

Our Approach to Service Development and Continuous Improvement : CBH Improvement Plan

1. Development of CBH

Short-term

Having set up the ALMO, to deliver the Improvement plan changes needed by November 2003 to achieve 2 star. These involve matching the Audit Commission's expectations on service delivery, becoming more businesslike internally, and developing Board Governance and relations with the Council.

Medium-term

Having achieved 2 star status, to fully implement the neighbourhood management approach, evidenced in the Neighbourhood Committees and in investment outcomes that include community benefits as well as bricks and mortar. There has also been continued development of the company and a plan to review council support services.

Longer term

Achievement of the excellence rating – evidenced in consistently high quality services, well located and accessible offices and high levels of customer satisfaction.

Recent development of the services provided by CBH has been framed by consultation with tenants and the requirements of Best Value for Housing, but is essentially focused on linking a neighbourhood management approach with an internal performance management framework. This is also in line with the latest Audit Commission guidance.

In service design, we have attempted to meet tenants' expectations and to balance the books. We have developed functional teams which are responsible and accountable for their own performance. Performance should be transparent with targets that take into account income and expenditure.

We have involved tenants in setting standards for repairs, empty homes, and environmental standards. They need to be involved in evaluating all estates and services and we need to be working towards a local business plan for each area. These areas and every part of the stock will receive an evaluation (by the Board, management, staff and tenants) of;

- Current and future demand
- Stock condition and investment needs

- Capital values to measure investment performance
- An assessment of rent yield and turnover
- Current marketing plans
- Future marketing plans

Developing the CBH Delivery Plan

Cheltenham Borough Homes has a focus, developed in partnership with board, staff and tenants, which includes:

- developing our area based approach at a smaller, neighbourhood level
- improving clarity around setting and maintaining service standards
- improving performance against business plan targets which include:
 - debt, especially arrears and void loss
 - investment and repairs performance
 - a healthy demand for properties
 - contribution to wider regeneration and sustainability
- introducing incentives to perform and a consequence for non-performance throughout, including suppliers and contractors
- an annual review of service against standards, and clear expectations for our services
- teams controlling their own performance and costs to give clarity to performance evaluation
- Improvement to the service will be through a staged approach to demonstrating performance.

A new approach to area/patch management is being developed based on natural, not administrative boundaries. They should be linked to local tenants' structures, and also repairs patches.

Local business plans for areas can then specify;

- a price and plan for resources (staff, offices, contracts, etc.)
- performance, particularly arrears and rent loss
- investment and repairs performance proposals
- maintenance strategies and contract requirements
- proposals for improving and meeting demand
- contribution to regeneration and sustainability

Local business plans build up into a portfolio for Cheltenham, where strategic option appraisal occurs. Tenants will have a key role in these plans.

We need to continually develop our asset information, which is used to

- analyse the stock in detail
- review the financial viability of different stock investment options at an estate or street level
- develop our approach for deciding priorities across town and within areas

Clearly, this also gives a split in roles between those services identifiable at an area level; those which are delivered from central teams through an area

basis; and those teams working in support or co-ordination roles. It requires teams to be able to work independently, and inter-dependently.

2. Detailed Operational Improvement Plan

Before transferring landlord services to CBH, CBC had carried out a Best Value and developed an Improvement Plan. That Plan has been revised and replaced by this new plan.

In November 2002 the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectors spent two weeks with the council's housing directorate and carried out a best value inspection of the services provided to tenants and prospective tenants.

It was the inspector's judgement that Cheltenham Borough Council provided a "fair" (1 star) service to customers and that it had promising prospects for improvement.

Their final report was published in March 2003. In it the inspectors outlined their findings and their view of the service. They also made a series of recommendations that offered the service some direction in its efforts to continuously improve the service.

A key step forward for the council was the establishment of Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) on the 1st April 2003, as a separate company to manage the council's 5,300 council homes.

Having reviewed the Housing Inspectors recommendations, and with the advice and direction of the CBH management board, this improvement plan groups the individual suggested improvements under five main themes:

- The setting, publishing, promoting and monitoring of clear service standards and targets
- Improving access to the service
- Improving services by involving tenants
- Ensuring services are cost effective
- Ensuring effective management of risk, including the safety of staff and tenants

The setting, publishing, promoting and monitoring of clear service standards and targets

What the Inspectors recommended:

We recommend that the Council should set clear and challenging aims for the Service in consultation with tenants, contractors and other stakeholders, which:

- ◆ form the basis of well publicised and easily accessible service standards which tenants can judge the performance of the service against; and
- ◆ are translated into clear, customer-focused targets for staff.

They made these recommendations because they found improvements were needed in a number of areas:

“Information on the service is not readily available to tenants and other customers.”

“The standard of cleaning on housing estates is inconsistent, with some communal areas, such as stairs and landings in blocks of flats, not appearing to be well looked after.”

“Altogether the Council has a large number of published service standards, these standards are found in a large number of different documents many of which are unlikely to be readily available to all tenants or indeed staff. We found that the sheer number of service standards contained in the various documents to be confusing for both staff and customers.”

“Our view is that there are clear high level aims for the Service but these aims have not been effectively translated into clear customer-focused targets for staff. Targets that do exist do not reflect local needs and priorities are not customer-focused or measurable in terms of outputs. Targets do not reflect all national targets and are not sufficiently challenging in some areas to match the best performing councils.”

“The Council has a target for answering calls within four rings but we could find no evidence this was being monitored.”

“We are unclear what the service standards are for tenants wanting or needing an inspection of their home. The Council do not monitor how well they currently perform in meeting their target of carrying out an inspection within 48 hours but they estimate that performance in this area would be approximately 70-80 per cent.”

“However, we saw no information on display in the area offices about the future works programmes planned for tenants’ homes, although we understand this is now being prepared.”

“Councilors do not appear to be getting a full suite of Performance Indicators - both national and local, to properly monitor the effectiveness of the services.”

“We found best use is not being made of the IT system to produce management information and we were told a lot of information has to be collected manually.”

In response Cheltenham Borough Homes will:

Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) has the opportunity to draw together all the service standards previously issued by the different parts of the Housing Directorate, and review them in partnership with tenants and other stakeholders. This will be within a management framework provided by CBH’s board.

The Delivery Plan clearly sets out the company’s vision, values and objectives. And one of our objectives states, “ensure that all services delivered are clearly explained and meet set standards”. All the companies service standards and commitments will support our vision, values and objectives.

With an overall aim to achieve a 3 star rating and so provide an excellent service to our customers, the need for us to clearly explain what service standards all our customers and stakeholders can expect from us will be given a high priority.

Our improvement plan is specific in addressing the inspectors, customers and the company’s concerns in this area. These specified actions are then cascaded down into local team’s service delivery plans, with clear targets that are regularly monitored to ensure actually delivery.

One specific issue within this area is that of the environment around the homes we let and manage, in particular the standards of cleansing in communal areas. CBH will work tirelessly with tenants and our service provider to ensure service standards are improved, clear and published widely, and that tenants and leaseholders are actively involved in setting those standards and in monitoring the service provider.

Improving access to the service

What the Inspectors recommended:

We recommend that the council should improve access to the Service, by:

- ◆ making area offices more welcoming for tenants and ensuring that all offices are physically accessible;
 - ◆ ensuring that all written information is available in appropriate alternative formats and at all Council offices;
 - ◆ raising awareness within the Service about equality and diversity issues; and
- u ensuring that the service is fully accessible via the internet.

They made these recommendations because they found improvements were needed in a number of areas:

“Few documents about the service are made publicly available in different formats, such as in community languages, or in Braille or large print.”

“At neither office are there signs in the vicinity directing people to where the offices are located.”

“At the cash halls there is no formalised queuing system, such as a ticket machine which dispenses numbered tickets. We observed times when quite lengthy queues had built up and elderly tenants or mothers with young children were having to stand in a slow moving queue.”

“Just 55.36 per cent said it was easy to complain, and only 40.74 per cent said their complaints were resolved quickly and efficiently.”

“We saw no leaflets or other key documents produced in community languages, nor in Braille or large print.”

“The interview facilities at both of the area housing offices are not readily accessible by customers with mobility problems”

“Emergency and out of hours telephone calls are made to a different number. None of the Council’s telephone lines for repairs are freephone.”

In response Cheltenham Borough Homes will:

Included within Cheltenham Borough Homes’ (CBH) values is the following statement, “We recognise the diversity of the different areas and individuals within the Borough and we strive to provide our customers with services that are tailored to their needs”.

Our improvement plan recognises the need to make physical changes to the

buildings we use; changes to how we inform customers about how they can communicate with us and how they can visit us; changes to some of our procedures to ensure they are tailored to meet customers needs; and changes to our training and support of staff so that the whole organisation actively shares the same values.

Again these improvements have been incorporated into local team service delivery plans to ensure the necessary changes are made to ensure we are truly an open and accessible service.

One of CBH's first actions as an independent arms length company was to approve a new customer complaints policy and procedure. This policy emphasises the rights of all our customers to express their dissatisfaction to us and then commits us to then investigate their complaints in a way that will both help to resolve the complaint to the customers satisfaction and act as a learning tool for the company to improve services.

Improving services by involving tenants

What the Inspectors recommended:

We recommend that the Council should improve the Service to customers by:

- ◆ developing the Council's tenant participation mechanisms to support and enable tenants to actively participate in the Service;
- ◆ promoting tenant participation by raising awareness among staff and through the use of local compacts;
- ◆ providing tenants with regular rent statements;
- ◆ increasing the information provided to tenants about the sources of independent advice;
- ◆ ensuring resources are used effectively in relation to emergency repairs and the post inspection of repairs; and
- ◆ making full use of technology to improve efficiency, for example by using hand-held computers to improve data capture and reduce paper work.

They made these recommendations because they found improvements were needed in a number of areas:

"Customer involvement is undeveloped and there are relatively few

tenants actively involved in the management of the service.”

“concerns have been voiced by many about the over-reliance on a small number of tenants and the need to develop greater capacity within the tenants’ movement. For a small number of tenants (less than half a dozen) this means they have an extremely high workload and a lot of stress.”

“Staff training in tenant participation has been patchy, with very little or no training being given to technical staff. This is typified by a low awareness among staff of the Tenant Participation Agreement.”

“In our view the tenant participation agreement could be strengthened and made more customer focused. We felt that it had been written from the Council’s perspective and does not reflect a true ‘partnership’ with tenants. In addition there was an absence of clear outcomes and reporting arrangements. Targets were not particularly challenging and its design did not promote participation.”

“The computerised system contains a large suite of standard letters for staff to use. Two issues we would highlight are that the contact details of agencies (telephone number, address and opening hours) who can give independent advice (such as the CAB) are not provided and where staff wish to vary the letters to reflect knowledge they already have on a particular tenant, they cannot amend the standard letter on the system.”

“We found little evidence of IT being used in an efficient manner to record information and improve the service to tenants.”

“There are no clear procedures on what is an emergency for both staff and customers. The call centre does not have clear procedures from the Council on what is an emergency.”

In response Cheltenham Borough Homes will:

Cheltenham Borough Homes’ (CBH) vision states that we are “a real partnership between tenants, staff and other stakeholders.” Our values state that “our customers are at the core of everything we do”. One of our objectives is to “increase tenant involvement and satisfaction”. Our commitment is demonstrated by the active involvement of the tenant board members who make up 1/3 of the board, and who have actively taken the lead in supporting the establishment of CBH’s.

Our improvement plan details actions the company is currently or about to implement in order to actively engage customers in the development and monitoring of the service we provide. We plan to offer a collection of alternative methods for tenants to participate in the management and direction of our services. Some of these varied opportunities include having the opportunity to comment or judge a part of the service, or joining with other

tenants in working with staff on regeneration project boards, or participating in tenant training programmes, or by joining the CBH's board.

Ensuring services are cost effective

What the Inspectors recommended:

We recommend that the Council should ensure the cost-effectiveness of the Service, by:

- ◆ having systems that prevent non-emergency responsive repairs being undertaken shortly before capital improvements are made to tenants' homes;
- ◆ exploring the relative costs of the various methods of rent collection and developing a strategy to promote and enable tenants to use the most cost-effective methods;
- ◆ reviewing existing procurement practices and developing effective partnership arrangements; and
- ◆ developing a clear strategy for collecting outstanding rechargeable repairs debt.

They made these recommendations because they found improvements were needed in a number of areas:

"A high percentage of repairs are being completed as emergencies, which puts a strain on the service and undermines the Council's efforts to deliver efficiencies through planned works."

"Partnership working with external contractors has yet to reach a stage where it is providing extra capacity, better value for money or innovation in service delivery."

"In addition we were told that the Council did not presently have a recharge policy despite the fact that up to £60,000 is spent on 'rechargeable' repairs in re-lets and as responsive repairs each year."

"There is a high level of repairs carried out as emergency work (over 50 per cent of orders last year - 4,759 out of 9,291 orders). This is expensive and limits operatives' ability to manage their work effectively"

In response Cheltenham Borough Homes will:

Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) understands that to achieve our objective to "create, develop and support sustainable communities", we also need to

ensure we manage all our resources carefully and that customers and stakeholders are offered cost effective services.

This means we will challenge the way currently do things and will press forward with continual improvement. It is felt that our improvement plan, supported by the local team service delivery plans, provides a clear focus for teams to address inefficiencies and work collectively to manage limited resources to the advantage of our customers.

The implementation of an effective repairs re-charge policy will ensure the majority of tenants aren't paying for the destructive actions of a small minority of tenants. The involvement of tenants in that implementation will help the company implement this policy and safeguard the principles of fairness. The involvement of all our staff will ensure the comprehensive application of the policy across the stock. The setting of reasonable targets based on data from previous financial years will ensure we can measure our success and report that back to our board and our customers.

Ensuring effective management of risk, including the safety of staff and tenants

What the Inspectors recommended:

We recommend that the Council should effectively manage risks to the Council, by:

- ◆ ensuring that there is effective monitoring of gas servicing and repair work;
- ◆ ensuring effective management of health and safety within the workplace;
- ◆ having effective procedures for the recording of information and file management; and
- ◆ ensuring that there are clear and accessible procedures available to both staff and customers.

They made these recommendations because they found improvements were needed in a number of areas:

"The Council's recent performance in fulfilling its legal obligations to complete gas servicing work at tenants' homes every year is weak."

"The management of health and safety issues at the depot is weak."

"Performance monitoring is undeveloped and not enough use is being

made of IT to manage the service effectively and efficiently.”

“We also found that not all the files were well ordered or looked after with papers out of date order and in some cases several copies of the same letter on file.”

“However, currently there is no flagging system to alert staff that gas servicing is out-of-time or that works are planned or have been completed and guarantees are in force. In addition, repairs staff told us that they felt that they had little influence over the design of the capital programme and that they all had experience of instances where repairs were completed only to be followed by planned replacement works.”

“At the time of our inspection, there were 482 homes where a gas service has been outstanding for more than 18 months and a further 196 homes where the annual service is overdue.”

“One other major concern we have is in relation to health and safety where we found a number of examples where the Council was in danger of not meeting its statutory responsibilities – these included:

not advising staff and contractors of known hazards;

staff not being aware of any lone-working procedures;

only a limited number of risk assessments have been completed;

an untidy work environment at the depot, with no log or evidence of routine inspection of equipment; and

an asbestos policy is in place but staff have not been given training on identifying it and it is unclear what information and advice is given to tenants.”

In response Cheltenham Borough Homes will:

We understand that if Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) is to demonstrate that it truly values both its customers and staff it must ensure that tenants are safe in their homes and that staff are safe as they go about their work. The company has given the issue of safety highest priority, as demonstrated by the use of our staffing resources and in the emphasis on improving safety within our improvement plan.

CBH recognises that it must proactively manage risk. Identifying both internal and external risks. This goes beyond the risk to individuals to include risks to the services we provide and to the company itself. For this reason the company has made available additional resources to design and implement a

comprehensive performance management framework, that involves individuals, teams, customers and stakeholders.

The implementation of our IT Strategy is key to the complete integration of this framework within the organisation.

Our Delivery Plan, our improvement plan and our local team service delivery plans all provide individuals and the company as a whole with a clarity of purpose which will enable us to measure our successes and learn from our weaknesses.

By doing this CBH will manage risk successfully, meet its objectives and continually improve services to all our customers.

1. Set up of CBH and Separation from CBC

Action	Responsibility (or transfer of responsibility)	Timescale	Status
1.1 Appraisal of Stock Investment Options and Section 27 Application	CBC	2001-2002	Complete
1.2.1 Recruitment and establishment of CBH Board	(CBC to CBH)	Nov 2002 - June 2003	Work in progress
1.2.2 CBH Constitution, initial company documentation and policies	(CBC to CBH)	Nov 2002 – March 2003	Complete
1.2.3 Board review of committee structures	CBH	May – July 2003	Work in progress
1.3.1 Separation of roles (CBH landlord roles and former repairs DLO; CBC community and enabling)	CBC and CBH	Oct 2002 – April 2003	Complete
1.3.2 Operational handovers and liaison	(CBC to CBH) and (CBH to CBC)	April 2003 – June 2003	Work in progress
1.4.1 CBH objectives and vision, details of Delivery set out in Delivery Plan	(CBC to CBH)	Dec 2002	Complete
1.4.2 Review of Delivery Plan assumptions and budgets	CBH	July 2003	Work in progress
1.4.3 Challenge and review of delivery mechanisms (structure and process)	(CBC to CBH)	Jan 2003 – Sept 2003	Work in progress
1.5.1 Joint Consultative Committee established	(CBC to CBH)	Sept 2002	Complete
1.5.2 JCC for TUPE transfer	(CBC to CBH)	Sept 2002 – March 2003	Complete
1.5.3 JCC for delivery changes: repairs operatives pay and conditions, stores, technical team structures, area office structures	(CBC to CBH)	Dec 2002 to August 2003	Work in progress

1.6	Update of HRA Business Plan	CBH (for CBC)	April 2003 – July 2003	Work in progress
1.7.1	Review of tenant compact	CBH	May 2003 – Nov 2003	Work in progress
1.7.2	Review of Housing Forum	(CBC to CBH)	Feb 2003 – June 2003	Complete
1.7.3	Review of Neighbourhood Monitoring Panels	(CBC to CBH)	Dec 2002 – June 2003	Complete
1.7.4	Estate Agreements	CBH	May 2003 onwards	Work in progress (one complete)
1.8.1	Restructure and review of back office functions (Finance + Business Support)	CBH	April 2003 – August 2003	Work in progress
1.8.2	Implementation of IT strategy	CBH	April 2003 – 2005	Work in progress
1.9	Completion Certificate (schedules to management agreement + SLAs)	CBC + CBH	April – July 2003	Work in progress
1.10	Board and management review of performance management (including performance reports and Improvement Plan)	CBH	April – Sept 2003	Work in progress
1.11.1	Procurement strategy, new contract documentation and selection mechanisms	CBH to CBH	July 2002 – Jan 2003	Complete
1.11.2	Review of Council standing orders (for contracts)	CBC	May 2003 – November 2003	Work in progress
1.11.3	Operational procurement and management processes (including forward plan consultation and contractor selection panels)	CBH	June 2003 – November 2003	Work in progress
1.12.1	Development of sustainability model	CBC to CBH	Sept 2002 – March 2003	Complete
1.12.2	Use of model to review delivery patches and mechanisms for estate management	CBH	May 2003 – Sept 2003	Work in progress

1.13.1 Tenant Panels – contractor selection	CBH	May – August 2003	Work in progress
1.13.2 Investment conference	CBH	November 2003	No action
1.14.1 Review of budgets and workload splits: planned, reactive, voids and emergencies	CBH	April – July 2003	Work in progress
1.14.2 Cross cutting performance review: voids	CBH	June – September 2003	Work in progress
1.15.1 Review of service standards, access and information	CBH	April – September 2003	Work in progress
1.15.2 STATUS tenant satisfaction survey	CBH	May – Oct 2003	Work in progress