

Annex 9.1 Definitional issues to consider when working with social rented data

Introduction

Throughout this Guide considerable emphasis is placed on the need to ensure that secondary data is robust and useable. As discussed in annex 5.2, secondary data is by definition collected for a different purpose and should always be treated with care.

Lack of harmonised definitions and differences in recording practices amongst local authority landlords, RSLs and government agencies responsible for compiling statistical and administrative data pertaining to the social rented sector often means that data derived from landlord databases, housing management systems and national datasets is not strictly comparable.

Problems with inconsistent definitions and concepts underlying data tend to become more acute and take more time to resolve at lower spatial levels. In using data on social renting, it is critical at the outset to recognise the potential range of definitional issues that may be encountered and how these might be addressed.

This annex therefore summarises the potential range of definitional issues that may be encountered regarding data on the social rented sector.

Definition of the social rented sector

The social rented sector in Scotland now comprises of properties owned by local authorities, registered social landlords (RSLs) and a residual stock owned by Scottish Homes. When tracking historical trends in social rented housing provision it is important to remember that Scottish Special Housing Association (SSHA) and the four former New Town Development Corporations used to own a sizeable stock. Most of this stock has now either been transferred to the ownership of RSLs or sold through RTB.

In some parts of Scotland there may be other landlords who do not fall into the above three main categories of social landlord. Examples of such landlords are:

- Local housing companies such as WESLO in West Lothian.
- National and local housing trusts.
- Landlords that are registered in England (but not in Scotland) such as Crown HA.

As a result, the stock owned by these organisations and its occupants is often excluded from published data sources on social rented housing including the Scottish Executive Housing Statistics Bulletin.

In most local contexts such as West Lothian where WESLO is a major social landlord with a nomination arrangement with the local authority, there are probably very valid reasons for including these landlords as part of the social rented sector. Where relevant, housing stock and tenant estimates and projections for the social rented sector should address this.

Definition of social rented housing stock

Thought should also be given to what constitutes social rented housing property. In some instances, there may be an interest in knowing about all the properties owned by social landlords. However, in most instances the prime interest will be in housing that is rented out to social tenants.

In terms of establishing a reliable statistic on the volume of social rented housing, analysts should probably seek to include properties where:

- The property is allocated on the basis of need through some form of administrative queuing or allocation process.

- Social landlords largely control the allocation of the housing in question, often because of a nomination or allocations agreement. There is some risk that a few private sector properties, such as those managed through lead tenancy arrangements, may be included. However, as discussed below, this may only distort figures at very small area levels.

Analysts, particularly those seeking to analyse trends at the small area level, need to consider the extent to which stock estimates at different spatial scales are distorted by the inclusion of the following types of properties on property databases:

- Properties used for non-housing purposes such as property leased out to a voluntary organisation or community group - temporarily or longer term - to provide a community flat or other type of facility.
- Properties that are privately owned but recorded on a landlords housing database. This would include properties recently sold under RTB, properties where the landlord provides a factoring service and properties being used temporarily for social purposes such as lead tenancy.
- Shared ownership property - whilst these are excluded from statistical returns made to Scottish Executive and Communities Scotland, such properties may still be recorded on a landlord's property database.
- Non-residential properties maintained on a landlord's database such as garages, offices, and caravans.

No dataset is 100% perfect. Analysts therefore need to consider what acceptable margins of error would be. The extent to which it is feasible and cost effective to exclude such properties also needs to be considered.

A similar judgement needs to be made about property that is owned by a social landlord but is used to provide "tied accommodation" in the sense that it used to accommodate employees such as school janitors and sheltered housing wardens. Nationally, the numbers of such properties are small. Moreover, most of these properties are highly dispersed. In most instances therefore, counting such stock is likely to have minimal impact.

Aside from appraising what is meant by a "social rented property", analysts should also assess the possible risk of double counting. In particular:

- Lease and management arrangements between social landlords can lead to houses being recorded on more than one landlord's management system. For example, one landlord might own a property, but another may allocate and manage it. This is likely to be an important factor to consider in rural and island authorities, where management arrangements between RSLs and local authorities are common.
- When extracting data from landlord databases, checks should be made to ensure multiple entries are discounted. Multiple entries can occur for example where archived records for the same property are maintained on a management information system.

Ultimately, analysts will be required to reach a judgement on what to include or exclude from the count of social rented properties. If the number of properties that appear to fall into one of the above categories is insignificant, the simplest solution may be to ignore them. However, the implications of doing so in terms of the reliability of data at small area level should be borne in mind.

In reaching this decision, analysts should discuss the issues with social landlords (both staff familiar with landlord systems and local housing staff) as well as end users of the analysis. Where possible arrangements for reducing inconsistencies between different data sources should be put in place. In line with good practice, decisions regarding what should and should not be counted as social rented housing stock should be documented and made explicit.

Types of provision

For some analysis, particularly relating to community care housing supply and needs assessment it may be important to differentiate between and separately analyse different types of provision. Three distinctive types of accommodation that can be important are:

- 'Self-contained' and 'non self-contained'.
- 'Mainstream' and 'specialist'.
- 'Temporary' (including emergency and short stay) and 'permanent'.

'Self-contained' and 'non self-contained'

Self-contained accommodation refers to a house, bungalow flat or maisonette designed to be occupied by one household and does not share facilities with another household space. The term is most commonly used as in Communities Scotland's APSR form, which states that self-contained refers to dwelling units that have exclusive use of a bath/shower, inside WC and cooking facilities.

Non self-contained housing refers to a dwelling where two or more households share some of the facilities or accommodation. Non self-contained accommodation may include a common lounge, kitchen or bathroom as well as staff accommodation (either an office or sleep over room). Examples of non self-contained properties include 'hostels' or 'group' accommodation. Individual rooms with some sharing of amenities (bathroom/toilet/kitchen), which are commonly referred to as a bedsits, are also regarded as non self-contained.

There are two main reasons why it is important to separate out non self-contained properties:

- A single property is often recorded as multiple 'places' or 'bedspaces' rather than one housing 'unit' and this difference can lead to inaccurate or inconsistent counting of the volume of social rented properties or units.
- Most non self-contained provision is specialist in nature and has its own access and referral arrangements and is not allocated through normal letting procedures. Where this is the case, it should be excluded from calculation of mainstream or general needs letting and turnover rates as discussed in chapter 9.

'Mainstream' and 'specialist'

General needs or mainstream housing refers to properties not built (or subsequently adapted) to meet the needs or requirements of households or individuals with "special needs". Such housing generally does not have any special features, fixtures, or fittings. However, most recently constructed social rented mainstream provision has been built to barrier-free standard.

Specialist provision refers to a wide range of properties that have special design features and/or the provision of specialist care and support to occupants on site. It covers a wide range of accommodation options including:

- Extra care, very sheltered and sheltered housing and (sometimes) amenity housing for older people.
- Housing built or adapted specifically for wheelchair users or ambulant disabled people.

Reasons for separately identifying specialist accommodation, a substantial proportion of which is non self-contained are:

- Many forms of specialist housing have allocation and access arrangements that are distinct from those of mainstream housing usually because of the provision of integral or linked support services (e.g. care staff). For example, this is typical of very sheltered housing and housing for adults with learning disabilities.

- Criteria for allocating sheltered and amenity housing tend to be slightly different from those for mainstream accommodation. For instance, applicants often must be over 50 or 60 years of age. In addition, separate waiting lists are often maintained - otherwise they are allocated in a similar way to mainstream housing. However, this may change in the future because of policy and funding reasons.

‘Temporary’ and permanent’

Temporary accommodation: As the name suggests, this is accommodation to be let on a short-term basis. As a category, it includes emergency and respite accommodation. It is likely to be of separate interest because:

- It tends to have its own distinctive allocation and access arrangements.
- There is strong policy interest in the level of provision of temporary accommodation within the social rented sector due to statutory responsibilities placed on local authorities in relation to homelessness.

There is likely to be strong interest in monitoring turnover volumes and rates in temporary provision to establish throughput in meeting specific housing needs arising from homelessness. As temporary accommodation is generally re-let more frequently than permanent housing, turnover volume and rates cannot be compared with those for permanent housing. When it comes to identifying and analysing ‘normal levels’ of turnover in the social rented sector, care needs to be taken to exclude turnover in accommodation intended to provide temporary accommodation otherwise turnover rates will be artificially inflated.

A final word

Whether specialist or mainstream, self-contained or non-self-contained, temporary or permanent, all types of effective social rented properties should be included in any mapping of total social rented sector stock. It is when assessing adequacy and effectiveness of supply in relation to need or demand that a more segmented approach is likely to be appropriate. In this context, it is useful to look at the demand for and supply of very specialist or extra care housing separately from mainstream housing. Further advice on analysis can be found in chapters 8 and 11.

When interrogating landlord management systems analysts should think in very exact terms about the specific data that is required and how the system treats and presents different types of data. For example, a ‘property’ database and a ‘housing management’ database may be very different with respect to definitions and estimates of what constitutes a property, or how characteristics are recorded.