



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION

Social housing conditions and disrepair

Feedback to social landlords.

First published: 11 February 2022

Last updated: 11 February 2022

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1. Background

Troubling TV and press coverage of extremely poor housing conditions in some social housing in England has revealed some tenants living in conditions described as squalid, with widespread disrepair, and seemingly being ignored when raising concerns. Subsequently, the Welsh Government wrote to all social landlords in Wales, seeking assurance that landlords are doing all they can to ensure tenants are not subject to similar conditions.

The correspondence sent to Welsh Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and Local Authorities with housing stock (LAs) is at Appendix 1. The Welsh Government asked for assurance that appropriate systems, processes and monitoring are in place to ensure complaints and issues are dealt with, fully investigated and acted on, including robust escalation processes. We requested if landlords had any occupied stock which could give rise to concern and what actions or plans, with associated timescales, are in place to resolve the issues. The scale of disrepair issues and details of formal claims in progress were also asked for, plus the systems in place to identify links between multiple claims so

that underlying issues can be identified and acted on.

Responsibility for a robust approach to housing conditions and disrepair lies with social housing landlords under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985. This legislation makes landlords generally responsible for keeping tenants' homes in a good state of repair, as well as safe and secure.

In asking for information from social landlords, the Welsh Government is not assuming any of the responsibility of ensuring effective arrangements for maintaining housing or dealing with disrepair issues. Similarly, in carrying out our analysis of the responses, the Welsh Government is not endorsing or agreeing any organisation's approach.

1.1 Approach to analysis

The analysis and commentary is based on information provided by social landlords in response to our request. It has not been validated nor have we interrogated or investigated where information wasn't provided.

This narrative reflects the information provided to us by landlords but it is important also to consider that for some tenants, the lived experience and perceptions can be very different. The 'think points' should therefore be considered in that context and landlords should also ensure their systems are proactive and tenant focussed.

For ease of reference, the term 'governing body' has been used throughout to refer to the governance structures of both RSLs and LAs, acknowledging they are very different in nature. All social landlords' governing bodies need to have sufficient assurance in respect of their organisation's housing conditions and disrepair arrangements, which includes how they deal with complaints, repairs and maintenance, disrepair, properties with concerns and identifying trends.

1.2 Objectives and next steps

The objective of this analysis is to provide feedback on what social landlords told

us, to provide a sense of the position across the sector and to help landlords by providing a flavour of different approaches being taken by their peers. With this in mind, we have included a number of ‘think points’, some examples of different landlords’ approaches and some shared learning.

In some instances not all of the information we asked for was provided and some responses were notably less detailed than others. However, where arrangements have not been disclosed we have not assumed that appropriate systems, processes or plans are not in place.

Conversely, some landlords provided additional information to supplement their responses and this has been included as shared learning and incorporated into further ‘think points’. A number of landlords also indicated they are reviewing their current approaches to housing conditions and disrepair and so we have included some examples which might be useful.

The analysis will be published on the Welsh Government website and we are considering whether a webinar/awareness session would be useful to the sector.

We would encourage all social landlords and their governing bodies to consider the ‘think points’, practice examples and shared learning as a basis for obtaining assurance that their governance, systems and processes are the best they can be to prevent tenants living in conditions which are unacceptable to us all.

2. Analysis

Analysis of the responses highlights a number of areas where there are lessons to be learned or scope for improvement

2.1 Systems, processes and monitoring of complaints

The vast majority, 94%, of social landlords confirmed they have systems, processes and monitoring of complaints in place to ensure they are fully investigated and acted on. However, the remaining 6% either did not disclose

the systems they have to deal with complaints, weren't clear as their response focussed solely on disrepair cases or they provided no details of monitoring arrangements.

It would be very surprising if any social landlords didn't have a complaints procedure in place with appropriate monitoring arrangements. Nonetheless, as this is not clear from all the returns received, it is a useful prompt for organisations and so this has been included as a 'think point'.

Different landlords told us they.....

- Have a complaints policy based on a principle of 'investigate once, investigate well' in line with the Ombudsman's recommended approach.
- Use a simple but effective complaints process following an overhaul of the procedure and recording, which includes a lead responsible officer being appointed for each complaint, the use of IT software to ensure deadlines are met and a real time reporting dashboard.
- Use impact statements when deciding on action to take in response to complaints.
- Learn from complaints and identify issues to be avoided in the future, seeking to continuously improve.

Think Point 1

Social landlords need to ensure they have appropriate, clear and effective systems, processes and monitoring in place to investigate and act on complaints, providing a simple and accessible route, which tenants know about, to get their concerns resolved.

2.2 Robust escalation mechanisms to ensure issues can be brought to the attention of the right people

Just 28% of social landlords advised they have robust escalation mechanisms, which include processes for issues being brought to the attention of the right

people, such as senior staff and the governing body if necessary.

32% didn't disclose any escalation arrangements, whilst the remaining 40% gave partial information, not clearly or fully describing a culture which enables them to escalate issues if needed. Instead, they either solely described their regular performance monitoring or reporting to leadership teams/governing bodies, or they only mentioned options for tenants escalating issues themselves through various stages of their complaints process.

17% described how their culture operates to harness the experiences and knowledge of all staff across the organisation effectively in relation to housing conditions, disrepair and identifying other issues, especially the contact which front line staff have with tenants and access to their homes on visits. A few also recognised the role that contractors can play in safeguarding and reporting any property concerns they might observe.

Different landlords told us they.....

- Have reporting mechanisms in place for any complaint handler to escalate it to the relevant Director or Chief Executive Officer. The Chair of the Board is also notified of any serious complaints.
- Have a culture of giving autonomy to staff to 'own' and report issues through a scheme called 'SOS' (See it, Own it, Sort it), which also enables escalation to senior staff.
- Encourage all colleagues, through communication from the executive team, to report and act upon concerns they find in tenants' homes, as their culture makes it everyone's responsibility to tackle any incidences of people not living in a decent home. They also have a diagnostic process in place which identifies the problem at the point of the service request, including where damp and mould is reported.
- Use a database to enable staff and contractors to report a concern, including any disrepair or safeguarding issues. Relevant training is provided to contractors and the retendering process has been strengthened to ensure it includes such reporting requirements. Housing Officers are also asked annually to identify properties and estates which could benefit from investment via the planned improvement programme.

- Use a system where complaints information and responses are shared with lead officers/managers and fed into the asset management plan/capital works programme.
- Have a culture where all housing management staff are responsible for alerting the response team of any disrepairs they notice when visiting tenants in their homes.

Think Point 2

Social landlords should have processes, systems and a culture of ownership to enable issues to be readily identified and easily escalated to the attention of the right people, including their governing bodies, if urgent action is needed.

2.3 Tenants are listened to and their concerns addressed

There was wide variety in social landlords' interpretation of the reference to tenants being listened to and having their concerns addressed. Whilst 26% did not include specific information on this, the remaining 74% did to a varying extent.

Some responses provided strategic examples of their organisation's values and corporate policies around hearing the tenants' voice. Others detailed much more operational ways in which they engage with tenants and a few detailed some specific outcomes to provide assurance that they listen to and act on tenant feedback.

Different landlords told us they.....

- Have a general approach to tailor programmes of work to address issues with urgency, so tenants' concerns and local knowledge is used to respond to emerging issues, such as repeat repairs.
- Include tenants in decision making regarding planned maintenance programmes, consulting and listening before deciding on major repairs/planned maintenance prioritisation.

- Have a Board which prioritises its tenants and regularly seeks customer feedback assurance, defining itself as a 'listening and learning Board'.
- Use a neighbourhood coaching approach to housing management, which ensures all tenants are visited every 18 months, so the proactive/closer relationships with tenants enable issues to be more easily identified/reported.
- Have a customer quality team which manages all feedback from tenants to ensure it feeds into service improvements, plus it uses the '*Rant & Rave*' voice of the customer technology, which allows the real time resolution of issues and informs service design.
- Have operating principles/services/systems designed to hear 'what matters to tenants', which is used as the basis for service improvements and is reviewed via a 'listening to demand' telephone engagement exercise bi annually, so tenants' feedback is sought on a continual basis.
- Adopt a pro-active approach to services, designed with tenants at the core.

Think Point 3

Social landlords should have a tenant involvement focused culture, at both strategic and operational levels. They must ensure tenants understand the ways they can get involved, including how the organisation will listen to, and act on, tenants' concerns and issues, plus be able to demonstrate that diverse tenant feedback, views and expectations are resulting in better outcomes.

2.4 Clear plans and timescales to resolve condition issues with occupied stock

42% of social landlords reported no significant concerns with any of their occupied stock in relation to poor conditions or disrepair. 34% did identify issues with some occupied housing. Most of those, (63%) have full or at least partial plans in place to resolve the issues, but 21% of the responses were unclear.

The type of issues most commonly reported and being addressed are works to eliminate building defects related to damp and mould, as well to improve thermal

efficiency, extract cavity wall insulation and to install new heating or new windows. These were either individual redevelopment/ regeneration projects or planned major works.

Half of those with plans in place to address concerns about their occupied stock had clear full or partial timescales in place, but the remainder didn't specify exact timescales. Landlords indicated this was for a variety of different reasons, including the need for further exploratory analysis before programmes of work and timescales could be established.

A couple of landlords mentioned they had clearly communicated to tenants and/ or published agreed timescales for their plans to address concerns with occupied stock. The importance of communication with tenants was also highlighted in Croydon Council's independent investigation, following the high profile news report in March.

Think Point 4

Where landlords identify issues with occupied stock, they need to communicate with tenants as early as possible, setting out clear plans and timescales. It is also important to continue communicating, particularly if plans and timescales change.

2.5 Shared learning – repairs pending redevelopment

Although the information was not requested, a couple of social landlords made particular reference to reactive repairs, providing specific assurance that where a scheme was lined up for redevelopment repairs were still being carried out in the meantime. One also emphasised the importance of clear communication with tenants regarding ongoing repairs and investigating their concerns where necessary.

Think Point 5

Social landlords should ensure they continue to provide an appropriate repairs and maintenance service while properties are occupied, even if they are pending redevelopment, and continue to investigate any tenant concerns, taking action where necessary.

2.6 Shared learning – stock condition information, strategic approach to asset management decision making and long term investment plans

Most social landlords gave additional information about how they use stock condition surveys to provide accurate, data driven knowledge of the condition of their properties, rather than relying solely on intelligence from staff. Some also referenced other stock performance information, such as repair trends. This data/information is used by landlords to inform their asset management strategies and/or formal stock option appraisal models to make strategic retention/disposal/priority investment decisions, including regarding major works and planned maintenance.

Think Point 6

Social landlords should ensure they have detailed and accurate information about the condition and performance of their stock, to assess and identify where there are concerns, to enable targeted and prioritised investment and to inform robust strategic stock option decisions.

2.7 The scale of disrepair issues – disrepair claims in progress

Although 79% of social landlords reported they are dealing with current disrepair claims, analysed as a percentage of their total stock, all landlords have fewer

than 1% of their properties with a disrepair case in progress. 68% have less than 0.5% of properties with active claims.

A few social landlords commented that tenants may not be aware of their rights regarding disrepair and the process, particularly as many tenants don't use the repair reporting system before submitting a disrepair claim.

23% of landlords dealing with disrepair claims commented on the number and quality of claims being pursued by claim management firms, who they report often proactively target social housing tenants to generate disrepair cases, through door to door canvassing, mail shots and other communications, sometimes throughout whole estates/areas at one time. Landlords advised us this causes an expensive and burdensome workload, as although cases may be genuine, some expressed their concern that many are without merit and that tenants are often given false promises and/or they are left with a resulting financial burden from court costs of unsuccessful claims.

Think Point 7

Social landlords should provide clear and accessible information so tenants are aware of how to report repairs, the service standards they can expect and their rights regarding repair responsibilities/disrepair. Landlords should ensure they also give tenants specific information about disrepair, the claims process, the risks and alternative routes, so they can make informed decisions if approached by claim management firms.

2.8 Systems to identify links between multiple disrepair claims, so any underlying issues can be identified and acted on

From the responses received, 55% of social landlords report they have systems in place to identify links between multiple disrepair claims to enable underlying issues to be recognised and resolved.

The remainder didn't positively disclose they have such systems in place, but

they do either intend to develop them or at least say they look for trends in repairs and/or complaints or use stock condition checks or surveys as a means of picking up underlying issues. However, 6% rely solely on anecdotal information or staff knowledge to identify trends and 4% did not disclose any arrangements.

Different landlords told us they.....

- Use trend information from disrepairs, repairs and complaints to inform investment/budget setting and business planning each year.
- Require their assets team to provide a plan of action for properties with a high number of repair requests, including action to address any underlying causes.
- Have set up a Disrepair Group, to analyse and understand trends plus provide key business intelligence/insights, with the aim of resolving issues and preventing further cases.
- Take the approach of learning from each successful disrepair claim by putting intervention measures in place to try to avoid similar future claims.
- Are developing a new monitoring system to identify trends in claims, which will provide a more in depth analysis and show repeat patterns for properties, across estates/areas and their full housing stock.

Think Point 8

Social landlords should have systems in place to assess trends in disrepair claims to identify underlying issues and take action to resolve them. Social landlords should also consider how they could use performance and management information to identify trends.

2.9 Shared learning – damp and mould

Whilst the information wasn't specifically requested, 40% of social landlords mentioned the common theme of damp and mould being evident in either disrepair claims, complaints or repairs and maintenance requests they receive.

The narrative provided by social landlords to explain this often referred to the identified cause being, following a surveyor's inspection, condensation, often attributed to tenants' lifestyles and behaviours. However, a few landlords noted that property design may also be a causal factor, with stock age/type and weather exposure challenges cited, as well as structural defects that need resolving, such as cavity wall insulation issues or lack of extractor fan servicing.

Different landlords told us they.....

- Recognise the problems caused by damp/condensation and have set up systems to catalogue and automatically report when such issues occur, which can then be interrogated and reported on via a monthly performance framework.
- Manage damp and mould via a set process, including ongoing assessment of its effectiveness, 6 monthly damp and mould washes where appropriate, specialist surveyor training plus condensation advice to tenants which sometimes includes fuel poverty and overcrowding. They also actively engage in diagnosis and rectification in priority order, with quarterly analysis.
- Ensure condensation issues identified as a result of fuel poverty are referred to their tenancy support team, who actively engage with tenants on income maximisation and advice.
- Are considering the proactive measure of installing more efficient extractor fans which use smart technology, in response to disrepair claims often being about condensation and damp problems.
- For assurance following the recent press coverage, they have undertaken a pro-active review into their approach to managing damp and mould, so will now specifically report on damp and mould to identify trends.

Think Point 9

Social landlords should ensure measures are in place to specifically identify and address reported issues with damp and mould. This should include investigation/inspections by default, ensuring condensation and its causes are accurately diagnosed, rectifying any defects as promptly as possible and supporting tenants with help and advice, including fuel poverty.

3. Shared learning

Many social housing landlords are reviewing their approaches to housing conditions and disrepair.

As a number of social landlords have already been prompted to review and/or make changes to their arrangements for managing housing conditions and disrepair, we have drawn out a few examples which may be helpful, for further shared learning.

Different landlords told us they.....

- Are developing a system that will correlate stock condition data with disrepair claims to identify underlying issues and decide future development plans, to replace reliance purely on anecdotal staff knowledge.
- Are introducing annual stock inspections for all properties, to be undertaken at the same time as annual servicing.
- Intend to start reporting separately on disrepair claim trends and have identified improvements needed to the disrepair claims process, including updating the information on their website.
- Are introducing new IT software that will be capable of analysing and identifying disrepair trends, rather than continue to rely on staff experience.

Appendix 1

Email to RSLs

2nd July 2021

Dear Chief Executive/Chair,

The recent TV and press coverage of tenants of social housing living in conditions described as squalid, with widespread disrepair and seemingly being

ignored when raising concerns will no doubt have troubled you as much as they have troubled me. I am keen that as a sector we take the opportunity to reflect on our policy and practice to ensure in Wales, we are doing all we can to prevent such conditions and the practices that might allow them to occur.

I accept that from time to time there will be disrepair issues to deal with which can prompt complaints and dissatisfaction from tenants. However, no social landlord in Wales should be in a position where they have systemically failed their tenants and not provided the service they paid for and deserve, even where properties are being considered for disposal, or there are pending large scale regeneration plans.

The recent reporting has highlighted deeply troubling conditions, but also that some social landlords didn't appear to be listening to tenants and weren't responding to legitimate complaints. I know you will agree this is very concerning and I'm sure you will have already been considering whether there could be circumstances where the stock you own and manage could be below the high standards we expect or where responses to complaints could be seen as lacking.

I am therefore requesting written Board assurance that your RSL has appropriate systems, processes and monitoring in place to ensure that when complaints are received, they are fully investigated and acted on, and that there are robust escalation mechanisms which ensure issues can be brought to the attention of the right people, including the Board, if urgent action is needed. In other words, that tenants are listened to and their concerns are addressed.

If you should have any occupied stock which could give rise to such concerns, please confirm what actions or plans, with associated timescales, are in place to resolve the issues, and note that we may ask for further details.

As well as the general assurance statement, I also require a breakdown of all disrepair claims which are in progress. The breakdown must include the street address of the property, the date and nature of the disrepair claim and a brief summary of the current position. I also require assurance that you have systems in place which identifies where there may be links between multiple claims over time (e.g. multiple claims on a single estate or particular property type) in order

that any underlying issues can be identified and acted on.

I anticipate that this information should be relatively easy to retrieve and so responses should be submitted by cop Friday 23rd July 2021 to the HousingRegulation@gov.wales mailbox.

We will be reviewing the responses received and will consider publication, in an appropriate form, any findings from the exercise which may be useful for learning and improvement across the sector.

Should you have any queries in relation to this request, do not contact individuals but please email the HousingRegulation@gov.wales mailbox so that we can ensure, where appropriate, queries and responses are shared across the sector.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Letter to Local Authorities

13th July 2021

Dear Colleague

You will have seen the recent TV and press coverage of tenants of social housing in England living in conditions described as squalid, with widespread disrepair and seemingly being ignored when raising concerns. It is important as a housing sector we take the opportunity to reflect on our policy and practice to ensure, in Wales, we are doing all we can to prevent such conditions and the practices that might allow them to occur.

Accepting from time to time there will be disrepair issues to deal with which can prompt complaints and dissatisfaction from tenants, the recent reporting highlighted some deeply troubling conditions, but also instances where some social landlords didn't appear to be listening to tenants and weren't responding to legitimate complaints. We know you will agree this is very concerning and are sure you will have already been considering whether there could be

circumstances where the stock you own and manage could be below the high standards expected or where responses to complaints could be seen as lacking.

We are seeking assurances that all social landlords in Wales have appropriate systems, processes and monitoring in place to ensure any complaints are fully investigated and acted on and there are robust escalation mechanisms if required. This will ensure tenants are listened to and any concerns they have are addressed. We have written separately to Registered Social Landlords and we are writing, in cooperation with Welsh Local Government Association, to request Local Authority landlords provide assurances and information as detailed below:

- A broad assurance that you are content you have the appropriate systems in place to ensure issues are dealt with efficiently and in a timely manner, including escalation processes.
- Details of any occupied stock which could give rise to concerns and if so, please confirm what actions or plans, with associated timescales, are in place to resolve issues.
- To understand the scale of any disrepair issues, a breakdown of all disrepair claims which are in progress. It would be useful for that breakdown to include the street address of the property, the date and nature of the disrepair claim and a brief summary of the current position.
- It would also be helpful to understand if you have systems in place which identify where there may be links between multiple claims over time (e.g. multiple claims on a single estate or particular property type) in order that any underlying issues can be identified and acted on.

We do appreciate the pressures Local Authorities are under, particularly in response to Coronavirus, but kindly request you submit responses by cop Friday 30 July 2021 to the Welsh Government standards mailbox at HousingQualityStandards@gov.wales. A review of the responses received and any findings from the exercise may be used to support learning and improvement across the social landlord sector.

If you have any queries please direct them to the same mailbox so they can be dealt with promptly.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Appendix 2

Think Point 1

Social landlords need to ensure they have appropriate, clear and effective systems, processes and monitoring in place to investigate and act on complaints, providing a simple and accessible route, which tenants know about, to get their concerns resolved.

Think Point 2

Social landlords should have processes, systems and a culture of ownership to enable issues to be readily identified and easily escalated to the attention of the right people, including their governing bodies, if urgent action is needed.

Think Point 3

Social landlords should have a tenant involvement focused culture, at both strategic and operational levels. They must ensure tenants understand the ways they can get involved, including how the organisation will listen to, and act on, tenants' concerns and issues, plus be able to demonstrate that diverse tenant feedback, views and expectations are resulting in better outcomes.

Think Point 4

Where landlords identify issues with occupied stock, they need to communicate with tenants as early as possible, setting out clear plans and timescales. It is also important to continue communicating, particularly if plans and timescales change.

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Think Point 5

Social landlords should ensure they continue to provide an appropriate repairs and maintenance service while properties are occupied, even if they are pending redevelopment, and continue to investigate any tenant concerns, taking action where necessary.

Think Point 6

Social landlords should ensure they have detailed and accurate information about the condition and performance of their stock, to assess and identify where there are concerns, to enable targeted and prioritised investment and to inform robust strategic stock option decisions.

Think Point 7

Social landlords should provide clear and accessible information so tenants are aware of how to report repairs, the service standards they can expect and their rights regarding repair responsibilities/disrepair. Landlords should ensure they also give tenants specific information about disrepair, the claims process, the risks and alternative routes, so they can make informed decisions if approached by claim management firms.

Think Point 8

Social landlords should have systems in place to assess trends in disrepair claims to identify underlying issues and take action to resolve them. Social landlords should also consider how they could use performance and management information to identify trends.

Think Point 9

Social landlords should ensure measures are in place to specifically identify and address reported issues with damp and mould. This should include investigation/inspections by default, ensuring condensation and its causes are accurately diagnosed, rectifying any defects as promptly as possible and supporting tenants with help and advice, including fuel poverty.

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