

How should occupants be informed about the need to use extract fans?

Occupants should be informed through a clear, multi-channel communication strategy. This includes providing simple, accessible instructions upon tenancy commencement and during routine property checks. Explaining the ‘why’—that fans combat damp, mould, and poor indoor air quality, which are significant health risks—is crucial for encouraging use. Simple, visual guides and follow-up communications can reinforce this message effectively.

The Unseen Enemy in Our Homes: A Pragmatic Guide to Fighting Damp

Look, let's get real for a minute. The conversation about housing often gets bogged down in numbers, regulations, and all this abstract bureaucratic jargon. But what it really comes down to is this: are people living in places that are healthy for them? Are their homes actively contributing to their well-being, or are they a source of invisible stress? The truth is, for a huge chunk of the population in the UK's social housing sector, there's an invisible enemy at work—damp and mould. We're not talking about a bit of a musty smell; we're talking about something that's making people sick, and it's a problem that's been brewing for years, often in plain sight.

For decades, the standard way of building and retrofitting homes was all about insulation. The idea was simple: seal 'em up tight, keep the heat in, and save on energy bills. On the surface, it makes perfect sense. Why would you want to let all that lovely warmth leak out? Well, the unintended consequence of this approach was that we created airtight boxes. We stopped the heat from escaping, sure, but we also trapped something far more insidious: moisture. Every time you boil a kettle, take a shower, or even just breathe, you're releasing moisture into the air. In a modern, sealed-up home, that moisture has nowhere to go. It just hangs there, a silent passenger, until it finds a cold surface—like a wall or a window—and boom, condensation. This is the starting gun for the damp and mould race.

The statistics are sobering, and they paint a picture that frankly should make everyone sit up and take notice. The latest English Housing Survey reveals a grim reality: in 2023-24, a startling 7% of social homes in the UK had damp problems. To put that in perspective, that's the highest jump across all housing tenures, and it's a three percentage point increase since 2019. It's a clear signal that something isn't working. This isn't just about the fabric of a building; it's about the health of the people inside. The UK Health Security Agency has even identified a considerable burden of respiratory illness from residential exposure to damp and mould, and they note that ethnic minority and disadvantaged groups are disproportionately affected. This isn't just a housing issue; it's a public health crisis and a social justice issue all rolled into one. Therefore, the fight against damp isn't just a maintenance chore; it's an urgent mission to create healthier, safer living environments for everyone.

The Problem Isn't Just the Building, It's the Occupant

Now, here's a crucial, and often overlooked, part of the equation: the people. We can fit the most advanced, state-of-the-art ventilation systems, but if the occupants don't know how to use them, or why they should, we've failed before we've even started. This is the heart of the matter for social housing providers. It's not just about ticking a box that says 'ventilation installed'. It's about

empowering tenants to be part of the solution. You see, the problem with condensation-related damp isn't usually a structural issue; it's a lifestyle issue. People need to understand that their daily habits—from drying clothes indoors to not using the extract fan in the bathroom after a shower—are contributing to the problem.

For example, a tenant might believe that using the extract fan is expensive. This is a common and understandable concern, especially with the cost of living crisis. However, the reality is that the running costs of a modern, continuous ventilation system like the VENTI ARIA (dMEV) are negligible, whereas the cost of dealing with mould remediation and potential health issues is far, far greater. A single room dMEV fan, for instance, operates continuously at an extremely low wattage, sometimes costing as little as a few pounds a year. In comparison, the average cost of mould remediation can run into the hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds, not to mention the irreparable damage to health and belongings. It's a classic case of prevention being better than cure, and this message needs to be communicated with clarity and conviction.

How to Bridge the Knowledge Gap: A Practical Guide for Housing Providers

So, how do we fix this? The answer lies in a multi-pronged, empathetic communication strategy. You can't just hand someone a 50-page technical manual and expect them to get it. You have to meet people where they are, using formats and language they can easily understand. This isn't about telling people what to do; it's about educating and collaborating with them.

Here are some actionable steps for social housing providers:

- **A “Welcome to Your Home” Pack:** When a new tenant moves in, provide them with a simple, easy-to-read welcome pack that explains the basics of ventilation. This shouldn't be a dry, technical document. Use clear, simple language and lots of visuals. . Include a 'how-to' guide for using the extract fans, explaining their function and the benefits of continuous use. For example, a simple bulleted list would work well:
 - **After a shower or bath:** Switch on the fan and leave it running for at least 20 minutes to clear the air.
 - **While cooking:** Use the kitchen fan to pull out steam and cooking smells.
 - **Drying laundry indoors:** Open a window slightly and use a fan to prevent moisture build-up.
 - **Keep air flowing:** Don't block air vents or grilles. They're there for a reason!
- **Routine Property Inspections:** Use property inspections not just as a compliance check, but as a teaching moment. Maintenance staff or housing officers should be trained to explain the importance of ventilation and to demonstrate how to use the fans. This face-to-face interaction is invaluable. When they see a problem like condensation, they can use it as an opportunity to educate the tenant on the spot. “See this condensation on the window? That's a sign that the air is too moist. If we don't get that moisture out, it can lead to mould. Let me show you how to use this fan to stop it.” This transforms a potential confrontation into a collaborative problem-solving session.
- **Multi-Channel Communication Campaigns:** Not everyone responds to the same type of communication. Therefore, a modern housing provider should be using a mix of channels. A simple text message campaign could send regular reminders, for instance, “Remember to use your kitchen fan when cooking to keep your home healthy!” A short, engaging video shared via a tenant portal or a social media group could visually demonstrate the effects of not using a fan. For tenants who are less digitally connected, a simple postcard or leaflet drop can be a powerful tool.
- **Focus on the ‘Why’:** As mentioned, the most effective communication is about explaining the

'why'. Don't just tell them they must use the fan. Explain that by using the fan, they are:

- Protecting their health from respiratory issues.
- Preventing costly damage to their home and belongings.
- Creating a more comfortable living environment.

A table can be a great way to present this information concisely, comparing the 'before' and 'after' effects of proper ventilation.

Without Ventilation

Condensation on windows and walls

Musty smells and stale air

Risk of mould growth on surfaces

Damaged paint, plaster, and belongings

With Ventilation

Clear, dry windows and surfaces

Fresh, clean air indoors

Reduced risk of mould and damp

Protected interior and belongings

By focusing on clear communication and practical education, social housing providers can empower their occupants to become active partners in the battle against damp and mould.