
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT
STRATEGY 2009-2012

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1. Introduction

As a provider of housing and housing related services, HHL must ensure that it delivers the best possible services to customers from the resources available. Our drive to deliver a wide range of services to the highest possible standard makes continuous improvement a corporate priority and is, therefore, explicitly laid down as a corporate value, one of the things we hold dear. Further, our corporate vision – where we want to get to – emphasises the importance of providing excellent services underpinned by customer-driven improvement.

Continuous improvement has been a key driver for us since transfer. This strategy builds upon those previously adopted and outlines a new continuous improvement framework and approach that moves away from the rigidity of 'Best Value' reviews in the strictest sense. The approach strives to meet the range of challenges and priorities within our refreshed corporate plan and ensure that we retain a focus on being a well-managed, well-governed and viable organisation.

The strategy sets out the key elements that underpin continuous improvement with the overall aims being to ensure that all improvement is planned, managed and monitored and that we achieve real and measureable outcomes for our customers. It also aims to ensure that all colleagues understand their role in improving services and the positive contribution that they can make.

1.1 Objectives of the Continuous Improvement Strategy

The objectives of the Continuous Improvement Strategy then are to:

1. Embed continuous improvement into the culture of HHL and make continuous improvement an integral part of everything we do
2. Ensure our services are shaped around customers and that customers are fully involved in influencing continuous improvement priorities
3. Improve services in the context of best practice and high performing housing providers
4. Monitor the impact of improvement activities from a business and customer perspective

It is vital, therefore, that this strategy is not viewed in isolation but in the context of our Resident Involvement and Value for Money Strategies and our Equality and Diversity Framework.

2. What do we mean by Continuous Improvement?

The Regulatory Code adopted by the Tenant Services Authority, expects registered housing providers to ensure that:

Service provision is subject to challenge and change. The wishes of residents, and others, are balanced against available resources within a clear and transparent framework and according to the principles of Best Value. Progress in working towards improvements...will be published by the association.

Further, continuous improvement is fundamental to the Audit Commission's second judgement at inspection, 'Prospects for Improvement'. The related Key Line of Enquiry (KLOE) asks associations to evidence:

- *A record of effectively implementing change that has led to improvements in service delivery*
- *Significant improvements in outcomes and key performance indicators that would be experienced by customers*
- *Plans to improve the 'right' things – the things that matter most to customers and communities.*

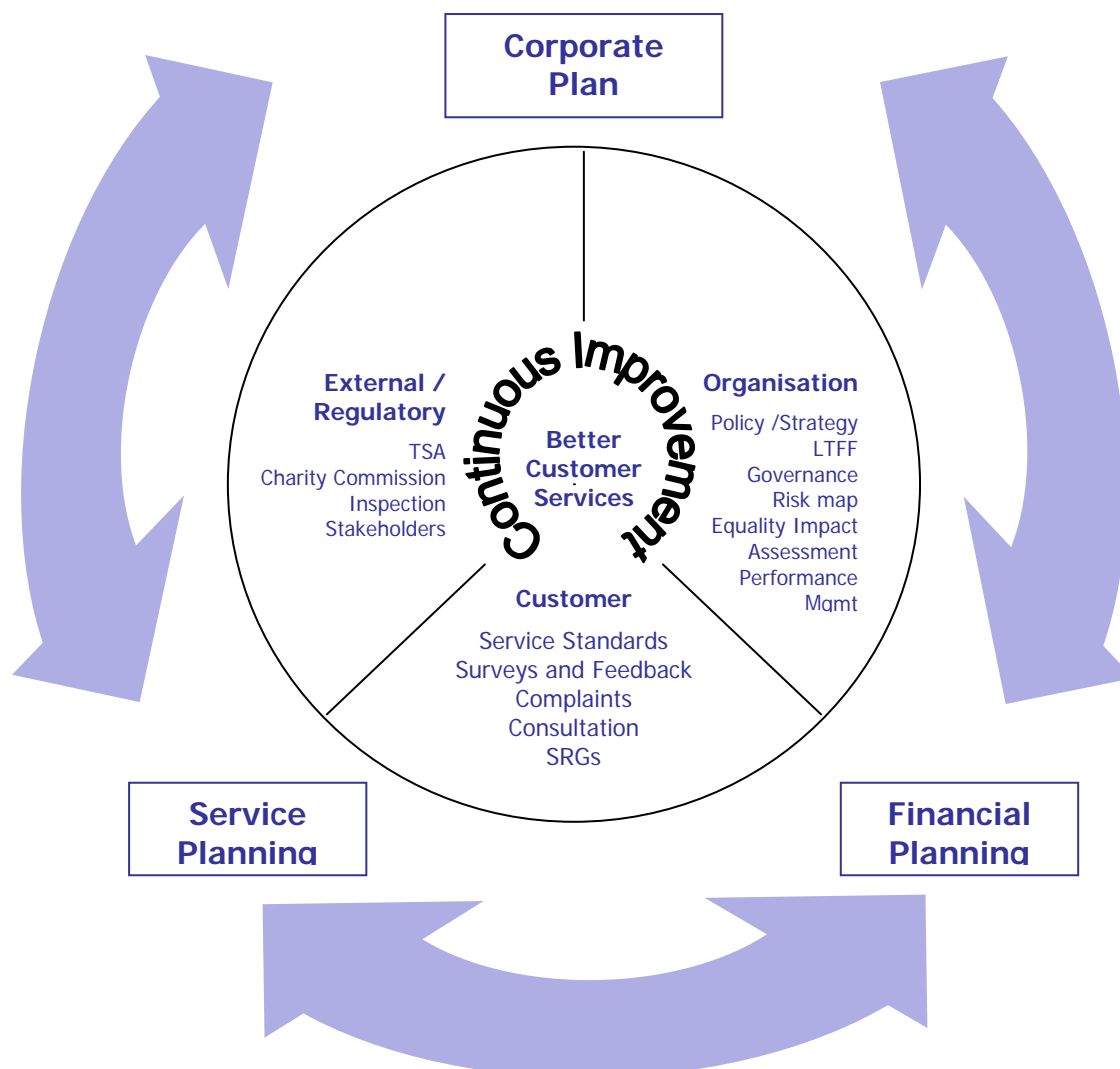
For HHL, continuous improvement is about the outcomes we achieve in the context of:

- Continually looking for more efficient and effective ways of delivering services
- Harnessing the resources we have and targeting them at the right things
- Enabling customers to influence what we do and how we deliver services
- Learning from the mistakes we make and putting in place improvements
- Striving towards the delivery of high quality services by learning from others
- Targeting services to those who need them

3. The Framework for Improvement

3.1 Planning Improvement

HHL have developed a sophisticated planning framework that ensures there are clear links between all levels of plan and that priorities are clear and agreed.



The annual service improvement planning cycle provides the link between the overarching Corporate Plan and Service Improvement plans, and runs alongside the budget setting process thus enabling resources to be allocated to deliver continuous improvement.

Included within HHL's approach to business planning are:

- The Corporate Plan is the overarching plan that sets out our aims for the coming three years. The plan takes account of the priorities of customers and colleagues as well as the wider local, regional and national priorities
- The Long Term Financial Forecast (LTFF) sets out the financial parameters within which the business will operate over the next 30 years. The plan includes targets for making efficiency savings as well as the financial performance targets required by our funders.

- The Risk Map summarises the strategic and operational risks that HHL faces. Risks are the potential barriers to us achieving our aims and objectives. The risk sets out how likely the risk is, the impact that risk would have on the organisation and how we are reducing the risk through the controls we have in place. These controls are reflected in our strategic and service improvement plans.
- Service Improvement Plans are developed annually by each team within HHL. Linked directly to the goals within the Corporate Plan, they set out the tasks that need to be achieved over the year in order to drive service improvement. All plans are SMART and therefore include the colleague responsible for delivery of the task as well as timescales for achievement.
- Strategic Action Plans are linked to specific projects or strategies (such as Diversity, Asset Management and Customer Access). These action plans ensure that organisational priorities covering more than one area of the business are delivered and are often overseen by specific working groups.

Before agreeing priorities for improvement, the needs and expectations of a range of stakeholders are considered. These stakeholders are those that set the legislative and policy framework, regulate our business, provide us with funding or depend on us as a partner when meeting local and regional objectives. Most importantly, we need to understand the needs and expectations of our existing and future customers so that we can improve our services and ensure the future sustainability of our communities.

3.2 Managing Improvement

One of our corporate themes is to Build an Excellence Business – one that is equipped to respond to the challenge of continuous improvement. This means developing a performance led culture at all levels of the organisation and allowing our leaders to develop a more strategic and outcome-based approach.

Through targeted recruitment, tailored learning & development and active performance management at organisational, team and colleague level, HHL seeks to develop a 'can-do' culture of creativity and innovation, freeing up capacity to deliver our ambitious plans.

Our approach to managing improvement is based on the following activities:

- **Management Development**

Following on from our successful Management Development programme in 2008 in which six managers achieved an NVQ Level Four qualification, an external facilitator has been engaged to assist the Leadership Team in building a shared vision of the culture and values that will support the successful delivery of the Corporate Plan. The HHL vision of leadership centres around being customer-focused, passionate, self-aware and able to maximise our opportunities for learning. Effective leaders will support their teams in removing barriers to improvement and by tackling areas of poor performance.

- **Colleague Development**

HHL have refreshed the approach to individual performance via the introduction of the Colleague Development Scheme (CDS) and Colleague Support Scheme (CSS). Through regular CSS meetings and an annual CDS meeting, all colleagues have an understanding of their role, clear goals, regular feedback and appropriate skills are developed.

- **Performance Management Framework**

Our performance management framework measures performance across HHL so that progress towards targets can be monitored and actions to address any shortfalls implemented. Information is reported to Board, Committees and to the Leadership Team in order that performance is shared and understood at all levels.

Targets are set for all key performance indicators and progress against these is monitored by the Leadership Team individually every month and collectively every quarter at performance review meetings. We have set ourselves an ambitious overall target of achieving top quartile performance across all KPIs by 2011. KPIs are further broken down, where appropriate, into individual colleague targets allowing colleagues to align their performance directly to the aims of the Corporate Plan.

A major part of demonstrating continuous improvement is to understand how we compare with others and identify opportunities for improvement. We are members of various benchmarking clubs including Housemark, Checkmate and BOB 'Back-Office Benchmarking' and are able to derive data on service costs and performance. We will use these data sources to challenge the status quo and deliver year-on-year improvements.

3.3 *Delivering Improvement*

HHL has a wide range of services and service areas which require regular review in order to ensure continuous improvement. Previously HHL has adopted the Best Value methodology when undertaking service reviews, however our own experience as well as learning from other top performing organisations has informed our approach and this continuous improvement strategy sets out a renewed framework for improvement activities.

Best Value reviews are comprehensive and robust but can also be time-consuming and resource intensive. It is therefore important that the right services are prioritised for Best Value review as opposed to alternative methods of ensuring continuous improvement.

The following table¹ sets out a number of alternative approaches for improvement activities, their main characteristics and an indication of when it may be appropriate to use them. The table is not definitive but aims to assist us in the process of deciding what type of review process might be most appropriate for different service areas. Although the approaches may seem to be 'light touch' when compared to full BV reviews, the majority can be applied intensively to generate service improvements.

¹ Taken from Housemark Research Paper 2008

Type of improvement activity	Characteristics	When appropriate?
Self Assessment	<p>HHL assesses itself against identified standards / documents (e.g. KLOEs, best practice toolkits – HQN, Housemark)</p> <p>Needs to be undertaken honestly and robustly to generate most impact and ideally be led by an independent party.</p> <p>Can involve internal audit to give external perspective.</p>	<p>Where agreed standards/effective practice has been developed at a national or regional level and are set out in toolkit / self-assessment format (e.g. Respect toolkit)</p> <p>When the organisation wants to check how well it is doing against agreed standards / effective practice</p>
Peer Review	<p>Involves a peer organisation or members of HHL not connected with the service under review.</p> <p>Can be used for small or large service areas and be done very intensively or light touch.</p> <p>Greatest impact if peer organisation is a high performer and can offer focused advice and assistance as part of the process.</p> <p>Scope for using RSL forum to identify peers.</p>	<p>Where HHL is comfortable subjecting itself to scrutiny by peers and considers it has something to learn from the process</p> <p>Scope and format needs to be agreed</p> <p>Resource implications – may require reciprocal arrangement</p>
Systems Thinking / Process Re-engineering	<p>Involves looking at key business processes from the customer perspective and re-engineering to strip out waste/duplication</p> <p>There are a number of types of systems thinking and business re-engineering processes – e.g. LEAN thinking</p> <p>Can generate significant efficiencies and often generate significant changes in long established processes</p>	<p>Approach can be used in relation to an identified business critical area (e.g. income services)</p>
Task Group	<p>Group of agreed membership comes together for fixed period of time to undertake a review of an identified service area working through an</p>	<p>Brings together ideas from various sources on the development of a new initiative or approach or review an existing one</p>

	<p>agreed work plan</p> <p>Nature of review can vary, e.g. a detailed review of a specific service area (e.g. Customer Services) or a short concentrated focus on a high profile issue</p> <p>Timescales and composition of group dependant on nature of task – likely to include resident representatives and ‘experts’ selected for their skills and knowledge</p> <p>Offers the opportunity to use a variety of different working methods rather than following the BV review methodology – site visits, research, open meetings etc</p>	<p>Used where flexibility is needed not provided by the BV approach</p>
Use of external consultants	<p>Commission external consultants to bring identified expertise/focus to an area</p> <p>Must ensure that learning is embedded in the organisation</p>	<p>Can be used in conjunction with / to facilitate BV or other type of review</p> <p>May be most beneficial to help kick-start a new approach where the organisation has limited knowledge and/or capacity</p> <p>Cost implications must be carefully considered</p>

4. Involving Customers

Involving our customers in setting priorities for and delivering improvement is, as already stated, an essential part of our overall approach. In order to facilitate customer involvement we will:

- Analyse customer feedback on service delivery to highlight areas for improvement
- Involve customers directly in any improvement activities in order that they may influence the focus and direction of the improvement work
- Respond to the finding of Mystery Shoppers and Resident Inspectors to ensure that we are addressing identified weaknesses.
- Analyse our customer complaints, comments and compliments process to demonstrate learning and improvement

During 2007 and 2008, HHL undertook a Resident Census project and as at January 2009 approximately 80% of customer profiling data has been collected with plans to collect the remaining 20% in place. This data, in addition to service-specific satisfaction data, information from the planned STATUS survey

in 2009, complaints information and data collected independently by Quality Housing Services, will also inform our improvement projects and the areas on which we must focus.

5. Recent Improvement Activities

During 2008 HHL implemented a number of improvement activities across the business primarily in response to the findings of the Audit Commission inspectors. These specifically are summarised below:

Diversity

The organisation's approach regarding equality and diversity has been significantly strengthened over the past 12-15 months and now includes an improved Equality & Diversity Framework, Single Equalities Action Plan, programme of Equality Impact Assessments and regular Diversity Working Group that consists of Board Members, colleagues and customers.

Value For Money

Our VFM working group has been meeting since 2007 and consists of colleagues and a Board Member 'champion'. Since its inception, the group has agreed our revised VFM and Procurement Strategies and developed a suite of VFM indicators. Organisationally, HHL have set a target of 2% efficiency savings across all areas and a register of gains is in operation.

'Soft' Market Testing of the DSO

An analysis of the in-house repairs service has been conducted through the Value for Money Working Group. Internal and external benchmarking data has been used in addition to an independent review to assess VFM. Bidding for works put out for tender by the Asset and Partnering Team has been completed and a detailed analysis of the process undertaken to highlight areas for improvement. The resulting Improvement Plan will be monitored by the Value for Money Working Group

Leaseholders

Our Leaseholder Forum, consisting of around ten Leaseholders, was established in 2008 and quarterly meetings have been held throughout the year. To date the Forum has agreed the Leaseholder Policy, information leaflet, newsletter and Service Standards and work is underway to finalise our first Leaseholders Handbook. The service provided to our 403 leaseholders is now significantly improved.

Income Services Process Re-Engineering

Whilst our current arrears have continued to fall, albeit slowly, it was decided to review the whole arrears management process using a 'Systems thinking' approach and focusing on the relationship between the various parts of the system. One of the purposes of this approach was to identify and reduce waste in the arrears management process.

The outcome of the review highlighted some 'quick wins' in terms of removing waste from the arrears management process as well as more than 30 further changes that are to be adopted as part of our new Arrears Management Strategy.

6. Current Improvement Activities

Using the planning framework described under 3.1 above, the following timetable of specific improvement activities was set out.

Improvement Activity	Planned Completion Date
<p>Quality Housing Services (QHS)</p> <p>HHL became members of QHS in March this year in order to gain an independent assessment of the quality of our services that will compliment our internal methods of measuring service quality.</p> <p>To date QHS have carried out a number of mystery shopping exercises over the phone and in person at our offices, assessed telephone accessibility and carried out an on-site audit. Further on-site audits are scheduled in for 17th and 18th February and it is anticipated that following these sessions full QHS accreditation will be achieved.</p>	<p>February 2009</p>
<p>Investors in People</p> <p>The Investors in People Standard is a recognised and internationally respected business improvement tool and the only standard focusing exclusively on people.</p> <p>The Standard places emphasis on maximising the contribution of employees to an organisation. It incorporates personal and organisational development, recruitment, training, motivation and communication, leadership and management issues, the effective delivery of plans and the review of performance to assist continuous improvement.</p> <p>HHL have engaged the West Midlands Quality Centre to undertake a 'diagnostic' exercise in early March with a view to either gaining IiP accreditation or being in a position to formulate an action plan to achieve accreditation during 2009.</p>	<p>Diagnostic to be undertaken in March 2009</p>
<p>DSO Process Re-engineering</p> <p>A key recommendation arising from 2007 Audit Commission inspection concerned the 'market testing' of the DSO. As described under 'Recent Improvement Activities' HHL has already begun the process of market testing through benchmarking, tender exercises and assessing the 'value for money' delivered by Property Services</p>	

<p>HHL will develop a project plan, informed by benchmarking data and customer feedback to market test discrete elements of the DSO over a two year period.</p> <p>We will completely review the current approach to service provision and subject the DSO to rigorous 'process re-engineering' to ensure services are completely fit-for-purpose and provide optimum VFM.</p>	<p>March 2009</p> <p>June 2009</p>
<p>Customer Services</p> <p>Following on from the Customer Access document approved by the Board in 2008, collection of approximately 80% customer census data and service plans developed and budgets set accordingly, HHL's overall approach to customer services/access will be shaped during 2009. This will include a detailed project plan regarding delivery of a dedicated 'Customer Service Centre'.</p>	<p>April 2009</p>
<p>Investors In Excellence</p> <p>The Investors in Excellence (IiE) Standard is a UK programme designed to improve organisational performance and help meet customer expectations. IiE enables organisations to see the bigger picture as all key performance areas – including the way people and customers are managed - are linked together in a standard of all-round excellence.</p> <p>Working towards the IiE Standard would enable HHL to identify opportunities to improve and provides a further external perspective on how the organisation is performing.</p> <p>IiE complements and adds value to other programmes such as Investors in People and it is non prescriptive, enabling us to progress in a way that suits us.</p>	<p>Commitment to the standard – July 2009.</p> <p>Timescales for completion to be agreed following diagnostic</p>

7. Improvement Planning

To ensure that continuous improvement is strategically addressed as part of HHL's annual planning cycle, we will incorporate, in March of each year, a Wider Management Team workshop to set out the programme of projects for the forthcoming year.

The Wider Management Team will ensure that this programme, whilst challenging in the individual areas, is achievable. It will be aware that current services have still to be delivered, when outlining the number of projects.

In doing this, the following factors will be taken account of

- As highlighted under Section Four, customer feedback from Service Review Groups, satisfaction surveys, Resident Inspections, complaints and comments.

- Key risks highlighted from the risk management database plus internal (audit) and external inspections.
- External influences, such as our stakeholders and the national agenda
- Performance Indicators; with particular reference to those that are not within the top quartile
- Budgetary analysis highlighting any areas of significant variance.
- Equality and Diversity implications, particularly where Equality Impact Assessments completed have highlighted issues of concern.
- Housemark Annual benchmarking review with a focus on those services that are shown to be high cost and low performance

This Workshop will identify the Lead Review Officer, with wherever possible, this being an officer who is independent of the service or area that is being reviewed. The aim here is to ensure the objectivity of the review.

The Workshop will also agree the approach to be taken, based upon those highlighted in this Strategy, and which is best suited for each individual review.

The Lead Review Officer is responsible for appointing members with appropriate skills to the review team. This should include customers and may also include board members

The Workshop will set expectations on reporting to the Wider Management Team and the appropriate Sub Committee. The initial report from the Lead Review Officer will set out a project plan and timetable for approval.

Lead Review Officers will be supported by the Business Excellence Team, both operationally and to ensure that project timelines and outcomes are delivered. The Business Excellence Team will also ensure that a consistent approach is taken by project teams and that delivered outcomes are evidenced and are embedded in the policies and procedures of HHL.

8. Making Continuous Improvement the day job

Although the Board is responsible for ensuring implementation of the CI strategy, everybody at HHL has an important role to play in making CI an integral part of everything that we do.

Managers, with support from the Business Excellence Manager, are responsible for:

- Implementing the CI strategy and proposing amendments to it
- Establishing and proposing priorities for improvement projects based on feedback from customers and taking into account other drivers
- Monitoring progress on CI activities and the impact they have
- Embedding a culture of CI at an organisational level
- Investing in people by providing appropriate training for facilitators and colleagues involved in improvement projects
- Executing the parts of the strategy delegated to them
- Involving their colleagues and stakeholders in improvement projects and the identification of potential improvements
- Releasing colleagues to enable them to be involved with improvement projects

- Promoting awareness of CI within their teams

All colleagues are responsible for assisting HHL achieve CI by:

- Proactively looking for ways to improve services and making improvement suggestions via team meetings or the colleague suggestion scheme
- Taking part in improvement projects and other CI activities as required

8. Equality and Diversity Implications

This Continuous Improvement Strategy should be read in conjunction with our Equality and Diversity Framework. The framework sets out the clear intention that all new policy decisions will be assessed for their impact on our diverse customer base and modification to service delivery made in response.

As set out in Section Seven, a key consideration for instigating improvement projects will be equality and diversity implication, particularly where major concerns have arisen from the completion of an Equality Impact Assessment.

We would also expect each major project undertaken to have included within it's project plan a further Equality Impact assessment with the results reported as part of the feedback to the WMT an to the Equality and Diversity Working Group. It would be a key role of the Business Excellence Team to ensure that these expectations are delivered.

9. Outcome Reporting

The Continuous Improvement Strategy sets out important strategic principles to be adopted in delivering continuous improvement within HHL. These will be reviewed and updated on an annual basis as HHL's operating environment evolves. This will encompass a formal review of both the Strategy itself and the outcomes that have been delivered in the previous twelve months. This formal review will be presented to Board.

The outcomes and targets identified within individual improvement projects will be reviewed on a regular basis by the Wider Management Team and the appropriate Service Committee as part of the monitoring process set out in Section Seven.

Approved by:	Board of Management
Effective date:	March 2009
Review date:	March 2010
Policy developed by:	Business Excellence Manager
Associated Procedure:	None