**Stock condition data: striking the right balance**

Donald Rumsfeld famously set out that there are known knowns; the things we know we know. Known unknowns; the things we know we don’t know. And unknown unknowns; the things we don't know we don't know.

It’s the latter category that strikes fear into housing management professionals.

Across the sector, landlords have well-developed processes to ensure that their stock meets the decent homes standard and that any complaints are addressed appropriately. There are also ambitious plans to retrofit ageing stock to meet modern sustainability standards.

But without comprehensive and accurate data about the condition of every property that they manage, social landlords are operating in a climate of unknown unknowns. They simply do not know to what degree of risk they are exposed in the future. In the long term, this could result in under- or over-estimating the cost of capital works programmes. In the short term, it could mean overlooking critical maintenance and exposing tenants to harm.

Against this backdrop and following a bruising couple of years for the sector, housing providers across the country are revisiting their approach to stock condition surveys.

However, an official stock condition survey shouldn’t be the only time we collect data. Every time someone visits a property is an opportunity to update the data, and this should be used whether that be a housing officer attending or a gas service or electrical test. It is important to upskill teams to identify issues while they are looking at other things and make sure that this is properly recorded.

But whether collected through a stock condition survey or a home visit - with each home containing hundreds of individual data points, there is also a fine line between collecting not enough and too much information.

At Procure Plus, our secret weapon in navigating this challenging debate is our people. With a longstanding history of working with landlords to put together, manage and continuously improve commercial arrangements, we are able to share best practice at every stage.

**The need for comprehensive surveys**

Some of the most common issues that we see come from works that have been done to properties incorrectly or works that haven’t been identified or actioned in an appropriate time.

Comprehensive stock condition data is vital strategically and operationally to tackle this challenge. From ensuring that every home has adequate fire safety measures to estimating the cost of achieving net zero between now and 2050, good data makes good decisions.

A well-designed stock condition survey programme enables us to work with a landlord to carefully manage planned maintenance and responsive repairs. With the right data, it is possible to keep pace with an ever-changing market, delivering best value and enabling available funding to stretch further.

**Striking the balance**

While the rationale for comprehensive surveys is clear, the question arises: Can you have too much of a good thing?

Every piece of data entails a cost in terms of time and resources both in collection and analysis. Gathering excessive information might overload the process and divert resources from addressing actual problems.

There is a delicate balance to be struck between ensuring that there is a clear picture of every property being managed and problems being hidden in data that is not being properly analysed.

A similar debate is taking place about the frequency of stock condition surveys, with [the Regulator of Social Housing recently warning that five-year stock condition surveys may no longer be enough.](https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/five-year-stock-condition-surveys-may-no-longer-be-enough-says-regulator-of-social-housing-81396)

By aggregating knowledge from across the sector, we work with landlords to determine the information that they need to make good decisions, not just the data that construction teams or surveyors think they should have. This is based on a clear understanding of exactly what will be needed when working with contractors and suppliers to deliver programmes of every size and variety.

**Final thoughts**

To finish where I began, in social housing repairs, maintenance and retrofit, knowledge is power. This is true both in terms of ensuring that landlords have information that they need about their properties and also in ensuring that they draw upon best practice from peers when developing a strategy for stock condition surveys.

The level of data that landlords collect will always be a balancing act. If we ask for too much, it reduces the amount we can collect, and if we ask for too little, we miss things we need to know. Getting the right balance of data collection and frequency is key. If we then add to this right level of data every time we visit or do anything to the property, we will be heading in the right direction.

The shape and frequency of surveys will always be a matter of debate, and the same is true when we think about how it is used. When issues are identified, should sensors be used to monitor properties that are identified in a risk category? Are retrofit works effective in delivering the anticipated improvements? Has the damp problem been resolved? Is this a big brother to be feared or a vital support function for our customers?

At PP, our people can help you structure and collect the right data. Our system Schemes Plus means that when collaborating with PP for works, you can export and input the right level of information into your systems to appropriately manage that data.

We need to take control of the items that are put into our properties and how they are fitted to effectively manage their life cycle. Using our new frameworks means that commercially they are the best the market can deliver.