



Looking After Your Home

Welcome!

We have put this Repairs Handbook together to give you help and advice with the day-to-day upkeep of your home. It tells you what things to avoid, and what to do in emergencies

If you do not understand anything in this leaflet, or if it doesn't give you the information you need to know, please contact our team of Customer Service Advisors.

If there is a problem, who should I contact?

Soho Housing Association is responsible for the general upkeep of your home. We will look after the main services supplied to your home as well as the general structure of the property.

Responsibility for repairs

It is our responsibility to carry out repairs caused by normal wear and tear or faults. But you are responsible for any damage caused by yourself or other members of your household. This includes any breakages or problems that arise as a result of neglect. We charge residents for any work done that is not our responsibility to repair.

Most problems can be avoided. Below is an alphabetical list of common problems and our advice on how to avoid them.

Bathrooms

Don't flush sanitary items, nappies, cotton buds or other items down the toilet. Don't dispose of anything down the plugholes of washbasins. These items need to be thrown away with your other refuse. If you try to flush them away, you risk serious blockage to your pipes, and we will have to recharge you for any repairs we carry out.

Avoid scrubbing surfaces with harsh powder-based cleaners. These will cause scratches. Please use liquid or cream household cleaners instead. Alternatively you can use a mixture of water and vinegar to clean baths and basins.

A greyish deposit may build up around your taps and plugholes. This is called limescale. You can remove it with limescale removers or lemon juice

Burst pipes *(see "Pipes")*

Calor gas heaters **For safety reasons, we do not allow the use of calor gas or paraffin heaters.**

Central heating **If you have the operating instructions to your central heating system, take a few moments to read them. This will help you to familiarise yourself with the system and find the best way of using it for your own needs. You can set it to come on when you want at the desired temperature.**

Most heating systems have separate controls for heating and hot water. Although some radiators have their own thermostats, the temperature of most homes is normally controlled by a thermostat, which is mounted on a wall – often located in the hallway. To make sure that the thermostat controls the temperature throughout your home, you need to turn on radiator nearest the thermostat.

Heating systems can reach a high temperature. If you have young children be careful that they do not touch hot radiators or pipes.

Circuit breakers *(See "Power failure")*

Communal areas You may live in a home that has shared areas such as a main hallway, garden and rubbish stores:

If you are paying a service charge, we will look after communal areas and make sure that they are kept clean. But we need you to let us know if there are any problems – e.g. if the cleaning is not being done or if a light isn't working in one of the communal areas.

You must keep the communal areas in your building clear at all times. Do not leave bicycles, pushchairs, prams, rubbish bags or any other items in the hallway or in corridors. These areas need to be kept clear to allow access for all residents and also to allow people to leave the building quickly if there is any emergency.

See under "gardens" for information on communal gardens.

Condensation Many daily activities such as boiling a kettle, cooking or taking a shower all produce moisture that fills the air. Condensation occurs when there is too much moisture in your home. The moisture turns into water when it hits any cold surface.

Condensation can be a cause of mould. It can damage your possessions, clothing, furnishings, and the building itself. On the walls this can appear in the form of black patches. In extreme cases condensation can aggravate health problems.

There will always be some moisture inside your home but the following tips can help you prevent or reduce condensation:

- Try to maintain a minimum temperature in your home throughout the year;
- Try to stop the moisture spreading through your home – keep the bathroom door closed when you are having a shower and keep the kitchen door closed when you are cooking;
- Wipe away any moisture that collects on your window sills;
- If you have extractor fans in your kitchen and bathroom, use them whenever you are boiling a kettle, cooking, washing, drying clothes, taking a bath or a shower;
- Don't dry clothes in unventilated rooms;
- Put lids on pans that contain boiling liquids;
- Do not use calor gas or paraffin heaters. For safety reasons, these are not to be used in any of the Association's homes.
- If you run a bath, start by running a little cold water first; then run the hot water. This will cut down on the level of steam produced.

We are aware that you will not always want to have the window open, especially in cold weather, but try to find a balance between heating your home, and keeping it well ventilated.

If condensation is a problem in your home, please contact your team of Customer Service Officers.

Corridors (*see "Communal areas"*)

Damp Damp happens when water comes into your property through the ground, the walls or the roof.

Penetrating damp comes through the walls and roof. After rainfall, you may see wet patches or mould on your walls or ceilings. You might notice a musty smell.

Rising damp comes up through the ground. You may see a tidemark on the wall. You might notice a musty smell.

If you think your home has damp, please call your team of Customer Service Officers and a surveyor will come to inspect your home.

Drains

Don't pour oil, fat, any other greasy substances, food leftovers or tea leaves down your sink. These are the most common causes of blocked sinks. If the sink has been blocked by one of the above causes, we will have to recharge you for unblocking it.

You can clear any build-up of fatty substances by using soda crystals or recognised product from the supermarket. Rinsing your sink with bleach will also help to keep it clear and clean – please do this regularly: we suggest once a week.

You can also use a sink plunger to unblock you sink - they can be very effective.

You can also clear blockages by removing the U-bend underneath your sink. Make sure you place a bucket underneath before you start, or you will get very wet!

Unscrew the U-bend and clear any blockage inside, then screw it back carefully. Then run some water to make sure it drains away properly.

Energy saving **Saving electricity**

You can use low-energy light-bulbs, to cut down on electricity costs. They cost more in the first instance, but they last for years.

Heating and hot water

Keep the boiler set on a low setting. Make sure that you only have the timer set for periods when you need heating.

If you have a gas boiler and an immersion heater, use the gas boiler to heat your water whenever possible. It is much cheaper to heat your water using gas. Use the immersion heater as a back-up.

You can economise on heating in your home by stopping draughts. Keep doors and windows closed most of the time. You can fit draught excluders and fit insulation to your roof space and you can add insulation to your hot water tank to stop heat escaping. You may be eligible for a grant to help you with this. Contact our office for more details.

But don't block air vents – these need to be kept clear at all times for ventilation.

Water

Make sure you only run taps when you need to use water. Make sure taps and showers are completely turned off. **If** you have more than one toilet – you can convert one into a "short flush" toilet by placing a sealed plastic bag full of water inside the cistern. This will reduce the amount of water needed to refill the cistern. But remember: the flush will not be as powerful.

If you have a garden, you can collect rainwater in suitable containers to water grass and plants.

Fire

Common causes of fire. Do not:

- Smoke in bed
- Leaving lit cigarettes unattended
- Leave matches where children can play with them
- Leaving food frying on the cooker and then leaving the kitchen.
If a chip pan catches fire. Turn the cooker off, then cover the pan with a damp cloth. **Do not** try to move the pan.
- Leave electrical items plugged in when you're not using them
- Use electrical items with a damaged flex

What do I do if there is a fire?

- Close all doors (to stop the fire and fumes spreading)
- Get everyone out of the building. Do not go back inside!
- Call the fire brigade

If there is a fire in a flat of your block, stay inside until directed by the Fire Brigade.

Smoke alarms / detectors

If a smoke detector has been fitted in your home, it will be connected to the mains, but it will also have a battery in case of power failure. You should replace this once a year and test the alarm once a month. If there is not one fitted, we strongly recommend that you buy smoke detectors.

Other fire safety measures

We may have fitted door closers to some of the doors in your communal areas. Please don't interfere with them or prop the doors open. The door closers have been designed to help you leave your building quickly and safely in the event of a fire or other emergency.

Don't block fire exits or put locks on fire doors.

You can buy fire extinguishers and fire blankets for your own home from DIY stores. You will need to check these from time to time.

Freezing pipes (*see "Pipes"*)

Frost damage (*see "Pipes"*)

Fuses, fuse boxes (*see "Power failure"*)

Gardens, roof gardens **Shared gardens**

If the cost of gardening is included in your service charge, the Association will ensure that your garden or roof garden is maintained on a regular basis. If you have any complaints about this service, please contact us. If there is no service charge, residents will be expected to share responsibility. Some small grants may be available to help you, contact us for details.

Private gardens

Private gardens are your responsibility. We hope that you will enjoy your garden and take the time to look after it. If you are planting for flowerbeds, leave a gap of a few inches between the beds and the walls of your building, in case your building has been fitted with airbricks. If you plant shrubs or trees in the garden, don't plant them too near to walls and fences. Try not to let your shrubs and trees cast shade on, or overhang, any of your neighbour's space. If your neighbours have shrubs or trees that overhang your boundaries, you can trim them back to the line of your boundary. It's a good idea to let them know before you start any work. Technically you need to return any trimmings or fruit to the neighbour.

Some trees may be protected by a Tree Preservation Order. If you are thinking about cutting a tree down, contact your local authority for advice first or you may be fined.

Grass/lawns

If you live in a new home, we may have laid new turf. Please water this on a regular basis until the roots of the lawn are more established. Don't cut the grass too short to start off with.

Gas

Gas emergencies

If you suspect you have a gas leak,

- **Don't** turn any electrical switches on or off.
- **Put out** cigarettes.
- **Don't** light matches.
- **Open** doors and windows.

- Check your cooker and make sure all the knobs are turned off.
- Check the pilot light in your boiler is still lit.
- If you can still smell gas, turn the gas supply off at the meter and make sure all gas appliances are all turned off.
- **Contact the gas board immediately. The number should be written in your home tenancy details.** (Otherwise, the number will be in your phone book.) It is safe to use your telephone.

Hallways

(see "Communal areas")

Instructions

(see "Operating instructions, manuals")

Insurance Claims

If you have home contents insurance, make sure that you note down model numbers and serial numbers of valuable equipment, keep any receipts. You can also take photos of valuables. We strongly advise you to take out insurance on your home contents.

Kitchen units Use liquid or cream cleaners to wipe down your kitchen surfaces. Avoid harsh abrasive or powder cleaners – these will scratch your surfaces. Don't put any hot items, such as hot pans, directly onto worktops. Otherwise you may get burn marks on your surface!

Please take care of your kitchen cupboards and drawers. Don't slam or lean on doors or drawers. If you are responsible for a breakage, we will recharge you for the repair.

Manuals *(see "Operating instructions, manuals")*

Neighbourhood watch In some areas, residents run neighbourhood watch schemes. Residents help each other by being watching out for any suspicious activities in their area. These groups work alongside the police and aim to keep local areas safe for everyone to live in. If there is no scheme where you live, you can see if your neighbours would be interested in starting one with you. Ask to discuss this with the Crime Prevention Officer at your local police station.

New or renovated homes

Moisture

The materials used in new or renovated buildings contain a lot of moisture.

A lot of wood is used in most buildings. As this new wood dries out, it will change shape or shrink slightly. Bricks, cement, concrete and plaster are also used and these need to dry out as well.

It takes about a year in total for the materials in your home to dry out. During this time it is especially important to keep your home ventilated to allow the moisture to evaporate. Try to keep your heating on at a constant low temperature, as this will help your home to dry out properly.

If you have built-in wardrobes, don't fill them too full or pile objects against the sides or back. Try to leave the doors open or slightly ajar to help air to circulate and dry out the cupboard. If you overfill your cupboards, things may smell musty during the drying-out period.

Cracks and warping

During the first year the plaster dries out and may shrink. Small cracks may appear on walls as a result. Doors may not close properly if they warp.

White patches

White patches may appear on your outside walls. This is called "efflorescence" and is caused by natural salts coming out of the walls. It will eventually disappear but you can remove it by gently scrubbing the white areas with a wire brush.

Decorating during the first year

Please do not put up any wallpaper during the first year. The walls need to be inspected at the end of the year, and you will only have to remove it again!

You can use emulsion paint to paint the walls, but small cracks may appear – and you may prefer to wait until the property has been inspected at the end of the first year.

Operating instructions, manuals

If we have manuals or operating instruction to any appliances in your home, we will give them to you. We advise you to keep these handy, in case you have any problems.

Paraffin heaters

For safety reasons, we do not allow the use of calor gas or paraffin heaters.

Pipes

Frost damage

During the colder months, the water in your pipes can freeze, and pipes can burst. To avoid freezing pipes:

- Try to maintain a constant minimum temperature in your home. If you have central heating with a thermostat, set the temperature to at least 10°. If your thermostat is in the hallway, make sure the radiator in the hallway is turned on.
- If you're going away for a few days, try to leave the heating on for a short period of time each day. Then you won't come home to burst pipes!
- If you're going to be away for longer, please contact our Customer Service Officers for advice.

If your pipes freeze:

- Turn off the water at the stopcock. If you don't know where it is or how to do it, phone your team of Customer Service Officers.
- Turn your taps on
- Switch off your immersion heater and/or
- Turn off your boiler
- Phone your team of Customer Service Officers for advice and help

If you have a burst pipe:

- Turn off the water at the stop cock
- Switch off the electricity at the mains if water is coming into contact with wiring or fuses
- Switch off water heaters or central heating
- Turn your taps on
- Call your team of Customer Service Officers
- Warn neighbours below if water may seep through into their homes

Power failure Your electricity is controlled by either fuses or circuit breakers. They cut out before anything dangerous happens. If your power goes off you can phone your team of Customer Service Officers for advice and assistance. But you may be able to deal with the problem yourself if a fuse has blown.

If you have a traditional fuse box:

- Turn off anything which might have caused the problem
- Turn off your electricity at the mains (there should be a switch by the fuse box)
- Find which fuse has blown – it will be burnt
- Replace the burnt fuse wire with the same sort of fuse wire
- Turn the electricity back on

If you have a new-style fuse box with circuit breakers:

- Turn off anything that might have caused the problem
- Turn off your electricity at the mains (there should be a switch by the circuit breakers)
- Find the circuit breaker that has turned itself off and turn it back on
- Turn the electricity back on.

Hopefully your power will come back on. If the same fuse cuts out repeatedly, please report this to your team of Customer Service Officers.

What made the fuse blow?

If a fuse blows or a circuit breaker cuts out, think about what electrical items you have just used, such as a kettle or an iron. You can check the plugs and the items themselves to see they are the cause. If you suspect that an appliance is faulty, get a qualified electrical engineer to check it out. Don't take any risks!

Don't overload power points with too many plugs. Avoid using adapters and extension leads where possible. If you do use an adapter or extension lead, make sure that it carries a British Standards mark and is a suitable voltage for the appliances you plan to use.

If your electricity supply cuts out and you cannot see a problem with your fuses or circuit breakers. Check to see if your neighbours have any power. It could be a general power cut. Otherwise contact our office and we will investigate the problem.

Saving Energy *(see "Energy saving")*

Security Your home is secure enough to comply with the requirements of most insurance companies. But you might want to consider adding extra security items such as spy holes (door viewers), door chains, bolts and padlocks (for gates and sheds).

If you live in sheltered accommodation, please contact your warden before you make any alterations.

Our office can always advise you whether you can install extra security items. We may have to refuse certain requests. For example, safety grilles cannot always be installed as they sometimes prevent quick access and evacuation in the event of a fire.

You can also help prevent theft from your home by following these steps:

- Make sure you lock all doors, windows and garden gates even if you are only going out for a few minutes
- Don't leave ladders up against walls when you are not using them. Make sure they are kept out of the reach of prospective burglars!
- Keep hedges trimmed to waist height, so that they don't provide cover for burglars

If you are going away for a while:

- Ask a neighbour to look after your home. They can make sure free newspapers and post don't build up on your doorstep or stick out of your letterbox for days. This is a big clue for burglars!
- Cancel newspaper and milk deliveries. Tell the newsagent and milkman personally – do not leave notes for burglars to read!
- Use timer switches to turn lights, TVs and radios on and off, so that it looks like somebody is at home
- Store valuable items out of sight. Don't leave items in view that will tempt burglars.

Contact us for more advice on security, as we may be able to help upgrading the security on your block.

Shared gardens

(see "Gardens")

Shared hallways, corridors

(see "Communal areas")

Smoke alarms / detectors

(see "Fire")