



Damp and mould Scrutiny Project

Southern Housing Residents Scrutiny Panel



When Southern Housing residents live with damp and mould in their homes, it has a negative impact on their health and wellbeing which can, in some cases, be profound. While some residents report that issues are solved quickly, others are frustrated – even angry – with the service they receive. This Scrutiny project examines residents' experience, analyses current systems and processes, reviews the Southern Housing Action Plan for Damp and Mould, and suggests improvements.



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Introduction

Southern Housing Resident Scrutiny Panel

A Panel of Residents who independently look at the services Southern Housing provide and make recommendations to improve the services residents receive.

Our Objectives

Paul Hackett, CEO of Southern Housing, was keen for the Resident Scrutiny Panel to scrutinise the services provided by Southern Housing in relation to damp and mould issues. The Panel regard damp and mould as a pressing matter for many residents, particularly in light of emerging evidence of the harm that it causes to health and wellbeing.

Project Scope

The Resident Scrutiny Panel set the scope of the project to include:

- A review of the processes used to address damp and mould issues
- Understand resident satisfaction
- Communication
- Identification of gaps between resident experiences and best practice as defined by the Housing Ombudsman.

Project Sponsor

Carl Dewey, Director of Repair and Estate Transformation, was appointed as the project sponsor. His team has responsibility for remediating damp and mould issues. He presented information about the legal and political context, the work that has been undertaken by Southern Housing and actions planned for the future.

What did we do?

The Resident Scrutiny Panel divided tasks. These included:

- An in-person workshop involving Southern Housing employees
- Surveying and interviewing residents
- Reviews of communications
- Review of Key Performance Indicators
- A review of the current Southern Housing damp and mould action plan provided current perspectives.
- The data collected provided the perspectives of residents and Southern Housing employees. These perspectives were then compared to the "desired future state" as defined by the Housing Ombudsman.

Process Review

During the in-person workshop attended by a range of Southern Housing Employees and Resident Scrutiny Panel Members, Southern Housing employees identified key strengths and opportunities for improvement which impact on the resolution of damp and mould issues:

Strengths

- **Cultural:** internal teams are dedicated to making damp and mould a priority and partners deliver good services once scheduled in.
- **Skills:** relevant training provided to Customer Experience Team when responding to contact on Damp and Mould.
- **Solutions and technology:** interim solutions have reduced calls; data logging helping with diagnosis.

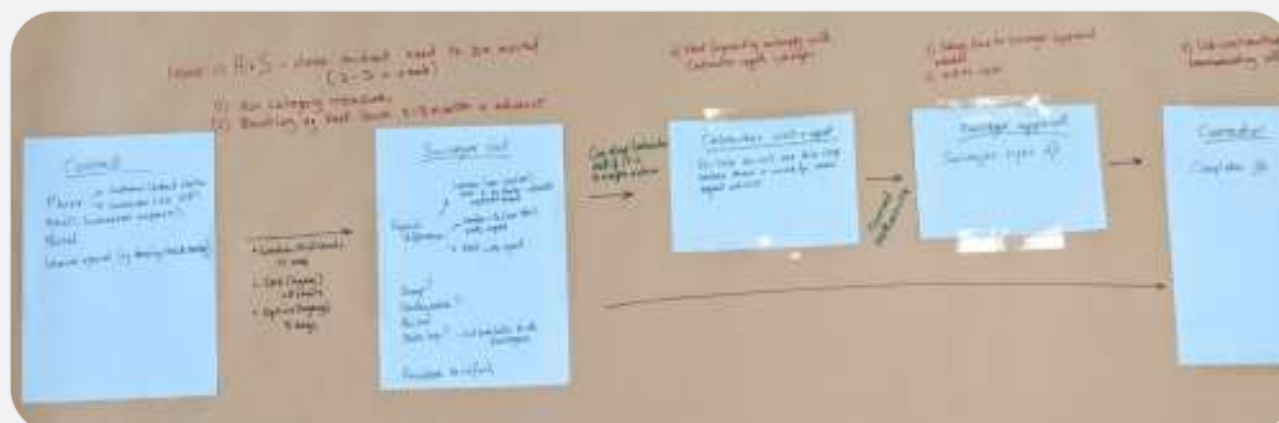
Opportunities for improvement

- **Customer relationships:** provide one point of contact/dedicated team, improve communications between Southern Housing their contractors and residents (appointments, timelines, expectations), instigate after-care.
- **Process and technology:** Add damp and mould to the CRM (customer relationship management) categories, uniform technology and process (e.g. forms), upgrade the IT system so that it better supports needs allowing residents to upload pictures.
- **Skills development:** More shared learning between teams, Property Care Association training for all surveyors.
- **Practical solutions:** Establish contracts where there are none, ensure the Direct Labour Operatives are geared up to carry out damp and mould work, more surveyors, don't carry out mould washes if it is reasonably clear they will not provide a permanent solution, ensure there is sufficient budget.
- **Getting ahead of the game:** More proactive behaviour (e.g. if Southern Housing are working on one home in a block, the chances are next door has the same problem and should be inspected).

Southern Housings view of residents' perspective

Southern Housings employees attended a workshop and were asked to put themselves in residents' shoes. What would they say:

- **Communication:** lack of communication, particularly on progress and expected timelines, lack of empathy, information and availability
- **Difficulty in contacting Southern Housing:** confusing routes for reporting issues
- **Fear** (particularly after recent publicity)
- **Let down:** shown through complaints and delays
- **Knowledge:** Residents may feel they don't have the right tools and knowledge to prevent damp and mould.





Getting in touch

- ✓ Two websites, different paths
- ✓ Contact paths overcomplicated
- ✓ Information leaflet poor
- ✓ Different Responses time targets
- ✓ Multiple contact points.



Survey and diagnosis

- ✓ Processes differ
- ✓ Backlog
- ✓ Surveys doubled up (surveyor then contractor)
- ✓ Surveyor form long winded
- ✓ Information about when work will be done is not provided to residents.



Remediation work

- ✓ Delays (Inbox pressure, approvals)
- ✓ Contractor communications with residents
- ✓ Lack of contractors in some areas
- ✓ Contractor performance varies
- ✓ Lack of visibility of contractor work.



Follow up

- ✓ No after care calls

Resident Views

Survey

A survey was sent via email to 3500+ Southern Housing residents who were identified on the database as having reported damp and mould issues since August 2022. There was around a 10% response rate.

Survey – qualitative results

Residents were invited to provide comments explaining their property, the damp and mould issue, the effect it has had on their everyday life, how they got in touch with Southern Housing and to provide any further comments. Key takeaways and reoccurring themes from these comments include:

Widespread and Prolonged Issues	Dampness and mould problems are not isolated incidents but affect multiple rooms, including bedrooms, bathrooms, living rooms, and kitchens. Many residents' have been dealing with these issues for several years, indicating a prolonged and unresolved problem.
Health Impact	Several respondents link these problems to health issues, particularly respiratory conditions. Mould and damp can exacerbate health problems, underscoring the need for urgent resolution.
Ineffective Repairs and Maintenance	Many comments expressed frustration with the inadequacy of repairs and maintenance provided by Southern Housing. In some cases, promised repairs were not completed, and issues reoccurred.
Financial Burden	Respondents have had to spend their own money on remedies like mould-resistant paint and dehumidifiers, adding a financial burden on tenants.
Ventilation and Condensation Issues	Inadequate ventilation, often due to broken vents and non-functional systems, contributes to the problem, particularly during the winter months when condensation on windows is common.
Water Leaks and External Factors	Leaks from roofs, gutters, and external brickwork are cited as sources of damp issues. Addressing external factors is crucial in resolving the internal problems.
Communication Challenges	Several residents reported difficulties in getting their concerns addressed promptly by Southern Housing, indicating communication issues.
Impact on Living Spaces	Damp and mould affect various rooms and living spaces, making some areas unusable or unfit for habitation.
Damage to Belongings	Personal belongings, furniture, walls, and ceilings have been damaged by damp and mould, causing additional expenses and stress.

Satisfaction survey results

Very Satisfied Satisfied Dissatisfied Very Dissatisfied

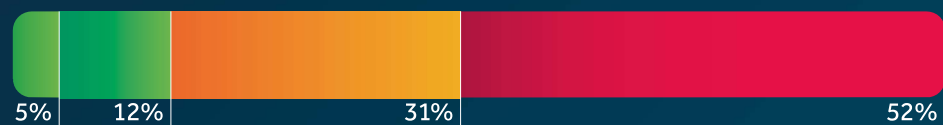
Getting in touch



Visit



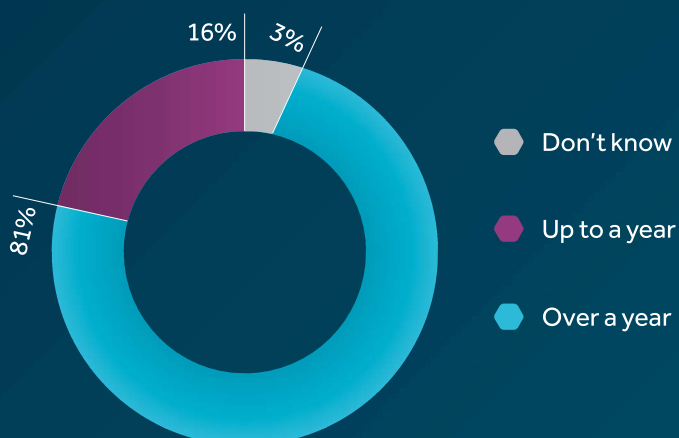
Action



Overall



When the problem started



Interviews

25 Residents were selected at random. The Resident Scrutiny Panel conducted telephone interviews. Eight Interviews were completed. Key themes and trends were:

- Frustration with communications
- Suspicion that costs are the most important issue
- Contractor competence
- Unreliable appointments – and their effect
- Unreliable follow-up.

Every time [there is] any contact online about mould [that] contact just dies out. It really hurts when [we are] not taken seriously”.

“Papering over the cracks” with short term solutions, rather than getting to the bottom of the issue.

They love their house they feel that they have been good tenants but it makes them sad to see the house deteriorate.

Communication has deteriorated in the last 2 years and has become “awful, appalling, diabolical”, and “fallen to pieces”

“I am a teacher and I must tell a white lie to my employer to get time off for an appointment. If no one shows up or contacts me I then have to sit at home all day feeling guilty, let down and upset. Nobody contacts you to say why they didn’t show up, you have to ring them up and then they don’t even know why”.

“Not very impressed” with the information leaflet.

Old windows have been replaced; a fan has been put in the bedroom; damp proof course work has been done on the building; in the more recent contacts with Southern Housing employees, they seem to have a better understanding of his problems. But the underlying D&M issues persist.

One worker said he would wash the walls with bleach, they were never offered information online, offline or verbally regarding damp and mould.

Communication

The Resident Scrutiny Panel assessed the leaflet using a psychologically informed approach (PIEs), a strength-based approach that identifies the strengths and needs of a group.

Our findings

The 'group' in this assessment were residents who had been sent the leaflet either as a paper leaflet or guided to it on the internet.

The leaflet makes several assumptions regarding financial, physical, age, and cognitive abilities. The reader may be frustrated by the lack of contact details such as phone numbers of appropriate departments within Southern Housing. There is no external signposting to agencies that may assist with the elderly, energy costs, access requirements (such as activities that include cleaning at height), and for other hidden vulnerabilities. The information was dense in places, and overwhelming in relation to instructions for the resident to attempt to complete.

The focus of the leaflet appears to be to remove the visual evidence and effects of damp and mould. The onus is upon the residents to complete this difficult and frustrating process. Information regarding removal of damp and mould would be better delivered alongside a visit/survey and tailored to the needs of the resident.

The information contained in the leaflet could be better delivered as several smaller leaflets or links that focus on parts of the process, such as:

- ✓ How to report damp and mould and how to keep a record
- ✓ How to reduce moisture and increase heat retention
- ✓ How to prepare for, and what to expect from, a visit from surveyors and/or repairs
- ✓ How to remove mould damage or how to get assistance with removal
- ✓ Follow-up visits and how to monitor.





The critique and comments added to the leaflet are included at appendix 1.

Housing Ombudsman recommendations

The Housing Ombudsman reported that following their Spotlight Report on damp and mould "It's not lifestyle" in October 2021 they identified 26 key recommendations.

The Resident Scrutiny Panel reviewed and analysed the Southern Housing action plan produced in response to a Housing Ombudsman report to identify how well Southern Housing's proposed actions addressed the Housing Ombudsman 26 recommendations.

The 26 recommendations are regularly monitored. Each of the recommendations are addressed individually or in groups, with several tasks, responsibilities and due dates.

The plan addresses most of the Housing Ombudsman recommendations, although there are some questions arising.

- Do the various training and briefing sessions mentioned include elements designed to change the culture towards one in which residents' views and inputs are listened to, valued and acknowledged in subsequent actions and interventions? The actions are heavily process and system based, yet much of the anxiety and stress experienced by residents is caused by poor communications, which is largely a cultural issue
- The actions about information provided by websites and a leaflet have been closed as 100% complete. Scrutiny analysis shows these are not fit for purpose
- Housing Ombudsman recommends a zero tolerance approach to damp and mould, the plan only seems to address how this will be managed for external contractors. Perhaps the new standard operating procedures cover all internal employees?
- Housing Ombudsman recommends finding opportunities to diagnose damp and mould. The actions address this to the extent of adding to audits but doesn't mention other opportunities, e.g. gas inspections, "neighbour" inspections
- "One system" between the two legacy organisations seems key – what progress has there been?
- Housing Ombudsman recommends review of accessibility and use of systems for reporting repairs and making complaints. It's not clear how

this is addressed in the actions and evidence from the scrutiny points to dissatisfaction and frustration with reporting

- The plan suggests that a dedicated Damp and Mould Team may be put in place. This has the potential to help but needs to be thought through with caution as it could introduce rigidity into the management of resident services.

In February 2023 the Housing Ombudsman completed a 1 year follow up report on damp and mould - It's not Lifestyle. There were three main issues the Housing Ombudsman wanted to highlight:

1. "Hiding behind" legal proceedings – suspending complaints processes too early citing legal proceedings, prior to those proceedings actually starting
2. Dignity, respect and fairness – despite some good practice (e.g. removing the use of the word "lifestyle") there was still too much focus on the solution to damp and mould being within the control of residents
3. Good governance, knowledge and information management. This covered policies including the adoption of a risk-based approach

Websites

A review of the damp and mould content was undertaken on the three websites Southern Housing, Southern Housing Group and Optivo. Although there is some common content, visitors are taken to separate pages for some topics, depending on whether they are living in legacy Optivo or legacy Southern Housing Group property.

There findings were:

Southern Housing www.southernhousing.org.uk

Searches for “d&m” and “damp and mould” returned zero results. A search for “mould” links to a webpage urging residents to report damp and mould by contacting the service centre.

Southern Housing Group www.shgroup.org.uk

This website offers a small section about condensation amidst content about saving energy costs. The Scrutiny Panel utilised the contact form on the Southern Housing Group website to enquire about damp and mould, and to date has not received any response.

Optivo www.optivo.org.uk

A website search for “Damp” or “damp and mould” resulted in links to the leaflet or how to contact Optivo call centre. A search for “Mould” provides a further link, to a list of ways residents can help reduce condensation and prevent mould and ends with a link to the Property Care Association – which may be of little help with residents.

Reflections and Recommendations

1. CULTURE, COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION

There is a pressing need to improve communications to residents so that they are “kept in the loop” about visits, timescales, actions and follow-up work. Partly, this can be achieved by improvements in systems and processes but the most important element will be a fundamental culture change: moving from a top-down model to a “citizen model” that values and listens to residents. To achieve this, Southern Housing should:

- Provide training and development in the requirements of the new culture which emphasises the resident experience and resident diversity
- Consider the requirements of the new culture while designing improved systems and processes
- Establish follow-up processes that include eliciting feedback from residents and demonstrate how the learning from this leads to further improvement.

Southern Housing should review how information leaflets are developed, so that they better meet the needs of its diverse community.

- This should include involving residents in leaflet development, using appropriate language, simplifying messages.

The information contained in the damp and mould leaflet could be better delivered as several smaller leaflets or links that focus on parts of the process, such as:

- How to report damp and mould and how to keep a record
- How to reduce moisture and increase heat retention

- How to prepare for, and what to expect from, a visit from surveyors and/or repairs
- How to remove mould damage or how to get assistance with removal
- Follow-up visits and how to monitor.

The two web-sites need to be amalgamated (no doubt this is in development) and the damp and mould information content should be revised to provide:

- Clear, one-step contact details for engaging help and making a complaint
- Information aligned with the leaflet series (above).

2. SPECIALIST DAMP AND MOULD TEAM

The Panel agrees that the development of a specialist damp and mould team with individuals linked to each remediation works is a good strategy. Our observations:

- Sufficient resources should be allocated to make sure that the team has the capacity to provide a rapid and responsive service. This is particularly important in the early days of the team as it deals with lengthy backlogs
- Health warning: Southern Housing should be clear whether the establishment of this team is a temporary or permanent solution. There may be “solution effects” adversely impacting on service elsewhere (e.g. repairs)
- Contact from residents to the team should be as frictionless as possible. It is acknowledged that contact needs to be recorded for management information purposes but the Panel was of the view that this could be dealt with via the phone system (“press 3 for the damp and mould team”) rather than routing residents through the contact centre

3. SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

The Panel recommends carrying on with the work identified during the in-person workshop

- Improving the process for reporting damp and mould issues – particularly shortening waiting times and information availability
- Cutting out duplication and inefficiencies in the surveying process
- Better management of contractors
- Training employees who deal with resident enquiries about damp and mould issues
- Ensuring appropriate works and management information is available and shared
- Establishing and communicating clear timescales to residents
- Making progress on remediation actions visible to employees and residents.

Follow-up is particularly important in damp and mould cases because of the long-term and seasonal nature of this issue. The Panel recommends:

- Each remediation works should finish with a SMART plan for follow-up.

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Relevant
Time-bound

4. BACKLOG

The survey data revealed extreme dissatisfaction with service around the damp and mould issue – anger and frustration. Often this was due to poor communications (getting in touch, appointments, timescales, follow-up). There is now an opportunity to demonstrate how Southern Housing is improving:

- Provide a short-term investment in dramatically reducing backlog – e.g., a rapid action team to tackle priority cases
- Pro-actively contact all unresolved cases to check the current situation, prioritise interventions and communicate proposed actions and timelines.



What happens next?

An action plan will be created to ensure these recommendations are implemented. The Resident Strategy Group will monitor the action plan and close actions once completed.



Appendix 1: Communications – analysis of leaflet

Insert contact details and guidance on how to report issues at the beginning and throughout this document

TOP TIPS TO PREVENT MOULD

Mould needs water to grow.

There are three ways to reduce it:

1. **Control household moisture**
2. **Careful heating**
3. **Careful ventilation**



Use radiators to warm and dry the air. Don't cover them up!



Close doors in the home while cooking, bathing and doing laundry to prevent moisture reaching cold spots.



Run the cold water first then add the hot water to your bath to reduce the steam.



Cook with pan lids on, and turn the heat down when boiled. This also saves energy.



Use covers for fish tanks.



Wipe away condensation that builds up on glass, window frames and window sills.

Did you know?

On average, a family of four produces up to 13 litres of water vapour per day due to condensation. Common causes include drying clothes indoors or tumble drying without working ventilation.

Laundry



Hang your washing outside to dry if possible. Alternatively, hang it on an airer in a small room with the door closed, and a window slightly open, or extractor fan on. Hang up washing straight away to prevent it getting musty.



Use a washing line or clothes airer to dry clothes.



Vent tumble dryers outside.

Extractor fans



Use extractor fans and close doors in the home while cooking, bathing and doing laundry to prevent moisture reaching cold spots.

Ensure the fan and filter are regularly cleaned. If they become clogged or blocked they'll stop working. You don't need to switch them off, they cost pennies to run per week.

Extractor fan issues?

If your extractor fan isn't working, please report it.

If you don't have an extractor fan, let us know and we can assess if you'd benefit from one.

Insert how to request and/or report an issue.

Too much information on this page. Difficult to take it all in. Needs to be broken down in to manageable chunks, with consideration of all levels of literacy. Pictures would be helpful to further guide

KEEPING YOUR HOME FRESH



1. Tiles and grout

Grout can be cleaned with an old toothbrush. You can also try cleaning with a bicarbonate of soda paste or bleach. Use a squeegee or cloth to dry it after. Let the air circulate while drying.

2. Shower screens, door and curtains

Bicarbonate of soda can also be used to clean a shower screen or cubicle door. Finish by rinsing and drying it.

To clean a shower curtain use one part bleach to four parts water. Soak it in the bath then machine wash. Allow the curtain to dry fully extended before you close it up. Following a shower make sure you remove excess water from the floor and tiles by using a squeegee or cloth.

3. Carpets

Before cleaning any carpets affected by mould make sure they're vacuumed.

4. Wardrobes

Silica gel boxes can be used in drawers and small cupboards to absorb moisture. Keep out the reach and sight of children. Try not to overfill wardrobes.

5. Refrigerators

Bicarbonate of soda can keep the inside walls of the fridge clean with a quick wipe round. If you have a drip tray make sure it's emptied often and isn't leaking.

6. Mops

Thoroughly dry mops and store them in the emptied bucket after use. Clean mops in a weak mix of bleach and water and rinse it out

7. Mattresses

Vacuum mattresses outside if possible. Place the mattress in direct sunlight, as this is a great natural disinfectant. It'll reduce smells and allow it to dry thoroughly. Slatted bed frames let air circulate effectively.

8. House plants

House plants can absorb moisture through their leaves which then moves down to its roots. Recommended plants are English ivy, Boston ferns, peace lilies, palms, snake plants and spider plants.

Insert poisonous plants for pets warnings

9. BOOKS

A piece of barbeque charcoal can be placed in a closed bookcase to absorb moisture. Cornflour can be sprinkled through a damp book. Just brush it off after several hours once the moisture is absorbed. This should be done outdoors if there's mildew.

10. Cupboards

Let the air flow by keeping doors ajar. Keep items susceptible to mildew such as shoes and luggage, on wire racks or perforated shelves so air can circulate around them.

Residents should be advised to take photos of the mould before removal in order to keep a clear record of the pattern of growth and the relationship to any external processes such as weather and/or leaks.

CAREFUL VENTILATION

Air circulation is helpful as it will remove damp air from your home. It's done by opening a window on one side, and another on the opposite side of your home.

Be careful not to 'over-ventilate' your home when it's cold. You only need a window or vent open a little, otherwise heat is wasted.

- Ventilate your kitchen when cooking, washing up or washing by hand. A window slightly open is as good as having it wide open
- Blue sky days are the best times to ventilate. As the sun goes down you can try shutting vents to keep the dry warm air in
- **Don't** block up vents or air bricks and keep them clean
- **Don't** put furniture against cold external walls. If beds only fit tight up against the wall turn the mattress regularly to keep it dry
- **Don't** block radiators with furniture. If this isn't possible try to ensure there's an air gap between the furniture and radiator.

GETTING RID OF MOULD

Act fast!

It's easier and cheaper to clean mould when it first appears. Be sure to wipe down surfaces when warm air condenses on colder surfaces. Wring out the cloths and don't dry them on a radiator. Once the mould is removed, focus should turn to trying to prevent it.

Choosing a cleaning product

Bleach based products work well on non-porous surfaces such as wall tiles, PVC, glass and windows.

On porous surfaces such as paint and plaster, use a product containing a fungicide for longer term protection or use vinegar to make your own DIY mould killer.

Don't mix cleaning products and always follow the instructions.

Assumes lots of knowledge- should be delivered as face-to-face advice during visits

Before you start

Read the instructions on any product labels. Open windows during and after cleaning to allow air circulation. Close off doors to the rest of the home while you're cleaning.

Change 'don't' to 'do' - example - 'do keep a gap between furniture and walls'

This page assumes residents are fit, able, safe, and financially able to complete these tasks safely. Alternative advice and support should be offered throughout, with relevant signposting to external organisations if SHG unable to assist.

Assumes financial and physical health and abilities. Does not consider that landlord may be responsible for the repairs to decor.

What you'll need

- ✓ A face mask, goggles and plastic or rubber gloves
- ✓ A bucket of water with some washing up liquid in it
- ✓ Old cloths or rags that can be thrown away after

Removing stubborn stains

If a stain remains after washing off, you can consider cleaning with one of the following. (try a small section first):

- White vinegar
- Sugar soap
- Bleach
- A fungicidal wash approved by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Find out more at:

www.hse.gov.uk


Insert final list of services both internal and external. Include hyper-links for online version; phone numbers should be available for those who need additional assistance due to not being on survey and/or vulnerabilities.

Decorating after cleaning

Once mould has been removed from painted areas, sand off any flaking paint before applying a trade matt emulsion of the best quality you can afford (high opacity) and use anti-mould additive. Or redecorate with an anti-mould paint.

If you redecorate with an anti-mould paint, don't paint over it with a normal paint, or with wallpaper as this will make it ineffective. Test a small area. You may need to use a stain block first. If wallpapering consider anti-fungal wallpaper paste.

Keeping your home tidy and uncluttered can improve air circulation and help prevent mould reappearing.

 Keep children and pets away from chemicals



