

Does your property have rising dampness?

'Rising dampness' is a phrase that many building owners dread to hear. It conjures up images of a damp, dilapidated property that will be expensive to repair and difficult to sell. Yet many homes with a dampness problem fall far short of this dramatic description. In the majority of cases, the problems are caused by relatively minor faults. Despite this, every year tens of thousands of dwellings undergo expensive repair work to cure a problem that an increasing number of experts say is not that serious. This BlueBox partners factsheet reviews this controversial issue and describes what rising dampness is, how it occurs, and what can be done to get rid of it.

What is 'rising dampness'?

The common explanation of this type of dampness goes something like this:

- *Water in the ground rises up through the bricks and mortar of a wall by a process called 'capillary action';*
- *If the wall does not include a horizontal water proof layer (called a damp proof course), this rising moisture will eventually affect the internal parts of the home;*
- *In the worst cases, it will ruin decorations, cause the plaster to crumble and adjacent timber surfaces to rot.*

On the inside, it can look like the base of the wall is stained with a 'tide mark' that has white furry salt crystals along its edge. In some cases, this dampness can rise to heights of over one metre above the floor level. An increasing number of experts have begun to question whether rising dampness is as common as some surveyors and specialist contractors claim.

So does rising dampness exist?

Although capillary action does occur, it is unlikely to result in dampness reaching these levels on its own. Instead, the dampness is often 'helped' along its journey by other faults including high ground levels, leaking drains and gutters, and inappropriate wall finishes that stop the wall drying out (for example, cement render). Repairing these problems will often solve the dampness.

How can the 'cause' be identified?

For any repair to work properly, the true cause of the problem must first be identified. Many surveyors use an electronic moisture meter and although this may look impressive, it is a simple instrument that can easily mislead. For example, it cannot tell the difference between condensation, water that comes from the ground, or dampness caused by a gutter leak. If a moisture meter shows high readings, surveyors will often refer the matter to 'specialist' contractors to investigate. As many of these specialists have a commercial interest in selling damp proofing products, it is hardly surprising their reports include recommendations to use some of them.



Damp areas to the base of a wall



In the worst cases, dampness can cause 'tide marks' and affect the plaster



This problem was caused by rain water coming through cracks in the wall.



This dampness was caused by a problem in the floor rather than the wall.

BlueBox partners
220 Sharrow Lane
Sheffield
S11 8AS

info@blueboxpartners.com
www.blueboxpartners.com
Tel: 0845 260 3500



Where a visual inspection does not identify the cause, small parts of the building may have to be 'opened up'.

At BlueBox partners, we adopt a step by step approach to diagnosing the cause:

- Firstly, we carry out a thorough and detailed inspection of the property;
- If this does not reveal the cause, we may recommend the 'opening up' of parts of the building. Using a builder, we may have to knock holes in walls, remove plaster, and lift fixed floorboards. In most cases, this will give the information we need;
- Occasionally in difficult cases (especially those that have resulted in a legal dispute), we may have to use more sophisticated techniques such as sending brick and plaster samples to a laboratory for analysis.

In short, our strategy is based on using an appropriate range of diagnostic techniques that suit the complexity of the dampness problem.

How much will this cost?

At BlueBox partners, we base our recommendations on an objective analysis of the facts. We have no commercial links and have no other products to sell so we charge a fee for our inspections and reports. To find out what we charge, please email or phone the BlueBox partners office.

What are the solutions?

In many cases, the solution can be simple, straight forward, and relatively inexpensive. Lowering a garden path, fixing a leaking gutter, or repairing the render on the outside of the wall can quickly stop water getting into building. However, in some cases thick walls and floors will take a long time to dry out and during this period, the dampness can continue to cause problems inside. Consequently, internal repairs may also be required. In years of experience of this type of work, we have rarely used chemical injection damp proof courses.

Other services

BlueBox partners offer a variety of services that can help to reduce the stress of getting the repairs done. This can range from organising the whole project on your behalf through to providing you with specific, limited support. For example, we can provide any (or all) of the following:

- A detailed specification of the work and materials so you can organise your own building work;
- Obtaining fixed quotations from a range of appropriate contractors so you can supervise the work yourself;
- Advise you on what sort of building contract to use, and;
- Inspect the work to make sure it is done in accordance with the original contract.

Please contact our office for details of our fees.

Geographical coverage

BlueBox partners operate across England and Wales from our offices in Bristol, Kings Lynn, Sheffield, and Stafford. Helping you get the work done is currently limited to the South Yorkshire region only. We have links with Chartered Surveyors in all regions so if we cannot do the work ourselves, we will be able to refer you to other organisations we know and trust.

For more information, please contact the BlueBox office by email on info@blueboxpartners.com or by phone on 0845 260 3500.



Taking brick samples from a wall for laboratory analysis



The samples are sent away and analysed in a laboratory. The resulting data can help identify the source of moisture.

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