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County Council

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Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
4th Floor, Fry Building
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Dear Secretary of State

HOUSING STANDARDS IN RENTED PROPERTIES IN ENGLAND

We were saddened to learn of the death of Awaab Ishak in Rochdale recently and take the critical matter of tackling damp and mould seriously and indeed the continuing need to continue to urgently improve conditions for private and social tenants living with chronic disrepair.

Thank you too for the subsequent letter from your office, setting out more detail about the specific initial information requested by the end of November, and the full response by 27 January 2023.

Confirmation we have received and will pick up the request set out in the letters

I am very happy to confirm safe receipt of both letters, as well as a copy of the letter sent to social landlords. We are clear about the information requested and have set in train processes for collating the required data.

A plan setting out how we are intending to prioritise the issues of mould and damp for privately rented properties

To ensure we prioritise our efforts in tackling damp and mould in private rented housing, we will:

- Put in place a full suite of enforcement and regulatory sanctions to ensure no private rented property escapes the requirement to have and to maintain appropriate standards
- Formally refresh and deliver training to our staff team in both the full range of sanctions and powers available to them, as well as the specific relating to the impact of damp and mould on the health and wellbeing of tenants

The section below provides further detail about each of these measures.

The council employs a small but experienced private rented sector housing standards team who sit within a wider environmental health service. The team have tended to operate largely reactively, insofar as they deal with complaints received from tenants and landlords about private rented housing stock, alongside their duties to ensure compliance in houses in multiple occupation. Until very recently, the team also managed our selective licensing scheme for private rented properties in key locations in the city; a new proposal for a subsequent selective licensing scheme is being assembled ready for submission to your office for consideration.

As the law has evolved, increased enforcement powers have been given to councils to tackle poor housing standards, including the use of civil penalties. To date these and other sanctions have been underused in Rutland, limiting the full impact the team is able to have. We intend to change that and have already undertaken a rapid review and begun a comprehensive service rebuild to ensure officers are trained and focused on chronic disrepair matters such as damp and mould as an absolute priority.

We recognise that despite the good work of officers in the team that there is both a need to invest in training and development to make sure all team members are fully equipped for their roles, as well as ensuring the necessary processes and procedures are in place, supported by appropriate governance and performance management to support and inform service delivery, and development needs.

To provide the best opportunity to raise and maintain good housing standards across the private rented sector in the county, and in part in response to the recent events in Rochdale, it is proposed that a combination of licensing schemes is used providing cover countywide. This will be achieved by:

- Ensuring that all properties within scope of the HMO Mandatory Licensing Scheme are prioritised to ensure they are licenced, and compliance checks continue throughout the lifetime of the licence
- That all queries in relation to chronic disrepair particularly damp and mould will continue to be robustly assessed

To supplement Mandatory HMO Licensing there will be training and development to empower officers to be able to more readily use a wider range of enforcement sanctions, including a significant increase of the use of civil penalties. These will provide an effective and rapid deterrent for rogue landlords, as well as a necessary focus for the team. We will also ensure our mandatory training includes the nature of advice and guidance needed for all tenants on the importance of heating and ventilating their homes.

The council is also currently running a project to improve current EPC F-rated and G-rated properties to an E-rating or above. This is to improve energy efficiency of private rented properties therefore lowering bills for tenants and allowing them to keep their

homes warmer for less which is critical in the fight to reduce damp and mould. Landlords are now required to improve their properties to an E-rating or register an exemption. Non-compliance of the MEES legislation will lead to compliance and penalty notices being served on these landlords. We are encouraging tenants to check the EPC rating of their rented property and contact the department for help and advice.

We will also examine what sources of data are already available to us that may help to indicate where poor housing conditions, and particularly those relating to damp and mould, are prevalent. For example, our partners in the NHS and education sectors will have some knowledge about presentations to them from people affected by these issues, and we will be keen to work with them to find ways for that data to be shared or for our teams to be referred to residents affected in this way. We will also work with data held within the council to help identify affected properties; for example, our social care colleagues will have full details of vulnerable residents in receipt of care or other forms of support, and where housing conditions are of concern. Although data such as this should be routinely shared between council services, we will absolutely ensure this is the case.

Although outside the immediate scope of this request, we are also keen to satisfy ourselves that residents in social housing as well as those living in privately owned homes are also protected from harm relating to damp and mould. We therefore intend to write formally to all the social landlords operating properties within Rutland to seek reassurance ourselves that they have all appropriate measures in place to identify and resolve damp and mould issues. We are also working on a media campaign targeted towards residents in privately owned properties alerting them to the dangers of damp and mould and signposting them to various schemes that offer both advice and guidance as well as practical forms of support. We will also be asking businesses in Rutland to support this important work by sharing information from this campaign with their workforce.

Any issues we envisage with completing the full response for 27 January

I can confirm that we do not envisage experiencing any issues when compiling our full response for the January deadline.

I hope this provides you with the assurances you need at this point, and we will ensure our fuller response is provided by the January deadline.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'MA' followed by a stylized flourish.

Mark Andrews

Chief Executive, Rutland County Council