be resourced to use the data intelligently and have the capacity to share with customers to have a positive impact.
- Many landlords don't yet use all existing available data to intelligently influence property management. So, using new technology producing more data requires implementation as part of the bigger 'data picture', for asset performance and tenant wellbeing.

- The group had a concern that capturing data for the sake of having more data would be counterproductive – new technology can and will help, but its use and management must be targeted and the data outcomes used proactively.

FUTURE PROGRESS

- The sector is still early in its journey of using new technology (and data) effectively. Client teams still need strengthening with asset data managers, analysts and planners.
- Retrofit projects are chasing solutions as yet not fully proven – pilots, testing, analysis and learning all need to be ongoing to refine technological support solutions, where there is simplicity of use for the resident.
- Technology is good if it helps reduce damp and mould, heating costs for tenants and the carbon footprint of the asset. But adoption must be progressive.



A few words from the Chief Executive John Fisher, CHIC

I am grateful to all of our roundtable participants for their involvement in this event, for their honesty in their discussions and for their knowledge and wisdom. My thanks also to our sponsors who, as well as participating in the discussions, made the event possible with their support.

The introductory sessions from the Housing Ombudsman, Richard Blakeway, and Kieran Colgan from ARK, set the scene for the engaged set of roundtable discussion that followed. Listening to the feedback and reflecting on the summaries in this paper, for me there are some key headlines and questions to end with:

1. As a sector we have let many of our customers down. Has the commercial head outwitted the social heart? Is it time to rebalance?
2. We have commonly held customer focused values but is leadership now too distant from front line services?
3. We all know about damp and mould – it has been a housing issue as long as all our homes have been around. But did we measure and understand the scale of the issue until recently asked to do so by the Regulator?
4. If not, does the BIG 6 now become the BIG 7, adding damp and mould as the new building/people safety test?
5. We still miss lots of opportunities to hear from residents and to recognise or capture information which, if identified, could reduce damp and mould. We must make every visit count.

6. We need to train all staff (Client and Contractor) to a minimum standard so, if working in social housing and visiting homes, they know what to ask and look for.

7. All professional representative organisations, in housing and construction, have a role to play to drive best practice and improvement.

8. New technology and retrofitting towards zero carbon are both opportunities (together or separately) to reduce damp and mould. But they are no panacea – progress must be gradual, learning as we go and supporting customers to change how they heat and ventilate their homes.

9. The sector needs to continue on its journey to become better strategic asset managers. By using data from across social housing providers, true asset performance must be understood and used to drive investment in tenants' homes to make them warmer and more affordable and, by eradicating damp and mould, healthier places to live in.

Our roundtable "thought leadership" events will be continued.

**John
Fisher**

We still need Housing Officers who are allowed to be Housing Officers, with a pride in their neighbourhoods and supporting their communities.