

SHARED INTELLIGENCE

REGULATORY SERVICES PEER CHALLENGE PROGRAMME



FINAL EVALUATION REPORT APRIL 2010

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I EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report presents the findings of the evaluation of the Regulatory Services Peer Challenge programme, conducted by Shared Intelligence between August 2009 and March 2010. The evaluation used a logic model approach to assess the outcomes and impact of the programme. The methodology included a desk based review and analysis, a series of telephone interviews, a focus group with Member peers and observational and case study research.
2. The evaluation team produced an interim report in November 2009. The purpose of the final report was to have a stronger focus on the progress that participating authorities have made towards outcomes and impact as a result of the Peer Challenge process.

Context and rationale

3. The evaluation found that the Peer Challenge programme in the main attracts local authorities that perceive they are performing well and have an existing culture of improvement. The main reason cited for undergoing a Peer Challenge was the perception that it would represent a valuable learning opportunity bringing external validation. A number of participating authorities had also recently undergone organisational restructuring and saw the Peer Challenge as a way to establish whether new working arrangements were appropriate.
4. Other reasons for participating cited by Heads of Regulatory Services were ambitions to raise the profile of the Service within the local authority and a wish to benchmark performance against other Services. Staff members, on the other hand, felt that the Peer Challenge process would enable them to gain new skills and become more involved in management structures.
5. For authorities not participating in the programme, the main reason given was the perception that it would take too much staff time. Lack of interest on the part of senior management was also a factor in some cases. Anecdotally, some of those interviewed also suggested that authorities who are less confident about their performance would hesitate to open themselves up to external scrutiny.
6. Peer Challengers also identified their key motivations for taking part in the programme. Most of those interviewed saw the programme as a vehicle for the cross transfer of knowledge between them and the assessed authorities. Many of those working within Regulatory Services wanted to see how other authorities operate and felt that they had valuable experiences to share. Elected members who acted as Peer Challengers were also keen to learn more about Regulatory Services, and felt that their participation would ensure the political credibility of the process.

The Peer Challenge process

7. Overall, the evaluation found that local authorities who had participated in the programme were very positive about the process and found it a valuable experience and a robust tool for driving improvements.
8. The training provided for participating local authorities and Peer Challengers was well received. Participants were able to obtain a good understanding of the theory behind the Peer Challenge process and Peer Challengers felt well prepared for their roles.
9. The evaluation suggested that all types of local authority can benefit from the Peer Challenge process – new Unitary Authorities, District Councils, County Councils and Metropolitan Boroughs of all sizes. Even authorities who said the process did not highlight ‘anything new’ felt that the added value the process brought was helping to refocus the team on priority areas, and the process itself gave staff the opportunity to express their views about the Service and input into Improvement Plans.
10. The Excellence Framework against which the Self Assessment was conducted was generally perceived as flexible, robust and fit for purpose. However, some Self Assessment leads felt that the criteria across the different themes were too repetitive, and that the Framework lends itself to being used as a checklist rather than a flexible self-improvement tool. Some Peer Challengers and Self Assessment leads also found it difficult to identify areas of best practice and technical service excellence, as the Framework does not enable the measurement of progress or benchmarking against other authorities.
11. The evaluation found that in the main, improvements focused more on two out of the four themes within the Excellence Framework: Customer and community focus and engagement and Resource, activity and people management. The most consistently highlighted improvement areas were found to be internal and external communications and stakeholder involvement.
12. Some Self Assessment leads found it difficult to establish measurable indicators for improvements and felt that they would benefit from regularly reviewing the Improvement Plan, possibly with the help of the Peer Challenge team. Several Peer Challengers also felt that there is a need to follow-up on their visit after a certain time has passed.
13. The Peer Challenge visits were found to be an integral part of the programme, and it was strongly felt that the Self Assessment on its own would be less beneficial without the element of external review. The Peer Challenge was seen as a key driver for undertaking the Self Assessment and preparing the Improvement Plan. In addition to gaining an external perspective on the Improvement Plan, the visit was seen as crucial for raising the profile of the Service and the peer review exercise within the local authority, especially with senior management and Cabinet Members.
14. The visits were judged as well-structured and successful by both local authorities and Peer Challengers, although some felt that two days was too

short to undertake a full Peer Challenge, particularly in the case of larger authorities.

15. Peer Challengers were on the whole able to both validate the Improvement Plans and identify gaps and inconsistencies within them. Some of the more challenging aspects of their role included communicating in a way that does not make the authority feel defensive and analysing the data collected within the agreed timescales. The majority of interviewed Peer Challengers also felt that the time allocated for preparation before the visit was insufficient, particularly if the assessed authority was late in providing the required information.

Progress towards outcomes and impact

16. The evaluation found that participating authorities had made significant progress towards implementing their Improvement Plans, particularly in areas relating to improved internal communications, relationships with elected members and customers, staff training and development. The types of early outcomes achieved ranged widely, and in most cases some “quick wins” had been secured. There was also evidence that Services were becoming more efficient and effective, and there was a range of spin-off benefits, such as improving staff motivation and raising the profile of the Service.
17. The evaluation found that local authorities were taking Improvement Plans seriously and were generally very strong on implementation. Implementation usually followed one of three patterns: aligning the Improvement Plan to business or service plans; making the Improvement Plan part of a performance framework monitored at senior management meetings; and setting up a delivery group to review progress on implementation.
18. Many authorities found it difficult to describe how identified improvements would lead to longer term outcomes in relation to service delivery. For example, most found it hard to explain how better communication between teams would improve service delivery or outcomes on the ground. It must be noted, however, that the evaluation was conducted at an early stage and most authorities were still implementing their Improvement Plans, which makes it difficult to judge the long-term impact of the process.
19. The evaluation also identified the key challenges for authorities in implementing Improvement Plans. The most common difficulty was with resources, in particular staff time, and it was felt that this would be a persistent challenge in the context of expected spending cuts in the future. Other barriers were the lack of staff motivation or senior management drive, systemic difficulties within the wider authority and, for unitary authorities, the specific challenges presented by merging regulatory functions that had hitherto been separate.
20. The evaluation has found that the Peer Challenge programme has gone some way towards promoting self-directed improvement within the Regulatory Services sector. This has led to several important outcomes, including the transfer of knowledge between Peer Challengers and participating authorities,

the identification and dissemination of service strengths and good practices, and the greater openness and flexibility on the part of authorities to undergo peer challenges in the future.

21. Since one of the main aims of the programme was to support self-improvement, the evaluation found that it was effective in this regard. It was also found to be successful in enabling Regulatory Services to share good practices and learn from each other, as well as in raising the profile of Services within local authorities. However, the evaluation found that at least one of the stated objectives of the programme has not been fulfilled, namely the embedding of an outcome-focused culture within local authorities. The Improvement Plans were based on meeting activity-based targets and success was measured in terms of outputs rather than outcomes. This was found to be a result of both the dynamics of the Peer Challenge programme and the wider lack of an outcome-focused culture within authorities.

Implications

22. A number of implications surfaced through the evaluation for the Project Board to consider:

Encouraging uptake from local authorities through:

- Continuing to communicate Peer Challenge opportunities through LACORS and emails centrally (from project manager), emphasising the benefits to all types of authorities with a particular stress on the programme's benefits for under-performing authorities;
- Direct communication to senior management e.g. letters to the Board / Directors outlining the benefits of the Peer Challenge;
- Communications should implicitly outline the flexibility of the process in terms of the focus and scope of the Peer Challenge.

Strengthening the Self Assessment process through:

- Further support for local authorities to use the framework flexibly, e.g. through the inclusion of an initial assessment / scoping exercise for Self Assessment teams to complete to determine the focus of the Peer Challenge;
- Encouraging senior management to play a role in the Self Assessment process in order to fully address all four themes;
- Encouraging Self Assessment team to come together regularly with one or two coordinators (Self Assessment leads) whose role it is to ensure a number of key components are in place, such as keeping to the allotted days, drawing on all available data, input of senior management and retaining the thread of evidence, picking up best practice, and technical service delivery.

Strengthening the Peer Challenge through:

- Ensuring strong competency levels of Peer Challengers, and acknowledgement that Lead Challengers require a specific set of skills to carry out their role effectively, which could prompt 'add on' training;
- Encouraging Peer Challengers to offer more detailed feedback, e.g. examples of outcome measures and examples of working practices to illustrate points made;
- Encouraging flexibility on the length of the Peer Challenge visit to accommodate the circumstances of the recipient authority and the requirements of the Challenge team;
- Extending the timescales to allow for any slippage in the preparatory stage;
- Continue efforts to expand the pool of Peer Challengers through communicating the benefits of being a peer through case study examples and testimonials;
- Improved communication of best practice dissemination;
- Exploring the possibility of a formal process of post-visit follow-up;
- Exploring ways to incorporate LBRO's outcomes and impact toolkit into the Self Assessment training and guidance in an attempt to breach the activity-based culture of Regulatory Services.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. In August 2009, Shared Intelligence (Si) was commissioned to evaluate the Regulatory Services Peer Challenge programme. This final report outlines the key findings of the evaluation and the subsequent implications and recommendations for the Project Board.

The Regulatory Services Peer Challenge process

- 1.2. The Regulatory Services Peer Challenge process involves two key elements: a Self Assessment against an Excellence Framework, and a Peer Challenge of the effectiveness of that Self Assessment. The Framework was developed based on a previous peer review process within Trading Standards and reflected similar frameworks developed elsewhere within local government. It was initially used for Self Assessment within Environmental Health, and subsequently its use was expanded to encompass all Regulatory Services.
- 1.3. The Peer Challenge process in essence is a performance improvement framework. It is intended to:
- identify strengths and areas for improvement through Self Assessment
 - develop an Improvement Plan that is validated by peers
 - ensure that effective improvement is undertaken
 - share best practice
- 1.4. Authorities can take part in two ways - they can undertake a Regulatory Services Self Assessment and host a Peer Challenge visit, or provide officers to become a Peer Challenger. The latter allows officers to develop skills and experience to constructively challenge and support improvements in Regulatory Services. This fits with the objective of driving improvement from within the sector and increasing self regulation.

The Peer Challenge process in detail

- 1.5. The Peer Challenge process involves the following:
- **Self Assessment:** A Regulatory Services team (covering the main Environmental Health and/or Trading Standards services) makes an internal appraisal of their Service using the Excellence Framework. This Self Assessment identifies strengths and areas for improvement. References may be made to aspects such as the priorities of local area agreements (LAAs) or the key national indicators (NIs) relevant to the Council. The findings of the Self Assessment are captured in a draft three-year Improvement Plan.
 - **Peer Challenge:** The draft Improvement Plan is reviewed by 2-3 Regulatory Services managers from other local authorities, plus an expert senior officer or elected member from the Improvement and Development

Agency (IDeA) Peer Clearing House. They conduct a site visit to consider whether the evidence presented is challenging, accurate and robust. A report is then produced fleshing out the various proposals, with the aim of maximising their value. The report makes observations, not ratings or scores, and is made available to the relevant Council. Reports are retained by the Project Manager, while innovative and excellent practices are shared with LBRO and LACORS for national dissemination.

- 1.6. To help local authorities consider their current performance and to provide the gauge for measuring progress, the Regulatory Services Peer Challenge is underpinned by a common **Excellence Framework**. This takes a practical approach and builds on previous efforts by local authorities to develop and test Environmental Health and Trading Standards initiatives. It concentrates on the features and benefits of good service provision and does not specify any set actions.
- 1.7. The four central themes that guide the Self Assessment are:
 - Theme 1: leadership, strategies and collaboration.
 - Theme 2: customer and community focus and engagement
 - Theme 3: resource, activity and people management
 - Theme 4: achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably
- 1.8. The aim of Peer Challenge is to produce measurable improvement outcomes for participating authorities through the development and implementation of Improvement Plans.

Management and delivery of the programme

- 1.9. A partnership of key organisations was established in 2008 to develop an excellence framework for local authority Environmental Health services. The framework would be used by those services for the purpose of self-assessment and developing an improvement plan. The self-assessment and improvement plan would then be challenged by a group of peers, both senior officers and councillors. The partnership comprised Coventry and Westminster City Councils, the Beacon environmental health authorities 2005-06 and Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services (LACoRS). The project was funded through CLG's Beacon programme and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health was invited to also contribute to the work.
- 1.10. The development of the process to cover all of Regulatory Services, including Trading Standards, followed a second successful bid to CLG for further Beacon funding. The partnership was expanded to include the Trading Standards Institute and the Local Better Regulation Office (LBRO) formally joined as a senior partner providing additional funding to support a larger pilot testing an amended framework. It was agreed that the framework that was to be piloted would be the vehicle, suitably

amended, to incorporate the LBRO's World Class Coalition's agreement to develop an Excellence Framework.

- 1.11. The Regulatory Services Peer Challenge Project Board which steers the programme is currently made up of Coventry and Westminster City Councils, LACoRS, LBRO, Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) and Trading Standards Institute (TSI). The Board is supported by a consultant, Graham Baker of Qualitygb Ltd. The day to day management of the Peer Challenge programme is led by a seconded project manager based at Coventry City Council.
- 1.12. The programme is currently funded through central government and LBRO. It is currently free to participants - training and implementation is provided at no cost to the local authority. Thirty eight local authorities have participated in the Peer Challenge programme to date.¹

The evaluation

- 1.13. The Peer Challenge Project Board requested that the evaluation focus on outcomes as well as the effectiveness of processes of programme delivery, and wanted assurance that the programme was helping 'to deliver improved services'. Nevertheless, the Board recognised that outcomes (in terms of improved services) may take time to be fully measurable, given the time-lag between Improvement Plans being developed and implemented, and resulting effects becoming apparent and measurable.
- 1.14. Some of the key evaluation questions highlighted by the Project Board's brief included:
 - Does the Self Assessment process identify the correct strengths and areas for improvement?
 - Are the four elements of the Excellence Framework fit for purpose?
 - How good are the teams of peers at reviewing and challenging Self Assessment?
 - Are Improvement Plans realistic and being acted upon?
- 1.15. Shared Intelligence developed a logic model for the programme, which acted as a framework to evaluate the programme's key outcomes to date and to draw conclusions about the likely longer term outcomes and impacts of the programme. Using a logic model enabled us to explore both *whether* intended outcomes are being achieved and *how* they are being achieved.

¹ As of 13 April 2010. See Appendix 1 for further information.

Regulatory Services Peer Challenge: Logic Model					
Context	Rationale	Inputs	Outputs	Short/medium outcomes	Impact
The current performance of local Regulatory Services	The need for self directed learning	Activities to support learning	The results of learning activities	The direction toward service improvement	Long term changes to service improvement
<p>Need to increase use and effectiveness of self regulation in improving performance</p> <p>Uneven performance of Regulatory Services</p> <p>Support required for weaker authorities</p> <p>A multi-agency Regulatory Services approach</p>	<p>Self Assessment and Peer Challenge are recognised tools that support improvement</p> <p>They have been successfully piloted in a Regulatory Services context through the Trading Standards peer review programme</p> <p>Provides an alternative learning methodology to the rigour of audit</p>	<p>Training for Self Assessment leads and Peer Challengers</p> <p>Structured Self Assessment process with appropriate supporting documentation and guidance</p> <p>Peer Challenge over two days</p> <p>Support from 'critical friend'</p> <p>Preparation of Self Assessment, Improvement Plan and Peer Challenge report</p>	<p>Improvement Plans</p> <p>Activities delivered as a result of Improvement Plans</p> <p>Cumulative learning from review process – sector wide improvement actions</p> <p>Identification of good practice</p>	<p>Improvements in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - leadership, strategies and collaboration - customer and community focus and engagement - resource, activity and people management - ability to achieve outcomes effectively and sustainably <p>Alignment of service improvements to wider LAA outcomes</p> <p>National dissemination of good practice</p>	<p>Long term improvement in Regulatory Services</p> <p>Increased public safety</p> <p>Reduced level of Trading Standards cases</p> <p>Improved health and safety record (e.g. fewer reportable incidents)</p> <p>More consistent practice across authorities</p>
Evaluation questions flowing from the model					
<p><i>What do stakeholders identify as service improvement?</i></p> <p><i>Which outcomes are of most interest?</i></p> <p><i>What types of authorities choose to take part?</i></p>	<p><i>Do the four elements together cover all the aspects of managing a local authority Regulatory Service?</i></p> <p><i>Is the framework flexible enough for different configurations and types of Regulatory Services to use it?</i></p> <p><i>Does the framework meet Services' expectations of what excellence should look like?</i></p>	<p><i>Are self-assessing authorities and Peer Challengers adequately prepared to take part in the programme?</i></p> <p><i>How many of those trained undertake a Peer Challenge?</i></p> <p><i>How do different authorities approach the process?</i></p> <p><i>What resources are needed?</i></p> <p><i>What makes an effective Peer Challenge team?</i></p> <p><i>How can the Peer Challenge process be refined?</i></p>	<p><i>Are improvement activities SMART? Are strengths and areas for improvement identified?</i></p> <p><i>Are there common themes emerging from the Improvement Plans?</i></p> <p><i>What is the added value of the peer review process? How does it link to the Self Assessment?</i></p> <p><i>How does Peer Challenge strengthen Improvement Plans?</i></p>	<p><i>How are Improvement Plans being used?</i></p> <p><i>Have knowledge and skills been transferred?</i></p> <p><i>Is there greater support /understanding of self regulation?</i></p> <p><i>Is there evidence that performance has improved?</i></p> <p><i>How have officers in self-assessing authorities / Peer Challengers benefited from this process?</i></p>	<p><i>Is there evidence that Regulatory Services will improve as a result of the challenge process?</i></p> <p><i>Will Regulatory Services be able to deliver better outcomes as a result of the Peer Challenge process?</i></p> <p><i>Is there more consistent performance across authorities?</i></p>

1.16. The research included:

- A thorough desk-based review and analysis of available documentation on the development of the Peer Challenge programme, evaluation of the Trading Standards Peer reviews and feedback on the pilot Peer Challenges collated by the Project Board, and analysis of complete sets of Peer Challenge documentation (including Self Assessments, final Improvement Plans and final team reports) from six Environmental Health Peer Challenges and six first cohort Peer Challenge completers;
- Eleven semi-structured telephone interviews with key stakeholders, including Project Board members and wider partners;
- Fourteen semi-structured interviews with Self Assessment leads and Heads of Service in ten authorities from the first cohort of Peer Challenge completers and Environmental Health Peer Challenge pilots;
- Observation at the Brighton and Hove Peer Challenge and attendance at a training session for Self Assessing authorities in September 2009;
- A focus group with a sample of elected member Peer Challengers and a set of interviews with officer Peer Challengers who were involved in the first cohort of Peer Challenges;
- Nine telephone interviews with non-engaged authorities and Trading Standards regional coordinators;
- Seven in-depth case studies with authorities taking part in the second cohort of Peer Challenges; and
- Nineteen outcome focused interviews within eleven authorities who had been involved in the pilot and first cohort of Peer Challenges.

1.17. In total, some 68 people from within 36 authorities were consulted as part of the evaluation – see Appendix 2 for more information.

Structure of this report

1.18. This report summarises the results of our research, focusing on outcomes achieved and on drawing out lessons learned through the evaluation:

- Section 2 outlines our findings on **context and rationale** for Peer Challenges, looking at motivations and expectations of those involved;
- Section 3 outlines our findings on the **effectiveness of the Peer Challenge** process – the inputs and outputs of the programme - looking at what works currently, as well as areas for improvement;
- Section 4 outlines our findings on **the journey toward outcomes and impacts**, looking specifically at indications that the Peer Challenge process has driven improvement within participating Regulatory Services and more widely; and
- Section 5 presents our **conclusions** and draws out possible **implications** for the programme.

2. WHY PARTICIPATE IN THE PEER CHALLENGE PROGRAMME?

2.1. This section explores the context and rationale - the motivation - for participating in the Peer Challenge programme from the viewpoints of local authorities and participating Peer Challengers.

How did local authorities hear about the programme?

2.2. There were a range of ways through which participating authorities found out about the Peer Challenge programme. These included:

- **LACORS** (the Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services), either by attending briefings or receiving emails. Some also attended the LACORS conference in October 2008, where there was a presentation of the Peer Challenge programme
- Emails from **the Project Manager** in which they were invited to participate
- **Attendance at professional seminars**, in particular the meetings of regional Environmental Health officers (e.g. East, West Midlands)
- The **LBRO** (Local Better Regulation Office) Unitary Pioneers programme and other information from LBRO
- An **article published in the Environmental Health Journal** in 2008 gave some authorities the idea to get in touch with the programme team.

2.3. LACORS and emails from the Project Manager were most frequently cited, suggesting that they were more effective as a source of information and publicity about the programme than other sources.

2.4. Heads of Service most frequently made initial contact with the programme, but some of the Self Assessment leads had also heard about it through the above-mentioned sources. Some of them had seen the programme as a potential training opportunity and expressed an interest to their managers/Heads of Service. However, most Self Assessment leads became involved after the decision to participate had already been made.

The context for participating authorities

2.5. There were several contextual similarities between the authorities that decided to participate in the Peer Challenge programme.

2.6. A number of authorities had undergone a recent **organisational restructure** and wanted to use the Peer Challenge as a way of establishing whether the new ways of working were appropriate.

- 2.7. Some of these were large-scale changes, such as transforming from a two-tier authority into a unitary authority, which required a large array of services to be brought together.
- 2.8. Others were smaller changes, for instance in the management structure. In one case, the Head of Service was new to the position and thought it would be good to start by identifying key strengths and weaknesses. Overall, it seemed that authorities that had recently undergone organisational change had more incentives to participate in the programme than others.
- 2.9. Most of those interviewed **perceived their authorities as high-performing already**, and spoke of an existing culture of learning and improvement. This suggests that the programme appeals to higher performing authorities more than to those who are struggling with some aspects of delivery.
- 2.10. Several of those interviewed had **previous experience of peer reviews** (most often through the Trading Standards peer reviews) and had found the process positive and useful. Most, however, were new to the idea and had no previous experience.

Motivations for taking part

- 2.11. As they generally perceived themselves as high performing, most authorities did not expect that the Peer Challenge would identify major weaknesses in the Service. Nevertheless, the majority of those interviewed stated that they were motivated to take part because they saw the programme as an opportunity to identify improvements that could be made to the Service. The **programme was perceived as a learning opportunity**, and this was the reason most frequently cited as to why the decision was made to participate.

"We want to make continuous improvements, wanted to identify what's going well and what isn't going as well."

SELF-ASSESSMENT LEAD

- 2.12. At least some of those interviewed, however, pointed out that they expected the programme to help re-focus priorities on the most problematic areas and inform future thinking about service delivery.
- 2.13. The opportunity to draw on the **Peer Challengers' external perspective** was a strong pull factor for taking part. Many authorities expected to be able to pick up on good practice from the Peer Challenge team. Local authorities welcomed the fact that Peer Challengers were not auditors but work in a similar environment and understand the nature of Regulatory Services. Some even stated that they wanted a "**stamp of approval**", an external validation of their effectiveness.
- 2.14. Authorities also expected that the **Peer Challenge would raise the profile of the Service** within the wider local authority. There was a widespread perception that Regulatory Services are not high on the agenda of Councillors

and senior officers and only receive attention when there is a perceived failure in delivering services.

- 2.15. Some of those interviewed also felt that the programme could **help identify links to corporate priorities** and areas of good practice, which would lead to greater engagement with the Service on the part of Councillors and external stakeholders.

“Another benefit would be to raise the profile of the Service, both with elected members and within the Council, and see if the priorities we have set ourselves fit into the wider priorities and strategy.”

HEAD OF SERVICE

- 2.16. Participating authorities were also attracted by the programme’s approach, in particular that it was **different to audit** and offered the opportunity to focus on improving outcomes and areas of good practice rather than just areas of concern. It was also suggested that the programme represented a ‘light-touch’, informal approach to assessment and was not as resource-intensive as audits. The ability to conduct an internal Self Assessment (as opposed to being assessed only externally) was seen as a key part of the programme’s appeal.
- 2.17. There were some differences between Heads of Services and the Self Assessment lead officers in terms of motivation for participating. Heads of Service were interested in **benchmarking** and comparing their Service to others against an agreed framework: *“We are going through a process of efficiencies and cuts – our members have been looking at that – they and we want to be able to benchmark with other local authorities too”*. They also felt the Peer Challenge would help with **motivating staff** and getting them involved in the training and knowledge transfer that come with the programme. Some also felt that this would be a good opportunity to meet the peers and **widen their contact networks**.
- 2.18. The lead Self Assessment officers, on the other hand, saw the Peer Challenge as a way to **get involved in the management structure, gain new transferable skills**, and do something different from their day-to-day jobs.
- 2.19. Some of those interviewed had other reasons for participating, such as a perception that the programme would be rolled out nationally and they would have to do it anyway; a desire to improve their reputation with the programme’s national sponsors, LACORS and LBRO; and in the case of the authorities that piloted the programme, a desire to influence its future development by being among the first to try it out.

Reasons for not taking part

- 2.20. The primary reason cited by authorities for non-participation in the Peer Challenge programme was the **lack of resources**, primarily in terms of staff time. Several interviewees perceived the process as too labour-intensive and time-consuming. Some thought that the process was more suitable for larger

authorities, as smaller ones had neither appropriately trained staff nor the financial capacity to undertake such a commitment. The Self Assessment in particular was perceived as requiring too much staff time.

- 2.21. However, most of those interviewed had a positive view of the programme overall, and cited limited internal resources as the only reason for not participating.

"We [would have] only had couple of months to do the process – evidence in that time would be rushed and we wanted to do a good job. If it was a permanent programme we would definitely sign up."

CHIEF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH OFFICER AT A NON-PARTICIPATING AUTHORITY

- 2.22. The other reason for non-participation in the programme was a **problem with timing** – several of the authorities interviewed stated that their departments were currently undergoing restructuring and they did not think it would be useful to conduct a Peer Challenge until the restructure was completed and there is some stability within the department. At least three of the seven interviewed authorities indicated that they would be interested in participating in the programme once their restructuring was completed, and that they think it has the capacity to deliver long-term benefits to their departments and Councils.
- 2.23. Another reason for not participating was a **lack of interest on the part of senior management**, particularly the Head of Service, and lack of buy in from staff members themselves. It was felt that direct appeals to senior management in the form of letters to the Board and direct emails would encourage future participation in the project as there was currently no drive within the department: *"I feel it is good practice – we could come out well but there was no senior drive."* However, one of the Regional Coordinators said that in their experience Heads of Services were generally supportive of the programme and many would have liked to participate were it not for problems with funding or timing.
- 2.24. Finally, one of the interviewees criticised the concept of the Peer Challenges and said they did not feel it would be beneficial to their organisation, which had recently undergone a restructure. The authority participated in the Trading Standards peer review and there was concern that expanding the scope to include Regulatory Services as a whole, and particularly Environmental Health, would not be suitable for County Authorities. They expressed a view that **there should be flexibility to focus only on certain services** that the authority specifies. Since the Peer Challenge programme does in fact allow authorities to choose the scope of the challenge, this is an indication that this aspect has not been communicated clearly enough to authorities.

Why be a Peer Challenger?

- 2.25. The main reason identified by Peer Challengers was an interest in the **cross transfer of knowledge** within the sector. Peer Challengers made many

references to *“wanting to see and learn how other services operated”*. Many felt that this process was important to the Environmental Health and Trading Standards professions because it encouraged self-improvement and gave local authorities ownership of the improvement process. A number of those interviewed expressed a belief that peer reviews in general are a good tool for improving services and performance.

- 2.26. Heads of Service acting as Peer Challengers felt that the process would help them **pick up on areas of good practice** that they were previously unaware of, so they could implement them in their own Services. In parallel, they would also look for practice that should be avoided. Following the visits, a number of Challengers reported that this expectation was fulfilled and gave examples of the good practices they had taken back to their own authority.
- 2.27. Several Peer Challengers thought that the process would aid their professional development and help them **gain new skills**. Some had previously been involved in the Trading Standards peer reviews, and were keen to build on these experiences and skills: *“Being able to critically challenge is a skill and I felt I could learn these skills from the process”*. The training that is given as part of the programme is seen as valuable and useful for other initiatives as well, as one learns what indicators of performance to look for.
- 2.28. Peer Challengers also felt that they could help improve the performance of other authorities by **offering their own experiences** and an external perspective. They felt that because they were working within the sector themselves, they would be trusted to provide constructive feedback to self-assessing authorities: *“I strongly believe in the improvement agenda of local government and think that local government is best place to challenge itself, rather than have outsiders do it.”* Some pointed out elements of good practice that they had introduced within their own authority and would like to see implemented by others as well.
- 2.29. In the case of **elected members**, it was revealed that they were motivated to become Peer Challengers because they would **ensure the political credibility** of the process and felt they had the skills needed to engage with other elected members and senior officials in the authorities they visited. *“Councillors bring the experience of high level political thought. The officers involved do not always have exposure to this area”*. Councillors also reported that they learned a lot about Regulatory Services from both the training and the Peer Challenge visit, and were pleased that this would enable them to take a better look at services in their own authority.
- 2.30. Finally, some Peer Challengers mentioned that the programme offers a **good networking opportunity** and the chance to meet other peers working in the sector. It was also mentioned by an IDeA Peer that for them it represents an additional **source of income**, although none of those interviewed identified this as a key reason for participating. Elected Members receive a fee for participating, although this does not apply to officers taking part.
- 2.31. The only possible deterrent we could find for becoming a Peer Challenger was lack of time. There was a feeling among both Peer Challengers and

interviewed authorities that the Peer Challenge is quite a time-intensive process, particularly for Lead Challengers, which may prevent some authorities from putting their officers forward.

3. THE PEER CHALLENGE PROCESS

- 3.1. This section looks at the effectiveness of the 'inputs, activities and outputs' of the Peer Challenge programme, focusing in particular on the training provided; the Self Assessment process; the Peer Challenge itself; and the Improvement Plan. The section concludes with findings around the cost effectiveness of the programme.

Reflections on the programme overall

- 3.2. The vast majority of interviewees, including Self Assessment team leads, Heads of Service, and Peer Challengers felt that the Peer Challenge programme was **'fit for purpose'** and were happy with the process. People thought it was 'effective,' 'flexible' and 'cost effective' with many believing the process **"took a robust approach to driving improvement"**.

"The whole process is an effective way for an authority to look at what they're doing, look at what they'd like to do better, and identifying the best ways to implement this."

PEER CHALLENGE LEAD

- 3.3. Interviewees reflected that it was a **'healthy' process of supporting service improvements**, and in comparison to other audits and reviews, had the benefits of involving and 'empowering' service staff to highlight areas of improvement, giving the resultant improvement areas ownership and buy-in. The process itself was also found to 'start the ball rolling' on some of the highlighted improvement areas, particularly around internal communications and staff engagement.
- 3.4. In general, the programme **met the expectations** of service managers and Self Assessment teams, in that they felt the process would lead to real service improvements. All expressed that they would recommend (and indeed had recommended) the programme to others, and expressed that they planned to conduct the process again in the future.

Training

Self Assessment training

- 3.5. The vast majority of interviewees spoke very highly of the two-day training for Self Assessment leads, seeing it as enjoyable, clear, fit for purpose, and left Self Assessment team leaders feeling **'well equipped'** and **'more than prepared'** to go on to lead the process on behalf of their service area(s).

"The training was a non-pressurised, relaxed learning environment which gave participants space to talk, reflect and think things through. It was an enjoyable experience"

"The training was excellent. It was interactive, so you get more out of it"

SELF ASSESSMENT LEADS

- 3.6. Benefits of the training included:

- the opportunity to attend with a colleague, which made it easier to cascade the learning to the Self Assessment team and wider service staff. Some interviewees who attended the training were also able to act as advocates and advisors for the process within their departments
- the availability of ongoing support from the trainer whilst undertaking the Peer Challenge process
- the fact that it was free of charge, which facilitated attendance
- the opportunity to network with other leads
- skills gained through the training could be applied in a broader sense

"[It was] great to have the training – really enjoyed this and still talk about this now – I learned some management stuff I may not have otherwise thought of"

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- 3.7. In terms of preparedness to undertake the Peer Challenge process, some explained that the training provided a sound theoretical understanding of the requirements, but felt that **guidance around the practicalities of the process could be strengthened**, for example by including practical tips from others who have undertaken the process in relation to shaping the Self Assessment team and the Self Assessment process itself. However, as part of the training for the second cohort, there was the inclusion of a visit by an experienced Self Assessment lead or Peer Challenger to pass on hints and tips, so this issue may have already been addressed.
- 3.8. Another suggestion was for the training to place **further emphasis on the flexibility of the process**, in terms of the resources needed to be put into the process and how the Excellence Framework is used. For example, we heard how a number of trainees felt 'overwhelmed' by the whole process.

Some would have liked the training to have covered flexibilities around completing the Self Assessment and Improvement Plan.

“The training suggested producing the Improvement Plan in a certain way (focusing on prioritisation), but then the challenge team suggested it would have been better to lay it out differently (timescales). It should be addressed more in training ‘if want to do it your own way, you can’ or example documents could also show alternative ways it could be presented”.

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD

Peer Challenger training

- 3.9. Some Peer Challengers found that their training was repetitive of the Self Assessment training, as the initial first day of training included some cross-over in the project background information for officers who have attended both the Self Assessment and Peer Challenge training. This should be addressed, as many Peer Challengers come from authorities who have already undertaken a Peer Challenge themselves.
- 3.10. Some peers also felt that experience, rather than training, was most important in becoming a good ‘lead’ peer. Particularly, it was felt that in order to become a Challenge Lead, it was important to first experience being a member of the challenge team once or twice in order to learn from the Lead Challengers.
- 3.11. Some Peer Challengers and Challenge Leads had many practical ‘tips’ which they felt would benefit other Peer Challengers if shared, either through the training or through an informal ‘Peer Challenger’ network.
- 3.12. A small number of Peer Challengers felt that because sometimes there could be a time lag between their training and being part of a Peer Challenge team, perhaps they would benefit from a short ‘refresher’ course once a year.
- 3.13. Some of the Peer Challengers felt that the training they received was **inadequate to prepare them for taking a leading role** and felt it should be more tailored to Regulatory Services, as it felt too generic. However, most of those interviewed were of the opinion that the training provided them with useful skills and enabled them to undertake their role as Peer Challengers.

The Self Assessment process and the Excellence Framework

- 3.14. Interviewees generally felt that the Self Assessment process provided a valuable opportunity to ‘take a step back’ and review the Service against an agreed set of excellence criteria.

How did authorities approach the Self Assessment?

- 3.15. Self Assessment teams were typically made up of 6-8 members of staff that were divided into small teams of up to two, each focusing on a specific theme. Some authorities included management staff within this process,

whilst most did not. It was often the case that teams met regularly as a whole Self Assessment team – and in some instances, with wider Service staff - to feedback on progress and compare and corroborate findings. Most leads thought that this process worked well in the main.

- 3.16. Some authorities drew on the input of a 'critical friend' in the process, which was valued in all cases. 'Critical friends' were drawn upon from inside or, on a small number of instances, outside the local authority, but in most cases were outside of the service areas under review. This was seen as beneficial as it brought in an external perspective and was highlighted as particularly helpful in challenging assumptions, highlighting gaps and identifying strengths and areas of good practice: *"Their help was invaluable; they challenged and advised a few of our initial assumptions around the areas for improvement"*.

How useful was the Excellence Framework in undertaking Self Assessment?

- 3.17. On the whole, the Excellence Framework was seen as a **useful, robust, and analytical tool** that was nationally developed and recognised, and provided a broad structure to work within. Interviewees particularly identified the 'flexibility' of the framework in that the same criteria could work for all service areas (Environmental Health, Housing, Trading Standards, Licensing, Animal Welfare, etc).

"It takes a holistic approach – the training was good so we very much understood its purpose".

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD

- 3.18. Nevertheless, there were some common challenges in using the Excellence Framework to guide the Self Assessment.
- 3.19. Several interviewees pointed out that while the training had emphasised that the Framework should not be used in this way, in fact **many teams had used it as a checklist**, and not thought more broadly about what the criteria actually meant. As a result, some felt that their Self Assessment teams had *"wasted time trying to measure against all the criteria"*. Many Self Assessment leads explained how they *"felt obliged to do it properly"* and give the same amount of input to all sections of the Framework, but some explained how their teams were *"scrabbling around to find something to say – strength or area for improvement"* against every criteria.
- 3.20. Related to this, a number of Self Assessment leads from different cohorts (pilots, first and second round completers) felt that a number of the **criteria were repetitive** and they were confused about where their evidence fitted within the four different themes, such as engagement and communications. One suggestion was for these 'over-arching' themes to be reviewed separately from the four theme areas.
- 3.21. Using the Framework in this way often meant that teams ended up with a significant number of action points, with a lot of overlap. As a result, Peer

Challengers often recommended that plans be refined and prioritised. This was often felt to be frustrating as the Self Assessment team had spent a significant amount of time developing such a list and were then asked to cut it right down. Some suggested an initial 'quick and dirty' assessment of priority areas to give the Self Assessment team a tighter framework within which to concentrate efforts on.

- 3.22. Another challenge was that a high proportion of Self Assessment leads found it **difficult to identify strengths and areas of good practice** and innovation. Some had used the template provided to capture examples of excellence, but not all seemed aware of this. Perhaps more fundamentally, consultees often noted that the Framework itself tended to point towards areas for improvement rather than draw out good practice.

"We would have liked to have spent more time on identifying good practice, and presenting it in a better way. We did ourselves down. Would have liked more guidelines and criteria. There's lots of things we do well, but not necessarily innovative or unique. We would like clearer definition on what they expected to see. This is my only concern [about the process]"

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD

- 3.23. The Excellence Framework did not help authorities to understand their progress in relation to their peers, or to understand the distance they would need to travel in order to become 'high performing'. Some interviewees would have liked the Framework to **help them benchmark their performance**.

- 3.24. There was also some **confusion over terminology** used – specifically the definition of 'stakeholders', which came up a number of times.

"Some of the terms used caused a bit of confusion e.g. 'stakeholders' – what's the definition of this? The background paper mentions stakeholders to mean customers and stakeholders, but later asks the question 'how will you respond to customers and stakeholders' – so then seems to differentiate. This could be clearer as we spent a lot of time discussing this"

SELF-ASSESSMENT LEADS (2ND COHORT)

- 3.25. Finally, some (though not all) interviewees found the Framework "too generic" and did not feel that it was sufficiently tailored to specific service areas within Regulatory Services, and in particular, felt that the Framework missed some aspects of Regulatory Services, such as technical service excellence.

"The biggest failing is that the framework doesn't drive out areas of technical service excellence. The framework is very business orientated e.g. managing performance, so technical strengths don't fall out. For example, locally, we are the only place who does National Mosquito Surveillance in partnership with the National Zoological Society. Also, we do Trading Standards Doorstep Crime Rota – which wasn't picked up in SA, but was picked up in challenge site visit"

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD (2ND COHORT)

Benefits of the Self Assessment process

- 3.26. The Self Assessment process was found to be **beneficial to different types of authorities**. For those who were performing well and were aware of their 'weaknesses', it might not have told them anything new, but the benefit of the process for them was in refocusing their attention on issues and prioritising them.
- 3.27. The process was deemed particularly beneficial to new unitary authorities, for those who had recently undergone a re-organisation, and those with relatively weak internal communication processes, as the process was able to bring new staff together as a team, or bring teams together, and enabled them to express their views, empowering them in process. It had also started the ball rolling on some of the areas for improvement in itself – particularly around communication, staff engagement, and understanding how Regulatory Services fit into the Council's corporate objectives.

The Peer Challenge visit

How did the Peer Challenge visit add value to the Self Assessment process?

- 3.28. The Peer Challenge visit clearly **helped to strengthen Improvement Plans**. Peer Challenge teams were often able to identify gaps within the document. In some cases, the challenge team were able to 'dig out' certain issues that those undertaking the Self Assessment had not had the confidence or level of seniority to draw out. For example, some Self Assessment teams shied away from bringing out issues relating to leadership, as they had not wanted to be seen to 'criticise' their superiors.

"The external focus group [that the Peer Challengers held] focused on how to build relationships with external stakeholders and identified staffing issues – staff perceptions and low morale. It gave us some insight into this issue."

HEAD OF SERVICE, LOCAL AUTHORITY

- 3.29. A key benefit of the Peer Challenge team was helping to **identify or verify examples of innovative or good practice**. Self Assessment teams often struggled to do this initially, owing to issues such as under-confidence, no benchmark against which to highlight best practice, and the difficulty in identifying 'what is good' within routine practice.
- 3.30. A major part of the challenge team's function was to **make Improvement Plans SMART**. In almost all case studies, challengers had found the Improvement Plans to be too **lengthy, repetitive and too ambitious** in terms of timescales. The challenge team therefore helped to prioritise and focus the improvements.

"At first, our Improvement Plan had 35 points. The department had wanted it to be transparent. So when the Self Assessment team identified an issue it [was automatically] fed into the Improvement Plan. The external challengers

felt the Improvement Plan was confused with no focus. At that point, I didn't realise you could delete things that weren't crucial. The Improvement Plan was reduced to seven points"

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD (1ST COHORT)

- 3.31. In a small number of cases, challengers had recommended ensuring targets linked up to corporate objectives – although this did not seem to be a consistent message across Peer Challenges.
- 3.32. A benefit identified was that of the Peer Challenge team being *real* peers – fresh from other authorities and bringing with them a **real understanding of some of the current challenges** that authorities and service areas are facing at present. This was thought to be a real benefit of the Peer Challenge programme compared to other auditing and review processes.

Additional value of the Peer Challenge visit

- 3.33. All consultees thought that the Peer Challenge visit added value beyond strengthening Improvement Plans.
- 3.34. Many saw it as bringing '**external validation**' and a '**reality check**' to the Self Assessment process, without which the process was an internal viewpoint prone to bias, ambiguity and immeasurability.

"The challenge visit was very beneficial. We knew of some of the issues, but this enabled them to be brought into sharper focus. And things we weren't aware of came to light. This will help us hugely in our service planning".

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD

"When you read the Self Assessment, there's as many questions as there are answers, the site visit is an important aspect. You could conduct interviews over the phone, but body language is everything. The real benefit of the Peer Challenge programme is going in to see how they operate"

LEAD CHALLENGER

- 3.35. Some authorities said this **verification gave them the 'drive' to move forward** with the Improvement Plan, whereas if perhaps this did not exist, it would be tempting to put identified improvements 'on the backburner'.

"The Self Assessment is our own ideas. Although [the challenge team] identified nothing additional, they did want us to focus more on certain things. It gives us the drive to move forward with our priority improvements, where if it was a list of our own ideas, it wouldn't be given the same priority"

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD

- 3.36. In all cases, the external visit was felt to **add to the 'kudos'** of the process – it was seen as giving the Improvement Plan more importance and credibility to an otherwise internal review.

- 3.37. It was also found that having external visitors helped to **bring in interest and engagement from the wider Council**. Most Peer Challenge teams asked to speak with senior Council staff over the two days of the visit, which often included the Chief Executive, Senior Cabinet Members, and Directors – bringing in senior interest and **raising the profile** of the Service under review. This was found to be particularly beneficial if there was positive verbal feedback from the challenge team at the end of the two days to senior staff – ‘it puts Regulatory Services on their radar’.

“[The Peer Challengers] weren’t here to audit the Self Assessment, but to add value. Getting an outside opinion is helpful, as Self Assessment is staff opinions. It gives the Improvement Plan added importance and credibility. Everyone’s bought in [to the process] anyway, but does look good if you’re getting external people in”.

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD

- 3.38. For some authorities, their ‘critical friend’ was able to help highlight best practice and other authorities were confident enough to do so themselves, but **having the time to discuss good practice during the visit was seen as beneficial** - giving the Service staff time to ‘step back and reflect’ on what they were doing well. The opportunity to discuss good practice, with external verification, was found to **help raise staff morale**, and again, raise the profile of the Service through the challenge team’s verbal feedback to Senior Council staff at the end of the visit.

- 3.39. The evaluation found that the Lead Challenger has a very important and quite intensive role in terms of coordinating and shaping the Peer Challenge visit. One Peer Challenge lead explained that on top of the 3-4 days work of a Peer Challenger, there is an extra two days on top of this for the Lead Challenger. As Peer Challenge leads require additional skills, this may have implications for the training package, although it was noted by a number of Peer Challengers that the best way to learn is to first be a peer and ‘shadow’ a Peer Challenge lead.

“Being a Lead challenger is intensive – have to coordinate everything, sort out the timetable, write vast majority of feedback report, bringing together the team who have never met before and managing the dynamics. Then after – liaise around draft report before leave the site visit [nice for them to have something before we leave] then incorporate LA’s comments”

LEAD CHALLENGER

Difficulties for Peer Challengers

- 3.40. Peer Challengers highlighted some challenging aspects of their role, including:
- communicating the ‘challenge’ in a way that does not make the authority feel defensive
 - the ability to effectively analyse the data and information collected over the 2 days and the time available to do so

- keeping officers focused on strategic challenges rather than just operational and process issues
- pushing authorities to discuss service effectiveness and identify improvements needed in order to improve services for customers

3.41. The main challenge described by Peer Challengers was timing. It was felt that there was **insufficient time allocated for preparation** before the visit and most of those interviewed spent more time on it than had been expected. Documentation that needed to be reviewed before the visit was extensive and a lot of time was spent by Peer Challenge Leads on logistical organisation.

3.42. One of the main challenges is that the documentation from the assessed authority usually **arrived quite late and/or was incomplete**. This meant that the Peer Challenger needed to chase the authority to get all the information that they needed. Also, some of the documents that were sent were not entirely relevant.

“One of the challenges is the amount of paperwork that you have to read prior to the visit, they send everything they have and it’s up to you to decide how relevant any of it is.”

LEAD CHALLENGER

3.43. During some of the visits, the Peer Challengers were **unable to meet all the people** they wanted to. Sometimes this was because senior management were ‘too busy’ to meet the Peer Challenge team, which was singled out as particularly frustrating by interviewees. Nevertheless, all challengers found the staff they met helpful and none criticised the way they had been received by the assessed authority.

3.44. Some lead challengers commented that **“some peers don’t really read the character and the profile** of the LA before they challenge.” However, it should be emphasised that the Lead Challengers were in general happy with the teams they led.

Improving Peer Challenge visits

3.45. In the main, Self Assessment leads felt that their own Peer Challenge visit went well. Many interviewees suggested that if there is good self discipline by both the host authority and the Peer Challenge team, the process will run smoothly.

3.46. Where problems did occur, this was often associated with **slippage of timescales**. It was often for Self Assessment teams to pull together the background and supporting documentation for the Peer Challenge team within agreed timescales. However, if deadlines slipped at this stage, this had a knock on effect for the whole process, as then the Peer Challenge team would receive documents late and would therefore send requests through in terms of who they wanted to interview over the two days late in the day,

which would then put more pressure on the Self Assessment team in preparing for this.

- 3.47. The likelihood of timeframe slippage was recognised by all and there was empathy around this on both sides. It was therefore suggested that extending timescales or having a minimum requirement for the amount of preparation time before site visits would benefit Self Assessment teams and Peer Challengers and allow for any slippage that might occur.
- 3.48. A small number of local authorities also expressed that they would have liked more clarity from the Peer Challenge team on logistics and facilities required, for example the number of rooms needed for interviews.
- 3.49. It was felt by some that it would be beneficial to try and **match peers from similar authorities** (e.g. unitaries) and from within the same service areas as the focus of the review (e.g. Animal Welfare, Licensing). However, consultees understood the challenges that the central team faced around this, i.e. that the pool of challengers may not be big enough to make this possible in all cases.
- 3.50. From both the perspective of local authorities and Peer Challengers, **two days was not always seen as a sufficient amount of time** to conduct the site visit, particularly for larger authorities focussing on two or more areas for their Self Assessment. It was felt that there could be more flexibility around this – some thought two and a half days would have worked better, while for some authorities one and a half days would suffice. Others felt that telephone interviews outside the 2 day site visit could have helped.
- 3.51. Within the visit itself, consultees sometimes felt that there should be **more opportunities to discuss and share experiences** and working practices. Self Assessment leads' expectations of the challenge visit often included having the chance to share concerns, challenges and working practices with peers, but the schedule of the site visit is often far too busy to allow for any such discussions to take place. For example, one Self Assessment lead recalled the challenge team having a 15 minute slot to interview three people, another spoke of the Self Assessment team working from 8:00am until 6:00pm without a break in order to 'fit all the interviews in'.
- 3.52. There was found to be not much discussion about the connection between Improvement Plans and how these would **translate into service improvements for communities**. Some contended that the Improvement Plan would 'inadvertently' lead to improvements for communities, but the mechanisms through which this would occur was unclear to authorities and had often not been discussed during the Self Assessment process or the Peer Challenge itself.
- 3.53. On the logistical arrangements of the site visits, some expressed the importance of spending a portion of time at the start of the two days for welcomes and introductions, stating the purpose of the visit and laying down some of the ground rules, such as outlining that the process is not an inspection and the importance of confidentiality within focus groups and interviews. For example, there was a case where internal staff did not know

what was going on and another example of breach of confidentiality. This points to a lack of communication, as it is something that is covered in the Self Assessment training.

Improvement Plans

What did Improvement Plans focus on?

- 3.54. An analysis of Improvement Plans from the pilots and first round of completers found that improvements in the main focus on Excellence Framework themes 2 and 3 – with a **particular focus on ‘resource, activity and people management.’** The most consistently highlighted improvement area was found to be communications.
- 3.55. The table below illustrates this, and interviews with second cohort completers reinforce this commonality. When asked to identify key improvements, the vast **majority highlighted communications** (internal and external), engagement with stakeholders, and electronic management and IT systems.

Themes for improvement identified in a sample of Improvement Plans					
	Theme 1: Leadership, strategies and collaboration	Theme 2: Customer and community focus and engagement	Theme 3: Resource, activity and people management	Theme 4: Achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably	Total
First Round Peer Challenge Programme Completers					
1	8 (26.7%)	8 (26.7%)	7 (23.3%)	7 (23.3%)	30
2	4 (28.6%)	2 (14.3%)	6 (42.9%)	2 (14.3%)	14
3	5 (16.1%)	7 (22.6%)	15 (48.4%)	4 (12.9%)	31
4	3 (13%)	6 (26.1%)	10 (43.5%)	4 (17.4%)	23
5	3 (15%)	4 (20%)	8 (40%)	5 (25%)	20
6	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	0	5
<i>Total (Average)</i>	<i>25 (20.3%)</i>	<i>28 (22.8%)</i>	<i>48 (39%)</i>	<i>22 (17.9%)</i>	<i>123</i>
Environmental Health Pilots					
1	6 (25%)	7 (29.2%)	6 (25%)	5 (20.8%)	24
2	2 (16.7%)	1 (8.3%)	8 (66.7%)	1 (8.3%)	12
3	2 (7.7%)	10 (38.5%)	9 (34.6%)	5 (19.2%)	26
4	3 (30%)	3 (30%)	3 (30%)	1 (10%)	10
5	8 (26.7%)	6 (20%)	7 (23.3%)	9 (30%)	30
<i>Total (Average)</i>	<i>21 (20.6%)</i>	<i>27 (26.5%)</i>	<i>33 (32.4%)</i>	<i>21 (20.6%)</i>	<i>102</i>
<i>TOTAL FOR BOTH</i>	<i>46 (20.4%)</i>	<i>55 (24.4%)</i>	<i>81 (36%)</i>	<i>43 (19.1%)</i>	<i>225</i>

3.56. Common areas for improvement included:

- **Internal communications:** involving staff in service planning processes and bringing teams (within Regulatory Services) together to share what each is doing
- **Senior management and Councillor engagement:** clarifying Councillors' roles in the Service and re-engaging with senior management and portfolio holders
- **Stakeholder involvement** in service planning process and delivery
- **Consultation with customers:** providing customers with consistent information on the website (e.g. service response times); customer surveys and closing the feedback loop

3.57. Relatively **fewer improvements were identified under leadership, strategies and collaboration**. Within this theme, even fewer improvements are recorded around the performance of leaders. The challenges identified with focusing on these improvement areas include:

- the role and seniority of the staff completing the Self Assessment – in the main, Self Assessment was delegated to front line officers and team leaders who, understandably, would place more emphasis on issues affecting them personally and that they better understand (which are found in Themes 2 and 3)

“Overall, we covered the four themes [of the Excellence Framework]. With the ‘Leadership’ theme, [the Self Assessment team] looked at this as far as we could but there’s a limit on what we can comment on.”

HEAD OF SERVICE

- those developing Self Assessments did not always feel comfortable in ‘criticising’ their superiors, particularly when they would be presenting this judgement to the same leaders for approval. In light of this, involving senior members of staff in the Self Assessment process was seen as important by some.

“We received open and honest feedback (during challenge visit) particularly about relationship between Senior Manager and AD. We highlighted ‘closer ties between Management Team and AD’, in feedback. This wasn’t initially in their Improvement Plan.”

LEAD CHALLENGER

3.58. Improvement Plans **tended not to be strongly outcome-focused**. Improvement Plans typically involved setting up activities that were ‘expected’ to lead to improved service outcomes, although it was not always clear how improved outcomes for customers would be achieved.

3.59. Related to this, Self Assessment leads and Peer Challengers highlighted the challenge of **measuring whether improvements had been achieved**.

“Some things were more measurable than others... e.g. improve relationship with Members... how do you measure that? [you can measure] frequency and quality of communication with cabinet member through briefings, but can only measure outcome by speaking with cabinet member and asking them how things have improved.”

PEER CHALLENGER

- 3.60. A number of interviewees felt there should be some **level of ‘follow up’** after the final drafting of the Improvement Plan. Suggestions included inviting the Lead Challenger back to visit the authority after 12-18 months to review progress against the Improvement Plan; in fact, one Challenge Lead had already been asked to do so by an authority, which he had accepted. Another suggestion included using the core Self Assessment team to conduct an in-depth study of progress made against the Improvement Plan 12 months after the challenge visit.

“If the Peer Challenge is to work and be effective, I would suggest that there be continued support for the implementation of the Improvement Plan. So the process should not end with the visit but someone from the peer team should continue to be involved, so that the Improvement Plan doesn’t just fade away. It would make sense to have an additional 3 days a year to check on progress. But overall, I’d like to say again, this is a very good process and I think it’s highly useful and should be undertaken by more authorities”.

LEAD CHALLENGER

- 3.61. The vast majority of Self Assessment leads interviewed were **keen to undertake the process again** in 2-3 years time to refresh their Improvement Plan, albeit in a different guise. Self Assessment leads were keen that the process remains flexible enough to reflect any changes that are made within local authorities and specific service areas, and many explained how they would want to ‘focus in’ on specific aspects of their service areas the next time they were to undertake the programme.

- 3.62. One Self Assessment lead specifically highlighted the difficulties associated with the structure of the Self Assessment and Improvement Plan in terms of losing the ‘thread’ of evidence between the two documents. Although this was only highlighted by one Self Assessment lead, it was also something the evaluation team felt could have the potential to slow down implementation, specifically in the context of small teams (e.g. Districts with low capacity), and in terms of reorganisation of teams, where knowledge could be lost.

“The evidence base is summarised into the Self Assessment report which is fed into the Improvement Plan. But then you need to go back to the evidence base and unpick it to inform the delivery of the Improvement Plan. If the Peer Challenge process helped to order that evidence well, then getting from the Improvement Plan to the delivery could be quicker”

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD

Resource implications and value for money

Resource implications for participating local authorities

- 3.63. Self Assessment leads and Heads of Service all agreed that although a good portion of staff time and commitment needs to be invested in the Peer Challenge process, it was **cost effective** and **good value for money**, in that the benefits (or perceived benefits) outweigh the required resources.

"The benefits far outweigh what you put in. There are no direct costs, it's all staff time. It takes a fair amount of people's time, but the document you get at the end is worth more than cost to get there."

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD

- 3.64. The amount of time as a team spent on preparing the Self Assessment, Improvement Plan, involvement in Peer Challenge and follow up for the Self Assessment varied across authorities and departments from a total of ten person days (for a small County Council) up to 40 person days (for a Metropolitan Borough Council).
- 3.65. One interviewee summed up their team's time: *"As lead I spent 10 full days and the team of 8 spent about 5 days each, and our implementation lead spent 7-8 days. So it requires a strong commitment, but in terms of value for money it is very good indeed – very positive"*.
- 3.66. As many Self Assessment leads explained – 'the more you put in, the more you get out', but this also perhaps supports the need for the 'flexibility' of the tool to be reaffirmed through the training and guidance. Some Self Assessment leads explained that they were 'overwhelmed' by the amount of preparation needed, and some felt 'obliged' to cover everything in the Excellence Framework. Many Self Assessment leads from the second cohort explained that if they were to do it again, they would do it very differently – often stating that they would conduct it in a much more focused way.

"We have thought about this. We probably wouldn't do it the same way as we did it before, but would want to do some kind of programme to refresh in 2-3 years time, as context will be so much different by then after general election".

HEAD OF SERVICE

- 3.67. While all interviewees felt that the process provided good value for money, we could gain no examples of quantifiable benefits (e.g. efficiency savings or increased productivity) as a result of the Peer Challenge. This is not to say that no savings or gains had been achieved - in fact many of the outcomes discussed in the next section might lead to these, at least in the longer term - but no authorities were in a position to be able to evidence or quantify these.

Resource implications for Peer Challengers

- 3.68. Although Peer Challengers did some of the preparation for the Peer Challenge visit in the allocated work time, **most also spent a number of hours of their 'own time' preparing**. They felt particularly "*overwhelmed when the documentation arrived late*". Peer Challengers estimated that preparation took two-three days in total, which included the desk top review, meeting up with challenge team to compare notes (including travel), and a further two days for the challenge visit. Elected Member Peer Challengers were paid for their time, up to a maximum of two days for the visit and one day of preparation; most did not feel this was enough.
- 3.69. Lead Challengers estimated on average that they spent two-four days on preparation, including the desk review, developing a timetable and liaising and negotiating with the local authority, and a further day following the review to write the report.

"Being a lead challenger is intensive – have to coordinate everything, sort out the timetable, write vast majority of feedback report, bringing together the team who have never met before and managing the dynamics. Then after – liaising around the draft report before leaving the site visit then finalizing the report. So it's not without cost, but we're due to have a Peer Challenge soon and four people will be giving up their time, so it's a trade off...this is what's needed if we want people involved who understand how the land lies".

CHALLENGE LEAD

4. PROGRESS TOWARDS OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Summary

- 4.1. The evaluation team conducted eighteen outcome focused interviews (in nine authorities) with the first cohort of Peer Challenge completers (including some of the Environmental Health pilots). We have also supplemented some of this research with interview data from the in-depth case studies of seven authorities from the second cohort to understand some of the mechanisms of implementation of the Improvement Plans.
- 4.2. Overall, the evaluation has found it is still too early to identify the long term outcomes and impacts of the Peer Challenge process. While there are some examples of short, medium and long term service improvements, the **majority of authorities are still working on implementing the activities** described in their Improvement Plans. This means the common perception amongst authorities completing a Peer Challenge was that implementation will lead to service transformation but it is difficult at this stage to evidence outcomes for customers, communities, businesses and staff. A significant amount of authorities also demonstrated **a limited understanding of an outcome-focused approach**.
- 4.3. In terms of impacts the programme can demonstrate **some positive promotion of self regulated improvement** within the Regulatory Services sector. This is evidenced through outcomes regarding knowledge transfer, the validation of service strengths and future support to the programme amongst participants.
- 4.4. This section therefore explores the distance travelled regarding the implementation of improvements and then identifies the initial outcomes (service improvements), wider benefits and impacts with regards to the promotion of self directed improvement within the programme to date.

Implementing Improvement Plans

- 4.5. Interviews with completing authorities showed that in the majority of cases, the **Improvement Plan was being implemented with some progress on actions**. Indeed, the commitment toward implementation amongst participating authorities was very clearly articulated and identified as a result of increased ownership of the improvement process by staff and managers. Some participants also revealed that because the Peer Challenge visit had assisted participating services to validate the need for change, they now have the mandate to act upon the recommendations. As one interviewee explained, *“the plan means a lot to the Service now, we put a lot of hard work into the Self Assessment and the peer visits, we want to see this through into real changes – we have to”*.

- 4.6. Nearly all participants interviewed highlighted that their Improvement Plan is being (or has been) **translated into an action plan for change** with dedicated timescales and opportunities for review. This was seen to be a positive step to maintaining the Service's enthusiasm for improvement. Some authorities are also making a clear link to measuring progress through performance management structures. Only one of our sample said that due to limited staff capacity the implementation of their plan would be deferred to the next financial year (starting April 2011).
- 4.7. Overall, there were three approaches to the implementation of Improvement Plans amongst participating authorities:
- **Aligning the Improvement Plan to business or Service plans**, and cascading into team plans and individual development plans: *"As part of our ISO 9001 accreditation, we are going through our annual management review, and will be building improvements into the service plan and training and development plan. From that, it should translate into people's PDPs (appraisals)."*
 - **Making the Improvement Plan part of a performance framework being monitored at senior management meetings**: *"We have already developed an action plan, with timescales, and quarterly review. The management team is responsible for this plan and have actions against each improvement so someone is responsible for each of the four Excellence Framework themes".*
 - **Setting up a delivery group** which would meet monthly or quarterly to review progress of their action plan (a minority took this approach): *"Most of our actions have been co-ordinated by the Performance Challenge Group (PSG). This group involves a mix of staff and managers and was set up prior to the Peer Challenge visit. The improvements are a (monthly) agenda item at those meetings".*
- 4.8. Not all local authorities had made formal links between the Improvement Plan and other performance management procedures, however. Two interviewees from the sample described the Improvement Plan as a "standalone document", and while management staff were monitoring its implementation, it had not been mainstreamed into other staff members' objectives and priorities. This may make the potential for long term change difficult.

Measuring change

- 4.9. The interviews suggested that local authorities feel more comfortable monitoring the activities proposed in the Improvement Plan (i.e. whether the proposed improvements had been achieved) than measuring the outcomes that might be achieved through making these improvements.
- 4.10. This is further evidenced by a desk review of a sample of first cohort (completed) Improvement Plans, which showed that while some included outcome measures and showed how these would be collected (e.g. changes in staff awareness of energy efficiency, measured through annual staff

survey and 'responsible use of energy'; business satisfaction with services measured through regular surveys), most proposed measurements were indicators of activity rather than outcomes.

- 4.11. A possible reason for this trend may be to do with the layout of the Improvement Plan, which may be indirectly supporting the measurement of 'progress against activities' (outputs) rather than progress against outcomes. Since all Improvement Plans must provide details of the actions that need to be taken to achieve each improvement and the possible ways to measure progress, it may be the case that only those 'improvements' which can be measured as activities are being actioned.
- 4.12. One authority (a new unitary), however, did point to a desire to measure performance on its Improvement Plan in relation to outcomes using the **LBRO outcomes toolkit**. The Head of Service stated that, *"we have no desire to performance measure the Improvement Plan, we want to see changes on the ground for our customers and stakeholders. How are we improving the Service for them? We are moving towards this model of working and will use the LBRO outcomes toolkit to implement and measure our plan. Key outcomes for us are improved staff morale and a greater profile for our Service as result of improved prioritisation in our work."*

Links to corporate objectives

- 4.13. In most cases, **connections between service Improvement Plans and corporate objectives were not explicit**. Nearly all interviewees found it difficult to link their action plans to wider objectives within their Local Area Agreements (LAA), Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAAs) and national indicators. Participants also found it hard to explain how their Improvement Plans made direct connections to local outcomes for relevant sectors such as health, the environment or community safety.
- 4.14. Interviewees often "assumed the LAA was relevant" or that the Improvement Plan was "complementary" to wider objectives. Others described national indicators which they "thought" they linked into. However when probed into the specifics of such statements they were unable to identify the direct links to localised delivery planning. This may be due to two factors. The first is that these Services are still in the process of identifying their links to corporate objectives and cannot describe them at this stage.

<p>A Peer Challenged authority – seeking to make links to the LAA</p>
<p>Does your Improvement Plan make any links to wider corporate objectives? "We are in the process of looking at this, we want to be more relevant to corporate targets – but we cover such a broad area of LAA targets, we are unclear about what to focus on, we work in public protection do we say we contribute to public health, the environment, public safety, safeguarding – which one?"</p> <p>What is the plan? "We would like to get our suite of indicators noticed, get this on the table in our authority. So for example, we have a strand of work in health and nutrition – we've inherited a food advisory unit (providing food hygiene training to</p>

the public) when that ceased to be cost effective we have tried to involve the PCT's public health department to support the training. We have secured joint funding for School nutrition and nutritional awareness. The training aspect is our skill set. We will soon be able to demonstrate a direct link to the LAA priority on improved nutrition, but cannot say this now."

- 4.15. The second factor may be that the participating Service is experiencing some level of isolation from the wider LAA planning process. For example a number of interviewees from district authorities said that their LAA targets were *"quite imposed and don't match our service priorities – we are very much on the periphery within the local authority"*. Others did not see themselves *"as services which merit LAA grant funding"*. This may point to wider difficulties in terms of organisational structures (i.e. relationships between two tier authorities).

Barriers and challenges to implementing plans

- 4.16. The evaluation also asked authorities that have undergone a Peer Challenge to identify the main challenges to the implementation of their Improvement Plans. These were described as follows:
- **Resource constraints (finance and staffing):** Specifically, financing staff to work to deliver the Improvement Plan: *"I think finance is and will be a real obstacle. If we had more money and staff we could have done a lot more with the Improvement Plan. We were short of staff when we took the Peer Challenge on."* Similarly, *"We have lot of great actions that need to be completed but if the money's not there, they will be stalled. We need to make 20% cuts across the authority as a whole... our biggest barrier would be losing staff to actually make those improvements"*.
 - **Wider structural changes within the host authority:** Unitary authorities mentioned that they have a particular challenge for implementation due to their current organisational context, as within these authorities regulatory functions have been merged. The process of *"moving to a unitary Council can delay some improvements as we wait to settle down, it's a cultural change, which requires a change in the way we work together."*
 - **Wider organisational systems:** A few of the Services interviewed also highlighted that implementation can be hampered by overarching local authority systems which may take longer to change. For example, some mentioned that they could not improve their IT communication systems because the wider local authority had not invested in a sophisticated IT system. Two authorities also said progress had been slowed because larger scale improvement programmes with different timescales were also underway within their organisations. Both of these authorities stated that improvements highlighted through the Peer Challenge were feeding into these larger scale (transformation and 'systems thinking') programmes, and that it did not make sense to implement the Improvement Plans in isolation.

- **Staff engagement:** Services expressed a need to maintain staff motivation for improvement activities. As one interviewee explained: *"a challenge for us is if staff become disengaged in the improvement process, because of changes to their job roles. There has to be equal ownership, training and understanding of why the plan is important."* In some other areas the reasons for slower progress was less clear. There was a sense that in one of the Environmental Health pilots progress had stalled, possibly because of staff changes, to the extent that the Improvement Plan was no longer seen as a major driver for change.
- **Involving senior staff:** Some Services also saw long term senior level buy-in to their Improvement Plans as a challenge. *"We'll have to do what we can to involve senior managers and elected members more in our actions.... We can't make too many demands though especially as we are not seen as a priority"*.

Progress towards outcomes

- 4.17. The evaluation research found that nearly all the first cohort of authorities that had undergone a Peer Challenge were still implementing their Improvement Plans. The common perception amongst these authorities was that implementation would lead to service transformation but **it is difficult at this stage to evidence outcomes for customers, communities, businesses and staff**. While the evaluation team did push for examples from authorities on progress toward outcomes, a significant amount of interviewees had **a limited understanding of potential outcomes external to the Service**. This may reflect a wider gap within the Regulatory Services sector regarding outcome-focused approaches.
- 4.18. Interviews therefore revealed that authorities have implemented a mix of short or 'quick win' service improvements as well as medium term changes. In the section below, these levels of service improvements have been sectioned into their relevant Excellence Framework themes and identified against any 'anticipated outcomes'. This may give the Project Board some indication as to the 'distance travelled' by Peer Challenged services.

SHORT TERM: 'The quick wins'

- 4.19. Nearly all authorities highlighted that they had implemented some short term service improvements or 'quick wins' as a result of their Improvement Plans. These were usually focused around communication, stakeholder mapping and improved intelligence on need. Addressing these would seek to *"address the improvements identified by staff around silo working or poor communication"*.

LEADERSHIP, STRATEGIES AND COLLABORATION

- **Improvements to internal communications:** For example, one authority had started using Microsoft SharePoint to support online collaboration and as an information store: *"It's a forum which allows staff*

to find answers to questions... lets management notify staff of new procedures, etc., introduces staff and lets them know who they need to speak to on different issues." Another authority highlighted that, "we have added agenda items and terms of reference to team meetings so teams can exchange information, to reduce silos. We also have regular departmental briefings and cross departmental training."

CUSTOMER AND COMMUNITY FOCUS AND ENGAGEMENT

- **Review of current partnerships:** A few Services explained that they undertook a review of their existing community partnerships to see if they are still fit for purpose and identify any gaps across the local authority, public health, consumer groups, businesses and utilities.
- **Managing customer expectations:** Two authorities have also established "*service standards*", which have been clarified across the board and published on websites; they explain matters such as in how many days the public can expect responses to letters or emails, how long it will take to respond to cases, etc.
- **Linking external communications:** A number of authorities have improved their communications with customers by making links between the local authority customer contact database and the Regulatory Service database, to create a joined up approach and enhance efficiency in referrals. For those services that had identified good customer service mechanisms in their Improvement Plans, the priority was to "*not be complacent about responding to new needs*".

RESOURCE, ACTIVITY AND PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

- **Improve intelligence on the needs of local businesses:** Some authorities have sought to increase their knowledge of local food premises and wider businesses in terms of health and safety. These improvements were seen to "*develop a good database so we can risk assess and intelligently enforce good practice on the businesses that need our support the most*". Similarly, another authority had "*developed links with key groups including town centre forums, business groups, chamber of commerce, trade associations, etc. To stop businesses feeling removed, to explain we are not just about enforcement*". This is an opportunity to offer support and assistance to business, and enforcement when appropriate. The anticipated outcome was to "*be more supportive of self regulatory activity*".

MEDIUM TERM: SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS TO PRACTICE

- 4.20. Some authorities also pointed to the implementation of improvements which were medium term, and allowed Services to "*change the way we work*" with regards to customers, service planning and staff training.

LEADERSHIP, STRATEGIES AND COLLABORATION

- **Collaborative service planning:** This was a popular Service improvement for participating authorities. For example, *"The Peer Challenge fundamentally changed the way we do service planning. We used to use a top down methodology, which has been turned around. We now have a series of away days and teams meetings which feed into service planning. Service plans are now more realistic, achievable and more relevant to the community, and staff feel empowered – they bring their own ideas. It has improved staff morale, used to feel dictatorial. It's also a way of bringing teams together, building bridges"*. The outcome of such an activity was perceived to assist staff in prioritising their workloads toward Service and corporate objectives.
- **Elected member involvement in service planning:** A few authorities also explained that they had taken steps to include their elected members in their service planning processes in order to seek their 'buy in' to the process. This improvement was seen to lead to a raised profile of the Service and aid its integration within the local authority.

CUSTOMER AND COMMUNITY FOCUS AND ENGAGEMENT

- **Improvements to customer engagement:** Two authorities had set up focus groups with service users to generate feedback on services (although none seemed to be trying to engage 'non-users' as yet); one of these was providing monthly briefings on Regulatory Services; and one further authority was going through a process of 'mapping' how service users engaged with the Service in order to see how accessible services were to different groups. Another Environmental Health Service was holding 'best practice' seminars with food premises. One interviewee explained, *"Certainly my work has become more community based - we get out and talk to people, and we realise why it's important"*.

RESOURCE, ACTIVITY AND PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

- **Restructure of specialist teams:** A few authorities have used the Improvement Plan to restructure teams so they are more aligned to community strategy priorities. *"Our licensing function was previously undervalued, so wanted to highlight how it contributes to Community strategy through mini restructure. It's brought Licensing on a more level footing with other services."*
- **Staff training:** for example, one of the Environmental Health pilots had put in place a programme of customer care training, which had since been taken up by Trading Standards and Licensing as well, *"so the outcomes [of the Peer Challenge] are spreading"*; another had put in place training around technical issues. Another authority explained that *"We have implemented a rolling training policy. We have training days across the department, e.g. safety, licensing, legal practices, - across Food, Health and Safety and Pollution. We needed to cascade learning and spread knowledge across the organisation"*. The anticipated outcome is "a

coherent service for customers, joint working and when dealing with cases".

EFFECTIVE, SUSTAINABLE OUTCOMES

- **Changing the way resources are being used:** Some authorities have used their Improvement Plans to reorganise their Regulatory Services into one brand. For example one authority had started to address "*silo working*" highlighted in the Peer Challenge and had since "rebranded" as 'Regulatory Services' to try and address this. Since then, there had been some joint working, for example between pollution and licensing officers.
- **Reviewed enforcement processes:** One authority had taken significant steps toward making enforcement (licensing) links to health outcomes. "*A good example is around our joint work on alcohol sales to juveniles, we changed our approach to reviewing licensed premises to accommodate a PCT campaign called 'keep it safe' around the Christmas city centre party scene. So there's an integrated enforcement approach - people can come into the city, enjoy themselves, get home safely, not drink too much (restricted sales) and get looked after if they do*".

LONG TERM: Outcome focused improvements

- 4.21. A minority of authorities identified longer term improvements which would lead to significant alignment between Service priorities and local priorities (outcomes). Examples included changes to the way the Service is 'valued' either through budgetary efficiency or co-designed services.

LEADERSHIP, STRATEGIES AND COLLABORATION

- **Building evidence on the links between Regulatory Services and wider corporate objectives:** "*We wanted to actually evidence how we were contributing to the sustainable community strategy. We embarked on an exercise to map what we do against the community strategy themes and now have evidence of how we contribute. This makes sure projects don't go on in isolation and that they take our services into account earlier.*"

CUSTOMER AND COMMUNITY FOCUS AND ENGAGEMENT

- **Engagement of key stakeholders:** Two of the Environmental Health pilots had developed a stakeholder database and had put in place a new marketing strategy. These authorities were all intending to use customer feedback to a greater extent to shape services. One authority had even identified a need for engagement with local BME communities, and had developed a project to improve Health and Safety for newly established BME businesses.

RESOURCE, ACTIVITY AND PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

- **Improved the staff Performance Development Framework.** Some authorities made improvements to staff appraisal systems: *"We wanted to begin to use the framework to consistently drive in targets and robustly monitor progress against our priority work areas. The targets are agreed by a committee, so everyone knows what we're doing and working towards"*.

EFFECTIVE, SUSTAINABLE OUTCOMES

- **Addressing efficiency and value for money:** A number of authorities also revealed that they had *"taken significant steps towards aligning their Regulatory Services budgets to the service plans"* or *"Financial and budgetary info has been devolved to team leader level"*. This was to allow for more understanding and control of budgets to deal with the impact of future financial constraints.

Wider outcomes and benefits

Raising the profile of Regulatory Services

- 4.22. Evaluation interviews suggested that in the short term, Peer Challenges were generally effective in raising the profile of Regulatory Services within local authorities. This had been achieved both by engaging senior staff and elected members in the process, and by having a "written document for all to see," setting out the outcomes of the process. One interviewee perceived that this raised profile had 'safeguarded' the Service from budget cuts that were affecting other parts of the local authority.

"All services are being reviewed [but] in quite an ad-hoc way. Our Service was excused from this because of the Peer Challenge and its outcomes. The Chief Executive of the Council really engaged with the Peer Challenge and identified not only what a good process it is, but gave us credit for volunteering to undertake it. We've been recognised for doing something when we weren't forced into it, and we've been left alone amidst a lot of budget cuts."

HEAD OF SERVICE

- 4.23. The Peer Challenge process and implementation phase has also led to some change in the **relationships between Regulatory Services and their elected members**. *"There's a better understanding of what we're here to deliver now, amongst politicians and community members. [How do you know this?] Some of the survey data we get back has helped to show people the value of what we do, and this has helped when we're challenged as part of the budget setting process. Cabinet system means you only work with one member - now we've got our new publicity protocol it's a bit of a broader church in terms of who knows about what we do."*

- 4.24. In another area, the Peer Challenge had led to Regulatory Services being seen as an example of best practice in relation to preparation for Investors in People accreditation, and some of the work that had gone into the Peer Challenge was being used as a model for other parts of the directorate. This profile also results in changed reporting mechanisms, for example *“because we have corporate director support we can report on our progress on the Improvement Plan at corporate level.”*
- 4.25. However, two authorities explained that elected member and Chief Executive involvement had not changed. As a result, they were still focused on ‘higher policy priorities’, which related to the needs of national regulators and central government policy directives – such as those for crime reduction or child protection - many of which are reflected within LAA and LSP priorities.

Staff motivation

- 4.26. Another key perceived benefit was in improving staff motivation. Peer Challenges involved a range of staff at different levels, and gave them an opportunity to identify improvements needed. This was seen by several interviewees to be an empowering process and in this sense the Peer Challenge was contrasted very favourably in comparison to audit processes. Interviewees also suggested that the Peer Challenge had provided staff with the opportunity to discuss issues that had been *“rumbling under the surface”* in a formal manner. Staff morale was also seen to increase when these ‘rumblings’ were addressed within the Improvement Plan.
- 4.27. The process of “external verification” of successes and good practices was also thought to have helped improve staff morale. One authority described how they had *“widely circulated the Peer Challenge team’s comments, so that staff can see that their contribution is valued”*. One interviewee went on further to explain that, *“the fact that our Chief Executive had come to our Peer Challenge feedback meeting and wanted to support the improvements that we had suggested meant a lot. We felt very positive about change and it cleared up any staff cynicism”*.

Team cohesion

- 4.28. Another wider benefit of the Peer Challenge programme has been its role in promoting more cohesive Regulatory Services teams. A number of Self Assessment leads commented that the process of gathering evidence for the Self Assessment had created a mandate for *“people to speak to each other, across our teams and understand what each other does in their day to day role. So, Licensing and Pollution Control have a much better understanding of each other and how they can work together now”*.
- 4.29. This means that internal communications were in the process of improving before the Improvement Plan had identified it as an action. Staff were being encouraged to be more cohesive and operate as ‘one Regulatory Service’ through the Peer Challenge process.

Personal development

- 4.30. The personal development of Self Assessment leads within authorities that had undergone a Peer Challenge was generally seen to have been good. As one lead explained, *"I developed skills in project management and learned that self driven improvement was a powerful tool for change, I feel more confident about it"*. Others mentioned that the Peer Challenge process was an *"empowering process because it asks for staff feedback, a 360 degree approach to improvement"*.
- 4.31. Peer Challengers also benefited from personal development as a result of taking part. One described how they had developed better "interpersonal skills as a result of being lead challenger", while another spoke of their "broadened knowledge of the sector".
- 4.32. Another Lead Challenger from the evaluation case study research also highlighted that they gained greater political awareness from their visit. *"The interaction within the Peer Challenge teams is of great benefit. I learned a lot from my peer team, especially our IDeA Member. It is a powerful moment when an elected member in the host authority is constructively challenged by our 'member' peer. I think I gained a lot of understanding about political awareness, especially power sharing arrangements and how they impact on services"*

Exploring progress towards impacts

- 4.33. In terms of longer term impacts, the evaluation can demonstrate that the Peer Challenge programme has made some progress in positively promoting self directed improvement within the Regulatory Services sector. Interviews with Peer Challenged authorities revealed that many saw the process as a positive step toward improvement for the entire sector.
- 4.34. Indeed, all participants saw the process as a more *"positive experience compared to an external audit"*, one which provides the opportunity for a *"Service to own the change process and not have it done to us"*. As one Head of Service explained, *"the advantage of the Peer Challenge lies in the fact that it's an external assessment conducted by competent people, who are familiar with the issues from their regulatory work and Peer Challenges in other authorities. They can compare situations, help us to benchmark. The more councils that undergo this type of review, the more impact it will have on the general condition and improvement of the Regulatory Services sector."*

Knowledge transfer

- 4.35. The evaluation has also found a number of outcomes as a result of the positive promotion of self regulated improvement. The first is the transfer of knowledge between Peer Challengers and participating authorities. Interviews suggest Peer Challengers have learned from the process and provided specific examples of learning taken back to their own organisations, including

“innovative practices in employing agency staff” and “an example of how they had set up a charity for [addressing] anti-social behaviour”. Another Peer Challenger spoke extremely positively about their experience, “I saw some interesting things to take back with me especially around the night-time economy. Some knowledge on how a licensing service can operate more effectively which I would only have picked up from the visit. It was a good benchmarking exercise and it’s been good to be involved in it.”

- 4.36. Elected member Peer Challengers were similarly engaged. The Peer Challenge process was noted to have helped them to understand the pressures and legislative frameworks that Regulatory Services operate within, which were described as *“the forces outside a local authority’s political system”*.

Validating strengths

- 4.37. A further outcome of the programme’s promotion of self directed improvement has been around the validation of service strengths and/or innovative practice. Interviews revealed that nearly all the authorities that had identified strengths in their Improvement Plans felt Peer Challengers had *“helped them to understand where there was good practice from a national perspective”*. For example, one authority clearly explained that, *“it was good to have our strength areas validated by the Peer Challengers; it tells us that we are going in the right direction, and we have now realised this as a Service”*.
- 4.38. However, the interviews also revealed a significant gap within the knowledge transfer process regarding the way good practices and outcomes from the Peer Challenges are circulated. Interviews and focus groups with host authorities and Peer Challengers revealed only isolated examples of where best practice had been disseminated and developed. The evaluation heard of one Improvement Plan being tested across a sub-region but, while very positive, this was an isolated example. The research also revealed that participants were *“unsure about where the examples of best practice went”* or that cross-local authority learning continues to be promoted after Peer Challenges were complete.

Support for the programme

- 4.39. The third outcome regarding the positive promotion of self directed improvement within the sector is the ‘energy’ and **commitment to undertaking the Peer Challenge programme in the future**. The evaluation asked host authorities whether they were likely to participate in the process again and all of the responses from our sample suggested that they would like to in two-three years time and had *“no regrets about going through the process”*. As one participant explained, *“we would gladly do this again, to refresh our Improvement Plan and focus on some key areas, it was a worthwhile exercise”*. Other participants also felt there would be some merit in them acting as champions by *“recommending the programme to other services”* in the future.

- 4.40. Finally, some interviewees re-emphasised the point that **the Peer Challenge process reflected much more favourably than the 'usual audit processes'** and this could be a unique selling point in the future.

"It might seem like a lot of hard work but the product at the end is worth it. I would definitely recommend it as an alternative to audits".

SELF ASSESSMENT LEAD

5. CONCLUSIONS

Testing the rationale for the Peer Challenge programme

5.1. Participating local authorities largely shared the Project Board's aspirations for the Peer Challenge programme. Overall, these aims were achieved.

- The programme, and in particular the Excellence Framework, aimed to support a single Framework of excellence across all Regulatory Services. The evaluation found that the Peer Challenge process was used to support development of integrated Regulatory Services departments and directorates, and was seen as useful across all professional disciplines.
- A key aim of the programme was to support self-improvement, and the evaluation found that the programme was effective in doing this. Nevertheless, it tended to appeal to local authorities that already perceived they were performing well and had "an existing culture of improvement". Under-performing authorities may have been reluctant to undergo an external scrutiny (although none of the non-participating authorities interviewed stated this – the suggestion was made by other interviewees).
- The programme was also designed to respond to a need, which local authority Regulatory Services had previously expressed: to be able to share learning and good practice. We found that there was indeed a strong desire amongst participating authorities to learn from one another, and the programme addressed this to a considerable extent through the use of external peers, 'critical friends', and by offering networking opportunities through training and acting as a Peer Challenger. Nevertheless, we also found that local authorities would like more, ongoing opportunities to learn from one another and share good practice.
- Both the Project Board and participating local authorities hoped to raise the profile of Regulatory Services through the Peer Challenge programme, and again, the evaluation suggests that the programme was an effective mechanism for doing this locally.
- However, while the Project Board hoped that the Peer Challenge programme would help to generate a greater focus on outcomes amongst Regulatory Services, the evaluation found that participants often struggled with being outcome-focused. We conclude that this was partly a cultural issue, and partly to do with the design of the programme itself. We discuss these issues further below.
- There was some debate both within the Project Board and at a local level around how far the programme was primarily designed to promote national consistency and national standards of excellence, or to be flexible to respond to local needs, issues and challenges. In practice the programme did both, to some extent. However, authorities were sometimes confused as to which of these aims was more prominent within the framework, and tended overall to assume that the programme was more about achieving national consistency than about responding to local

issues. Several interviewees stressed that they believed local government improvement would best be achieved through Self Assessment and evaluation (in contrast with less flexible, national audit procedures) and were keen that the programme should offer greater flexibility to focus on local issues (or that this flexibility be better communicated).

Programme activities

Effectiveness of programme management

5.2. The Programme was managed and administered very effectively.

- The role of the Project Manager was crucial in promoting the programme and securing involvement of local authorities and Peer Challengers.
- The backing of national bodies (LBRO and LACORS) was valuable in attracting participants to the programme by giving it credibility.
- The fact that the Programme was also local authority led, with strong involvement of the Beacon authorities, made it attractive as it was not seen as a central government initiative. The Beacon authorities were also effective in acting as champions for the programme, being well placed to advocate the process from one authority to another.

Effectiveness of programme design

5.3. Overall, the Programme is designed appropriately to achieve its aims. The combination of activities and tools - training, the Excellence Framework, the Self Assessment, the use of 'critical friends', the external Peer Challenge, the Peer Challenge report and the Improvement Plan - is effective in identifying and embedding improvements across Regulatory Services.

- The evaluation suggests that the Excellence Framework is comprehensive, robust and has supported the process of self-improvement. All authorities had been able to use it to identify areas for improvement and to inform their Improvement Plans.
- Nevertheless, some weaknesses with the Framework were highlighted. Some were related to the way it was used: for example, local authorities tended to use it as a checklist and as such, found it repetitive in places. Others reflected the structure and content of the Framework. Several consultees pointed out that the Framework was more effective in identifying areas for improvement than good practice. In particular, it did not draw out areas of technical excellence, as it was largely "business focused". This led some people to describe it as "not sufficiently tailored" to Regulatory Services.
- We also noted that the Framework led authorities to consider processes and structures more than outcomes, and as such did not help to generate an outcome focus in Improvement Plans.

- It was clear from the evaluation that the whole process took considerable time and resources. All local authorities participating thought that the process offered good return on this investment of resources. Nevertheless, for non-participating authorities, the time needed to undertake the Peer Challenge process was a major factor discouraging them from taking part, and the evaluation suggested that their concerns in this respect were well founded.

Key success factors

5.4. The external Peer Challenge itself was crucial to the programme's success.

- While the Excellence Framework is designed so that it can be used in conjunction with a Peer Challenge or without, the evaluation suggested that the external challenge provided the motivation to undertake the Self Assessment using the Framework, and it seemed unlikely that authorities would have gone through the process of Self Assessment without this external drive.
- The Peer Challenge also provided a 'reality check' for Improvement Plans and, crucially, the external 'benchmark' that many participants desired. Peers were valuable in identifying examples of good practice. They were also in some cases able to identify issues or areas for improvement that the Self Assessment had not brought out, and as external peers, they could give feedback to senior staff that would have been difficult for Self Assessment team members to provide.
- Selecting the 'right' peers was really important to the programme's success. Considerable effort was put into matching Peer Challengers with local authorities and in the vast majority of cases, participants thought that the peers assigned to them had the right skills and, crucially, experience to provide a valuable challenge. In a minority of cases, Peer Challengers did not have the right experience (for example, the local authority they came from was very different, or they did not have a background in the specific types of Regulatory Services under review), and when this happened, the Peer Challenge process was seen as less valuable.
- 'Critical friends' were not always used, but when they were, their input was valuable, particularly in challenging authorities on the evidence provided for improvements and pushing them to identify good practice.

Outputs of the process: Improvement Plans

5.5. Improvement Plans were consistently seen as valuable, and were being implemented in virtually all cases. The Peer Challenge was vital in strengthening the initial plans.

- Most Self Assessments initially led to Improvement Plans that had long lists of actions with little prioritisation, and often to be delivered in an over-ambitious timescale. Actions proposed were not always the most

appropriate to make that improvement. The peers' input to Improvement Plans was therefore of vital importance. They generally helped to make Improvement Plans more realistic and robust and helped authorities to focus on what was most important.

- Local authorities were significantly more likely to identify improvements around Theme 3 (Resource, activity and people management) than around the other three themes in the Excellence Framework. Commonly, improvements focused on internal communication, staff training and development. This is likely to partly reflect local needs, particularly where new departments, directorates or local authorities have been formed.
- On the other hand, this bias could also reflect the roles and seniority of the staff who typically undertook the Self Assessments. As senior management were not usually closely involved, the process may have missed staff with a greater capacity to comment on Theme 4 (Outcomes); while more junior staff felt less able to challenge senior officers around Theme 1 (Leadership).
- Further, the criteria in Theme 4 in particular were somewhat less tangible than in other themes, and participants sometimes struggled to identify measurable indicators around this theme - this may explain a focus on themes that were easier to grasp.
- The evaluation suggests that local authorities found it somewhat difficult to get out of the 'mindset' of audit when going through the Peer Challenge process. An example was the consistent reflection that the Excellence Framework had been "used as a checklist" - one of the factors that made the process so time consuming. In gathering evidence for the Self Assessment, all authorities had gone through each of the four Excellence Framework themes; one commented that they had "felt obliged" to do this, rather than focusing on areas perceived to need specific attention.
- In some cases, the evidence on which Improvement Plans were based was limited, focusing mainly on staff perceptions from qualitative interviews or focus groups. While this type of evidence was helpful, it sometimes made it difficult for authorities to distinguish important, systemic issues from personal concerns or 'gripes'.
- Building Improvement Plans into existing service planning and monitoring mechanisms seemed an effective way of making sure that plans would be implemented. However, as most authorities were monitoring the progress with their Improvement Plans at a senior management level, there is a risk that the progress made in engaging staff in service improvement might be lost.

Outcomes

- 5.6. The evaluation suggests that all types of local authority can benefit from the Peer Challenge process. Although some lower tier (e.g. District) authorities perceived that the programme was more appropriate to top-tier authorities (e.g. unitary, County), District Councils that had completed the process also

found it useful - although they had struggled with finding the time to complete the Self Assessment.

- The evaluation shows that the process of going through a Peer Challenge can be beneficial in itself. It was striking how often local authorities had used the Peer Challenge process to engage with staff at all levels, seeing the Peer Challenge as a key opportunity to involve staff in service planning. Further, while the structure and size of Self Assessment teams varied, in the majority of cases the lead was delegated below Head of Service level and often, the Self Assessment leads were able to gain new skills and insights by taking on this role.
- Nevertheless, the evaluation also suggests that local authority Regulatory Services teams still struggle with being 'outcome focused'. Culturally, there seemed to be a strong emphasis on meeting activity-based targets, and this was reflected in how Improvement Plans were drafted and monitored. For example, success measures included in the plans were almost always measures of activity (outputs) rather than of outcomes.
- A handful of consultees made a clear link between Regulatory Services and wider corporate priorities, such as the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, and saw their Service as making a strong contribution to the delivery of these priorities. However, many consultees did not think Regulatory Services were relevant to the LAA, seeing this more as 'project funding' and not related to statutory services. In an environment of increasingly tight public sector finance, a weaker focus on outcomes and links to corporate priorities may be detrimental to Regulatory Services.

Sustaining the programme

5.7. There was strong support amongst participants for the programme to be sustained, as well as considerable interest in the programme amongst non-participants.

- The evaluation suggests that in order to sustain use of the Excellence Framework and continue to support self-directed improvement within local authority Regulatory Services, the impetus provided by an external Peer Challenge would need to be maintained.
- Local authorities generally felt that the programme would need to be organised at a national, or at least regional, level in order that an appropriate group of peers could be selected for each Peer Challenge. It was not felt that this could be done locally.
- On the whole, local authorities did not think that they would be able to pay to support the programme on an ongoing basis. Nevertheless, they were willing to contribute 'in kind', by dedicating resources to undertake the process or to act as Peer Challengers.

5.8. We also noted a need for some ongoing support to keep the process 'alive'. One authority had invited their lead Peer Challenger back to review their

progress, and several others thought that this would be a good model to keep links going and to maintain momentum.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PEER CHALLENGE PROGRAMME

Encouraging uptake from local authorities

6.1. A number of implications surfaced through the evaluation for the Project Board to consider in terms of encouraging uptake from local authorities:

- LACORS and emails from the Project Manager were the ways in which most interviewed authorities found out about the programme, suggesting that these are more effective as a source of information and publicity about the programme than other sources and should continue as a means of communication.
- Overall, it seemed that authorities that had recently undergone organisational change had more incentives to participate in the programme than others. This may mean that participation by other authorities can be encouraged by emphasising the 'continuous improvement' aspects of the programme and the ways it can be used to assess a wide range of issues in Regulatory Services.
- The findings suggest that the Peer Challenge programme appeals to higher performing authorities more than those who are struggling with some aspects of delivery. This may mean that publicity for the programme should include a stronger emphasis on the ways in which the Peer Challenge can help under-performing authorities, along with assurances that there will be no 'naming and shaming' of those who are struggling.
- Some of the non-participating authorities thought that the programme is more suitable for larger authorities, as smaller ones had neither appropriately trained staff nor the financial capacity to undertake such a commitment. This implies that authorities need to be informed of the benefits the programme can offer to smaller Councils, including that the skills gained by staff conducting the self-assessment would be useful in the future as well. This may go some way towards ameliorating the perception that too much staff time would be lost in undertaking the self-assessment.
- Several of those interviewed felt that direct appeals to senior management in the form of letters from the Board and direct emails would encourage future participation in the project as there is currently no drive within the department. This can be an effective way of engaging authorities in which there is a lack of buy-in from senior management.
- A view was expressed by a non-participating authority that there should be more flexibility to focus only on certain services that the authority specifies. Since the Peer Challenge programme does in fact allow authorities to choose the scope of the challenge, this is an indication that this aspect has not been communicated clearly enough to authorities.

Strengthening the Self Assessment process

- 6.2. There are a number of aspects of the programme that are working well, and as such, it is recommended that they remain in the same form that they take currently. These include:
- Self Assessment training
 - the combination of Self Assessment and external Peer Challenge
 - setting aside time within the challenge visit to discuss good and innovative practice
 - the inclusion of IDeA peers on peer teams
- 6.3. A number of improvements for strengthening the process came out of the evaluation for the Project Board to consider. These include:
- Further support for local authorities to use the Excellence Framework flexibly. It might be helpful to have a two page initial assessment / scoping exercise that Self Assessment teams complete to determine the focus of their Peer Challenge before undertaking the full Self Assessment. It was also felt by some that it would be helpful to draw together examples of successful ways in which the Self Assessment had been approached in a focused way that illustrates the flexibility of the framework. An important message to get across is that 'one size does not fit all' and that although there are examples of how things are completed within the guidance, this may not be the right approach for every authority.

EXAMPLE

Within the Race for Health peer review programme, the core team hold 1-2 scoping meetings to decide on the focus of the review and key research questions for the review to answer, for example, how can the PCT ensure that race equality practices are embedded in its commissioning processes? As such, the whole review is planned within this remit.

- The composition of the Self Assessment team was found to have an impact on the ability to address all four themes of the framework with equal weight. The importance of senior management involvement was important to fully address themes 1 and 2 that focus on Leadership and Outcomes. This would also help in aligning the Improvement Plan to corporate objectives.
- Other things that impacted on the Self Assessment process were found to be the time it should take to complete the exercise. This does and should vary considerably between authorities depending on the size of the service area(s) and the focus of the Peer Challenge, but was felt that it should not exceed 25 – 30 person days in total for the whole process. It is also important that the Self Assessment team draws on as much available data as possible to cut down on primary data collection – and ultimately the amount of preparation time required.

- It is also important for the Self Assessment team to keep the thread between the self-assessment evidence and the Improvement Plan. These are all issues that are covered in the guidance; however, on a number of occasions they are found to be 'getting lost'. This may be due to the fact that the Self Assessment is often delegated by Self Assessment leads who attended the training to wider staff teams. It is therefore important that the Self Assessment team – if split into working groups – regularly meet to ensure they are not duplicating work and to 'check back' to the list of principle components of a successful Self Assessment process:
 - retaining the thread of evidence throughout the document
 - keeping to the allotted number of days
 - drawing on all available secondary data
 - input of senior management to cover all aspects of the framework
- Further support or communication on the ability of the framework to pick up on things that are deemed to be missing or 'easy to miss' – such as strengths and best practice, technical service delivery, outcomes for communities and links to corporate objectives. This could be in the form of additional supporting documentation, such as examples or testimonials of good practice in the process of Self Assessment, and perhaps allowing a specific portion of the review to explore connections with corporate objectives and/or service improvements for communities. These are also components that the Self Assessment lead could ensure are picked up in the Self Assessment, and could be part of a 'checklist' for Self Assessment leads.

The Peer Challenge

- 6.4. The Peer Challenge was seen as an essential part of the process on a number of levels:
- For the self-assessing authority to validate and strengthen their Improvement Plan and confirm examples of good practice
 - For the Peer Challengers to build new skills, establish networks and learn about good practice and different ways of working elsewhere
 - The ability of the Peer Challengers to explore the effectiveness of the service and provide constructive feedback on priority areas
- 6.5. However, a number of implications for the Project Board to consider surfaced through the research.
- It was found that the competency level of Peer Challengers is important to the success of the reviews, particularly Lead Challengers whose role was found to be more prominent. The Board should consider specific training for Lead Challengers around building and ensuring the specific skills set required for that particular role (e.g. coordination, planning, preparation, managing team dynamics, leadership, analysis).

- Encouraging Peer Challengers to offer more detailed feedback within the feedback report, including examples of outcome measures and their own experiences within their authority or others they may have visited. This would lead to the emergence of a library of good practice examples (particularly on outcome measures).
- Being flexible on how long the Peer Challenge visit should take (from one and a half days for smaller authorities to 2.5 days for larger authorities, particularly those spread across a number of sites). This would help ensure that the challenge team has the time to meet with everyone they feel is necessary, enable them to meet after each round of interviews (something that was seen as very important), and allow enough time for the whole team to analyse the findings to properly prepare for the feedback session. Again, the importance of ensuring that Lead Challengers are aware of the flexibility of the site visit – that ‘one size does not fit all’ – needs to be emphasised.
- The programme could benefit from extending the recommended timescales for the preparatory phase, both for Self Assessment teams and for Peer Challengers, allowing for differences depending on the size of the assessed authority. However, it must be kept in mind that a significant extension of the timescales could act as a deterrent to those authorities and Peer Challengers who already perceive the process as too time-intensive.
- The programme would benefit from continuing to expand the pool from which Peer Challengers are drawn, in order to cover all areas of Regulatory Services and all types of authorities (including unitary authorities and all of the different Regulatory Services teams e.g. Animal Welfare, Licensing, etc.) through communicating the benefits of becoming a peer for individuals and their respective organisations through testimonials.

EXAMPLE

The NHS Institute of Innovation and Improvement has recently commissioned the development of case study examples which illustrate the benefits of becoming a peer for both the individual and their respective organisation.

Follow-up

- Some authorities were not aware of how best practice examples that are identified through Peer Challenges are shared. It was therefore felt that there could be better promotion of the good practice examples that are uploaded on the LACORS website.
- A number of authorities and Peer Challengers expressed a view that there should be some kind of ‘follow up’ to the Peer Challenge visit. It was felt that this would help keep up work on the Improvement Plan and monitor progress on completing it. Suggestions included inviting the Lead Challenger back to visit the authority after 12-18 months to review progress and using the Self Assessment team to periodically check

progress against the Improvement Plan. A formal process of post-visit follow-up may be beneficial in this regard.

- One of the key findings was that Improvement Plans tend to be more focused on activities rather than outcomes, and authorities find it difficult to express improvements in terms of outcomes. This is partly due to a lack of an outcome-focused culture and partly to the structure of the Improvement Plan, which indirectly supports the measurement of outputs rather than outcomes. The Project Board could think about incorporating LBRO's outcomes and impacts toolkit into the Self Assessment training and guidance. In an attempt to tackle the issue of organisational culture on a wider scale, the Board could think about holding a series of briefing / working sessions for authorities around how to link up improvements to outcomes and wider corporate targets, using examples of those authorities who have done so and outlining the benefits for the Service in doing so.

APPENDIX 1: LOCAL AUTHORITIES WHO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN A PEER CHALLENGE²

	AUTHORITY	TYPE	SCOPE
1	Brighton & Hove	Unitary	Environmental Health and Licensing
2	Cannock Chase	District	Environmental Health, Housing and Licensing
3	Chelmsford	Borough	Environmental Health and Licensing
4	Cheshire West & Chester	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Housing & Licensing
5	Chichester	District	Environmental Health and Licensing
6	Chorley	Borough	Environmental Health and Licensing
7	City of London	Unitary	Environmental Health
8	Coventry	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing
9	Crawley	Borough	Environmental Health and Clean Neighbourhoods
10	Croydon	Unitary	Environmental Health and Licensing
11	Doncaster	Met	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing
12	Dudley	Met	Environmental Health and Trading Standards
13	Gateshead	Met	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Housing
14	Hart	District	Environmental Health
15	Havering	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing
16	Hillingdon	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing
17	Isle of Wight	Unitary	Environmental Health
18	Liverpool	Unitary	Environmental Health
19	Luton	Borough	Environmental Health
20	Mansfield	District	Housing
21	Newcastle	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Housing & Licensing
22	Newham	Unitary	Housing
23	North Lincolnshire	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing
24	North Norfolk	District	Environmental Health
25	Pembrokeshire	Unitary	Trading Standards and Animal Welfare
26	Plymouth	Unitary	Housing
27	Poole	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing
28	Rossendale	Borough	Environmental Health, Licensing and Building Control
29	Rushmoor	District	Environmental Health
30	Shropshire	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing
31	Southend	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing
32	St Edmondsbury	District	Environmental Health and Licensing
33	Stockton on Tees	Borough	Environmental Health
34	Stoke on Trent	Unitary	Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing
35	Wakefield	Met	Environmental Health
36	Wandsworth	Unitary	Environmental Services and Anti Social Behaviour
37	Warwick	District	Environmental Health
38	Wolverhampton	Unitary	Environmental Health and Licensing

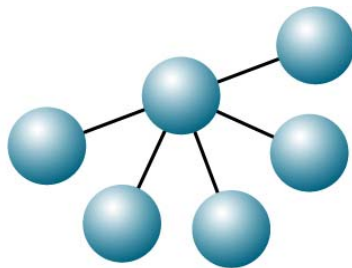
² As of 13 April 2010

APPENDIX 2: NUMBERS OF PEOPLE/AUTHORITIES CONSULTED

Local Authority	Consultees
<i>First cohort of Peer Challenge completers</i>	
Isle of Wight Council	Self-assessment lead
London Borough of Croydon	Head of Service and self-assessment lead
Southend Borough Council	Head of Service
Luton Borough Council	Head of Service and self-assessment lead
Chelmsford Borough Council	Head of Service and self-assessment lead
Liverpool City Council	Self-assessment lead
Warwick District Council	Head of Service
Borough of Poole Council	Self-assessment lead
Newcastle City Council	Head of Service and self-assessment lead
Wolverhampton City Council	Self-assessment lead
<i>Interviews with Peer Challengers from first cohort of Peer Challenges</i>	
Gateshead Council	One contact
South Staffordshire Council	One contact
Coventry City Council	One contact
City of London	One contact
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	One contact
<i>Non-participating authorities</i>	
Braintree District Council	One contact
Preston City Council	One contact
Gloucestershire CC	One contact
West Sussex County Council	One contact
Rother District council	One contact
LB Barking & Dagenham	One contact
South Tyneside Council	One contact
<i>Case studies</i>	
Cheshire West and Chester Council	Self-assessment lead, Head of Service and Lead Challenger
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council	Self-assessment lead, Head of Service and Lead Challenger
Doncaster Council	Self-assessment lead, Head of Service and Lead Challenger
North Lincolnshire Council	Self-assessment lead, Head of Service and Lead Challenger
Cannock Chase District Council	Self-assessment lead, Head of Service and Lead Challenger
Shropshire Council	Self-assessment lead, Head of Service and Lead Challenger
Pembrokeshire County Council	2 self-assessment leads, Head of Service and Lead Challenger
<i>Outcome-focused interviews</i>	
Liverpool City Council	Self-assessment lead and Head of Service
Wolverhampton City Council	Self-assessment lead and Head of Service
Brighton and Hove City Council	Self-assessment lead and Head of Service
Chichester Borough Council	Self-assessment lead and Head of Service
Chorley District Council	Self-assessment lead and Head of Service
City of London	Self-assessment lead and Head of Service
London Borough of Croydon	Self-assessment lead and Head of Service

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Mansfield District Council	Head of Service
Newcastle District Council	Self-assessment lead and Head of Service
North Norfolk District Council	Self-assessment lead
Southend Borough Council	Head of Service



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