

HOME HELP

A TOUGH CASE TO CRACK

Q We bought a Barratt home four and a half years ago at Latimer Gardens, in Northampton. As soon as we moved in we discovered a “shrinkage” crack on the exterior render, from the bedroom window to the ground-floor window. Barratt told us nothing could be done. We raised this again early this year, as it was becoming weathered. We were told to paint it or contact the National House Building Council (NHBC). Two weeks ago we raised the issue again as the exterior was “ghosting” (after rain you can see the outline of blocks beneath the render). We think it’s linked to the crack. The technical notes for the render (Weber Monocouche) imply it was too thinly applied. Barratt will not do anything and keeps advising us to contact the NHBC. We have a five-year fixtures and fittings warranty, and a 10-year NHBC warranty. What can we do?

Jane Drury, Northants

A You are right – your render looks a bit of a mess. Barratt seems keen to deny responsibility. It’s a shame. The firm won Large Housebuilder of the Year 2019, and claims to be “leading the industry in quality and customer service”. If this is typical, it would seem to be a damning indictment of the state of housebuilding in the UK.

It seems doubtful from the firm’s reply that anyone at Barratt thinks this is acceptable workmanship. Most likely, in our view, they’re not assessing the quality of work, but may be assessing your willingness to take them on in a dispute and to come out of it ahead, even if you win.

Put simply, some housebuilders seem to have worked out that when it comes to their customers suing them, most will struggle to find a suitable professional team, and the funds, and most will be deterred by the risks and the ordeal of the claims procedure, and that even if they win, they’ll likely only recover some of their costs, and may even lose money. As for other options, you can ask them to put things right (as you



AARON AMAT/GETTY IMAGES

have done); or you can try claiming on your NHBC policy but that means going head-to-head on your own with the housebuilder and the warranty provider.

But all is not lost. The first step would be to get the right surveyors or structural engineers to investigate the underlying cause of the cracking and identify the solution. An initial expert report might cost £350-£450, plus VAT. We (or another solicitor) could help by doing an initial case review and helping you appoint the right surveyor on the right terms. Then you would need to present those findings to Barratt and negotiate for them to put things right. If they still refuse, see if the NHBC will assist. If not, it will be time to consider legal action against Barratt.

Geoff Peter is founder and principal of Wingrove Law (wingrovelaw.co.uk), which specialises in class actions against housebuilders, and managing director of New Build Guru, the UK member organisation for owners of defective new-build homes (newbuildguru.com).

A spokesman for Barratt Homes Northampton responds: “As a five-star housebuilder we take customer service very seriously and are sorry for the issues Ms Drury has experienced with the render on the outside of her house. We will put that right and are pleased to have agreed work with her to rectify the problem.”

BREAK THE MOULD

Q I live in a 1970s bungalow. After finding mould on leather shoes and on walls behind furniture, I bought two dehumidifiers. Both fill the tanks with water every day, regardless of

weather. It’s solved the mould issue, but where is all this water coming from? I don’t dry washing on radiators. I live in south Wales and rainy days are common, but this is beginning to worry me. *Jennifer Miles, Pembrokeshire*

A There are many different sources of moisture that could be contributing to internal damp and mould.

Cooking, showering and breathing all produce significant amounts of moisture; an adult can give off as much as two litres of water a day just through breathing and perspiration.

The fact your dehumidifier tanks fill up isn’t surprising –

or necessarily worrying. Mould growth occurs on surfaces where there is a high relative humidity. The colder a surface, the higher the relative humidity, even if the actual humidity remains constant. There are two ways to stop mould growth: remove moisture (which you are doing with your dehumidifiers), or remove cold spots. The latter would require careful installation of suitable insulation. Insulation would also reduce heating bills and increase comfort.

A final consideration is the moisture content of the building structure. Rising damp can cause problems if there isn’t a damp-proof course blocking moisture

NEED EXPERT ADVICE?

Email your questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice is given without responsibility

READERS’ CLINIC

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I WASH MY DUVET COVER?

Karen Pattison, London

Suzie, Portsmouth

We change it every week, along with the fitted sheet and pillowcases.

@prepylondoners, Wimbledon

Once every two weeks.

Rachel Howlett, Bedfordshire

I have three duvet covers (each with a different design), which I use on rotation. Each is used for three weeks, then washed and changed.

Beth Parker, Liverpool

I change our duvet covers on the first of each month, as it’s easier to remember. Before you think, “Yuck”, let me describe: the fitted bottom sheet, top flat sheet and pillowcases are washed at 60C weekly. Duvet lies above top (flat) sheet, so not touching a body.

Juliet Tyler, Devizes, Wiltshire

I clean my bedding weekly, but if I have a top sheet, then the duvet cover stays on for two weeks before washing. But I recently ditched the duvet in favour of old-fashioned blankets and a heavy quilted cover, and now sleep like a baby.

@lozerwoz, London

Every 10 to 14 days, but it’s only me in there and I am a clean bean.

Readers’ tips

To get rid of fruit flies (November 3), put a tablespoon of apple-cider vinegar and a squirt of washing-up liquid in a small dish. This is catnip for fruit flies – but then they can’t escape the stickiness. Leave it on the counter for a week and your fruit fly problem disappears.

Sandra Rose, Beeston, Nottingham

Fill a small jar or ramekin with ½cm of cider vinegar, cover with clingfilm, punch several small holes in the film, and – hey presto – in they go and can’t get out. It’s shocking how many you trap.

Sue Hill, London

Future questions

- What is the best way to clean the inside of a tea-stained 1960s Picquot ware tea set?
- What should I buy my cleaner for Christmas?

Send your tips, tricks and questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk

from the ground, and wind-driven rain can also penetrate brickwork. Both these factors could cause internal mould growth. A qualified surveyor could advise on whether these are problems in your home.

Chris Hughes, project engineer and Passivhaus designer; enhabit.uk.com

RAISING A STINK

Q We live in a cottage and have a septic tank, not mains drainage. One of our loos is downstairs and has developed a smell that is there all the time. We have made sure there isn’t a blockage in the pipes. Any ideas? *Desperate, Swansea*

A Regardless of where loo waste ends up, there shouldn’t be any way for a smell to make its way back into the room. Check to make sure the water level is above the ridge of the hole at the bottom of the pan, and therefore still forming a seal. If it is, is the loo outlet pipework connected to an outside stench pipe, or does it have an internal (to the room) vent pipe with an air admittance valve (AAV) on top of it?

If it’s the latter, the AAV seal may have distorted, allowing smells back into the room. Replacement of the seal or the whole AAV (usually less than £40) should sort out the problem. If there is a low water level in the pan, it may be that something stuck in the outlet pipe – such as a sanitary product – is soaking up the water and breaking the seal. Or there could be a problem with the outlet pipe vent, meaning atmospheric pressure is pushing the water out of the pan when the toilet is flushed. I think this is unlikely, though.

There might be a problem with the septic tank, in which case you’ll need specialist advice, but it’s more likely to be a failed AAV seal.

Joe Greaves, owner, Paveway Plumbing, Leicester; pavewayplumbing.co.uk

BACK TO THE FLOORING BOARDS

Q What is the best way to clean grubby old floorboards prior to painting them? I don’t want to sand them. *Chris Catlin*

A As long as the floorboards are flat and don’t have any bad marks on them, you can just mop them with soapy water, leave them to dry, then Hoover them prior to painting. Two coats of Johnstone’s Flortred has great coverage for this kind of job (£30 for 2.5 litres). We would recommend doing a patch test in a hidden area to make sure the paint goes on nicely.

Wayne Perrey and Steph Bron, founders of thedydoers.com