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Living in Disrepair

A report about poor housing, damp and mould complaints



This document was written by the **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales**. It is an easy read version of ‘**Living in Disrepair - a thematic report about housing disrepair and damp and mould complaints to PSOW**’.

November 2024

How to use this document



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Words in **bold blue writing** may be hard to understand. You can check what the words in blue mean on **page 28**.



Where the document says **we**, this means the **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales**. For more information contact:

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This document is also available in Welsh.



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Introduction



My name is **Michelle Morris**. I am the **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales**.

My team and I work together to:



- look into complaints about Welsh **public services**



- look into complaints about Welsh councillors



- work with **public services** and local councils to make things better.



Public services are services paid for by Government. For example: local councils, the NHS, social landlords.



This is the second report I have written like this.
Where we look at one issue in more detail.

This helps us better understand:



- what the issues are



- and how we can solve them.

Housing conditions



This report looks at complaints we have received about:

- damp,
- mould,
- and poor housing conditions in **social housing**.



Social housing is affordable homes for people who cannot afford private homes. They are rented from your council or a housing association at a lower cost. Many people call them council houses.



We get a lot of complaints about housing every year.



This is an important issue to look into.



There is a lot of work and research that shows there is a link between:

- poor housing
- and people's health.



Damp housing can cause problems with things like your lungs and heart.



In 2020 a young boy in England died because there was mould in his family home. He lived in **social housing**.



Our NHS is under a lot of pressure. All **public services** need to think about whether their failings are adding to the problem. This includes **social landlords**, like housing associations.



A report by Public Health Wales showed that improving housing would improve people's health.



The report found that poor housing costs the NHS in Wales more than £95 million a year.



Better housing could lead to fewer people needing treatment in hospital.



I hope the learning from this report will help to:

- improve housing in Wales
- and as a result, improve people's health too.

About this report



This report looks at complaints we have received about **social housing**. This includes:

- housing provided by councils
- housing provided by Registered Social Landlords, also known as Housing Associations.



We used to keep all complaints about poor housing conditions together. Including complaints about damp.



However, damp has a serious impact on health. So in April 2024 we started to record complaints about damp separately.



This will help us better understand how **social housing** providers are dealing with damp issues.

What we learned

Requests for repairs or complaints?



When people ask for repairs or report things that need fixing, this is not always a complaint.



We only have powers to look into complaints that have not been dealt with properly. But we can take action if we think a **public service** has had enough time to deal with an issue.



We have made a guide to help **public services** deal with complaints. There are nearly 60 **public services** in Wales that must follow this guide by law.



The guide explains what counts as a complaint.



Public services need to use this to decide what is a complaint, and what is not.



People should not have to:

- make a complaint to get things fixed in their house
- or keep chasing landlords about issues.



If people have had to do these things, I believe they should be treated like complaints. Because people are giving landlords enough chances to deal with the problems.

Example



Ms A had been reporting issues to the council for 6 years.



The Council said it had not received a formal complaint.



But Ms A had repeatedly been in contact with the council. So we would view this as a complaint.



We told the council that they should treat this as a formal complaint. And asked them to sort the issue.

House inspections



Landlords must make sure their properties are good enough and safe enough for people to live in.



This is part of a law called the **Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016**.



It is better if properties are checked before they are rented out.



Landlords should check if anything needs repair and make those repairs. Before people move in if possible.



Some of the complaints we received showed that this is not happening.

Example



Ms C needed work done at her social house. She had moved in only 6 weeks earlier.



The housing association was made aware of the issue. An inspection was done before Ms C had moved in.



We contacted the housing association. They checked the property straight away. They found that a lot of work needed to be done.



Ms C had to move out for the work to be done. The housing association apologised. But this should never have happened.



It would have cost less if the work had been done before Ms C had moved in.



They also would have saved Ms C a lot of difficulty. Her family and home life were impacted. This goes against her human rights to have her home and family life respected.

Vulnerable people



Vulnerable people are people who need more support to stay safe. For example, elderly people and disabled people.



We often think about human rights when dealing with complaints. We want to help people be safe and happy at home.



In many of the complaints we dealt with, action was taken because we got involved.



Otherwise, many **vulnerable people** would have had to wait a long time for work to be done.

Example



Mr E was an elderly man with poor health. He had been complaining about a faulty front door for some time.



He had to put blankets over the door and in cracks to:

- stop water coming in
- and to keep out draughts.



His social landlord said it would take 6 months to replace the door.



We did not think this was acceptable. And we felt it went against the landlord's own policy to care for **vulnerable people**.



We agreed that the landlord would make an urgent repair within 5 days. And replace the door within 8 weeks.



The landlord apologised to Mr E. And gave him money to cover his extra heating costs.

Dealing with complaints



People are often waiting too long to have their complaint dealt with.



Sometimes landlords make short term fixes to deal with issues. And the complaint is delayed when this work is happening.



Sometimes landlords do not record complaints properly. Meaning landlords are not keeping track of the issues and actions that need to be taken.



Often people are not kept up to date with what is happening with their complaint. Which goes against our guidance. It is important that people know what is happening at all times.

Example



Ms I complained that there was damp in her children's bedrooms.



The floor was damaged by the damp. And her daughter, who has mobility issues, had fallen over on broken flooring.



The landlord told us that they were aware of the issues. And had known about it for around 7 months.



Some of the work that was needed included roof repairs, which may have been causing the damp.



We were told that the complaint was still ongoing. And that they planned to fix the roof next month.



We asked the landlord to:

- apologise to Ms I
- pay her money for the delay dealing with her complaint
- and provide Ms I with a timeframe for all works to be done in writing.

Good practice



We are happy to say that we have seen some good work too.



Landlords have asked for professional help to check properties properly. And to find the cause of the issue when they get a complaint.



This is often needed when landlords think the person living in a property is causing **condensation**. This is when you get water drops on things like your walls and windows. It can be stopped by doing things like putting your heating on. And opening your windows.

What should happen next



If damp might be an issue, landlords should check and take action as early as possible.



It is worrying that many landlords wait for problems to be reported. Instead of taking action to check properties earlier.



It is disappointing to see that complaints are still not dealt with well. Problems include:

- complaints not being dealt with quickly enough
- people not being kept up to date with what is happening with their complaint
- actions not being taken to properly sort issues.

Part of our job it to improve how complaints are dealt with. To support this, we have:



- Provided 500 free training sessions for **public services** since September 2020. This includes councils and housing associations.



- Shared how best to deal with complaints. Many **public services** must follow this by law. Including some housing associations.



We will keep working to include all housing associations in this work. So they must follow our complaints guide by law.



A lot of work is needed to improve housing in Wales. I know this will cost money. However, we need to think about how much poor housing is costing our health service.

Recommendations



Here are some things we think need to happen to improve **social housing**:



- All **social housing** providers should proactively check their properties. They should actively check for risk of damp and mould.



- All **social housing** providers should inspect their properties before renting them out. And do any repair work before people move in.

- All **social housing** providers should regularly:



- Check all requests for repairs and fixes, and make sure the work is done.



- Check all work is properly done and contact the people living in the home to check this. Before they sign off the work as complete.



- Complete repairs in order of need. So people most at risk are dealt with first.



- If a person makes repeated requests for repairs, record this as a complaint.



- Use **independent surveyors** to inspect properties that have serious problems. Or where there may be damp and people have reported breathing problems. An **independent surveyor** is a professional who does not work for the landlord. They provide specialist checks on a property.



- All **social housing** providers should read this report, and my last report about dealing with complaints. They should work with us to deal with complaints better.

Hard words

Public services

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