

Addressing ventilation in social housing

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Insight from Alan Siggins, managing director of [Airflow](#)

We often talk about heating and energy, but ventilation is often pushed to the side as a topic. Whilst staying warm is undoubtedly important, it's crucial not to overlook the importance of ventilation. The two are, in fact, connected and both are critical to a healthy, comfortable indoor environment.

Without proper ventilation, buildings can seal in stagnant air, pollutants and moisture, which can cause structural damage and health problems. The health issues from ventilation are usually due to the build-up of moisture that leads to mould, which triggers respiratory problems that can be life-threatening, as we saw in the tragic death of Awaab Ishak. This is largely what inspired us to create the [Ventilation Challenges in Social Housing report](#) as a study of the state of ventilation in social housing dwellings.

Social housing in the UK continues to face a significant challenge when it comes to ventilation. Many tenants are dissatisfied with the presence of condensation, damp and even mould, which is linked to insufficient or ineffective ventilation. In these socially rented dwellings, tenants find themselves unable to implement necessary changes for improved ventilation. Instead, they have to rely on landlords to take action. We don't always see this action, however, and we're still seeing cases of poor ventilation lead to serious health issues and cost some people their lives. In fact, BRE, the former government-built environment research body, estimates that around [217,000 social rented homes](#) are affected by a range of dangerous health and safety hazards.

The purpose of our report was to find out how social housing dwellings are being ventilated and how this is impacting tenants. Looking at government data, we found that tenants were more than 11 times more likely to experience ventilation issues than plumbing issues and almost five times as likely to experience

ventilation issues as heating issues. Ventilation, mould, and damp, are some of the main issues tenants have with their socially rented homes, so it seems obvious that improving this should be a priority. However, part of the challenge in improving ventilation in social housing is that the issues are so widespread, and many homes are noticing problems that stem from poor ventilation.

Another challenge with ventilation is the low adoption of sufficient mechanical ventilation systems. Mechanical ventilation is increasing in popularity and availability, but we found that there are still many homes that rely on natural ventilation alone – despite potential associated risks. What’s more, of the mechanically ventilated social homes we analysed, the majority of these had ‘extract only’ ventilation (79%), with only 21% of homes having ‘supply and extract’ ventilation installed, i.e. the system continuously both introduces fresh outdoor air and removes indoor air. Installing this kind of system could be hugely beneficial. Of course, improving ventilation across the market would involve an overhaul of a significant number of properties, which brings up the next obstacle: cost.

Understandably, there is a cost to installing or upgrading ventilation systems, which will put landlords and local councils off. However, many modern ventilation systems, such as MVHR, also reduce the need for excessive energy consumption. Promoting proper airflow can help regulate the indoor temperature, and some systems even preheat the new air entering the building. The point being that a small cost to landlords can save residents costs in the long run. Better ventilation will also mean a reduced risk of mould, damp and condensation, which can be costly to fix otherwise.

There is also an education gap that needs to be addressed, both for landlords and tenants. Many residents may not be fully aware of how to address or complain about ventilation issues. I think people have a good understanding of why their homes or properties are cold or don’t retain heat, but not everyone knows the implications of poor ventilation and how it might be affecting them every day. It is also a landlord’s responsibility to understand the state of their property and any associated health risks this might incur, both from a tenant wellbeing and satisfaction perspective and a legal compliance one.

We want to see good ventilation move up the list of priorities in the social housing sector. It’s definitely getting more attention, but often when it’s too late. A good place to start will be installing mechanical ventilation systems in homes that rely only on natural or “passive” ventilation. This can be as simple as adding extractor fans in bathrooms or other moisture-prone rooms. It’s also important that residents are aware of how to use any systems in place. It’s no good having all the systems available but not being used. These would be the first steps in an important movement towards better-ventilated and safer social housing.