



Scrutiny Report

Damp and Mould

October 2023

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1. Background

Why undertake this Scrutiny?

In January 2023 SNG (formerly Sovereign Housing Association) saw an increase in damp and mould reports, with 3,468 repairs raised – an average of 165 each working day. This was a 37% increase from the previous month, and double the reports compared to January 2022. The increase has been put down to the heightened press coverage on the subject, and the rising cost of living pressures.

SNG changed their approach to damp and mould to a more proactive and specialist approach in December 2022 following recommendations from the Housing Ombudsman “Spotlight Report on Damp and Mould” report and the PwC paper “Responding to damp and mould: observations from our internal audits”. With the spotlight firmly on damp and mould across the housing sector it was felt that now would be an opportune time to scrutinise SNG’s approach to damp and mould.

There was a request from SNG’s Chief Customer Officer that the Scrutiny Coordination Group (SCG) look to see how well this new approach was working and make recommendations in order to further improve the service, if required, to best tackle damp and mould across our localities and provide the best possible experience for our customers. The scrutiny was timed to commence in early Spring 2023 in order that the impact of the winter months could be fully assessed in a timely way, with the scrutiny concluding by October 2023.

Please note: This scrutiny relates to the former Sovereign Housing Association which is now part of Sovereign Network Group (SNG).

2. Scope

What did we want to find out?

The scope has been split into three sections: Communication, Approach and Technology.

Communication:

The SCG will review SNG's website, portal and other materials giving advice and information on damp and mould. They will consider:

- How are these working?
- Are they useful?
- What can be improved.

Approach:

The SCG will review the approach our frontline operatives take when dealing with damp and mould. They will consider:

- Is our approach empathetic, understanding and customer focused?
- What the experience of residents who have experienced damp and mould is;
- What can be improved.

Technology:

Damp and Mould devices have been provided to a small number of residents to test their effectiveness and usefulness both to customers and staff. SCG will consider:

- What the experience of customers who have received the devices is;
- Are people able to use it, and are they using it;
- What can be improved.

3. Methodology

Who was involved?

Involved Customers

Danny Lynch	Lead Scrutineer
Joyce Ward	Scrutineer
Jack Dunn	Scrutineer

Engagement Team

James Taylor	Engagement Specialist
Phoebe Newton	Engagement Coordinator
Steve Hill	Engagement Manager
Lorna Collisson	Engagement Specialist

Involved Staff

Matt Hensby	Project Lead - Assistant Director of Localities
Steve Cotton	Operations Manager
Sarah Fisher	Business Development Manager
Stephanie Martin	Customer Communications Specialist
Andrea Marchetti	Head of Customer Communications
Adam Woodhouse	Digital Product Manager

What was involved?

A variety of methods were used to ensure that both data, and customer and staff feedback and observations, were utilised to provide a balanced and holistic approach.

Staff Sessions

Three sessions took place with the scrutineers and relevant staff members on the three key themes within the scope. This enabled the scrutineers to gain a broad understanding of the service area and what is involved in delivering the service. The scrutineers questioned the staff on their subject areas, finding out what worked well and what the staff thought could be improved.

Desktop Analysis

The scrutineers had access to a range of internal data, as well as reports from external organisations. This included:

- SNG's complaint data on damp and mould for the previous two years (May 2021 – April 2023);
- The number of reports of damp and mould made by customers over the last 12 months (April 2022 – March 2023);
- The number of disrepair claims made based on reports of damp and mould;
- SNG's damp and mould procedures and process maps;
- The Housing Ombudsman's: "Spotlight Report on Damp and Mould";
- PwC paper: "Responding to damp and mould: observations from our internal audits".

Customer Surveys

Two separate customer surveys were sent out. The first focused on our approach and communication and was sent out to the 7080 customers who had reported damp and mould between April 2022 and March 2023. 597 customers (8.43%) responded across the 10 localities. 331 respondents made reports before the processes were changed and 266 respondents made reports after this point, enabling the scrutineers to look at the impact the change in process has started to have.

400 surveys were sent out to those who had Switchee or North devices in their homes. The response rate was very low with only a 1.75% response rate. This meant that the available data was not good enough to make full recommendations at this time and is something that may need to be relooked at in the future.

Focus Groups/Customer Case Studies

Following on from the survey on approach and communication, four focus groups were arranged and customers were invited to take part and provide further information about their experiences with the service. These again had very low customer uptake, and the lead scrutineer made the decision to change these to more focussed case studies. Five customers were invited to take part in a case study with one taking part in the end.

4. Key Findings – what is working well?

Communication

The information provided to customers on damp and mould is clear, accessible and useful.

59.68% found the information online to be useful (with MySovereign and social media being the most useful). 80% found the information clear, and 70% found it accessible. 50% found the advice leaflet useful with 85% of respondents thinking it was clear, and 65% stating it was accessible. 47% found the advice given by a tradesperson on the home visit useful.

The information was *"all well communicated"* and the advice leaflet received was *"really good"*.

The tradesperson was *"professional and offered a lot of advice"*.

Approach

Those living in Locality 4 (South Hampshire) were the most satisfied with the service they received.

The satisfaction in Locality 4 was at 60.47%, which is substantially higher than the overall satisfaction which stood at 31.49%. Respondents described the service they received as *"approachable"* and made them feel *"reassured"* and that they were *"being listened to and helped"*.

There is an increase in satisfaction from customers after the new process was put in place:

Satisfaction rose by 8.29% after the new process was introduced, and continued rates of damp and mould dropped from 75.84% to 71.70%. More people felt they were treated like an individual (+15.44%) and that they were treated with empathy and understanding (+11.64%) and less people said they felt blamed for the issues (-5.41%).

"I feel within the last 12 months the damp and mould service has improved a lot; I don't feel blamed like previously".

The scrutineers agreed the new approach seemed much more robust and were pleased changes had been made. They were pleased that the team were trying to follow the

Housing Ombudsman advice on timescales, and that they were seeking best practice guidance where available.

Easy to report:

5.53% of survey respondents took the time to comment on how they felt the communication had been good during both the initial reporting and appointment stage, and that it had been easy to report, and they felt the approach we had taken provided good customer service.

"It was easy to report the mould and the individual at the call centre was sympathetic and understood my concerns. She went above and beyond to assist."

Good links to Financial Inclusion Team:

There are good links with the Financial Inclusion Team and the leaflet and website have clear links to how to get further support. A number of survey respondents stated that they were pleased operatives had left mould spray for them and appreciated the gesture during the cost-of-living crisis. The scrutineers heard specific examples of where instances of fuel poverty had been discovered during their meetings with staff teams, and were pleased with the approach teams took to support these residents.

Technology

Fuel poverty support:

As above, the scrutineers heard really good examples of how the devices had flagged issues which suggested a customer may have had fuel poverty issues. As a result, 45 fuel vouchers were issued as immediate relief, whilst another customer was issued with an air fryer as she was struggling to pay for her gas. Having the devices identify these issues not only highlights where customers may need further support but also saves customers any initial embarrassment, or reservations, of making contact with us first.

Identifies properties with damp and mould that aren't self-reporting, and properties that need further investigation:

103 properties that did not self-report issues were identified through their devices as having problems, and could therefore receive a proactive visit. Additionally, 29 of the 400 properties were flagged by the devices to need further remedial work after an initial fix had been provided.

There is the ability to directly reach customers through the devices:

The scrutineers felt this was really positive and enabled tips and messages to be shared instantly with customers.

Clear learning from pilot and future actions already identified:

The team leading on the technology presented a list of lessons learned from the initial roll-out and were already improving processes to establish better internal communication, resulting in higher customer satisfaction. They are also looking at future proofing their approach by engaging external specialists to review devices that can be linked to more sustainable energy systems such as air source heat pumps.

Technology is a choice for customers:

The scrutineers were pleased that the current approach to installing devices in customer's homes was the customers choice and felt that this would ultimately bring more customers on-board. If there was a change towards forced installation the scrutineers recommend a full customer consultation, and that this is discussed thoroughly at any new tenancy sign-ups.

5. Key Findings – recommendations for improvement.

Communication

C1: Develop and use customer videos and case studies:

C1.1: Promote good news stories demonstrating we care and show to what we are doing to treat damp and mould:

One of the greatest drivers residents in the survey suggested that would encourage customers to report incidents of damp and mould was to demonstrate that SNG care. This was suggested by 8.54% of respondents stating they wanted to be reassured that SNG would act on concerns, and to know what type of works were being completed in customers' homes. Using real-life case studies actively shows the work we are doing to support customers.

"I feel like if people knew SNG would be responsive and effective people would be encouraged to contact them faster".

Customers to participate in education videos to give peer-to-peer advice:

C1.2:

The scrutineers felt that information and advice would be most effective coming from other residents, and these videos could form the basis of a social media campaign, as well as being hosted on the website/MySovereign.

C2: Have an easier to find page around damp and mould on the website:

The scrutineers felt the information on the website and MySovereign was really good but needed to be pulled together in one section on each and replicated across both, so if residents were looking for information it was easier to find. Currently on the website the damp and mould advice is under "Advice and Guides" which is not necessarily where you would start to look, and only 7.71% of survey respondents said they had used the website/MySovereign to look for advice. The scrutineers were also in favour of the advice leaflet being added to the webpage as a downloadable PDF.

When I contacted SNG, it would have been useful to have "details of where to find help on the website".

"I believe more advertising is needed, like the minute you go online the first thing you see on the SNG Website is a section with information on damp and mould".

C3: Year-round comms to ensure people are thinking about damp and mould:

This was suggested by the scrutineers in the session with staff on communication. They believed that information all year round would keep the message in people's consciousness and encourage people to report things as they happened, rather than have a build-up of reports in the winter months.

C4: Increase the prominence of the financial inclusion information on the leaflet:

This could perhaps be bold or put in a separate box to highlight that this has different information from the rest of the booklet. This would help those that feel the advice being given is too expensive to undertake and give reassurance to customers that we understand that there is an expensive to residents in some cases (e.g. putting on heating for longer periods). One resident suggested we needed to *"do more than just put in things that are going to cost me money"*, and this would help demonstrating our awareness of people's circumstances.

Approach

A1: Develop a Specialist Team

A1.1: Have a specialist and dedicated admin/contact centre with dedicated number:

A1.2: Ensuring every communication and follow up is logged on central system:

A number of residents commented that they were passed around, or the person they spoke to could not find the notes on the system from visits, or prior phone conversations, with 7 residents suggesting that communication could be improved by more accurate record keeping, this record keeping could also be helped by having a dedicated team.

"I contacted SNG many times due to mould and damp, nothing had been resolved. I always heard "we have to refer you to different departments" and nothing ever happen. I had to contact again and start all over again".

Having a dedicated team that residents could contact directly would eliminate the need for residents to be passed around and would centralise relevant information. One resident also suggested that *"having a separate team and phone line would show the dedication and seriousness of the matter"*.

A1.3: Send the correct person to do the job:

Around 6% of residents stated that the "wrong" tradesperson came to do the job. Although it is understood that everyone had had training in damp and mould inspections residents felt that the person attending was not knowledgeable about damp and mould and felt they were not receiving the best service, and in some cases the tradesperson attending was unable to complete the job as it required a different skillset.

"I think it's always best to send a person who is qualified in the area that needs to be addressed... they sent a plumber who said he was unable to resolve the problem. I still think SNG do a great job. But please listen to the occupant of the property when they tell you what the issue is".

"When someone came to do our "damp and mould inspection" he was just a carpenter and had had no training in the field. He simply saw the mould and offered to wash it off which we didn't need".

Having a skilled and dedicated contact centre being able to categorise initial enquiries may help the right tradesperson to attend, and having a more specialised team would give residents reassurance that they were receiving a good service.

A2: Follow on checks at 3 months and 6 months to ensure work is completed and that there is no reoccurrence:

68 residents (11.4%) suggested a more proactive check-in service would be beneficial and would prevent residents having to call in to chase appointments and re-report issues. Furthermore 74% of residents stated that they were still having issues with damp and mould after the case was closed down, as although there as a three-month follow-up within six months the problem had reoccurred, or work was still outstanding.

"We get the rooms decorated nicely and get on with life. Several months on the damp and mould comes back. This has been going on since we moved in in 2000."

A3: Ensure a home visit is provided to investigate the root cause of the damp and mould, have the operative give a clear explanation of what they are doing, and what the follow on will be:

Only 54.10% of the 597 respondents reported that they had received a home visit to investigate the causes of the damp and mould in their home. Out of those that received a home visit 58.99% found the information and advice given was clear, and 46.76% found it useful. Many suggested that it would be useful to have a clear idea of the timescales and work needed after the visit, rather than being left not knowing, and then having to call in to find out what actions were being taken.

We would have liked the *"reassurance of an initial site visit within x timescale of initial report made to review the case and determine a timeline of resolution after"*.

"The operative, although friendly, didn't explain what he was doing or how to prevent the mould from reappearing in the future."

A4: More proactive service – "finding the silence":

The scrutineers felt that if team have capacity then they should also work on finding the silence by looking at where there are gaps in reporting. They also felt it important to encourage tradespeople and officers to proactively check for damp and mould when onsite for other issues and report back using a specific reporting tool if it was found. This was echoed in the survey feedback from customers who had used the service.

"Maybe look for damp and mould as part of an annual check, review properties specifically for mould in the common areas to spot any issues at an early stage and resolve quickly and efficiently."

The devices in customers' homes also present a key opportunity for Property Services to identify where there may be issues that aren't being reported. The data should feed directly into strategies and approaches, as well as being reviewed when improvement works that may impact on damp and mould conditions are being considered.

A5: Compensation or financial support to be offered to residents to tackle damp and mould.

Although there are clear and successful links to the Financial Inclusion Team, there are occasions highlighted in the survey where this has not happened and a more consistent approach should be taken. The cost of fixing the causes of damp and mould were emphasised by a number of residents, who felt they were unable to afford the solution e.g. turning the heating on for longer or buying products to stop the mould reoccurring. Residents have also suggested that compensation could be offered if they need to run dehumidifiers, or vouchers offered for the purchase of mould paint.

"Not everyone can afford an expensive dehumidifier which seemed to be the only solution that was offered"

A6: More consideration of vulnerabilities and family make-up to ensure an informed and individualised response to each case:

Whilst this is clearly happening in some cases, through the survey we have received examples where this has fallen short. This was particular prevalent where someone in the household had asthma who felt both the mould and the chemicals being used to treat it were affecting their health.

"Telling asthmatic people to clean it themselves is ridiculous".

"I haven't got the outcome I need considering both my kids suffer from asthma and my daughter been in hospital numerous of times cause of the mould".

This does appear to have improved from December 2023 when the new process was put in place, with an increase of 16% saying they felt as though they were treated as individuals, and an increase of 12% saying they felt they were treated with empathy and understanding. Whilst those who said they felt blamed for the issues dropped by 6%. However other

residents said they felt “worthless” and “let down” by the service, with 24.29% stating that the process had a negative impact on their health and wellbeing. 5.5% of respondents thought the service needed to be more customer focused and that residents “*should be treated with respect and talked to as adults*”.

Of the damp and mould complaints in the last year, 11 were upheld where customers made a complaint that they did not feel like they were being treated with respect by the team handling the issues, whilst 8 complaints were upheld regarding damp and mould exacerbating health and wellbeing issues.

A7: Everyone who reports damp and mould to receive a leaflet, and sent a link to relevant online information.:

Only 4.86% of the 597 respondents said they had received the advice leaflet. Of those that had received it 41% found it useful. Similarly very few people actively looked for the information on the website/portal, but those that did found it to be useful. Proactively sending this information would prepare residents for their home visit and enable them to start dealing with the damp and mould proactively, where possible, as well as giving residents something to refer back to.

“When booking in a repair it may be helpful to direct your customers to our website, or to useful information, sending an email or text for links to them”.

Technology

T1: Easy photo upload via WhatsApp/Facebook messenger:

6 Residents suggested that it would be useful to have an easier way to upload photos and using a service such as WhatsApp or Facebook messenger – that customers are already familiar with – would help with the reporting. Having customer photos of the issues also allows a better pre-diagnosis of the issue, ensuring the right tradesperson is sent out on the initial visit, as well as helping with prioritisation of cases.

“Start a WhatsApp or Facebook group to send photos on if any problems with damp or mould.”

T2: Complete follow-ups with customers on the data from their devices.

Out of the 7 residents who responded to the technology survey only one had received any follow-up. The one that did found it really useful, and a wider roll-out may therefore be beneficial in educating residents in managing and mitigating damp and mould in their homes.

6. Management Responses

Communication

C1: Develop and use customer videos and case studies:

Management **Accepted:**

Response: We will develop a Communication plan that includes real life case studies and information and advice from residents including using videos.

Target Date: January 2024

Lead: Head of Customer Communications

C2: Have an easier to find page around damp and mould on the website:

Management **Accepted:**

Response: The creation of the new SNG corporate website will give us the opportunity to look at our content and layout of the customer facing website to ensure our information is easy to access.

We will work with residents to ensure the information is laid out in a way that is simple to navigate.

We are exploring how we can text or email customers a link to our website or post a leaflet when they first report damp and mould.

Target Date: December 2023

Lead: Head of Customer Communications

C3: Year-round comms to ensure people are thinking about damp and mould:

Management **Accepted:**

Response: We will develop an action plan setting out how we will communicate information to customers throughout the year.

Target Date: December 2023

Lead: Head of Customer Communications

C3: Increase the prominence of the financial inclusion information on the leaflet:

Management **Accepted:**

Response: We will review the content of the leaflet to ensure the financial information is more prominent and covers all our offers.

Target Date: November 2023

Lead: Head of Customer Communications

Approach

A1.1/ A1.2 Have a specialist and dedicated admin/contact centre with dedicated number:

Ensuring every communication and follow up is logged on central system:

Management **Partially Accepted:**

Response: We are testing in a new approach to damp and mould diagnostics and triage with focus on setting the priority of our response based on the severity of the damp and mould and customers individual situation, e.g. health and vulnerabilities. Call scripts have been developed to support this.

This will drive the priority of the job being booked. If this test is a success, we expect to roll this out to all front-line Contact Centre advisors. This will also be documented on the system should the customer call back.

All contacts are logged on CRM Dynamics and Property Systems if a customer calls the contact centre, any advisor can provide a good quality service. Training would be provided to all the Contact Centre Team along with new Inductions. And, call are all quality monitored.

If customers call back and need additional expertise that Triage 1 cannot provide, this will be a handoff within the business. We have agreed that in the future we will test a handoff to the Property Specialist Team (Triage 2) for Damp and Mould where more expertise is required or escalation.

Again, this team would log all conversations with customers on CRM Dynamics and Property Systems. We believe all advisors providing this triaged service, with all records in one place, enables us to address all reports of damp and mould and underlying issues.

Target Date: December 2023

Lead: Head of Customer Contact

A1.3: Send the correct person to do the job:

Management **Partially Accepted:**

Response: All our Trades have now been provided with the training, PPE and materials to undertake an initial treatment of damp and Mould within one of our customers homes. Typically, this will a mould wash of the affected area and before and after photos.

Follow on works may be required to address any underlying cause of damp and mould. This work may require specialist consultants or contractors to visit our customers home to recommend or carry out further remedial works.

Target Date: Ongoing

Lead: Assistant Director of Localities (Property)

A2: Follow on checks at 3 months and 6 months to ensure work is completed and that there is no reoccurrence:

Management **Partially Accepted:**

Response: Following any damp and mould works, we will contact the customers to identify any further works required.

After three months, we will follow up with the customers on all category 1 and 2 HHSRS hazards, to make sure that the issues have not returned.

Target Date: December 2023

Lead: Assistant Director of Localities (Property)

A3: Ensure a home visit is provided to investigate root cause of the damp and mould, have the operative give a clear explanation of what they are doing, and what the follow on will be:

Management **Accepted:**

Response: Following any report of damp and mould we will arrange a visit to the property or an inspection via a video call.

At this visit we will carry out a mould wash and complete inspection of the property to assess any underlying causes of damp and mould.

Where follow action is required this will be booked with the customer, either at the time of the visit or by a follow up call where specialist advice is required.

Target Date: December 2023

Lead: Assistant Director of Localities (Property)

A4: More proactive service – “finding the silence”:

Management **Accepted:**

Response: All front line team members are expected to report any damp and mould in customers homes. We provide annual toolbox talks to support this.

Working with the new Damp and Mould Specialist in the Asset Management team, we will continue to build out the current reporting we have. Through this we will identify any gaps, highlighting repairs not immediately identified as damp and mould that could develop into cases – for example gutter repairs.

We are developing a machine learning model to predict which homes may be susceptible to damp and mould, enabling us to proactively intervene.

Where follow action is required this will be booked with the customer, either at the time of the visit or by a follow up call where specialist advice is required.

Target Date: August 2024

Lead: Head of Data Analytics

A5: Compensation or financial support to be offered to residents to tackle damp and mould.

Management **Accepted:**

Response: The support issued via the Financial Inclusion Team is specifically for those in fuel poverty and/or financial hardship to help them keep their homes warm in Winter. The team have worked hard to raise awareness of the support and offers available across all teams, but specifically with those who are in customer facing position and working within people's properties. We will also imminently be launching Energy Packs and energy advice services and households with known damp and mould issues and / or lower EPC ratings will be proactively contacted. For those households not deemed to be in financial crisis, or where the issue relates to improvement works or disrepair, the support offered is via our compensation.

With regard to dehumidifiers and implementing recommendations such as increased heating of properties or paint to improve/ address damp and mould issues, this is being jointly reviewed by Community Investment and Locality Managers to see how we can have a more consistent approach to compensation or financial support for remedial action.

Target Date: January 2024

Lead: Head of Employment and Skills

A6: More consideration of vulnerabilities and family make-up to ensure an informed and individualised response to each case:

Management **Accepted:**

Response: When a customer contacts us to report damp and mould we will take time to understand the prevalence of damp and mould in their home and any vulnerabilities and health concerns they or their family may have. Our response will be based on the level of risk identified.

We should take a no blame approach to all reports of damp and mould, investigating and treating the damp and mould and advising customers how to manage their home. We regularly train our teams to support this approach.

Target Date: December 2023

Lead: Assistant Director of Localities (Property)

A7: Everyone who reports to receive damp and mould leaflet, and be sent a link to relevant online information:

Management **Accepted:**

Response: We are exploring how we can text or email customer a link to our website or post a leaflet when they first report damp and mould.

Target Date: December 2023

Lead: Head of Customer Contact

Technology

T1 Easy photo upload via WhatsApp/Facebook messenger:

Management **Partially Accepted:**

Response: We will work with our customer services management centre, customer experience teams and digital partners to identify the best channel(s) to receive damp and mould photos through.

Target Date: December 2023

Lead: Digital Product Manager

T2 Complete follow-ups with customers on the data from their devices.

Management **Partially Accepted:**

Response: We will look to make sensor data available to colleagues in the customer services management centre so that informed conversations about property performance can take place.

We will increase the use of automaton to triage sensor data to ensure that the most serious cases receive the quickest response.

We will work with our suppliers and digital partners to increase the use of digital messaging triggered by sensor data – this will allow us to send appropriate educational material to customers at scale

Target Date: December 2023

Lead: Digital Product Manager

7. Action Plan

	Action	Lead	Date
C3	Review the content of the leaflet to ensure the financial information is more prominent and covers all our offers.	Head of Customer Communications	November 2023
C1	Review website to ensure damp and mould information is easy to access.	Head of Customer Communications	December 2023
C2	Develop an action plan setting out how we will communicate information to customers throughout the year.	Head of Customer Communications	December 2023
A1	Test moving customers over to Property Specialist Team (Triage 2) for Damp and Mould where more expertise is required or escalation.	Head of Customer Contact	December 2023
A1	Review pilot of new approach with diagnostics and triage and roll-out to all front-line Contact Centre advisors if successful.	Head of Customer Contact	December 2023
A5	Review approach to compensation and financial support .	Head of Employment and Skills	December 2023
C1/A7	Explore how we can text or email customer a link to our website or post a leaflet when they first report damp and mould.	Head of Customer Contact	December 2023
T1	Identify the best channel(s) to receive damp and mould photos through.	Digital Product Manager	December 2023
T2	Sensor data to be made available to colleagues.	Digital Product Manager	December 2023
T2	Increase the use of automaton to triage sensor data.	Digital Product Manager	December 2023
T2	Work with suppliers and digital partners to increase the use of digital messaging triggered by sensor data.	Digital Product Manager	December 2023
C1	Develop a Communication plan that includes real life case studies and information and advice from residents.	Head of Customer Communications	January 2024
A4	Develop a machine learning model to predict which homes may be susceptible to damp and mould.	Head of Data Analytics	August 2024