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## Data management – how improved use of data and a strategic approach to data management is reshaping the way in which RPs view the world, saving money and helping them deliver a better service to customers

– Colin Sales, Managing Director, 3C Consultants



If you use a store card to gather points, you will assume data about you is being collected, but do you appreciate just how much data and what it reveals? Of course, it includes spending habits and preferences, but did you know it could also include such things as your likely disposable income; how far you are willing to travel to shop, on what days and if the weather impacts your decision; if you respond to incentives; if you are shifting to internet shopping...the list goes on. So valuable is this data, it forms the cornerstone of a retailer's corporate strategy. I once worked with a Virgin start-up that was developing a stay-at-home fitness club based around activity data collected via a small, belt-worn, bluetooth fitness monitor. I initially thought the corporate objective was to generate recurring monthly payments from people who wanted to get fit at home, but I quickly found that the jewel in the crown was the value that the data had to the trillion dollar private health insurance market, not to mention to other organisations that could benefit from identifying health-minded individuals.

Within the social housing sector, the HCA is already demonstrating how data is shaping the sector's future and the careers of many within it. An example is the recent letter the HCA's regulation chair, Julian Ashby, wrote to the top 350 housing associations after global accounts data identified a concerning 50% cost variation between landlords that could not be explained. A link to a copy of this letter is below. It states that those with higher costs will need to be able to defend the additional benefit they deliver or demonstrate that they are making savings as part of future In Depth Assessments. Some sector commentators speculate that such analysis could be used to justify future social rent reductions, and even RP 'league tables'.

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/538338/Draft\\_letter\\_to\\_chairs\\_11\\_July\\_2016\\_w\\_quartiles\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/538338/Draft_letter_to_chairs_11_July_2016_w_quartiles_FINAL.pdf)

Such data is therefore critical to success and how we are perceived. As well as accurate and timely information being key to effective operational management and strategic decision making, external bodies like the HCA will use this information to assess our performance. Additionally, service users, stakeholders and local residents need accessible and reliable information to make informed decisions. Careful data management is also critical to data security, so avoiding the risk of financial and reputational damage that can result from data leaks.

We are experiencing a revolution. Executive teams need to display vision and leadership, embracing the benefits that already existing data can provide. Key strategic decisions need to be 'data-led'. For example, maintenance costs can be reduced dramatically by better understanding the average length of tenancies, the age of assets, the productivity of operatives and the frequency of call-outs. One RP announced significant savings had been achieved simply by recognising that 1/3 of their tenancies ended within 4 years and 1/2 within 7 years, which had a significant impact on their maintenance strategy.

The management and accuracy of data is also key to truly automating services and making them 'human-free'. For example, the introduction of Universal Credit will mean around three times as much income will need to be collected by RPs rather than coming from housing benefit direct. To achieve this cost effectively, the use of real-time tenant data will be key. Much of the collection process can then be automated, with only the particularly troublesome cases being highlighted for human intervention.

A carefully considered data management strategy therefore needs to form part of corporate strategy. What should such a strategy include?

- **Governance and leadership** – defined roles and responsibilities to ensure accountability for data quality with policies and procedures. Accurate and consistent data should mean there is only ever one version of the truth.
- **Systems and processes** – that secure the quality of data
- **People and skills** – training staff with the appropriate knowledge, competencies and capacity for their roles.
- **Data use** – robust reporting providing good quality data that informs management, allows improvements to service delivery and promotes accountability to customers, stakeholders, local residents and auditors.
- **Data security** – ensuring data collected is secure and only used for authorised purposes.

If you need to justify why investment in data should be a priority, here is a summary of just some of the likely benefits:

- Easier, fact-based **strategic decision making**
- **Early warning** of emerging problems, so minimising their impact
- Prioritising where **investment** in time and money will achieve greatest results
- Customer **segmentation**: recognising challenging tenancies (often far fewer in number than you think), tenancy balance, repairs spend, rechargeable repairs, ASB, complaints, no access issues and amounts of contact
- Ensures **governance** objectives are monitored, minimising audit related disruption
- Ensures the effective management of **assets**
- Better management and reduction of **maintenance costs**
- Allows enquiries to be resolved swiftly on first customer contact
- Supports the introduction of true, automated **self-service**
- Improves staff **performance**, management and development

So to conclude, every corporate plan should include a data management strategy, as having access to accurate information is key to the well-being of the organisation, staff and customers. Importantly, it will help minimise the disruption audits can cause and the anxiety that can accompany them. Access to accurate data will allow you to increasingly take control, saving time and money and helping safeguard against those nasty surprises that makes running a business so much more stressful.