

**STOCKTON ON TEES
BOROUGH COUNCIL
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH
UNIT**

**PEER CHALLENGE
TEAM REPORT**



**PEER CHALLENGE OF STOCKTON ON TEES BOROUGH
COUNCIL ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICE 4TH AND 5TH
FEBRUARY 2010**

1. Introduction

This report provides feedback on the peer challenge of Stockton on Tees Borough Council Environmental Health Unit carried out in February 2010. This is part of a national programme of challenges of Environmental Health 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 an Environmental Health 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 Service undertook its self-assessment between October and December 2009. The output from that self-assessment was a report that identified the key strengths and areas for improvement for the Service, and a draft improvement plan based on this.

This was followed by a peer challenge by a team of people from other Environmental Health 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; good practices that others could learn from; and further opportunities for improvement.

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 4th and 5th of February 2010. The team consisted of:

Richard Block, Westminster City Council
Cllr Ross Henley, Taunton Deane Borough Council, IDeA Peer
Stuart Arnott, Pendle Borough Council

The peer challenge team undertook a series of meetings and interviews with staff, Members and other key stakeholders as follows:

Paul Dobson (Corporate Director of Development and Neighbourhood Services)

Mike Batty (Head of Community Protection)

Bob Cowell and Faye Holliday (Assessment Group Leaders)

Colin Snowdon (Environmental Health Unit Manager)

Interview with Principal Officers

Assessment Team focus group

Paul Spurrier (Health and Safety Executive)

Presentation by Mark Berry and Stephanie Landles on areas of excellence and innovation

Frontline staff focus group

Jimmy Jones (Critical Friend)

Nigel Laws (Economic Development)

Steve Nelson (Cabinet Member)

Neil Schneider (Chief Executive)

The team also examined relevant documentation both before and during their site visit.

The challenge team wishes to extend its thanks to everyone at Stockton on Tees Borough Council Environmental Health Unit for their courtesy and co-operation during the visit. Special thanks are extended to Colin Snowdon, Bob Cowell and Faye Holiday who assisted in the pre planning of the two days and helped to make the challenge process run smoothly.

3. Summary of our Findings

3.1 The Self-assessment and the Report of it

3.11 The self assessment process

The peer challenge team consider that the Service has carried out a self-assessment process that was challenging and robust. This was achieved because the team chosen to carry out the self-assessment represented a good cross-section of staff that were empowered to be challenging and honest. A large number of internal staff at all levels in the Council and some external partners were interviewed through the process. There was complete

staff buy in to the self assessment process demonstrating the effectiveness of engagement through the assessment.

The process had improved team members knowledge of areas they may not usually work in. The process had also been a good team building exercise. These factors will undoubtedly enhance future cross unit working.

The assessment was completed and submitted to the challenge team on time on 16th December 2009.

The Cabinet Member had been made aware the service was conducting the self assessment but was not interviewed through the process. The Challenge Team felt such an interview would have added further value to the assessment.

Although the assessment was detailed internally it had included few external stakeholders despite there being lots of excellent examples of external partnerships that came to light during the challenge visit.

The challenge team identified some excellent examples of intelligence led work in the Commercial Team to tackle non compliance that had not been identified through the self assessment process.

The critical friend was an excellent choice and was used effectively once the self assessment interviews had been conducted. He could however have been further utilised in the planning stages of the assessment.

3.12 The Report of the Self Assessment

The report from the self-assessment team raised valid issues and accurately reflected the evidence that the self-assessment team identified. It was thorough, clear and well written.

3.13 Key Strengths and Areas for Improvement Identified through the Assessment and Challenge Visit

The challenge team felt it would be useful to provide a summary of the key strengths and areas for improvement identified through both the self assessment and confirmed in the challenge visit against each element of the standard. These are by no means a complete list but instead those which were found of greatest significance through our desktop review and challenge visit.

Theme 1 - Leadership, Strategies and Collaboration

Strengths

- Clear service planning process
- “Bottom up” approach to service planning
- Mike Batty membership of health partnership
- Good consideration of shared services

- Urban Environment Tasking Group
- Partnerships with other enforcement agencies (HSE)
- Training officers and nutrition advice meeting wider health agenda

Areas for Improvement

- Lack of member involvement in service
- Greater linking EH objectives to corporate priorities

Theme 2 - Customer and Community Engagement

Strengths

- Customer care
- Innovative and committed frontline staff
- Staff understand their stakeholders well

Areas for Improvement

- Promote work of unit more effectively
- Website improvement

Theme 3 - Resource Activity and People Management

Strengths

- Partnership work with HSE
- Working environment
- Flexible approach to work
- Excellent team

Areas for Improvement

- Need to improve recognition of success
- Improved communications with senior management
- Some services seen as Cinderella service
- Excellent examples of intelligence led work that could be used as beacons

Theme 4 - Achieving Outcomes Effectively and Sustainably

Strengths

- Good Service
- Value for money
- Excellent performance in audit process
- Performance management strong

Areas for Improvement

- Communications between some teams/services good but others not
- Development of sustainable outcomes

3.2 The draft improvement plan and implementation

3.21 The Improvement Plan

The draft improvement plan was comprehensive and contained a number of areas for improvement that covered all areas detailed in the self assessment. All improvements had been prioritised effectively. There was widespread staff buy in to the plan.

3.22 Implementation principles

In terms of taking the improvement plan forward we feel the following four principles should be central to the management teams approach;

Staff engagement – the peer challenge team were impressed by the enthusiasm of the self assessment team and confidence of front line staff in the services ability to deliver against the improvement plan. The real challenge is to capitalise on this and include them in the design of solutions going forward.

Outcomes – first step in delivering each of the improvements should be to define what success will look like in terms of the outcomes to be achieved

Quick wins – value in identifying some successes that can be delivered in the short term to demonstrate commitment to improvement plan and maintain staff engagement

Member engagement - The service should look to involve and engage with members at every opportunity, including consideration of putting the results of this process to the Scrutiny committee for comments by the members.

3.23 Suggested Additions/Enhancements to the Improvement Plan

Through the course of the challenge process, additional areas for improvement were identified. If included in the improvement plan, the value of this plan will be further enhanced. These are:

Development of Staff

The challenge team identified examples of excellent intelligence led work particularly in the commercial team. The Development of Staff AFI could be enhanced to include exploring opportunities for sharing best practice between teams across the unit.

Linking service objectives with wider corporate objectives and LAA targets:

The Environmental Health Units contribution to wider council objectives had not been identified or communicated to other parts of the council. The challenge team identified the service has the potential to make significant contributions to corporate/LAA themes around health, environment and regeneration. Existing and potential contribution should be mapped and

communicated to staff, senior management, members and other relevant stakeholders.

Development of sustainable outcomes

The challenge team identified output measures being used to measure success rather than outcomes. When service plans are developed sustainable outcomes should be identified. Wherever possible these should be linked to LAA/Corporate outcome targets.

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

4.0 Excellent or Innovative Practices Identified

4.1 Excellent Practices

We identified the following examples of excellent practice:

- Out of hours noise service using security staff as initial response.
- Intelligence led project work conducted by food team

4.2 Excellent and Innovative Practices

We identified the following example of innovative and excellent practice:

Work conducted by animal welfare/health service to improve compliance through education and enforcement.

5 Conclusions

Overall, the team would like to congratulate the Service, firstly for its excellent delivery of core services, secondly for its dedicated, committed and ambitious staff group and thirdly for way in which it has carried out the self-assessment process. We feel confident that the service will be successful in maintaining the momentum provided by the Peer Challenge process in improving further what is already a very good Service.

Some additions/enhancements to the improvement plan were identified for the Service to consider as detailed in section 3 above.

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 Block
Peer Challenge Team Leader
Date: 2 March 2010