

HOUSING STANDARDS IN RENTED PROPERTIES IN ENGLAND: Treating damp and mould seriously

Cambridge City Council's initial response to Rt Hon Michael Gove's letter to Local Authorities of 19th November 2022

Cambridge City Council joins the Rt Hon Michael Gove in mourning the tragic death of Awaab Ishak.

The Council is committed to improving housing conditions, supporting tenants and takes the matter of ensuring safety and suitability in the private rented sector very seriously, in particular damp and mould. Our approach and objectives are set out in detail in the [Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy 2019 – 2023](#)

The Council acknowledges the letter from the Secretary of State for Levelling up Housing and Communities of 19th November, and his call to improve standards in rented properties, in particular treating damp and mould seriously. The Council has also received correspondence from the Housing Ombudsman which complements letters received from the Secretary of State and the Social Housing Regulator in relation to mould and damp.

The Council will consider how it can share the best practice and recent guidance detailed by the Ombudsman to landlords renting properties in Cambridge, as well as, via various tenant groups and forums to raise awareness about complaints and claims.

The Council will provide a full response by the deadline of 27th January 2023.

Initial response: context

The Council can confirm that it has begun work to extract data requested from our Environmental Health database systems: Northgate M3 and IDOX Tascomi for the past three financial year reporting periods 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22.

The Residential Team within Environmental Services includes 9.6 FTE enforcement officers, undertaking private sector housing improvement work. The team keep housing conditions within Cambridge City under review through both reactive and proactive daily work activities in line with the Council's Environmental Health Operational Plan.

Whilst the condition of properties in the private rented sector in Cambridge City is generally good, as per its duty and amongst its work activities the Residential Team investigates private rented sector housing complaints received by the Council including those relating to tenant concerns about damp and mould affecting their home. Information about how to complain is visible on our website: [Private rented accommodation - Cambridge City Council](#)

The council is a stock-retaining authority and manages 7155 social and affordable housing units and a further 1191 leasehold and 91 shared ownership properties. We

provide information and advice for residents on condensation and prevention of damp and mould on our [website](#).

The council has been developing an Estates Plan during 2022 for all its properties. One of the key objectives of the Plan is to review the data and information the council currently holds on its estates in order to identify opportunities for estate improvement or redevelopment. The plan covers 8 areas for investigation including assessing the physical condition of each estate. Damp and mould issues will be analysed by construction type. The sustainability of the estate will also be assessed including an analysis of EPC ratings and external wall and roof insulation.

Council officers have already recommended to elected members that a programme of uprating all of Council housing stock to EPC 'C' or above should be completed within 5 years.

Complaints and enforcement

The Council has dealt with complaints relating to damp and mould in the private rented sector and in properties the council holds in the past 3 calendar years (2020-2022). The prevalence and severity of damp and mould will be fully quantified along with the number that have been remediated. This will all be provided in the Council's full response by the 27th January 2023 deadline. Any action that is assessed as being necessary because of this review will also be included. This complaint data will cover privately rented properties and those properties provided by Registered Providers of Social Housing, including our own stock.

As requested, the Council will consider high scoring (bands D and E) category 2 damp and mould hazards. At present and where necessary we seek to take enforcement action in relation to category 1 and high scoring category 2 hazards. This reflects the Housing Health and Safety Rating System, (HHSRS) guidance.

Standards, tenant support and energy efficiency

More recently the Council has also been focusing on other associated areas of housing standards. Proactive work is underway to review available data in respect of those private rented properties in the city that may be occupied in breach of the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards, (MEES). A policy for the enforcement of these Standards was approved by Council Committee in September 2022 ensuring a mechanism for effective enforcement of these standards in line with relevant legislation.

MEES as well as signposting to support for tenants in terms of energy matters and warm homes were discussion topics at the Councils well-attended landlord forum in October 2022 that was organised in partnership with the National Residential Landlords Association, (NRLA).

The Council has issued Local Energy Rebate grant funding to households that receive Council Tax Reduction (CTR) as well as households with specific Council Tax exemption and low-income households with energy inefficient homes (EPC E-G) and

damp and mould concerns within the private rented sector. To date the Council has issued around £3,600 of grants to 127 households in relation to damp and mould.

The Council works with Peterborough Environment City Trust, (PECT), with a view to offering residents of the city fuel poverty support. PECT offer the following support to such tenants; understanding their tariff (and switching if possible), understanding their heating system, behaviour change in the household, priority service register, information on grants, problem solving with energy supplier, onward referrals for income maximisation and benefits advice, emergency fuel vouchers and water bills.

The Council has recently recruited a Home Retrofit Project Co-ordinator to work to establish routes to retrofit all existing homes within the city including private sector housing who will be starting in their role in January 2023.

The Council will continue to work to bid for as necessary and utilise available funding in a considered way with a view to continuing to improve housing conditions including those in the private rented sector.

Communications and Engagement

The Council is developing a public communications campaign including, press release, social media, and via the Council resident magazine, 'Cambridge Matters', to raise awareness about damp and mould and advice and support for tenants.

In addition, at the Council meeting in October 2022 members resolved the following in respect of the private rental sector. This provides an additional route to address mould damp and mould issues for privately rented properties and to improve housing conditions in the city:

- i) To convene a Private Renters' Forum to consult with private tenants in the city, including stakeholder groups such as ACORN, Students' Unions and Citizens Advice Bureau. Work with private renters to discuss how the Council can best support and advocate for private renters in the city.
- ii) To continue to put high priority on work to ensure that all HMOs in the city are inspected, improved if needed, and licensed. This includes addressing any hazards including damp and mould that may be identified upon inspection.
- iii) To ensure the relevant information in relation to private rented accommodation on the Council's website is reviewed and promoted and to investigate providing resources in other languages which are spoken in the city wherever practicable.
- iv) To continue working via the Council's Landlord Steering Group to reach out to landlords in the city and ensure there is always private tenant representation on the Landlord Steering Group.