

Briefing Note

Management Team

PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR HEALTHY HOMES PROJECT 2024, DEPARTMENT FOR LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES (DLUHC) & TENDRING DISTRICT COUNCIL

12th March 2024

Briefing note written by Grant Fenton-Jones

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide a background regarding the above project following on from conversations between The Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC), the Assistant Director for Housing & Environment and the Environmental Health Manager.

Back in the late summer of 2023, the Housing & Environment Service were contacted by DLUHC regarding the above project. This followed on from the Council's response to a data request from DLUHC on the responses to damp and mould in privately rented housing. The data from our response along with other data held by DLUHC led DLUHC to confirm that Tendring District Council (TDC) were one of forty Local Authorities that had been chosen to take part in the project, and a total budget of ten million pounds was to be allocated between these Authorities to tackle various issues that had been identified by the survey.

A telephone conference was held on the 26th October 2023 between DLUHC, the Assistant Director for Housing & Environment and the Environmental Health Manager. The call was to discuss the contents of the survey and to get a better appreciation of the type of properties we have and to discuss areas where there are specific issues, for instance, concentrations of House in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and parts of the district that have the worst housing. As there is a current Healthy Homes Project running in Jaywick Sands, funded by the Health Alliance, any additional project would need to focus on other areas in the district. No specific locations were agreed at the time, but Bathside in Harwich, Pier Ward in Clacton, and maybe certain areas of Walton could be seen as areas of poor housing within the district. However, these are not set in stone and further discussions are needed internally at TDC to decide where we focus our attention. With a zero-tolerance approach on Damp & Mould being the Government's number one priority, the three aforementioned areas stand out due to age of property, poor thermal performance, and a lack of investment by private landlords. DLUHC indicated that Damp and Mould was a definite theme to come out of the survey but indicated that the working group set up would meet and decide on what topics the chosen Authorities would have to focus on as being part of the project moving forward.

On the 6th March 24, DLUHC sent an email that indicated that they are now in a position to give a more substantial update. Attached was a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that they require to be signed by TDC as one of the chosen Local Authorities to take part in the project. Before we can accept to be part of the project, it is necessary to gain the approval of Management Team and the Portfolio Holder for Housing.

Below sets out the main objectives of the project, and as expected, the enforcement of Damp & Mould has been chosen as the main aim of the project.

DLUHC formally invites your authority to participate in the Healthy Homes Project and sets out next steps below:

Recap - what is the Healthy Homes Project?

- The Healthy Homes Project has been set up with the overall aim of improving damp and mould enforcement. The funding is being used to test whether a package of interventions have the intended impact and represent good value for money; and to look at the wider societal impacts of enforcing on damp and mould hazards.
- It's an ambitious project but one that we think will really help strengthen our evidence on what works when it comes to damp and mould enforcement and deliver benefits for local authorities, central government, and ultimately – and most importantly - tenants.

How will we gather evidence on what works?

- It is vital that we gather the strongest possible evidence from this project through the evaluation. We have worked closely with external evaluation experts and will be running the Healthy Homes project as a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT). This approach is considered 'gold standard' by experts and will allow us to confidently draw conclusions about how effective the approach is.
- For the RCT to work it's necessary to randomly assign areas into two groups: the group implementing the interventions; and a partially funded control group where members provide data but do not implement the interventions.

What will participation involve?

- We are hoping that every local authority receiving this email will be able to participate in the Healthy Homes Project. By signing up to participate, each local authority will be randomly allocated into either the treatment or control groups once the signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) have been received (see below).

Treatment Group

The treatment group will be allocated up to **£130,000** in 24/25 to deliver the following interventions to support damp and mould enforcement:

- Additional resource in your team;
- Standardised training across your existing team;
- Improved communications and engagement with landlords and tenants;
- Improved equipment, i.e. tools to measure damp and mould; and
- Improved data collection tools and support.

Respondents will need to provide data to support the evaluation, at the outset of the fund (likely April) and the end of the funding (March 2025). This is still being developed but likely to capture data on PRS inspections, enforcement activity and staffing over the previous 12 months (covering April 2024 to March 2025, and where available, April 2023 to March 2024).

Full guidance will be provided separately to authorities in the treatment group.

Control group

The control group will receive up to **£11,000** in 24/25 to provide data returns to support the evaluation. They will not be required to implement any specific interventions. Group members will need to commit to providing data as above.

This control group plays a vitally important role in providing comparison data (reflecting business as usual) so that we can ensure we have a robust evaluation.

Timelines and next steps

If you would like to participate in the Healthy Homes Project, please sign the attached MoU and return to us prs_place_based_projects@levellingup.gov.uk as soon as possible and ideally by **29 March** (please let us know if this timing will cause any issues).

The MoU sets out the delivery expectation of the project, and the support on offer. Once your signed MoU has been received, we will randomly allocate the groups and confirm funding as soon as we hear from you.

Healthy Homes – next steps	Date
Invitation to participate	Today, 6 th March
<i>If you wish to participate</i> – Sign MoU and return to prs_place_based_projects@levellingup.gov.uk	As soon as possible
DLUHC confirm whether you are in treatment group (delivering funded interventions) or control group (partially funded to collect data) and will provide guidance.	[Within 1 day of receiving signed MoU]
<i>If in treatment group:</i> Start implementation in line with guidance	
<i>If in control group:</i> No action needed, we will contact you about data collection.	
Baseline data collection commences	Mid-May 2024
Funding period ends	End March 2025

The above synopsis of the project highlights the tasks that will be assigned to the two working groups with further detail being provided within the MOU (a separate document presented along with this briefing note).

The Treatment Group will be given significantly more funding than the Control Group over the period of the project, but it will be interesting to see how the comparison data provided by both groups differs. It is hoped that TDC will be chosen as one of the Treatment Group as the extra funding will allow us to take a more formal approach with the enforcement of Damp & Mould, but should we be allocated to the Control Group it is likely to provide firm evidence of the difficulties we face when dealing with Damp & Mould in certain areas of the district.

Current legislation, that being the Housing, Health & Safety Rating System (HHSRS), introduced under Part 1 of The Housing Act 2004, the method used for assessing hazards in properties in the private rented sector, is somewhat flawed, as at the time of its implementation, there was very little statistical or medical data available that allowed Damp & Mould hazards to be deemed Category 1 hazards. Where Category 1 hazards are identified Local Authorities have a mandatory duty to take action, whereas should a hazard of Damp & Mould be assessed as being a Category 2 hazard, it is far more difficult to justify taking formal enforcement action. All enforcement action has to be proportionate and fair and not cause landlords hardship when implementing the required remedial works requested by Environmental Health professionals. Therefore, it gives officers very little scope to justify formal enforcement action as part of their assessments.

The HHSRS is currently being reviewed and it is hoped that Damp & Mould will be one area where necessary changes will be made. By taking part in this project, it is hoped that data collected by both groups will provide further evidence that major changes to the HHSRS are warranted and will allow professional officers the ability to improve the housing conditions of those who reside in their Borough / District.

Being part of the project will provide further statistical data with regard to the private rented housing stock in the district, whilst continuing to build on our seemingly strong relationship with DLUHC. In recent years it has become apparent that DLUHC appreciate that Tendring not only has areas of high deprivation, but we also have stock that requires major investment due to age, poor thermal performance due to the construction methods used when built, and very little investment from local landlords. They are also aware of the national shortage of suitably qualified Environmental Health professionals and the extra difficulty we encounter due to demographic location and those officers being drawn to roles in the major cities of the country. Therefore, our participation in this project is essential as it will continue to raise the profile of Tendring, which in turn will help us when looking to obtain further funding in the future and continue our work to provide our residents with decent homes in which to live.

The project will require resourcing which if we are in the Treatment group will be funded by the grant money awarded. There will be implications in terms of officer time from the Environmental Health Manager and Private Sector Housing Manager to design the project, meet with DLUHC and undertake procurement and recruitment and they have capacity to do this. Any staffing requirements are likely to be met through agencies or temporary 12 month positions due to the short term nature of the project. Resourcing requirements will be less if we are in the control group and the £11,000 grant will contribute towards the additional data collection requirements.

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