

PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

**STRATEGIC HOUSING
SERVICE – PRIVATE SECTOR
HOUSING**

**PEER CHALLENGE
TEAM REPORT**

27th April 2010



**Peer Challenge of Plymouth City Council's Strategic
Housing Service – Private Sector Housing
9th & 10th March 2010**

1. Introduction

This report provides feedback on the Peer Challenge of the Strategic Housing Service – private sector housing (to be referred to in this report as the Private Sector Housing Service) carried out on 9th & 10th March 2010. This is part of a national programme of challenges for Regulatory Services. The purpose of this programme is to challenge how well Services are performing and to help them identify improvements.

The peer challenge process has two key elements. Firstly, a self-assessment carried out against twelve criteria in a Regulatory Service-specific framework of excellence. Secondly, a follow-up peer challenge of that self-assessment, which examines its robustness and accuracy, and identifies any further improvements and good practices.

The Private Sector Housing Service undertook its self-assessment between November 2009 and February 2010. The output from that self-assessment was a report that summarised the key issues and identified, in detail, the Service's strengths and areas for improvement. A draft improvement plan based on this report was then developed.

This was followed by a peer challenge by a team of senior staff from other Regulatory Services, and a member of the Improvement and Development Agency's Peer Clearing House.

The team considered the self-assessment carried out and its outputs, and came to conclusions covering the self-assessment and its report; the draft improvement plan, further opportunities for improvement, and excellent or innovative practices that others could learn from.

This report contains details of the peer challenge process undertaken and the conclusions of the team.

2. Methodology

The peer challenge itself took place over the period 9th and 10th March. The team comprised:

Richard Drew:	Independent Environment Health Practitioner (recently retired from Westminster City Council).
Ian Dick:	Strategic Manager, Private Sector Housing Group, London Borough of Newham
Councillor Paul Ellis:	Chairman of the Environment & Leisure Scrutiny Committee, London Borough of Wandsworth
Andrew Wilson:	Senior Trading Standards officer, Bristol City Council

They undertook a series of meetings and interviews with staff, Members and other key stakeholders as follows:

Councillor Ted Fry - Cabinet Member for Planning, Strategic Housing and Economic Development

Councillor Mrs Nicky Wildy - Shadow Member with responsibility for Strategic Housing,

Councillor David Viney - Growth and Prosperity O & S Panel Chair,

Ian Gallin - Assistant Chief Executive

Anthony Payne - Director for Development & Regeneration

Stuart Palmer - Assistant Director for Strategic Housing

Phil Mitchell - Private Sector Housing & Regeneration Manager

Malissa Collyer-Tomas (Team Leader Renewals) and Linda Johns (Team Leader Private Rented)

Self Assessment team – Andrew Elvidge, Suzanne Hill, Carol Knapp and Carol Rowe

Staff Focus group: John Davies, Lee Mundell, Scott Carpenter, Matt Miller, Bradley Taylor-Jones, Peter Grimoldby, Jerry Pappin, Sarah Vincent, Peter Wade, Martyn Taylor

Critical Friend – Ian Hay (Manager, Care & Repair Home Improvement Agency).

External stakeholders:

- Marion Hayes - Student Accommodation Manager, University of Plymouth,
- Katerina Swain - South West Landlords Association
- Heather Crabb - Vice Chair Private Rented Forum
- Kate Medhurst - PATH (Plymouth Access to Housing)
- Jane Cookson – Housing Advice Team Leader
- Ann Holdsworth - Shelter

The team also examined relevant documentation both before the visit at a desk top review meeting on 19th February and during their site visit.

The challenge team wishes to extend its thanks to Phil Mitchell and Isobel Fisher for their excellent organisation and preparation for the visit and to everyone else in the Private Sector Housing Service and the Council for their courtesy, co-operation and assistance during the visit.

3. Summary of our Findings

3.1 The Self-assessment process and report.

The Peer Challenge team consider that the Service carried out a self-assessment process that was both challenging and robust. It was very well planned and completed within the target period agreed with the Peer Challenge team.

The Peer Challenge team however do have some concerns that the team chosen to carry out the initial self assessment was not only led by a senior manager but also contained 3 other managers, consequently there were only 3 members on the team representing staff. We understand that this was due to a lack of volunteers from non managerial staff but we worry that there is a risk that staff won't have confidence that the self assessment was inclusive.

We noted that staff not involved in the self assessment team confirmed that they were consulted during the process and have seen the self assessment report but we question if the consultation exercise could have been carried out in more depth.

We also note that there is a surprising absence of areas for improvement in connection with staff "needs" we feel this may partly be explained by the lack of staff involvement in the process. However, we would confirm that staff seem generally happy in their work and consider that they are well supported by their immediate managers. We would also confirm one of the strengths identified, regular annual appraisals, 1: 2: 1s and, as one member staff confirmed, managers also have an "open door" policy.

However, there was more of a mixed response regarding another identified area of strength, namely staff training. Some staff felt it was excellent whilst others considered that there wasn't enough professional training or they simply didn't have time for training. It may well be worth revisiting staff training through their Personal Development Plans (PDPs) to see if this aspect is sufficiently embedded across the service.

At this point we feel it is important to raise that during our discussions with staff and stakeholders the Private Sector teams appear to have a very heavy workload which we will return to later.

The self assessment team employed the manager of the Care & Repair Home Improvement Agency as their critical friend whom we consider proved an excellent choice adding value to the process. We understand that he would like to have a continuing involvement as the improvement plan is developed which we would encourage and support.

We believe that sufficient evidence was found in most areas to arrive at accurate conclusions, and this was used effectively to challenge how well the Service performs with respect to all four themes contained within the framework. The subsequent self-assessment report accurately brought all the

evidence together that both the self-assessment team and the Peer Challenge team identified.

We noted that the draft report was subsequently discussed at a meeting with the managers who had been part of the team together with the critical friend and the Assistant Director of Strategic Housing. In addition a member of the Council's Policy & Performance team was also asked to comment on the report but it is not clear to us the significance of this contribution. At the meeting it appears that some areas of improvement were grouped together for easier cross referencing and each of the subsequent list of improvements was prioritised using a series of measures.

The self-assessment identified that the Service has a clear sense of mission and direction but although we would agree with this it is not fully recognised by staff. More work needs to be done with staff to increase their understanding of, and contribution to, the overall aims, objectives and expressed mission of the council. This in turn should help alleviate a real concern expressed by staff around the lack of visibility to the senior management and the wider council. We are aware that this aspect has been recognised and has partly been addressed in the draft business plan for 2010/11.

The self assessment report rightly identified the use of the Scrutiny process for service and performance improvement. We consider that this is very positive as we believe that this will increase visibility at Member and senior officer level.

It is stated that the Service has, in the main, identified who its customers are but believes that more needs to be done to effectively engage with them to ensure service delivery is truly customer focussed by understanding and responding to their needs. We have some concerns over this area as from our evidence the service appears to know largely who its customers are. However, there remains a belief that there a significant number of "non users". We will come back to this when we discuss the outputs of the Improvement Plan but the Service needs to be clear what it wants from closer engagement with customers.

From the evidence gathered the Service is very highly thought of amongst councillors, stakeholders, and, external partners. Stakeholders in particular were very complimentary saying for example, "we have a good relationship with the service based on trust", "we find the staff supportive and helpful", and "they are active and easy to deal with"

In conclusion, we would reiterate that staff, notwithstanding a very demanding workload, came across as enthusiastic, committed and keen to improve and enhance the service. However, they clearly desire greater visibility and need to feel more valued by the whole Council and not just their peers but there is clearly a responsibility on the staff to engage with this process.

3.2 The Draft Improvement Plan

The draft improvement plan was drawn up by the same group of managers who had considered and finalised the self assessment feedback report. It contained all 36 areas for improvement that had been identified by the self assessment team, with no exceptions.

We understand the improvement plan was then revised in order to put a number of similar issues under the same heading, to make it more user friendly. The resulting areas for improvement were then prioritised according to the length of time it was considered it would take to resolve them. The Peer Challenge team noted that all the final 25 areas of improvement were to be completed in 1 year with a significant number being completed in the first 6 months. The team have concerns regarding the achievability of these aims.

We noted that staff had seen a copy of the draft Improvement plan and indeed one member of staff remarked that it was “more understandable than other documents he had seen”. However, we would reiterate our concerns expressed over the Self Assessment report that we did not think there had been sufficient staff engagement in the process. We would consider this is important in order that you encourage ongoing commitment and ownership of the process of implementation.

Leading Members showed clear understanding of, and a high level of support for, the service and its links to the wider strategic objectives of the Council. Commitment to involvement and improvement within service constraints was demonstrable.

We would suggest that the improvement plan is too ambitious both in the number of areas of improvement that have been identified for action but also the timescales set out to resolve them. We consider this is particularly true having regard to the small staff group available to engage with, and assist in, their resolution. Further, a significant number of the areas have been identified for resolution in the first 6 months. We believe that this probably reflects the need to have them completed before the Strategic Housing inspection but for the reasons already stated we suggest this timescale is too ambitious for all the items identified.

We do appreciate that the managers had very little time to complete the draft improvement plan before this Peer Challenge visit. We understand why some of the “actions” & “measurements” simply concerned setting up meetings or drafting reports; but as one stakeholder who had seen the report remarked “their goal was unclear as the plan lacked SMART outcomes”. We would agree.

We would therefore suggest that the improvement plan is revisited. The items on the improvement plan that simply end up with a meeting or writing a paper could be omitted, or a series of measured steps set out, to produce a tangible measure for improvement. For instance the Service wishes to improve its

profile at the LSP and a number of actions are identified to achieve this. We feel that the tangible benefit to service outcomes should be identified.

We believe that by really targeting your goals the Service will be able to reduce the number of areas for improvement by dropping some completely from the plan and by combining many more. Further by setting out a number of measurable steps the Service will be able to identify a number of “quick wins” together with medium and long term targets. It will also be able to identify how each item is progressing, demonstrating to staff, senior managers and leading members that the plan is on target for completion.

This process should make the plan more manageable although we consider that the completion of the work should be spread over a more realistic timescale than the proposed 1 year.

We also consider that it may be worthwhile discussing the resultant draft Improvement plan with a wider audience. One of the representatives on the Private Rented Sector forum expressed an interest in it being discussed at the next meeting, and we would suggest this would be a worthwhile exercise. Other stakeholders have also expressed a willingness to be involved and this may provide an opportunity for external contributions which can only strengthen the Plan.

We know that the Cabinet Member, Assistant Director and Director of Development and Regeneration were all aware of content and progress of the challenge and had seen, but not signed off, the draft improvement plan. This is entirely understandable because the Service was waiting for the visit of the Peer Challenge team to determine if changes would be made to the plan before requesting sign off. We recommend that once the final plan has been drawn up and agreed by the Service, the Cabinet Member and Chief Executive jointly sign off the plan. We believe the visible involvement of senior management and the Cabinet Member will provide additional credibility and priority to the process, as well as demonstrating to the staff the increased visibility of the service.

We would also recommend that the completion of the improvement plan is specifically stated in a service plan for both teams as this will again demonstrate support by senior managers. We recognise that completion of the Peer challenge process is identified in the draft Housing Services Business Plan.

3.3 Next Steps

As suggested and outlined above, the concern of the Challenge team relates to the central issue of how effectively the Service translates the Self Assessment report into an Improvement plan.

We note that some of the items of improvement have been combined to reduce the number of areas for improvement but we consider that there is scope for further reduction by combining some and omitting others.

For example we would suggest the following areas of improvement could be omitted because the Private Sector Housing Service cannot significantly influence them and any service improvement effects are likely to be marginal at best:

Item 3: Strengthen the role of PSH at the 'Single Conversation' with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)

Items 5(a): Develop a better understanding of the role of existing housing in supporting the local economy.

Item 13: Plan for the future, especially in responding to resource pressures.

In addition some areas for example, could be combined,

Items 1 & 2 These all concern increasing "visibility" of the service within the council

- Raise the profile of private sector housing (PSH) at Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) level.
- Strengthen the role of PSH within corporate agenda
- Develop stronger engagement with Members in helping to champion PSH housing issues.
- Achieve a better understanding of the Private Sector Housing team's role (and Strategic Housing) by Members.

The Peer Challenge team would suggest that under this heading an additional item is included where more comprehensive service plans are developed for each of the Private Sector Housing services. These could either be stand alone documents or as attachment to the draft Business plan currently being developed. These service plans should be more comprehensive than those already written which appear just to contain a series of targets. They should include the Service's aims and visions clearly showing how they contribute to the corporate vision – "The Golden Thread". This will increase the visibility of the service to members. Further, staff can be consulted on an annual basis so that they have an opportunity to put forward projects that they consider worthwhile thereby getting better staff engagement.

In addition, the Peer Challenge team would support a comprehensive review of service standards with a view to getting them into a framework of best practice that can be published and reviewed.

Items 17 & 21 These all concern "better engagement with customers"

- Develop service standards setting out what customers can expect.
- Improve the follow-up of customer feedback
- Improve how we make and record changes following complaint investigations

The development of the website is particularly important in order that residents (and landlords) can be informed about what they can expect from the service.

Items 23, 24 & 25 These all concern internal staffing/management matters

- Review what we measure to make sure we're looking at the right things.
- Make better use of 'eperform' to raise corporate knowledge of PSH issues
- Make better use of ICT and new technologies to monitor the service.

It is suggested that staff training is reviewed under this heading particularly "professional training" and that a commitment is made to ensure annual completion of Personal Development Plans (PDPs) and subsequent quarterly reviews to ensure that staff consider that they have equal access to training.

Prioritisation

The Peer Challenge would also suggest that the condensed plan is then prioritised not in terms of time to complete but in terms of which areas of improvement should be prioritised in order of importance. We recognise that the impending visit of the Audit Commission has meant that the Service has prioritised certain areas but we consider that this should be balanced with the needs of the service.

Having identified the condensed areas of improvement and then prioritised them. The goals and a series of measurable outcomes should then be identified for each one in order that the Service, managers and Members will be able recognise success and when it will be achieved

The Peer Challenge team consider that the timescales set out in the plan are not achievable particularly some of those set for 0 – 6 months, we also believe that the aim of completing the improvement plan in 12 months is extremely optimistic and this should be extended by up to a year i.e. a 2 year time scale .

Quick Wins

There may be an opportunity following this report for the service to develop a number of quick wins identifying those measured outcomes that can be completed in a short timescale.

Engagement

Following the restructuring and other amendments to the plan it is suggested that the self assessment team is reconvened and asked to reconsider it and to feed back their thoughts prior to the production of the final plan

Signing off and Ongoing Implementation

Once the Improvement plan has been re-structured with measurable outcomes and the self assessment team have had a chance to comment on it the Peer Challenge team believe that the final improvement plan should be jointly signed off by the Chief Executive and the Cabinet Member for Planning,

Strategic Housing and Economic Development. This will provide increased confidence to staff and increased “visibility” of the service.

The Peer Challenge team note that the completion of the Improvement Plan is already in the draft Business Plan but we consider it should also be included in the Service plans.

3.4 Further Opportunities for Improvement

As already identified, as a result of the comprehensive and challenging approach the Service has taken in this process there were very few additional areas for service improvement we could suggest.

However, there are two further opportunities for improvement that the Peer Challenge team have identified connected with the apparent heavy workload of the Private Rented team.

The Peer Challenge team would suggest that there may be opportunities to better target existing resources particularly in respect of HMO licensing. The Private Sector Housing service has developed a very successful Private Sector Housing Forum and there would appear to be an opportunity to develop an “accreditation” system which would allow the Service to focus resources on the worst problems whilst allowing a degree of self regulation for those landlords who have shown that they are reliable partners.

Secondly, we would advocate the use of benchmarking with other Authorities which we accept can be challenging particularly in getting agreement on measurements. But it should be possible to benchmark the number of HMOs being processed and monitored in comparison with the staff available. It will be important to ensure that the benchmarking is done against those Authorities with similar private rented stock but we believe that this would show Plymouth in a very favourable light.

Time did not allow us to meet senior police officers and representatives from NHS Plymouth so that we could not determine how the Private Sector Housing Service could assist in tackling anti-social behaviour and addressing the link between health and housing but we believe that there is scope to further develop these areas of work. This will have the added advantage of not only raising the Service’s profile at the LSP (and the four thematic groups) but it will also contribute to join targets with other Plymouth City Council services and external partners.

Linking internal Plymouth City Services will also have the benefit of enhancing the Council’s outcomes and recognising the important contribution of the Private Sector Housing Service in fulfilling many of the objectives identified above including; increasing effective service delivery, enhancing the profile of the service and better responding to customer and stakeholder needs.

The Peer Challenge team also question whether the impact of the formation of Plymouth City Homes (PCH) will need to be considered in respect of how it could affect the Private Sector Housing Service. As PCH is RSL led, the

service in future could be faced with increasing numbers of complaints from tenants that will need to be addressed.

We would suggest that in order to increase the visibility of the service “Open House” lunchtime sessions could be opened up to other Council staff and members could be approached before cabinet meetings. This will raise the service profile and encourage partnership working.

We would suggest that back to the floor initiatives such as the Cabinet Member & Director for Development & Regeneration go out with staff. This would assist the Cabinet Member and senior managers in gaining a better understanding of the valuable work carried out by staff whilst at the same time providing staff with greater visibility.

It was noted that whilst the Service had a very high satisfaction rate amongst customers there was a very low response rate. This is inherent with written customer response forms. It is suggested that other methods are trialled such as telephone surveys. By increasing the response, trends and service improvements can be more readily identified.

Consideration should also be made into the possibility of instigating staff rewards (not necessarily financial) where staff are rewarded for excellent work and that the awards are made at high profile ceremonies hosted by senior managers.

The LACORS peer challenge website contains examples of good practice identified during the peer challenge process, and you could consider looking at the website to identify if any other Services have been shown to be particularly effective in these areas, and learning from them.

3.5 Excellent and Innovative Practices Identified

Regrettably neither the Challenge team nor the Service were able to identify any projects that could be considered to be excellent or innovative but this should not be taken as an indication of a poor service as we believe the staff and managers provide a very good service to the residents and businesses of Plymouth.

3.6 Conclusions

Overall, the Peer Challenge team would like to congratulate the Service for its excellent delivery of its core service and for the way it has approached the Peer Challenge process.

The Peer Challenge team believe that senior managers should feel confident that they have an enthusiastic body of staff who are keen to play their part in taking the service forward and continue to contribute to the overall aims of the council.

The Service is now asked to:

Consider the issues described in paragraph 3.3 & 3.4 above in relation to the further development and implementation of the improvement plan

We would ask you to provide a response to these issues, including an amended improvement plan, within four weeks of the date of this report.

Richard Drew
Peer Challenge Team Leader
Date: 22nd March 2010