

118: Collecting, managing and using housing stock information: good practice

Introduction

New guidance on the processes involved in assembling and maintaining a housing stock information system, including the collection and integration of stock condition survey data is now available, published by the DETR. The guidance has been produced by a joint team from HACAS Consulting, the Building Research Establishment, and the former London Research Centre. The guide builds on and replaces an earlier (1993) publication *Local House Condition Surveys: A Guidance Manual*.

Overall the new guidance will help housing and regeneration practitioners to:

- Develop a housing information system within a wider integrated framework.
- Plan stock surveys within the framework of that system.
- Develop a process that provides data that can be analysed flexibly and allow practitioners to investigate options for prioritising maintenance and repair work to achieve the most efficient use of available resources i.e a Just In Time approach.
- Develop a system that can be used for a variety of purposes and can cope with updating information for future analysis requirements.
- Set priorities for data collection.
- Understand key technical issues, in as non-technical a manner as possible.
- Commission and manage cost effective stock surveys.

Some of the principles from the guidance have already been included in the recent A New Financial Framework for Local Authority Housing; Guidance on Business Plans which aims to promote the efficient use of housing assets. The guidance on business plans stresses the importance of developing comprehensive business plans for housing revenue account properties based on robust and up to date information about the stock.

However, the guidance is not only about the assembly of stock information for Business Planning; it covers the requirements for stock transfers, private sector renewal and housing strategies more generally. Robust information about the condition of the private sector stock is also very important for local authorities and regeneration partnerships, particularly those who are developing integrated cross tenure neighbourhood strategies. The guidance is also relevant for Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), as the continuing need to know the condition of their stock is becoming ever more important in order to continue to attract private finance and to underpin more effective asset management strategies.

The guidance is published as three volumes:

1. **Volume one** is aimed at senior staff in LAs, RSLs and regeneration partnerships who have a responsibility for strategic planning in relation to the housing stock. It stresses the importance of collecting and maintaining robust information about stock across all tenures, gives a broad

overview of the key concepts and general principles involved in achieving reliable and cost effective stock condition surveys and outlines the ways of integrating this data within the wider Housing Information System.

2. **Volume two** is aimed primarily for those with hands-on responsibility for managing and conducting surveys, managing databases and analysing the information. It provides more detail on the concepts outlined in volume one and gives practical examples of techniques for survey design and implementation and for translating the data into useful information. It also includes more technical information on key methodological issues connected with stock condition surveys, such as the type of data collected, sampling strategies and the integration of new methods for data capture in line with the Housing Health and Safety Rating System and Housing Quality Indicators.

3. **Volume three** gives a detailed steer on specifying and commissioning stock condition surveys. It highlights good practice examples and outlines some key pitfalls to avoid at all stages of the process. It covers setting objectives and getting the brief right, through to contractor selection, managing the survey and agreeing reports and other outputs, particularly the database.

Some key issues

A summary of some of the issues from the three volumes is outlined below, providing an insight into the scope and coverage of the guidance.

COMMON PROBLEMS

The guidance highlights common problems connected with assembling stock condition data and provides detailed guidance on how to overcome these. The key problems identified include:

- Surveys which have been undertaken in isolation, without a clear view of how they can inform strategy development or linked to other data (e.g on housing needs and housing demand).
- Missed opportunities (too little data).
- Information overload (too much information or the wrong type).
- Inflexible data (such as collecting data on pre-fixed archetypes in the field).
- Reports that do not meet requirements and are not used.
- Data that is not used or updated.

SETTING UP A HOUSING INFORMATION SYSTEM

The guidance outlines underlying principles for setting up a Housing Information System, within which stock survey data is a key strand of information. Some of the key good practice messages that are outlined in detail in the guidance include:

- Stock information should ideally operate within a corporate brief to ensure that key information is not missed or unnecessary information collected.
- Data on stock condition and characteristics may come from a variety of sources, of which a survey is but one. The information system will need to be flexible, in terms of both data collection and data analysis. Some users will want to interrogate the system at a more strategic level, looking at cross-analysis between (say) allocations and repairs. Others may

wish to look in more detail at a lower level for example, assessing at estate level the costs and benefits of major replacement versus ongoing maintenance.

- An Information Management Team can play an important role in overseeing the cost effective collection, analysis and updating of data.
- The emphasis should be on information rather than technology, IT systems should be driven by information needs, not the other way round. The guide recognises that options may be limited initially, set by existing IT infrastructures, and it may take time to develop a comprehensive information system.
- Data definitions should be consistent across the various sources to enable accurate cross-analysis. For example, UPRNs (Unique Property Reference Numbers) should be consistent across the organisation, and not unique to each individual departments.

PLANNING A STOCK CONDITION SURVEY

The guidance outlines key principles in planning a stock condition survey. These include:

- Surveys are a balance between maximising data opportunities (for example, linking stock condition, energy data, and socio-economic needs within one survey) and achieving feasibility (particularly keeping the time within a property to a reasonable level).
- Survey planning will involve:
 - identifying broad decision areas;
 - within these, identifying management decisions;
 - defining survey data requirements;
 - defining non-survey data requirements;
 - deciding on the appropriate survey method(s);
 - identifying the data processing, storage, and analysis procedures (and giving early thought to updating requirements).
- A core project team should be established, to manage the survey, operating within the overall framework set by the Information Management Team. A client focussed IT expert should be a key member of the project team.
- Potential users of the survey data should be consulted, even if they are not direct team members. This may vary from director level to key individuals responsible for local implementation of repair programmes.
- Surveys should have a clear brief, whether done in-house or through an external contractor. For complex projects (e.g where the data are being fed into Asset Management Systems) a complementary IT brief may be needed.
- As with any project, progress monitoring and quality control procedures should be implemented. The latter is particularly important in ensuring that subsequent users have confidence in the data collected.
- Databases should be capable of meeting the requirements placed upon them by the Housing Information System i.e. data storage, analysis or updating.

Stock condition surveys technical issues

The guidance outlines in broad terms in volume one and in-depth in volume 2 the technical issues connected with stock condition surveys. In particular it provides a steer on the issues to consider in determining the sampling strategy and sample size, how to determine the type of data that needs to be collected and how this can be collected in a way that permits flexible analysis.

SAMPLING

- Detailed guidance is provided on the principles connected with sampling for stock condition surveys and stresses that surveys of all dwellings in the stock (100% surveys) are difficult to achieve and expensive.
- Sample surveys are advocated but the guidance stresses that there is no pre-set percentage of stock that needs to be surveyed for any particular survey. The guidance explains that:

The size of the sample should be determined by the purpose of the survey and the type of the stock.

It is more important to have all types of property represented in the sample, rather than large samples of the same type.

Stratified rather than simple random samples are often the most effective in ensuring that concentrated problems in particular types of stock are included.

THE RELIABILITY OF STOCK SURVEY DATA

The guidance looks at the reliability of stock condition survey information, considering sampling error and surveyor variability. It offers practical advice for reducing the scope for variation; particularly through defining the surveyors task more precisely through careful survey briefing and management; including:

- clear briefing about the scope of the survey;
- restricting what is recorded to direct observations and leaving interpretation to the analysis phase;
- careful management, including spot checks during fieldwork;
- the use of call-back surveys to assess the potential extent of surveyor variability.

DATA COLLECTION

The guidance provides advice on the type of information that should be collected in a stock condition survey and how it should be collected to allow flexible analysis, rather than pre-determined and static data capture in the field. Some of the key principles are as follows:

- The balance should be to focus on significant items of expenditure and not overload the surveyor in collecting cost insignificant data;
- Elements selected by criterion of cost contribution will depend on the focus of the study and type of stock;
- A flexible approach to collecting data on stock type requires the surveyor to collect data on the age, size, tenure, building type and type of area which can then be analysed flexibly

across a range of different archetypes, rather than labelling each dwelling in the field as belonging to one archetype or another;

- To ensure the data on the state of repair of the stock can be used flexibly in analysis the guidance recommends the following information is obtained:

the type and age of element;

whether there is a defect and type of defect;

the type of initial action needed;

the scale of action needed;

the timing of the initial action/longest allowed delay;

remaining elemental life once action is completed.

This flexible approach will allow practitioners to consider maintenance and repair strategies under a range of different scenarios, rather than having fixed data on e.g backlog or catch-up repairs which cannot be interrogated further. It will allow analysis in line with the principles of Just In Time, through looking at the consequences of deferring or bringing forward major works, the relationship between maintenance costs and timing of major repair programmes and the effects of changing assumptions about building element lifecycles and costs of works.

New measurements and methods for Stock Condition Surveys

DETR has recently published the *Housing Health and Safety Rating System*. It is based on an assessment of 24 hazards to occupants and visitors that can occur in the home. Primary legislation is required before it replaces the current Fitness Standard for enforcement. However, local authorities may wish to capture information on the new rating system and the guidance outlines a possible methodology that should facilitate capturing core elements of a rating system within a stock condition survey.

The DETR (in partnership with the Housing Corporation) has developed a system of Housing Quality Indicators (HQI), primarily aimed at assessing the quality of proposals for new build schemes. However, key elements of the HQI can be a valuable tool in assessing dwellings or estates neighbourhoods in terms of location, design and performance and the guidance outlines how some core information could be collected during a stock condition survey.

Reports and Outputs from the Survey

The guidance stresses the importance of considering from the outset the need for usable reports and flexible databases. It stresses the importance of the database as the key output as this will be the long term tool for assessing options and priorities, updating etc. Reports should be analytical, not prescriptive, present costs in different ways and make assumptions and adjustments transparent. Updating of data is a key issue, procedures need to be identified to capture data routinely to continue to inform the database, and staff resources needed to collect and input the data must be assessed.

Specifying and Commissioning a Stock Survey

Volume 3 provides a detailed steer on specifying requirements for a survey and commissioning and managing the process. It also explores the issues connected with administering some or all of the survey in-house. This volume stresses the importance of:

- setting feasible objectives that maximise the value of the survey;
- providing contractors with the information they need to provide a good response to needs;
- developing a brief that tests a contractors skills and experience, allows them to meet requirements but still allows scope for creativity;
- testing a contractor as thoroughly as possible before appointing them;
- understanding in outline the key technical issues, so that the commissioner and the contractor will have a mutual understanding;
- managing the project to achieve a professional partnership approach.

Further Information

More information is available in the full set of guidance, Collecting, Managing and Using Housing Stock Information: A Good Practice Guide.

Vol 1: An overview of the Key Principles, ISBN 1 85112 423 3. Price £15

Vol 2: Key Principles and methodological issues, ISBN 1 85112 424 1. Price £20

Vol 3: Specifying Stock Surveys ISBN 1 85112 425 X. Price £15

The publications home page contains information on how and where you can obtain publications produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Titles of Interest

- A New Financial Framework for Local Authority Housing Guidance on Business Plans DETR, ISBN 1 851123 99 7, Price £15
- A New Financial Framework for Local Authority Housing Guidance on Stock Valuation for Resource Accounting DETR, ISBN 1 85112 393 8, Price £15
- Demolition and New Build on Local Authority Estates DETR, ISBN 1 85112 412 8, Price £14 (Housing Research Summary 115)
- Development of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System DETR, ISBN 1 85112 404 7, Price £10
- Housing Health and Safety Rating System: Quick Guide (Version 1) DETR, ISBN 1 85112 405 5, Price £20
- Housing Quality Indicators DETR, ISBN 1 85112 154 4, Price £18
- Local Housing Needs Assessment Good Practice Guidance DETR, ISBN 1 85112 408 X, Price £17 (Housing Research Summary Number 117)

- Low Demand Housing and Unpopular Neighbourhoods DETR, ISBN 1 85112 395 4, Price £32 (Housing Research Summary No 114)
- Responding to Low Demand Housing and Unpopular Neighbourhoods A Guide to Good Practice (Housing Research Summary Number 116) DETR, ISBN 1 85112 396, Price £10