

IRPM White Paper

Information overload:
where to start with data

irpm
setting standards

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Data is now integral to every aspect of our lives. In both the personal and professional space the way information is collected, managed and shared is increasingly under scrutiny. For property managers there is an urgent need to grasp the importance of the practical, legal and ethical issues surrounding data use as our role expands to embrace the new building safety regime and the need for greater resident engagement.

As part of the IRPM's continuing *Tech Insights* initiative, we brought together online a group of experts from the property, legal and technology sectors to discuss the ways in which we use data; how our understanding of data and its potential for our industry is changing; and how this is impacting the property management profession.

This paper is based on that conversation. It aims to highlight how property managers and other industry stakeholders can maximise the opportunities and benefits offered by optimising the way we access, collect and manage the data available to us.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The round-table discussion that formed this white paper was conducted remotely on 20 July 2021.





Introduction

In the past, property managers were expected to maintain simple data sets; lists of contractors, health and safety reports, and general leaseholder information. As the complexity of building design and operation increases, customer expectations grow and compliance is driven up the agenda, access to high quality data and efficient management of information has become vital to success in the block management arena.

Rather than simply generating and maintaining data as in the past, the challenge now is for managing agents to understand the potential of that data; knowing how to interrogate and share information effectively with industry stakeholders and developing new ways to use it in order to benefit our own businesses, our clients and residents – and doing so within an ethical framework.

What is the problem with data?

Our discussion began by considering where our profession finds itself in relation to data use, with our panel of experts identifying three key problems:

- Inconsistency of data content – we all keep different kinds of data
- Inconsistency of data format – we all store data differently
- Not enough of the right kind of data – we are all looking for different outcomes from the data we collect

What this means for our industry is that the data we produce is hard to share and to use effectively. The data we require from other stakeholders is not always presented in the right format. It may not be possible to use one system to interrogate data produced by another. Or the data provided is poor quality or inconsistent. We are all using different systems – some off the peg, some proprietary - and as a result operational efficiency is compromised. This is particularly the case where third party data is being used, for example Local Authorities often provide data in the form of PDFs which then have to be interrogated. This is highly inefficient.

Another problem for our industry, as one of our experts pointed out, is that there is frequently not enough value placed on the services offered. When management contacts switch agents, the data differs massively from operator to operator and as a result, key information is either lost or inconsistent or it can't be easily shared.

“Traditionally our sector has been behind the tech curve but now there is a feeling that something is about to change.”

“The fact that so much data cleansing is required in our sector is a symptom of the problem, not a solution to it”

What are the challenges?

Ultimately, data is simply a business tool but we need to be in touch with our business model in order to monetise the data we collect and manage. The quality of the data we gather is frequently poor but even after we have cleaned it up, there was a consensus that property managers don't always know how to put it to best use. So in order to drive up data quality, property managers have to constantly ask themselves, what does the end user want from this data and how do we give them access to it? It's effectively a logistics chain: if you can get that right you can deliver for the end user. However, in order to do that, two important aspects must be answered – and they are both becoming increasingly complicated - who is the customer and who owns the data?



Obviously in the Build to Rent sector, turning the property management industry on its head and seeing space as a digital service with data at its core and bricks and mortar as add-ons provides the opportunity for new players to enter the market. Major disrupters could be familiar names like Lloyds Bank, M&S, John Lewis or IKEA who already hold huge banks of data about our customers. They know what they eat, how they live and what they like; they could be the ones to simply add the external shell and, as a profession, we should be aware of that possibility.

“To get the right output you have to ask the right questions”

What about ethics?

There was general agreement among our experts that when it comes to the ethical use of data, as a profession we are at an early stage in the conversation. There is not always a clear understanding of the fact that what is legal and what is ethical are not necessarily the same thing. There is some overlap between the two and ethical data collection and sharing is often misunderstood. The point was also raised that although clients are becoming more data conscious there is often nothing about data included in contracts so they often don't allow for data sharing. When it comes to data protection, beyond complying with GDPR, it is often left for the property manager to take a view. There is a wide variety of commercial approaches so standards in this area are clearly needed.

There was a consensus among our experts that when it comes to potentially sensitive data, companies should do their own due diligence with suppliers, constantly asking themselves with whom they want to work, partner and integrate their data. It was considered that questions should always be raised about the need for collection of personal data. It may be seen as part of resident engagement to ask if people have children so they can be sent a card on their birthday. A nice touch perhaps but is it really ethical to hold that information?

In the public sector there is a greater understanding of the ethical implications surrounding data use as Local Authorities have to take equality legislation, algorithmic bias and data discrimination into account and are aware that intrusive technology such as CCTV in private spaces can infringe the Human Rights Act. The Nolan Principles are the starting point for ethics in local government and perhaps should be considered as a framework from which to develop commercial standards too.

Standing up for standards

Our panel agreed that a key solution to these problems is to put standards in place that the whole industry can abide by: Unfortunately, to-date, this is not something that property management has fully engaged with. Data standards are now being widely discussed but the profession has gone from a situation where there were a handful of standards that were not widely publicised or adopted to one where there is now a proliferation of different standards - and no one knows which one to adopt. This is a situation that must be addressed before real progress can be made.

“We need consistent standards so we can all tap into the same data source.”

“The Nolan Principles are the starting point for ethics....”

The easy availability of data from a wide range of sources is now leading to real-time solutions. Our experts believe this is the way forward as it avoids duplication of effort. Again, the requirement for a set of rules governing the way in which data is collected from an ethical standpoint and the way in which it is shared across different platforms means accepted standards will be even more important in future.



There was agreement that it is not possible to get total buy-in for what is a good data standard. So there is thought to be a role for the IRPM in identifying those standards that are workable and effective and from which people could choose. The current Government does not believe in setting standards for industry but expects individual sectors to set their own. This was considered an opportunity “for us to decide for ourselves”.

Conclusions

When it comes to building information, we are a data-rich profession and the sheer volume of data is overwhelming. However, we tend only to care about the data we need at any one time. What this means is that property managers only maintain about 30% of the data that potentially we should be keeping.

In future, the building manager will be managing the building safety case. A key aspect of the Golden Thread of information, that data will go to the Regulator, to residents, to estate agents, lenders, valuers, insurers and letting agents. Each of these stakeholders in the property process is a customer and they all need different types of information drawn from one data set. The building manager will be central to the new building safety regime and the importance of data collection, storage and management is undeniable. So in future the data we don't immediately need must also be maintained and curated, so that years down the line that information can be retrieved if necessary.

Our experts agreed that it is only by developing standards that the whole industry can work to for data collection and storage, as well as determining an ethical framework for our sector, that the future success of our sector can be assured. Data will continue to play a central role in all our business and personal interactions and we must all learn to use it to benefit, not compromise, the security, safety and wellbeing of our businesses and our customers.

The next steps

- Property stakeholders need to collaborate to identify and adopt appropriate standards to govern the way we operate. There are already a number of standards in existence but agreement between the industry and government is needed to adopt good data and ethical principles that will work across the industry.
- IRPM has a role to play in endorsing data standards for the benefit of businesses, clients and residents.
- Education is key to better data use. There is also a role here for the IRPM to help drive knowledge out across the industry.
- The property management sector needs standard protocols for data collection, storage and management. We need agreement over common formats, such as the UPRN, so information is accessible and can be shared in the most effective way. The next step is real-time access to that data to drive efficiency and customer service.

The role of the IRPM is to provide knowledge leadership and drive cultural change in the property management sector. This is the fifth in a series of white papers which aim to start the conversation around the future direction of residential block management in a changing business environment.

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