

Driving improvement

Summary of Orbit Report to
the Housing Ombudsman

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1. Introduction

On 27 October 2023, Orbit received a determination of one instance of maladministration and one of severe maladministration from the Housing Ombudsman (HO).

Under its powers within the Housing Ombudsman Scheme paragraph 54(f), we were required to carry out a review of our practices in relation to responding to requests for repairs due to reports of damp and mould. The order specifically requested:

- A review of all determinations issued to Orbit from August 2023 related to damp and mould
- Identification of all other Orbit residents who may have been affected by similar issues from April 2021
- A review of employee training needs, focussing on repairs and complaints officers

- An appraisal of Orbit's future compliance with the Ombudsman's Spotlight report on damp and mould
- A self-assessment using the Ombudsman's Spotlight report on Knowledge and Information Management
- Further exploration of the failings identified in a specific Ombudsman determination

In response to this, we launched an independent review of our complaints, repairs, and maintenance operations with a special focus on issues caused by damp, mould, and condensation (DMC).

2. Context

In the financial year 2023-24, Orbit received 11 severe maladministration determinations relating to seven cases / properties. All of the seven cases related to damp and mould.

A number of the determinations received involved works that were completed in 2021 and 2022. Since this time, we have made many improvements to our services, including changes to the repairs service, customer support operations, supply chain arrangements and complaints handling. While some changes have been fully implemented, others are being delivered as part of longer-term improvement plans. These areas of transformation are also underpinned by a review which is currently underway to map out our future customer journey.

Improvements already implemented have delivered changes relating to the management of report of damp and mould, including:

- New end-to-end damp and mould policy
- The implementation of case management for damp and mould (all existing works orders and communication recorded through the CRM system, including reports with trigger words such as leak, damp, mould, and condensation brought into the case management process)
- Increased case management / technical team resource (15 FTE), with surveyors undertaking a pathological approach to diagnosis and root cause
- A programme of training to support colleagues' knowledge and awareness of damp and mould to improve customers' experience of reporting cases, raising service issues and making formal complaints
- Implementation of a cross-functional damp and mould taskforce to drive operational delivery of works orders
- Cross-functional Incident Management Team instigated to ensure learnings from determinations are incorporated into improvement plans
- Press for Action – a function introduced for any colleague or supply chain partner to raise and prioritise any issue relating to property or customer welfare where safety is a concern, and an immediate response is required
- New supply chain arrangements with primary contractors, with updated systems and enhanced partnership management
- Enhanced repair diagnostics
- Introduction of a new repairs policy
- Implementation of a new approach to complaints handling with backlogs and escalation levels substantially reduced.

3. Learnings

The independent review made 13 recommendations (see section 4) based broadly on the following learnings:

The management of DMC cases

The review concluded that the processes and systems in place to respond to damp and mould cases meet the guidance issued by the Government and address some – but not all – of the learnings from our maladministration determinations relating to damp and mould.

Although our approach to managing damp and mould cases is considered robust, the review identified that our internal self-assessment against the Spotlight report was lacking detail, and there is evidence to suggest that we are already operating and planning beyond what is evidenced in the self-assessment. The review recommended that the self-assessment should be updated to reflect the actual processes in place and, at the time of writing this report, we are in the process of providing a more in-depth response.

Compliance with the Ombudsman's Spotlight report on Knowledge and Information Management

The review highlighted that significant progress is required to meet the requirements set out in the Knowledge and Information Management (KIM) report. This is due to:

- Evidence for compliance against the report being sporadic, with some elements of self-assessment being more robust than others
- A lack of acknowledgement of wider concerns such as the efficiency, effectiveness, change to and economy of service delivery
- The self-assessment doing little to assess the requirements associated with contractor systems
- The self-assessment lacking an assessment of how a good data culture is being driven by the organisation.

Learning and development

The review found that colleagues within Customer Services and the Property Technical teams have received appropriate training to effectively support them in dealing with repair requests, including damp and mould cases and handling of formal complaints. There is evidence of a link between learning and performance monitoring in both the Customer Services and the Property teams, however the review identified that this needs to be fully embedded as part of day-to-day management.

In addition, more work is needed to develop a strategic solution to learning and development. Our approach has generally been reactive to issues, rather than being driven by strategic learning and development priorities, with a decentralised learning and development model resulting in inconsistencies for job specific learning and development, and there being no evidence of an ongoing and planned programme of learning that will ensure colleagues are kept fully updated on future changes.

Embedding a holistic approach

The review stated that we need to implement our wider Asset Management Strategy, focusing on the consistent delivery of the capital improvement programme, year-on-year. This needs to include a joined-up approach to communicating with customers and engaging them in delivery plans.

In addition, further work is required to embed longer term solutions which will address causation. This will ensure that services delivered to customers are more effective, and make sure they become business as usual activities.

Finally, that learnings related to damp and mould should be applied to other service and repair types.

4. Orbit's Response:

The Assurance Programme

Whilst progress has undoubtedly been made, we recognise that there is still much more that we need to do in order to improve the homes and services we provide for our customers.

The independent report concluded with 13 recommendations, each of which has been captured in an Assurance Programme designed to close the service gaps highlighted by the Housing Ombudsman determinations, by either confirming that changes already implemented have been effective, or ensuring any remaining actions are being addressed.

We are fully committed to making these improvements and the responsibility for their delivery remains with the Executive Team, with progress reported and monitored at Board level.

5. Recommendations, assurance, and plans

Recommendation	Orbit's response	Source from Assurance Programme
1. Orbit should update the Knowledge and Information Management (KIM) self-assessment to include the approach for information that is passed between Orbit and its contractors.	The assessment will be reviewed and re-written in line with observations from the independent review.	Area 5: Insight, Data, Reporting and Record keeping
2. Orbit should provide more information within the KIM self-assessment about projects that have been undertaken to create a 'good data culture'.	The assessment will be reviewed and re-written in line with independent observations.	Area 5: Insight, Data, Reporting and Record keeping
3. Orbit should consider enhancing its self-assessment against the Ombudsman Spotlight on damp and mould to provide more detail such as policies, process maps and practices for handling damp and mould cases.	The self-assessment has been re-written and is in the process of being finalised. We will ensure that the findings from the independent review are incorporated within this.	Area 3: Proactive Property Management
4. In order to truly understand if the organisation has learned from past cases and that the mechanisms in place are fit for purpose, it is recommended that a detailed audit on a sample of randomly selected cases is carried out, either by an internal scrutiny panel or by external auditors. This could include a review of the reporting process, case management, repair and contractor performance, resident engagement and testimony and case outcomes/future interventions.	<p>Agreed. As part of the 2023/24 Internal Audit Plan a review of DMC processes has been completed and the report is currently being finalised. The scope of the audit was to provide assurance over the case management processes implemented.</p> <p>As part of the internal audit follow up process, we will undertake a further review incorporating the areas identified by the independent report.</p>	Area 3: Proactive Property Management
<p>5. It is recommended that in addition to the case analysis, Orbit seeks to understand how and where cases are reported, to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ascertain if employees, contractors and other third parties are utilising the methods put in place for reporting damp and mould cases. If they are not, seek to understand why. • Ascertain and understand any blockers that might prevent residents from reporting damp and mould cases. 	Agreed and this will be part of the follow up audit of the 23/24 DMC review.	Area 3: Proactive Property Management

5. Recommendations, assurance, and plans

Recommendation	Orbit's response	Source from Assurance Programme
<p>6. Additionally, it would be useful to identify expenditure on individual properties against damp and mould case reports. It would be useful to demonstrate and benchmark damp and mould cases and performance against historic stock investment. Going forward, it would provide greater assurance if learnings from damp and mould case management directly informed the asset management strategy and portfolio investment. This should apply to the entire stock, identifying correlation between cost per property expenditure and damp and mould case reports to identify individual property investment need.</p>	<p>Within the Asset Management Strategy and the Data Strategy, there is a plan of action to further enhance and bring together all data which informs the condition of our homes, which includes historic spend and activities.</p> <p>This will include DMC information and also extend to wider repairs and maintenance activities.</p>	<p>Area 3: Proactive Property Management</p>
<p>7. Orbit should take steps to consider further long-term plans to address issues identified through Ombudsman determinations as well as broader complaints' learnings.</p>	<p>Work has commenced in this area. We are embarking on a transformation programme underpinned by our work on the Customer Journey. This will ensure that changes to our repairs, complaints, contact centre, stock management and supply chain create a new way of working meeting the needs of our customer.</p>	<p>Area 5: Insight, Data, Reporting and Record keeping</p>
<p>8. Orbit should take steps to increase the scope of learnings to the case management of responsive repairs and other repair types beyond cases of damp and mould.</p>	<p>The case management approach for DMC is being extended across other repair activities as part of the repair's transformation programme. This includes work undertaken to introduce a complex case management approach.</p>	<p>Area 3: Proactive Property Management</p>
<p>9. Orbit should prioritise its plan to implement a robust learning and development programme, ensuring that there is a consistent approach to skill matrixes, training needs analysis, future learning priorities and continued professional development across the organisation.</p>	<p>Agreed and this will be led by our Learning and Development team. Resources are being increased in this area to support.</p>	<p>Area 4: Knowledge, attitude, and service culture</p>

5. Recommendations, assurance, and plans

Recommendation	Orbit's response	Source from Assurance Programme
10.Orbit should consider its organisational structure for learning and development to provide a more consistent learning and development offer across the whole organisation and target appropriate learning interventions based on identified learning priorities and outcomes, and which supports the continuing professional development of individuals.	Agreed and this will be led by our Learning and Development team. Resources are being increased in this area to support.	Area 4: Knowledge, attitude, and service culture
11.Orbit should ensure leaders continue to receive appropriate training and support to provide consistent and robust approaches to performance management, including checks to ensure any learning has been fully embedded into day-to-day activities and behaviour.	Agreed and this will be led by our Learning and Development team and supported by the roll out of new Colleague Commitments, the behaviours which set the minimum expectations for all of us.	Area 4: Knowledge, attitude, and service culture
12.Orbit should broaden the current approach for complex damp and mould cases to other cases of complex repair.	See response to recommendation 8.	Area 3: Proactive Property Management
13.Orbit should consider how it communicates the outcomes of surveys to its customers.	Since the set-up of the taskforce, the outcome of DMC inspections and copies of pathologists' reports are shared with customers.	Area 3: Proactive Property Management



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