

CABINET (HOUSING) COMMITTEE

19 SEPTEMBER 2012

MEASURES TO ADDRESS CONDENSATION/MOULD IN COUNCIL PROPERTIES  
(OPTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL INVESTMENT)

REPORT OF HEAD OF HOUSING SERVICES

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RECENT REFERENCES:

CAB2324 - Measures to Address Condensation/Mould in Council Properties - 4 April 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report brings forward, and seeks approval for, proposals for additional investment in measures to help tenants control condensation.

The report also proposes that the funds for this investment in 2012/13 be found from savings identified elsewhere within this year's programme, and that the source of funding for these proposals from 2013/14 onwards be determined as part of the 2013 business planning process.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1 That the approach and proposals outlined in the report for additional investment in mechanical extract fans, and /or positive input ventilation, be approved.
- 2 That the additional investment be funded from within the existing 2012/13 repairs and maintenance budget.
- 3 That the source of funding for these proposals from 2013/14 onwards be determined by the 2013 business planning process.

CABINET (HOUSING) COMMITTEE19 SEPTEMBER 2012MEASURES TO ADDRESS CONDENSATION/MOULD IN COUNCIL PROPERTIES (OPTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL INVESTMENT)REPORT OF HEAD OF HOUSING SERVICES

1. Background
  - 1.1. CAB 2324 (HSG) was brought before Cabinet (Housing) on 4 April 2012 in response to concern about the Council's approach to helping tenants with condensation and mould.
  - 1.2. The general view from tenants who suffer with condensation and mould is that the Council's approach is inadequate and that they would like additional measures introduced to help reduce condensation and its effects.
  - 1.3. The current policy is effectively limited to providing information and guidance on lifestyle measures and trying to get tenants to understand and accept the impact of their actions (e.g. drying clothes inside, not opening windows, etc.).
  - 1.4. CAB 2324(HSG) introduced and opened this debate with Members and asked them to consider whether or not the current policy for responding to requests for help in relation to condensation and mould problems is adequate and appropriate, and whether or not Members wish to consider additional investment in this area in future years.
  - 1.5. During discussion, the Committee acknowledged the considerable impact that the issues referred to in the report was having on officer resource, as well as on the lives of some tenants.
  - 1.6. Members agreed that surveyors should continue to provide comprehensive advice to affected tenants and that additional training be provided to staff to ensure this was consistently delivered. In addition, Members also wanted officers to acknowledge where physical defects in the buildings may either be causing or exacerbating these issues and that these matters be prioritised accordingly (in respect of the former, frontline staff have already undergone further training and revised survey pro-formas have already been agreed with the Repairs and Maintenance Scrutiny sub-group of TACT).
  - 1.7. In conclusion, at the Cabinet (Housing) Committee on 4 April 2012 (CAB 2324) it was resolved:-
    - a. That the current policy for responding to requests for service in relation to mould and condensation be noted.

- b. That a further report on options for additional investment be considered by the Committee in September 2012.

1.8. The purpose of this report is therefore to bring forward, and seek approval for, proposals in respect of options for additional investment (resolution 2. above).

## 2. Introduction

- 2.1. Save for a few notable exceptions (e.g. Winnall Flats), Council properties are generally well insulated and have adequate heating systems. Council properties also have adequate means of providing ventilation although we see additional options in this area as offering perhaps the most affordable and practical solutions to reducing condensation problems (discussed further below).
- 2.2. Where we have condensation problems, the capital cost of changing the type of heating (£2/3,000) just to help alleviate a condensation problem alone cannot be justified. However, where it has been practical and affordable to do so in the past, we have made a relatively minor change to an existing heating configuration if the tenant has already helped themselves as much as they can and we believe the change is likely to make a significant improvement (e.g. move a radiator from an internal wall to under a window on an external wall). We would propose to retain this option where practical and affordable to do so.
- 2.3. Council properties are generally well insulated. Where we are made aware that is not the case then we would take appropriate measures to remedy the situation in accordance with existing standard procedures.
- 2.4. Council properties also have adequate means of providing ventilation (i.e. via openable windows) although greater concerns about security and heat losses have made this very effective and natural method of ventilation much less attractive.
- 2.5. Therefore, for the reasons given above in regards to the heating and insulation, the remainder of this report focuses solely on additional investment options for reducing the proportion of moisture in the air (relative humidity) in properties - while at the same time not compromising security or losing any precious heat generated.

## 3. Ventilation

- 3.1. Research has shown that if relative humidity levels exceed 70% for prolonged periods, there is high probability that condensation occurring on cold surfaces will lead to mould growth. A ventilation rate of between 0.5 and 1.5 air changes per hour for the whole dwelling will usually be sufficient to control condensation. The ventilation rate is the rate at which stale indoor air is replaced by fresh outdoor air.

- 3.2. There are two natural mechanisms that drive ventilation. Firstly the effect of wind pressure on the building causes air to enter the windward façade and pass through the dwelling. Secondly, the temperature difference between the indoor and outdoor air causes air to enter at the lower part of the dwelling and then rise up through the dwelling and exit towards the top of the dwelling (commonly called the “stack” effect).
- 3.3. In addition, these natural mechanisms can be supplemented by the use of mechanical systems. Before the building regulations set a requirement for purpose-provided provisions for ventilation (which was long after most of our properties were built), dwellings mainly relied on these natural forces to provide ventilation via the cracks, gaps and windows in the building envelope.
- 3.4. This type of ventilation is termed “uncontrolled” (sometimes referred to as air leakage), and can result in significant energy wastage (20-30% of total heat loss). Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly, it cannot ensure the higher ventilation rates necessary during times of greatest moisture production (washing; bathing; cooking; etc.) and which is often the key cause of high levels of condensation in dwellings.
- 3.5. Ideally a good ventilation strategy would normally provide a balance between energy efficiency and indoor air quality. In new builds, this has led to the concept of “build tight – ventilate right”. In other words, minimise the amount of uncontrolled air movement through the building envelope, then install a controllable ventilation system to provide the necessary ventilation both where and when it is needed. Clearly, we do not have the option to “build tight” from the outset because we are dealing with existing stock, but we have over time indirectly reduced the uncontrolled air movement through the building envelope with the installation of PVCu windows/doors and insulation to cavities and lofts.
- 3.6. There will always be occasions where relative humidity will be higher than desirable and that, as time moves on and heating bills continue to rise; there will be more and more reluctance to open windows. In short, there will always be situations where tenants dry washing inside, or can not afford for valuable heat to be lost through open windows, and therefore we should perhaps accept this now and invest accordingly in additional ways to ventilate.
- 3.7. If additional investment is to be made available for those tenants that want and need it then, as part of any provision, not only will “ground rules” need to be set and agreed formally with tenants (i.e. no tampering with settings/controls; no disconnecting of unit etc.), but they will also need to clearly understand the implications of not then using any additional measures supplied. In either or both cases, not only do they risk exacerbating the problem, but they also jeopardise further help from the Council should the problem persist.

#### 4. Options for reducing moisture in the air

- 4.1. Ideally, controlled ventilation should be implemented on two fronts – directly and indirectly - and in that order if funding is limited. Firstly, direct extract ventilation should be provided in “wet” rooms where most water vapour is released (e.g. bathrooms; kitchens). This removes moisture at source directly to the outside and so minimises the spread of this moisture into the rest of the building. Secondly, indirect ventilation can be provided by a continuous supply of fresh air from the outside/loft (e.g. positive input ventilation) to dilute and disperse water vapour that is either not removed by extract ventilation or is generated in other rooms of the house.
- 4.2. There are other methods of controlling ventilation and the moisture content of the air in dwellings (e.g. air conditioning; passive stack ventilation; whole house mechanical ventilation with heat recovery etc.) but retro-fitting these options into existing dwellings is not only deemed “a sledgehammer to crack a nut” but also unaffordable - and will therefore not be considered further within this report.
- 4.3. If the moisture in the air is not reduced or removed by replacing it ( i.e. through either direct extraction, positive input ventilation or a combination of the two), then the only way is to physically reduce the moisture content of the air as it stands by controlled/managed condensation - i.e. as afforded by domestic (i.e. portable) dehumidifiers. Although these are seen as a very effective and practical solution in privately owned dwellings, we do not consider them a solution here (for the same reasons we do not provide other domestic appliances such as cookers; washing machines etc.), because of the added and ongoing maintenance responsibilities/risks it will place on the Council as a landlord (i.e. annual PAT testing, tracking of units, etc.). Any solution should remain as a fixture to the dwellings so that there is a good chance that the investment will remain in the property when the tenant/s move.

#### 5. Tenant Responsibilities

- 5.1. Cl. 29 of WCC’s Secure Tenancy Conditions states that “The tenant has a duty to minimise levels of condensation within the property”. These proposals do not affect the tenant’s underlying and ongoing duty in this respect.

#### 6. Costs

- 6.1. The modern mechanical extract fans usually cost about £200 each to install as a new installation. Replacing an existing fan (i.e. hole and electrics already there etc.) costs about £100 each. The running cost to the tenant (which includes continuous trickle extraction) is estimated at approx. 2/3p per day per fan (<£25 per year for 2 fans). Apart from a filter clean/change, these units need very little maintenance but could be routinely checked/serviced when properties are empty. The filter can

be periodically washed/cleaned by the tenant, or replaced at a cost of £2. The units have a warranty of 5 years, but beyond that the estimated maintenance/replacement cost to the Council is estimated at £60-70,000 per year.

- 6.2. Positive input ventilation systems cost about £500/£600 per property to install. The running costs to the tenant/s is estimated at 2/3p per day. Apart from a filter clean/change (about £20) every 18/24 months, these units need very little maintenance but could be routinely checked/serviced when properties are empty. If the proposal to fit mechanical extractor fans throughout the stock is adopted here, then the need to fit PIV units in addition should only present itself in very rare and exceptional cases. We therefore expect the investment in this area to be relatively minimal/insignificant.

## 7. Investment

- 7.1. Although none of the proposed measures has been possible to date due to funding restrictions, such works could now be funded within the current HRA business plan. Increasing provision would not necessarily address the whole problem, but it would provide tenants with all reasonable means to manage condensation problems more effectively – and bring properties broadly in line with current building regulations.
- 7.2. The proposal is to set aside/earmark a total of £300k a year for investment in direct mechanical extract fans and/or positive input ventilation. Positive input ventilation is seen as a secondary and additional means to the mechanical extract fans and therefore the proposal is that positive input ventilation should only be installed where the former has proven (by detailed data logging) to be insufficient. This investment will hopefully see all council dwellings fitted with extract fans to both kitchens and bathrooms over the next 6/7 years.

## 8. Priorities

- 8.1. With an acceptance that for many tenants, condensation and mould is a real problem, but that we still have limited resources, we somehow need to be able to prioritise those in greatest and urgent need.
- 8.2. As a general rule, the following is the suggested order of priority:-
  - a. Priority 1 - for existing tenants and prospective tenants (i.e. voids) where there are inherent and/or exceptional design flaws in the original construction /orientation which make it very difficult or impractical for the tenant to control condensation through existing or normal (i.e. natural) means.
  - b. Priority 2 - for existing tenants and with an identified need - where tenants have taken all reasonable measures to control condensation within their home but have been unsuccessful in alleviating the problem.

- c. Priority 3 - for existing tenants as part of the standard kitchen/bathroom upgrade/refurbishment programmes (extract fans to be offered and fitted to both wet rooms - irrespective of whether or not an upgrade to the kitchen/bathroom is actually needed/wanted and irrespective of whether or not a condensation problem exists).
- d. Priority 4 - for prospective tenants generally (i.e. empty/void properties). Although clearly no need, or priority, has been established for a new tenant, it makes practical sense to add the installation of extract fans and/or positive ventilation systems to the minimum voids standard, where affordable within the total investment of £300,000 per annum.

## 9. Other measures

- 9.1. Where tenants have confirmed that they do not ventilate naturally by opening the windows for security reasons, we already offer to fit security stays to downstairs windows. This existing standing offer to tenants will remain and be in addition to any new proposals adopted here.
- 9.2. Similarly, where we believe a minor configuration change to an existing heating system would have a significant impact (e.g. relocating a radiator from an internal to external wall) then we would continue to do this as part of existing procedure.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

### 10. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND CHANGE PLANS (RELEVANCE TO

- 10.1. The proposals within this report make a direct and positive contribution to a High Quality Environment.

### 11. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 11.1. The measures proposed within this report provide tenants with additional means to control condensation and mould within their properties. This should therefore not only reduce the incidence of condensation and mould within properties, but also reduce the likelihood of successful claims against the Council in this respect.

### 12. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1. We are rapidly approaching another winter which is when the incidence of condensation is most prevalent. It is therefore important that tenants reap the benefit of these proposals as soon as possible and so, to that end, we propose implementing the proposals contained within this report with immediate effect. The proposals will result in additional expenditure of up to £300,000 per annum. Works within the current financial year will be contained within the approved Maintenance

Programme as detailed in CAB2386 (HSG) elsewhere on this agenda and further information on progress with the programme, including the impact of the reduced costs of the gas servicing contracts, will be reported in detail to the November meeting of this Committee.. .

- 12.2. The source of funding for these proposals from 2013/14 onwards will be determined as part of the 2013 business planning process.
13. TACT COMMENT/TENANTS REPAIRS & MAINTENANCE SCRUTINY GROUP.
  - 13.1. This is a necessary exercise and TACT is pleased to see that plans are well thought out and thorough.
  - 13.2. At a meeting of TACT Repairs and Maintenance Scrutiny Group on 28 June, we were invited to look at current practise employed by Property Services to remedy mould and condensation and to recommend any changes in the way that Property Services deal with this matter.
  - 13.3. At subsequent meetings we have looked at information given to tenants from other housing providers in comparison with our own practice and considered various options for dealing with mould and condensation. We also noted that in some cases of reported damp in properties, the lifestyle of the tenant may be a contributing factor.
  - 13.4. Having been given the opportunity to read a draft of this report we are in agreement with the report as a whole and particularly the identification of priorities for those tenants in greatest need. We do however believe that money should not be spent where it is not needed and that fans etc should not be installed if tenants themselves are not willing to take steps themselves to alleviate the problem. Para 5 of the report makes reference to 'tenants responsibilities' in this respect.
  - 13.5. Finally we wish it noted our compliments to officers concerned with drafting this report for a clear and concise account of the present situation and the recommendations to address it.