

RCVE Scrutiny Panel

Damp Mould & Condensation Communications

Background

The Scrutiny Panel (SP) was tasked with reviewing Riverside's amended Damp and Mould (D&M) process with particular focus on communications to customers, scripts, and training provided to the CSC team. The project ran from January to March 2024.

We walked in the shoes of a customer who was experiencing the new D&M process, examining the communication process implemented by Riverside to ensure that all customers were covered, and all avenues of communication were used to ensure the correct message was communicated most effectively.

A range of methods were used to conduct the scrutiny including interviews, presentations, demonstrations, customer journey-mapping, research, and document and webpage reviews.

Executive summary

The Scrutiny Panel has seen evidence and received assurance that Riverside is generally communicating effectively with its customers over Damp and Mould (D&M). Staff training is very good, and the scripts are well thought through.

The customer journey needs to be mapped and our findings suggest that, in doing so, customer communications and the customer experience can be enhanced.

It could be argued that there is an issue over Riverside's approach to protecting its public image versus giving customers the full facts about the gravity of untreated damp and mould. We have compared the Housing Ombudsman Services guidance with Riverside's Communications plan and provided our perspective as customers.

There are ten recommendations and a further four discussion points, which RCVE and Riverside may wish to explore in more depth.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the hard work that Riverside staff have put into responding to Damp and Mould both prior to and after the publication of the Regulator's guidance on understanding and addressing the health risks for rented housing providers.

Scrutiny Report Recommendations- Major		
R1	Provide customers with a damp and mould report when the work is completed and information about what to do if the problem returns within, or after 6 months.	Accepted
R2	Introduce a dedicated hotline for damp and mould as per the new Complaints procedure - which now includes a direct line number.	Rejected
R3	Produce a customer journey map for reporting damp and mould and carrying out repairs and use it to review customer communications.	Accepted
R4	Review the customer information videos with customers, using the in-house training videos as reference material. More information is needed on where to look, and about the physical appearance of different types of damp and mould. Additional information is also needed on what customers can expect when the works are carried out. For example, potential temporary loss of power.	Accepted
R5	Carry out consultation with customers over the Communications plan, in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight report	Accepted

Scrutiny Report Recommendations- Minor		
R6	Evolve to work with a customer panel/focus group to draft letters about damp and mould repairs that are more customer-friendly than the current versions.	Accepted
R7	Remove the word 'here' on the webpage to avoid any misunderstanding that there may be a dead hyperlink. (Details passed to Business Partner Brand & Marketing).	Accepted
R8	Clarify how the offer to fit an extractor fan offer works on the website. State that installation is free of charge, and who qualifies.	Accepted
R9	Add an QR code to customer letters about damp and mould, which links to the Riverside customer information video.	Accepted
R10	Revise customer information to explain the option to be moved into a hotel under certain circumstances.	Accepted

Discussion points

D1. We found some noticeable differences between the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) advice and Riverside's policy for dealing with D&M (see slide 9).

D2. The informative in-house training videos are not available to customers on the Riverside website. The SP takes the view that access to these videos (or a similar version) would be beneficial to customers. Should Riverside publish the videos for customers?

D3. When asked how Riverside could improve communications, it was suggested that, with a bigger budget, bespoke area-specific leaflets could be produced based on expert knowledge of geographical areas and property types. The Communications plan could then include targeted

communications rather than just general communications. The SP takes the view that, given the gravity of D&M, Riverside should consider increasing its communications budget to target areas and property types.

Discussion point 1 – detail (1)

Riverside’s approach to talking about D&M set out in the Communications Plan 2023 –CDM

On Messaging and Tone, the Communications Plan (CP) states, *‘We suggest framing messaging from a positive standpoint rather than speaking explicitly around damp, mould and condensation specifically. For example, we do not intend to say: “We’re want to stop damp, mould and condensation occurring in your home.” Instead, we would say “We want to support you to live in a safe, warm and dry home.”*

Regarding the ‘Look and Feel’ the CP states, *‘We intend to use positive images to support and convey our messages, preferring to use, for example, imagery that showcases idyllic homes or the appliances in the home that can cause water-related damage, rather than pictures of the negative effects water-related damage can potentially cause, which may paint a negative picture of Riverside properties.’*

Discussion point 1 – detail (2)

The Housing Ombudsman Service advice and the Scrutiny Panel’s view on talking about D&M

In the Spotlight report on Damp and Mould (October 2021), Recommendation 8 states, *‘Together with residents, landlords should review the information, materials and support provided to residents to ensure that these strike the right tone and are effective in helping residents to avoid damp and mould in their properties.’*

The Scrutiny Panel wish to stress that overall, the Communications plan is a carefully considered document, which is designed to support colleagues and care for the interests of customers. We also recognise that D&M is a delicate subject and one that may cause customers worry and distress.

But as customers, we do question whether some of the guidance in the CP, quoted in the previous slide, is geared more towards protecting Riverside’s public image than providing customers with the most helpful images and accurate information, possible.

Findings 1-6

Customer service & service delivery

F1. The Head of Assets explained the training on D&M and the culture change that Riverside has undergone. Staff have been equipped with the knowledge and skills to identify damp, mould, and condensation in customers’ homes.

F2. A customer-focused communication plan is in place covering written, online, and staff training.

F3. The Riverside Information Centre (RIC) includes a condensation, damp and mould information hub for staff.

F4. Switchee Smart Thermostat data capture is helping Riverside to tackle damp and mould by producing affordable warmth reports.

F5. In turn, the Switchee data assists with fuel poverty support.

F6. Assets is working on several customer information initiatives in relation to D&M, such as 'out of target repair' push notices to customers, improving Riverside's knowledge of customers' vulnerabilities.

Findings 7-11

Customer service and service delivery

F7. In addition, Assets is planning the launch of customer information for damp and mould repairs, to set out what can be expected and how the repairs will be delivered as well as making 'SUSD' job type repairs visible to customers on 'My Riverside'.

F8. A ventilation strategy is being developed to meet regulations. Not all Riverside properties meet the regulations at present.

F9. Riverside is not asking Housing Officer's (HO) to be technical experts, but to have a certain level of awareness regarding D&M. The HO will log problems and then a technical expert will be sent out to properly assess it.

F10. 'Switchee' devices are being put into properties which helps to monitor D&M issues. There are 2,000 already in properties and Riverside currently has 5,000 more it can distribute.

F11. D&M training is a mandatory online training but will vary in depth and detail depending on staff member's role.

Findings 12-13

Customer service and service delivery

F12. Regarding the re-occurrence of damp and mould, the Head of Assets stated that preventing damp/mould can be complex to resolve due to the dynamic nature of the factors involved. Properties are affected by seasonal weather patterns, the level of heat the customer is able to afford, occupation numbers within the home and changes e.g. new baby being born in the intervening period. So, it's not unusual to have to review the current circumstances and take into account the previous repairs to assess why there is a recurrence then decide what action to take to manage it. The SP found that the offer to temporarily house customers while certain, more complicated remedial works are carried out, is not being actively advertised.

F13. The Head of Assets stated that Riverside strives to provide a more proactive service. However, due to current workloads in terms of inspections, this is proving a challenge. Inspection requests are only just coming back down to a manageable level following the winter spike, and as such Riverside is not yet in a position to proactively inspect properties.

Findings 14-16

Communications

F14. Previously Riverside had sent out a regular customer newsletter, but this had a low yield for a high effort, so this has been stopped.

F15. When asked how Riverside improve communications, it was suggested by management that with a bigger budget, bespoke area-specific leaflets could be produced based on expert knowledge of geographical areas and property types. The communications plan could then include targeted communications rather than just a general strategy. The SP takes the view that, given the seriousness of D&M, Riverside should increase its budget to target areas and property types.

F16. Riverside is enhancing communications with customers after a visit takes place by following up with a written explanation of what is going to happen. (Currently being trialled in the Pennine region).

Findings 17-18

Communications

F17. There is a clear extrapolation shown from the data on slide 65 that Riverside has a good, consistent open rate for email communications (around 40% above the third sector average according to Mailchimp, the platform Riverside uses) but a click-through to more in-depth information is much harder to generate. Riverside has adopted the approach of putting everything in the body of the email to some degree in its general wider communications and that is reflected in the customer Communications plan of sending more single-issue communications and moving away from downloadable newsletter style documents. Print customers get the same information as email customers and the same content is used across the channels.

F18. Riverside drives additional traffic to the guide and support information through the website and social media so the email statistics on slide 65 should not be considered to be the limit of scope of Riverside's reach with these documents.

Findings 19

Communications

F19. One could also extrapolate from the data on slide 65 that Riverside might consider breaking down the information in the eight-page documents into more regular bitesize mailouts (email and print) and this method may generate a higher open rate. The Business Partner Brand & Marketing stated that this point is certainly potentially true and something to consider. However, Riverside is mindful that that is a resource strain on various teams (Comms, CSC in particular) in that bitesize mailouts take a long time to produce and generate calls, which affect call waiting times. The bitesize method would be much more costly in print form (4 to 6 additional envelopes multiplied by the volume of print customers – approximately a third of 75,000, post integration with One Housing). There is also a question of diminishing returns

(essentially if people are sent too many emails, at what point do they stop listening/opening them and the effectiveness starts being impacted?)

Findings 20-22

Communications plan

F20. The informative in-house training videos are not available to customers on the website. The SP takes the view that access to these videos (or a similar version) would be beneficial to customers.

F21. The messaging on D&M needs to convey the gravity of the problem. Riverside's response to the issue has been good, but that the messaging needs to be frank and realistic. In the SP's opinion, the more customers are made aware of how D&M can affect health, the better.

F22. The communications plan places emphasis on Riverside's public image and how the landlord response could lead to negative press coverage. The SP appreciates the Public Relations challenges Riverside faces. However, although it is an internal document, it could still be re-phrased in places to better reflect Riverside's core values as a caring landlord which is trying to help and protect customers. See slide 10 and Recommendation 5 in this report, regarding our view that Riverside should carry out customer consultation about its Communications Plan in 2024.

Findings 23-25

Staff induction and training

F23. Riverside try to give inspectors as much information as possible before the visit. The language used when asking questions should reflect that customers are not being blamed for any problems. Advisors complete e-learning on this subject to ensure that customers do not feel embarrassed or frightened.

F24. When calls come in, all the customers details pop up. Within Salesforce there is guidance on what questions to ask. Alongside the script are Knowledge Articles on matters related to D&M, e.g. how to report it, hints and tips and prevention suggestions.

F25. There is no dedicated phone line. Calls are handled by CSC staff who log an inspection to start the process.

Findings 26-27

Staff induction and training

F26. Every call is recorded on Salesforce which this provides a trail that can be accessed.

F27. Agents at the call centre work shifts so may not be available if customers call back and want to speak to the same person. Because of the way the system is set up any member of the team can follow up the call because they can access the information recorded; the customer does not have to relay the same information again.

Findings 28-32

Evolve D&M letters

F28. There is no mention of arranging alternative accommodation if required.

F29. A designated person should be assigned to each area and their name should be on the form with contact details.

F30. Evolve needs to ensure this document is completed every time.

F31. The form is impersonal, and the wording needs to be more friendly and collaborative. Riverside's guidance on writing responses to complaints states that simple language and a human tone should be used, as if the writer were speaking to the complainant.

F32. 'What we have identified' section – the customer needs to be told what Evolve has identified, and not be left in the dark.

Findings 33-36

F33. 'We will leave your home as we found it' – it was felt this statement is open to interpretation and needs further explanation, as the nature of the repairs will, in most cases, leave the home altered.

F34. An information video of what customers can expect on the day of the repairs would be helpful.

F35. Asking the customer for their signature neither adds or subtracts from carrying out the repair. In the SP's view, asking the customer to sign a form that summarises all manner of technical details which they are likely to have little or no understanding is poor practice and should stop.

F36. Further clarification is needed on how long the power will be off to put customers at ease over such concerns as the fridge/freezer de-frosting. The SP appreciates that it is often difficult for the operative to judge, but a fair approximation would help the customer.

Findings 37

Follow-up letters after an inspection

F37. Follow-up letters are already implemented in Pennine as a trial. Riverside wanted to gauge customer and its' own TI feedback to how these forms are being perceived. Riverside's intention is to review the feedback and take on board any further comments from the RCVE, and then adapt to suit before rolling out in all areas/regions.

Findings 38-42

Riverside webpages

F38. Several click-throughs are required to get to the correct page.

F39. The contact number is the call centre. In the SP's experience there could be a long wait times to get through. A dedicated number would be better. A hotline is needed.

F40. The 'contact us here' wording on one particular webpage is confusing as it suggests there is a hyperlink, when there is not meant to be one. The details have been passed to Riverside.

F41. The extractor fan offer should state that installation is free of charge.

F42. Overall, the SP is satisfied with standard information on the webpages.

Findings 43-46

Video link:

F43. A good, informative video containing standard advice, but improvements could be made (see following points). Again, the SP would like Riverside to introduce a dedicated phone line.

F44. It should be considered that some people do not know what damp mould and condensation is. They may not know what they are looking for or where to look for it. The SP is of the view that the video should not assume that customers have even the most basic understanding of D&M.

F45. The SP felt that people needed more information on where to look for D&M and could be shown examples of what it looked like. For example, D&M can be hidden behind furniture and curtains, and may only cover small areas, whereas the examples in the video are visible, large patches.

F46. A QR code linking the video should be added to customer letters about D&M.

Findings 47-49

RIC Knowledge Hub (for staff):

F47. It was noted that the *Are You Ready for Winter?* newsletter was dated October 2022, so it needs updating.

F48. Love your home: Five top tips: Heating controls: The advice about leaving the thermostat on low (typically 12 degrees on the Switchee) needs to explain the pros and cons of doing so in more detail. For example, the potential fuel costs that could be incurred versus the benefits of preventing a home from becoming cold and therefore expensive to re-heat. (Nb. The Switchee can also be set to 'holiday mode' which starts the boiler if the temperature in the property reaches 5 degrees.)

F49. Overall, the Knowledge Hub is a useful and informative resource for staff and the SP acknowledges the hard work that has been put into developing it.

Findings 50-52

E-Learning Module

F50. The decision about when and how the D&M will be repaired is the responsibility of the inspector. This would depend on what they find, and it is completed on an individual basis.

F51. The SP questions, whether it would be better to have set number of times that an inspection can be done before fast tracking is put into place. What is Riverside's stance on this?

F52. A written report must be sent to the customer regarding the outcome of inspection and what needs to be done.

Findings 53-54

E-Learning Module

F53. If data on a particular area shows problems with D&M, not all properties of a similar type in the area will be inspected. The SP is of the view that Riverside should be proactive in inspecting similar properties in the same area, where it is probable that the D&M could be caused by the construction of the building, building defects, lack of ventilation etc. The Head of Assets commented, 'We strive to provide a more proactive service, however due to our current workload in terms of inspections, this is proving a challenge. Inspection requests are only just coming back down to a manageable level following the winter spike, and as such we aren't yet in a position to proactively inspect properties.'

F54. E-learning module: The pictures of damp and mould are only shown as very big patches - they should also reflect that it can be in very small areas to begin with that can spread.

Findings 55-59

Customer coverage

F55. An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out and was provided to the SP as part of the evidence base.

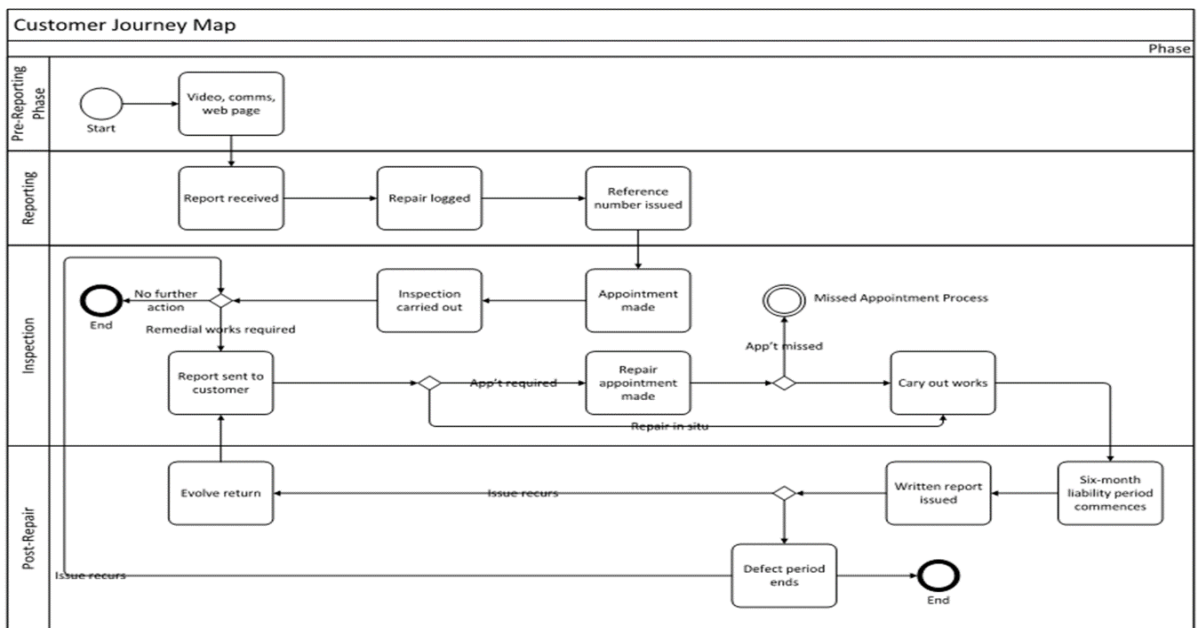
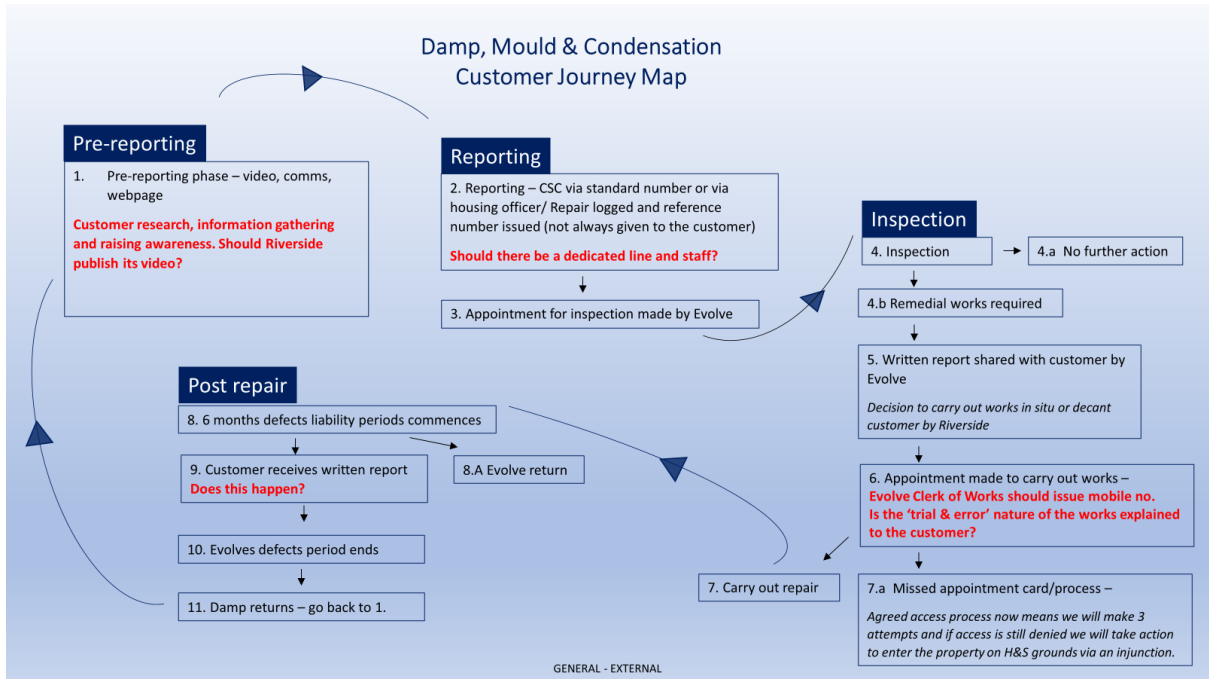
F56. The SP is satisfied that the needs of people with protected characteristics have been considered in preparing the assessment, along with all customers.

F57. Examples of customers for whom English is a second language/do not speak English, and customers with learning difficulties were considered by the SP. The assessment covers the needs of those people and all the relevant teams and departments had been consulted.

F58. The SP was further assured that Riverside's communications plans had taken the needs of people with protected characteristics into account, and communication channels are geared to help all customers to overcome communication barriers.

F59. We note and applaud the e-module's specific guidance for babies and children, older people, people with skin conditions, those with respiratory problems, and those with weak immune systems.

Customer Journey Map



Customer journey map commentary

Above is the Scrutiny Panel's attempt to map the customer journey based on the information we have been given by Riverside.

It includes a pre-reporting stage, when a customer starts searching for information about D&M.

The comments in red reflect the issues we have identified elsewhere in the report.

We are offering the map to Riverside to help develop a professional version – as per Recommendation 3 .

We recommend Riverside uses the customer journey-mapping process to identify any gaps in customer communications or touch points where the customer experience could be improved.

Conclusion

C1. Riverside has put in place a comprehensive communications plan and knowledge hub for staff. The scripts used by CSC are thorough and well designed, and the team members have been well briefed about D&M and how to handle calls on the subject. We are the firm opinion that customers would benefit from a separate hotline.

C2. We were surprised to find that the customer journey has not been mapped by Riverside. We designed our own map and in doing so we identified several customer touch points that do not seem to have been fully addressed.

C3. Reviewing the Equality Impact Assessment and the methods for customers to communicate with Riverside led us to conclude that all customers' needs have been considered and are covered. Riverside is communicating through multiple channels and the messaging is generally clear and accurate.

C4. We identified several ways in which communications could be improved during the customer journey, and we have set out our ideas in the recommendations. For example, providing the customer with a report about the D&M inspection.

Thanks

The Scrutiny Panel consisted of Keith Harkness (Chair), Viv Fleming, David Otty and Jules Jackson

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