

South East Region Children’s Improvement Board

Peer Challenge 2012

Learning Points from Peer Challenge Rounds 1 and 2

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History

1. In March 2011, 6 councils (who became known as the Berkshire 4+2) decided to trial a version of Peer Challenge. In the period May-July 2011, 5 Peer Challenges were successfully delivered, and lessons learnt documents compiled and distributed.
2. In early 2012, now working under the auspices of Sector-Led Improvement in the South East, a Round 2 of Peer Challenge was planned and delivered.
3. Subsequently, the South East has planned out a Round 3 (November 2012- February 2013), a Round 4 (February –April 2013) and a Round 5 (May- July 2013).
4. This document sets out the headline learning points from Rounds 1 and 2.
5. Detailed feedback on the Challenges (and on the 6-month review of progress from Round 1) is available on request from Richard Tyndall (richard.tyndall@richardtyndall.co.uk 07800-787007).
6. In Round 1, the “Berkshire 4” were Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead and Wokingham. The “Plus 2” were Brighton and Hove and Hertfordshire. One council participated in the Challenges, but did not host due to a timetable clash with LGA-managed Peer Review of Safeguarding.
7. In Round 2, the 8 participating councils were Bracknell Forest, Brighton and Hove, East Sussex, Hampshire, Medway, Portsmouth, Surrey and Wokingham. One Challenge concerned the operation of the Youth Justice Service, and was undertaken with the co-operation and assistance of the Youth Justice Board. The feedback from that Challenge is not included here.

Main Learning Points

The table below reproduces the 10 points from Round 1, and adds 4 more from Round 2.

	Learning Point	Round 1 Comments	Round 2 Comments
1.	Choice of Self-Assessment Topic	This must belong to the host DCS, and is most effective when it fits into a programme of work already underway, and is properly referenced to the improvement priorities for the Service. A useful test question for the host DCS is “What feedback from the Visiting Team would be helpful for us in completing the tasks already in our work programme?”	This principle has been further developed to state explicitly that the whole visit is at the invitation of the Host DCS.
2.	Scope/Breadth of Self-	The experience of the pilots was that no-one felt they had been too narrow	The Round 2 Challenges all reported that the initial DCS-to-

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	Assessment Topic	in their scope, but some felt they had been too broad. Where there had been an explicit dialogue between Host and Visiting DCS, the sharpness of the exercise was improved. Getting the right scope is seen as key to a successful self-assessment and peer challenge.	DCS dialogue and questioning about the scope and purpose of the Self-Assessment and Peer Challenge was an essential part of the planning and preparation.
3.	Peer Challenge is different from Inspection	The purpose is to help the host make progress on their improvement journey, not to make judgements. This means that host and visiting teams can work collaboratively towards this common goal. This was achieved best by an open and transparent dialogue; the principle of no surprises; and the deployment of an appreciative enquiry as opposed to a deficit analysis.	Round 2 participants gave strong support for the collaborative approach. They reported good results where Host staff and partners had been accurately briefed on this point.
4.	Evidence and Judgements	Given that the purpose is not to make judgements, the techniques of triangulation of evidence and the detailed audit of case files or work seen become useful, rather essential ways of working.	Round 2 Hosts were comfortable with feelings and opinions offered as feedback or areas for further consideration recommended. Round 2 Visitors were consistent about avoiding judgements, and offering supportive suggestions instead. Hosts gave consistent support for Visitors' questioning styles such as "...have you considered ...", "...tell us about ...", "...I'm curious please explain more ...", and they welcomed genuine dialogue.
5.	Less can be More – or Have we balanced Costs and Benefits	This was true both for lead times and for duration of field work. It was noted that extensive planning and preparation does not always produce a hugely better outcome. The teams that were confined to two days of field work reported good satisfaction with the input-output balance.	The consensus of opinion has settled on a four-member Visiting Team making a 2-day commitment for the actual visit as the default plan. Other variations have been tried, or forced upon us by late withdrawals.
6.	Reading Pack by Instalments	The best experience of Reading Packs was to plan for a staged release of material, allowing the Visiting Team to ask for the documents that they wanted to read, rather than to push out large quantities of paper "just in case".	The information supplied by the Hosts has evolved to a Self-Assessment (a narrative statement several pages long), and some background reading. All Visitors have then asked for, and been supplied with, further detailed material to help them in their understanding.
7.	Match the	All pilots noted the need to match the	The ideal Visiting Team is led by a

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	Individuals to the Scope of the Review	knowledge and experience of the visiting team to the scope of the Review in order to enhance the credibility of the exercise.	servicing DCS, and includes members with scope-specific professional background (eg Headteacher for a school topic), appropriate experience of the Host council context (eg a large county), but enough breadth of experience to bring a fresh or innovative view to the Challenge.
8.	Personal Input from each Director Highly Valued	The personal input of each Director was highly valued on a number of levels: to signal the importance of the process to host staff; to swiftly and accurately focus the efforts of the Visiting Team; to support and encourage the Visiting Team members. One Director reported, "I value very highly the high degree of personal and professional accountability that comes with the mutual nature of the process. It is not possible to buy this."	This point has been reinforced by the Round 2 feedback. One Host DCS described the Peer Challenge as "A rapid look at a key area by an experienced and knowledgeable team with no vested interest". He emphasised that the value of the feedback lay in the motivation of the team offering it: the Visitors were neither inspectors nor consultants, and their observations were freely and fairly offered for the good of the Host Authority.
9.	CPD for Visiting Team members	The Review Team members reported very high levels of satisfaction with the experience of their participation, enthusiastically describing the benefits for their own practice, and of gathering tips and ideas to introduce to their own work	This response was enthusiastically repeated by many of the Visiting Team members
10.	Details Details	The Host Project Managers received rave reviews from the visiting teams, including one who was presented with flowers and chocolates as a thank you. The attention to detail, care, and personal thought devoted by these people is a great example.	The high quality of the Round 2 Host organisation was a major contribution to the success for the Challenges
11.	Convening the Visiting Team	-	The Visiting Teams have usually met for the first time at the start of the Visit, either the night before, or on the first morning. Efforts to convene prior to the Visit have not usually succeeded. The learning point is to schedule at least an hour at the start for introductions and sharing of first reaction to the written material.
12.	Meeting Service Users	-	This is seen as context-specific, and if the context suggests the Visitors should meet service users,

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			there needs to be careful preparation to ensure a productive interaction.
13.	Liaison during the Visit	-	All Challenges that included planned liaison between the Host and Visiting DCS during the two days (by phone or face-to-face) reported positively on this contribution to the “no-surprises” ambition.
14.	Feedback to the Hosts	-	One point that is agreed is that the feedback should be relatively informal (ie not discoverable via FOI or similar). Beyond this, styles and choices vary greatly, and no format has emerged as a recommended way of doing this. The learning point is that the best experience has been where there has been a discussion in advance about what style and format will be used, and what audience will receive the feedback.