

# **Growth & Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

## **12 July 2010**

### **Private Sector Housing - Regulatory Services Peer Challenge**

#### **Summary:**

The Private Sector Housing Team, part of the Council's Housing Service, has undertaken a Peer Challenge Self Assessment and this work forms part of the Growth & Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Panel's work programme for 2010/11. The Peer Challenge process involved a self assessment against a framework of excellence and the development of a Draft Improvement Plan, followed by a visit by a Peer Challenge Team comprised of external Members and Officers expert in the field of work. The outcome is to develop a Final Improvement Plan which will help to improve the services we provide for all our customers. The Overview and Scrutiny Panel is asked to comment on the Revised Improvement Plan and to consider future actions.

#### **Introduction:**

1.1 This paper provides an update on the Peer Challenge self assessment of the council's Private Sector Housing team, which includes the work of the Private Rented team (focusing on improving the private rented sector, Houses in Multiple Occupation and reactive complaints work) together with the Renewals team (improving owner-occupied housing, Disabled Facilities Grants, Decent Homes loans).

#### **2. The Peer Challenge Process:**

2.1 The objective of the Peer Challenge process is to identify service improvements from within the service itself and to ensure that they are implemented. The Peer Challenge process consists of 2 key elements:

- Self assessment against a framework of excellence in regulatory services. The framework challenges Services to identify what they are good at and what needs to be improved. Having identified strengths and potential areas for improvement, the Service then develops a draft improvement plan.
- An external review and challenge of the effectiveness of that self-assessment by a team of peers

2.2 The self assessment focused on 4 key themes – (i) leadership, strategies and collaboration; (ii) focus on and engagement with customers; (iii) resource, activity and people management; and, (iv) achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably.

2.3 A self assessment team was drawn together from a cross-section of staff within the Private Sector Housing team together with an external critical friend (the Manager of the Care& Repair Home Improvement Agency). The self

assessment work took place over the period 23 November to 14 December 2009. Evidence collected by the team was further challenged and consolidated at a consensus day on 21 December 2009 resulting in the preparation of a Draft Feedback Report which set out strengths and areas for improvement. Further consideration, involving the Assistant Director, Strategic Housing, took place during January leading to the prioritisation of improvements and the preparation of a Draft Improvement Plan. This information was then sent to the Peer Challenge Team on 5 February 2010.

- 2.4 The Peer Challenge Team comprised of four team members: Richard Drew (Peer Challenge Team Lead), formally Environmental Health Manager at Westminster City Council with specific responsibility for housing; Councillor Paul Ellis from the London Borough of Wandsworth; Ian Dick, Housing Service Standards Strategic Manager from the London Borough of Newham; and Andrew Wilson, Bristol City Council, Trading Standards.
- 2.5 The Peer Challenge Team visited Plymouth on 9 and 10 March 2010, meeting or speaking with Councillor Fry (Cabinet Member for Planning, Strategic Housing and Economic Development); Councillor Viney (Chair of Growth & Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Panel); Councillor Wildy (Shadow Member with responsibility for Strategic Housing); Ian Gallin, Assistant Chief Executive; Anthony Payne, Director for Development & Regeneration; Stuart Palmer, Assistant Director, Strategic Housing, the Housing Advice Team Leader together with the Self Assessment Team members; a 10 strong staff focus group; and, external stakeholders including representatives from Plymouth University, South West Landlords Association, the private Rented Forum, Plymouth Access to Housing and Shelter. A Draft Team Report was prepared leading to the final Peer Challenge Team Report, dated 27 April 2010.

### **3. The Peer Challenge Team Report:**

- 3.1 The Peer Challenge Team Report (copy attached) provides a summary of its findings; comments on the Draft Improvement Plan; suggests next steps; and, highlights further opportunities for improvement.
- 3.2 In relation to the '*self assessment process*', the Peer Challenge Team felt that it had been challenging and robust, was well completed and within the target period. It noted that staff had been consulted; that there was an excellent choice of critical friend; that sufficient evidence had been found in most areas to support conclusions and challenge performance; that the self assessment report accurately brought all the evidence together; that the service appears to know largely who its customers are; and, that the service is very highly thought of amongst councillors, stakeholders and external partners. It was also felt that the process was management heavy and that staff consultation was not sufficiently in-depth with a surprising absence of staff related areas of improvement. The Peer Challenge Team commented that the Private Sector Housing teams appear to have a very heavy workload; that more work needs to be done with staff to increase their understanding of and contribution to the overall aims of the council; that staff need to feel more valued within the council; and, that staff came across as enthusiastic, committed and keen to improve and enhance the service.

- 3.3 On the *'Draft Improvement Plan'*, the Peer Challenge Team raised concerns about the achievability of all the aims feeling it was too ambitious both in the number of areas of improvement identified for action and the timescales set out to resolve them. The Peer Challenge Team suggested that some areas for improvement be dropped or be combined with others to make it more realisable; that the goals and measurement be made clearer; that the resultant plan be discussed with a wider audience; that completion of the Improvement Plan feature as part of Business and Team Plans; that there should be a comprehensive review of service standards; that the website should be developed; that staff training needs should be reviewed; and, that benchmarking with other councils should take place.
- 3.4 In relation to *'next steps'* and *'further opportunities for improvement'* the Peer Challenge Team commented that as a result of the comprehensive and challenging approach there were very few additional areas for service improvement that could be suggested. The Peer Challenge Team did highlight the opportunity to better target existing resources and suggested that there would appear to be an opportunity for an accreditation system. The Peer Challenge Team also advocated benchmarking with other councils with similar private rented stock stating that whilst this was challenging they felt this would show Plymouth in a very favourable light. The team also questioned whether the impact of the formation of Plymouth Community Homes will need to be considered in respect of how it could affect the Private Sector Housing service, e.g. an increasing number of complaints from tenants.

#### **4. The Revised Improvement Plan:**

- 4.1 In response to the Peer Challenge Team Report's findings, a Revised Improvement Plan has been prepared (copy attached). The total number of areas for improvement has been reduced from 25 to 12 and the actions amended to ensure that it is deliverable whilst reflecting the robust and challenging content of the Draft Improvement Plan. The Revised Improvement Plan targets realisable actions during 2010/11. It is proposed that delivery against the improvement plan be reviewed by the end of March 2011 in helping to develop a follow-on Improvement Plan for 2011/12. The headline areas for improvement in 2010/11 include:
- Raising the profile and understanding of private Sector Housing, crucially through a wide Housing Conference to take place in the Autumn
  - Assessing the Private Sector Housing Team's service delivery against the Audit Commission's 'Key Lines of Enquiry'
  - Targeted action, to include preparation of a Private Sector Housing Delivery Plan as part of the new Housing Strategy; reviewing the Assistance Policy; undertaking an assessment of the condition of private sector stock; investigating the viability of operating an Accreditation Scheme for the private rented sector; developing a training programme for landlords; and, developing a protocol for the funding of adaptations with Registered Social Landlords

- Improving the understanding of and engagement with customers, especially with 'hard to reach' customers
- Improving the response to customers
- Developing service standards setting out what customers can expect
- Benchmarking services with like councils to seeking to deliver value for money services
- Improving internal working to ensure better integration of private sector housing within the authority and the Housing service
- Improving the Private Sector Housing Team's understanding of council aims and embedding its core values
- Embedding equalities in all our work
- Promoting the Private Sector Housing Team's successes
- Improving conditions for and meeting the needs of staff, to include undertaking a local survey

## **5. Conclusion:**

- 5.1 In delivering these areas for improvement in 2010/11, it is very apparent that we must be mindful of other pressures facing the Private Sector Housing Team and the Council, notably the pressures on public spending and the impact this might have on work areas and budgets. The full implications of the Government's Emergency Budget on 22 June are not clear at the present time and the full details of impacts on Government Department's will only become apparent as part of the Comprehensive Spending review announcement on 20 October 2010.
- 5.2 It is largely for the above reasons that at this stage an Improvement Plan has only been set for the current financial year, with a view to developing a follow-on Improvement Plan for 2011/12 by March 2011. The areas for improvement identified in the 2010/11 can all be delivered within the current known budgets and it is considered that they will help to greatly improve the service received by our customers, both internal and external.

## **6. Further Action by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel:**

- 6.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel is asked to consider the following actions:
1. To comment on the Revised Improvement Plan as part of wider consultation with staff and external partners. Comments received will be taken into account in preparing the Final Improvement Plan which is then sent to the Peer Challenge Team. The Final Improvement Plan will then be signed off by the Cabinet Member for Planning, Strategic Housing and Economic Development.
  2. Receive a further report on progress against delivery of the Revised Improvement Plan and plans for 2011/12 by the end of March 2011.
  3. Consider setting up a 'task and finish' group to monitor progress against 1 or more of the actions identified, e.g. the targeted interventions identified at 3. of the Revised Improvement Plan.