Peer-Led Challenge Guidance

Introduction

Peer-Led Challenge involves organisations within the Local Improvement Network pairing up and challenging each other's self–assessments, to:

- ensure accurate and incisive self-assessment findings

- develop partnership working, especially in relation to sharing work practices.

This is recognised as a viable alternative to self-assessment validation or peer review, in circumstances where *improvement can be achieved without significant external challenge*.

What is Peer-Led Challenge?

A Peer-Led Challenge is a review and challenge of a sample of the organisation's self-assessment findings (i.e. strengths, areas for improvement and ratings) conducted by a peer. The peer is normally from a similar organisation within the Local Improvement Network.

This is a cost-effective way of achieving:

- more accurate and incisive self-assessment findings (i.e. strengths, areas for improvement and ratings), and therefore an enhanced improvement plan

- improved future self-assessments (the organisations learn about their self-assessment process and methods, and apply this learning to future self-assessments)

- improved understanding of the chosen excellence criteria (e.g. the CSIT Benchmark), for both the organisation being challenged and the peer, which assists future self-assessment and improvement activity for both organisations

- an insight into the value and habits of continuous improvement in your organisation (for example, what has led to an inaccurate judgement?)

- an insight to the practices, values and beliefs of another organisation delivering similar services

- a relationship between the two organisations to assist future sharing of practices and knowledge, and joint working

- recognition and confidence from internal or external partners that self-assessment has been carried out comprehensively, with enough objectivity and transparency

- a sound basis for best practice benchmarking within the Local Improvement Network and potentially across the region and country.

In a Peer-Led Challenge, the peer gathers objective facts and information about the way the organisation operates in relation to key excellence criteria. The peer does this through discussions with key staff members, on a one-to-one or group basis, and by reviewing documentation. These facts and information are then analysed and compared with the self-assessment findings.

The results are presented back to the organisation's management or self-assessment team constructively, meaning that they can review their own judgements and amend them if required.

This approach reflects best practice in conducting organisational assessments. Applying it ensures that Peer-Led Challenge is a credible and robust challenge of your self-assessment. At the same time, it leads to joint improvement working and sharing of knowledge, experience and practices.

Comparison with other External Challenge Tools

Inspection, Peer Review and Certification Assessment

Over recent years improvement in the public sector has, in many ways, been driven by inspection as part of best value and Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). However, inspection is both costly and often ineffective for stimulating sustainable improvement activity. (For example, the organisation does not always 'own' the need to improve, the areas for improvement or the improvement actions.)

The sector has used external certification schemes – such as Quest, the Green Flag Award scheme and ISO 9001 – to assess, recognise and improve services. Again, costs are a factor in taking up these schemes. Sometimes the desire to 'chase badges' overtakes the improvement process.

The culture and sport sector has successfully utilised peer review, mainly for library services. Peer review involves a team of consultants, peers and elected members reviewing the service against a benchmark and reporting their findings. Again, the process is quite intense and costly. However, it has been successful at generating ownership of the improvement required.

Validation

Self-assessment and improvement planning are now the 'direction of travel'. Self-Assessment potentially leads to increased ownership - and therefore implementation of - the improvement activity, helps to develop continuous improvement habits and involves many people and partners.

External challenge is still seen as important for ensuring that the organisation acts on accurate and incisive areas for improvement. Therefore the sector has developed external validation of an organisation's self-assessment and improvement planning. As a result of the validation, an organisation can agree adjustments to its self-assessment findings and improvement plan with the validator (as opposed to acting on findings imposed by an external inspection, assessor or review team). This approach means that the people who will be taking the actions can maintain ownership of the strengths, areas for improvement and improvement actions. Validation is conducted by an IDeA consultant and an accredited peer. Costs are currently about £6400 depending on the scope.

Peer-Led Challenge in comparison

This process still involves an external challenge of your self-assessment, but by a person who is part of your Local Improvement Network and a future source of ongoing support.

This is a sample challenge (like validation), with less external capacity and perception of your organisation than the other external challenge options available. There is also no external 'control' of the process (it is coordinated by the Local Improvement Network, not a paid consultant or review administrator).

However, the need to undertake training and follow this protocol ensures that the process is rigorous and challenging enough in most circumstances. It is clearly a cost-effective option (although there are costs involved in training and people's time). It achieves the significant benefits associated with:

- improving people's (peers') commitment to and understanding of *excellence*, excellence frameworks and the evaluation system, which helps develop the capacity for future improvement

- providing the opportunity (for the peers) to learn from another organisation

- developing a relationship between the two organisations to assist future sharing of practices and knowledge and joint working.

Peer-Led Challenge is not…

- giving advice

- criticism

- a value judgement

- taking a 'because we do it better' approach

- a compliance audit

- a staff performance review (it is about the way the organisation works, not the way individual people work)

- a trophy hunt (although the hunt is for the trophy of improvement!)

- a paper-chase!

- negative or a threat

Who challenges whom?

A trained peer from a similar organisation within the Local Improvement Network conducts the Peer-Led Challenge. This is a reciprocal arrangement, which could continue for future self-assessments. Ideally, the peer challengers will be actively involved in, or have experience of, self-assessment (although this is not essential).

The Local Improvement Network or nominated team coordinates the process and works out the pairings, using the following criteria:

- the scope of the two self-assessments should be similar (and therefore the Peer-Led Challenges will involve a similar amount of time)

- travelling time and cost for the peer challengers should be minimised

- There should be a good working relationship between the two organisations.

Clearly organisations need to agree the pairings. The Peer-Led Challenge training course provides a good opportunity to discuss and agree the pairings.
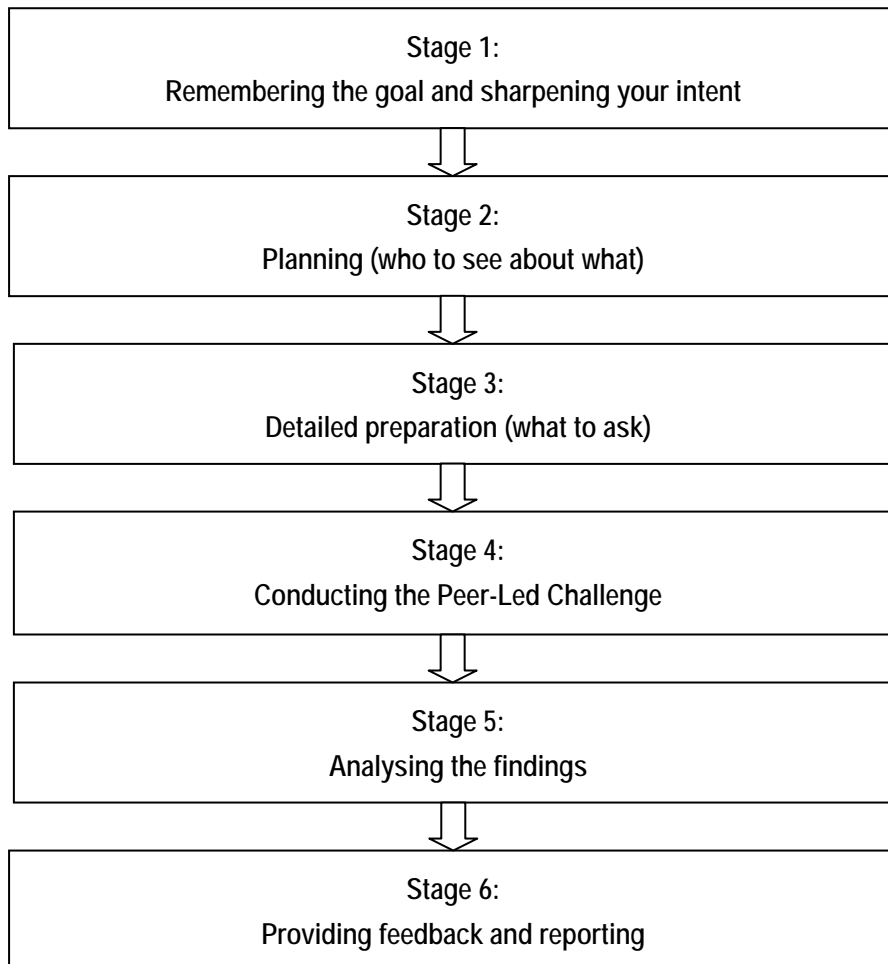
What are you challenging?

When doing a Peer-Led Challenge, you are reviewing and challenging a sample of the organisation's self-assessment findings, including strengths, areas for improvement and ratings. This involves:

1. obtaining facts and information about the way the organisation works, through:

   - discussions with staff members on a one-to-one or group basis

   - reviewing documentation.

2. using these facts and information to answer the following questions for each of the areas that you are challenging:

   - to what extent has the organisation planned approaches, which meet the requirements of the excellence framework?

   - how well defined are these approaches?

   - to what extent are these approaches focussed on stakeholders' needs?

   - how well are these approaches linked together?

   - to what extent are these approaches implemented for all relevant areas of the operation and among all relevant people?

   - to what extent are these approaches implemented systematically?

   - how effective are the approaches? (i.e. to what extent have they caused or helped to cause positive results?)

   - has the effectiveness of the approaches been reviewed and improved?

3. comparing these findings against the strengths, areas for improvement and ratings identified by the self-assessment team, to:

   - reinforce the self-assessment findings

   - identify disparities

   - suggest additional strengths and areas for improvement.

4. reporting the above back to the organisation's management or self-assessment team and helping them to decide changes to the final self-assessment findings.

5. helping the organisation to determine the priority areas for improvement, 'golden threads' and 'fault lines' (i.e. the themes running throughout the self-assessment and Peer-Led Challenge findings).

The Peer-Led Challenge process

When carrying out the challenge, it is important that you use the following process. This ensures that the challenge is comprehensive, robust and valuable.

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│                    Stage 1:                     │
│  Remembering the goal and sharpening your intent │
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│                    Stage 2:                     │
│           Planning (who to see about what)       │
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│                    Stage 3:                     │
│         Detailed preparation (what to ask)       │
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│                    Stage 4:                     │
│          Conducting the Peer-Led Challenge       │
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│                    Stage 5:                     │
│               Analysing the findings             │
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│                    Stage 6:                     │
│           Providing feedback and reporting       │
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Stage 1: Remembering the goal and sharpening your intent

Regularly remind yourself of your role and what you will achieve through the Peer-Led Challenge. Compare this to what you are actually thinking and achieving.

Remember:

The peer challenger is a part of the self-assessment team. The main goal is to help the organisation carry out an accurate and incisive self-assessment that will lead to value-adding improvement plans, which should ultimately benefit the community.

Stage 2: Planning the Peer-Led Challenge

Plan the following elements in partnership with the organisation (remember that this is not an external inspection or certification assessment, and therefore the partnership approach to planning is important):

a. **Ensure you are clear on the scope of the self-assessment**

Review the organisation's self-assessment scope and planning documentation to establish which services are included, which functions are included and the organisation's definition of leader, customer and community. If you are not clear on any of these points, discuss them with the organisation.

b. **Agree the date and time for the Peer-Led Challenge with the organisation**

The amount of time spent on the Peer-Led Challenge will depend on the scope of the self-assessment and the size of the chosen sample for the challenge. We recommend that you spend:

- half a day planning and reading the organisation's self-assessment findings and key documentation
- at least one day at the organisation's premises
- half a day producing the report.

c. **Review the organisation's self-assessment records**

This will give you a clear idea of the organisation's perception of its strengths, areas for improvement and ratings.

d. **Decide the sample that you will challenge**

Focus on the high and low-rated criteria and criteria where areas for improvement and strengths do not appear to have been clearly established. The organisation might want you to focus on particular areas where it suspects it has not been accurate (for example, where there has been limited stakeholder input to the self-assessment). In the current climate we feel (as a guide) that it is important to challenge the following areas:

- managerial & political leadership
- strategy development and implementation
- service development
- community consultation
- partnership working methods
- financial management (aligned with strategy)
- learning and personal development
- performance measurement, learning and improvement.

e. **Plan who you will speak to in relation to each criterion**

Speaking to a cross-section of staff will help you judge the accuracy of the self-assessment. You can choose to meet people on a one-to-one basis or through focus groups. For example:

- a staff focus group to challenge the judgements made on leadership and people management

- one-to-one discussions with senior managers and elected members to challenge the judgements made on leadership, policy and strategy, use of resources, and performance measurement and learning.

Contact the organisation to discuss your requirements. Needless to say, it is important to avoid adversely affecting the operation.

f.   **Plan which documents you will review in relation to each criterion**

Request key documents from the organisation, to be reviewed either before or during the visit (for example, strategy, service plans, performance review system, integrated management information). Remember that Peer-Led Challenge is not a paper-chase, or a compliance audit or assessment. Reviewing documents will help you establish whether the organisation has developed a defined approach that meets the criteria. Therefore, before asking for or reviewing the document, ask yourself what you are looking for.

g.   **Plan an opening meeting**

Ensure that you plan the time of the meeting and who is attending. This meeting gives you the opportunity to ensure that key people from the organisation are completely clear about:

- the role and nature of Peer-Led Challenge
- the plan for the day
- the outputs.

The meeting could involve the management team and/or the self-assessment team. Discuss and agree this with the organisation.

h.   **Plan a closing meeting**

During this meeting you will give the organisation feedback on the key strengths and improvement areas that you have found, and how these differ from or reinforce the self-assessment findings. The meeting could involve the management team and/or the self-assessment team. Discuss and agree this with the organisation. In some cases, you or the organisation might prefer to hold this meeting on a future day.

i.   **Agree a timetable for the day with the organisation**

The organisation is best placed to plan when the focus groups and discussions should take place. However, remember that there needs to be time for:

- the opening meeting
- the closing meeting
- evaluating your findings.

j.   Produce your Peer-Led Challenge plan

Combine the above elements into your Peer-Led Challenge Plan. A template for your plan is provided on page 12. Send the final plan to the organisation.

k.   Agree the domestic arrangements

Confirm who will meet you when you arrive, where you will be based during the day, where the meetings will be held, lunch arrangements, etc.

Stage 3: Detailed preparation for the Peer-Led Challenge

Detailed planning involves identifying the questions to be asked, to whom they will be asked, and completing checklists. These act as an aide-memoir during the discussions and provide space to record findings. A checklist template is provided on page 13.

When preparing for the interviews and focus groups, remind yourself that your task is to obtain facts and information to answer the questions shown on page 5. If you do not know what you will do with the answer, do not ask the question. The goal is to instigate discussions with the people you meet. Ask open questions to achieve this, such as:

- how does this work?
- what is the plan for this?
- when does this happen?
- what was the reason for this approach?
- how often does this happen?
- how has this been reviewed?
- what examples are there of improvement?
- what are the results of this?
- what led you to make this self-assessment judgement?

Or simply....

- tell me what happens in this area.

Avoid using 'why', as this can be unclear and can provoke a defensive reaction. Also remember that the only silly question is the one not asked!

Use the checklists to guide your questions and to make the best use of the valuable time available with people, rather than to dictate what you say. As you gain experience, you will need to use checklists less. However, they will always be valuable.

Stage 4: Conducting the Peer-Led Challenge

The impression you create during the challenge will have a significant impact on its success. This impression will affect people's thoughts and feelings, and therefore their approach to improvement and self-assessment. It is important that people view the self-assessment and improvement planning as the basis for continuous improvement. It also important

that the Peer-Led Challenge is seen as a valuable part of this, rather than as an externally enforced 'check', 'added extra' or 'trophy hunting'. The major difference between inspection/audit and Peer-Led Challenge is not in the process or technique: it is in the impression created by the peer.

Remember that you create an impression as soon as you speak on the telephone or walk through the door and this continues the whole time you are working within the organisation. You create various impressions through a mixture of your:

- Body language (approximately 65% of the total impression you give)
- Verbal tones (approximately 30% of the total impression)
- The words you use (approximately 5%)

For most of the time, we communicate without realising it. We cannot <u>not</u> communicate; we can only choose to become aware of the impact of our communication on others and to refine how we communicate as a result.

During the Peer-Led Challenge, work towards creating the following impression all of the time:

- interested and enthusiastic about the organisation and its service

- courteous and helpful

- trusting

- calm

- avoiding one-upmanship

- impartial and non-judgemental – establish all the facts first, draw conclusions later

- not defensive or offensive

- there to aid continuous improvement – you are on their side!

Instigate discussions with the various people in the one-to-one sessions and focus groups. As soon as you are seen, heard or felt to be 'quizzing' staff, your approach will be perceived as threatening. The people involved in focus groups or interviews should have an enjoyable time talking about the way they work, rather than have a stressful time answering questions. For most of the time you will be quiet, guiding the conversation and allowing people to speak.

It is surprisingly easy to forget what you have found during the Peer-Led Challenge, once you have returned to normal work. The checklists enable you to record your findings. Make notes without adversely affecting the communication style and rapport you have built with the people involved. A useful technique is to make these notes quick and brief during the discussions, then programme in time after each session to make them more comprehensive.

It is important that you collect all the information first, and make your assessment once you have all the relevant information. It is very easy to think you have a clear picture, only to find that you have missed a critical piece of information. Also once you have arrived at conclusions about the organisation, your perception and judgement of other

information and the impression you project will be affected. Therefore, try to adopt a 'sponge' approach until you have completed the process.

Feedback is vital in developing your Peer-Led Challenge skills. Ask your peer organisation to give you feedback after the process. Remember there is no such thing as 'criticism', only feedback.

Stage 5: Analysing the findings

Once you have obtained and recorded comprehensive information, analyse the information in relation to the excellence criteria, using the questions shown on page 4. When this is done, document your perception of the organisation's strengths, areas for improvement and ratings for the sample criteria.

Compare your judgements with the initial self-assessment judgements. Identify significant variations or additional strengths and/or areas for improvement.

You can use the Peer-Led Challenge report template on page 14 to record this analysis.

Stage 6: Providing feedback and reporting

During the closing meeting give the organisation feedback on the key strengths and areas for improvement that you have found. Explain how this differs from or reinforces the self-assessment findings. Discuss these findings with the team and help it decide:

- changes to the strengths and areas for improvement

- changes to the ratings

- the cause of any differences between the self-assessment findings and the Peer-Led Challenge findings

- the priority areas for improvement, 'golden threads' and 'fault lines' (i.e. the themes running throughout the self-assessment and Peer-Led Challenge findings).

Following the closing meeting, you need to produce the Peer-Led Challenge report. This is designed to provide the organisation with a simple record of the process and your findings. It includes:

- a brief description of the process

- a summary of the findings, including the strengths, areas for improvement and ratings that you identified, along with the evidence to support these judgements (taken from your checklist)

- a commentary on where the Peer-Led Challenge findings differ from the initial self-assessment judgements

- a summary of the agreed themes and improvement priorities.

Your Peer-Led Challenge Plan can be part of this report if required. A report template is provided on page 14.

Peer-Led Challenge Plan

Time	One-to-one discussions, focus groups, or documentary reviews	This will challenge the following self-assessment criteria
	Opening meeting with:	
	Contingency time	
	Analysing the findings	
	Closing meeting with:	

Peer-Led Challenge Checklist

Type of session	Date	Time	People attending	Criteria to be covered

Questions	Responses		Information for which criteria

Peer-Led Challenge Report

Section 1: Introduction

Date of Peer-Led Challenge	
Organisation	
Peer challenger	
People interviewed	
Focus groups	
Team members at closing meeting	

Section 2: Peer-Led Challenge Findings

Criteria	
Strengths identified through the Peer-Led Challenge	
Areas for improvement identified through the Peer-Led Challenge	
Evidence to support the above	
Ratings identified through the Peer-Led Challenge	

Criteria	
Strengths identified through the Peer-Led Challenge	
Areas for improvement identified through the Peer-Led Challenge	
Evidence to support the above	
Ratings identified through the Peer-Led Challenge	

Criteria	
Strengths identified through Peer-Led Challenge	
Areas for improvement identified through Peer-Led Challenge	
Evidence to support the above	
Ratings identified during the Peer-Led Challenge	

Criteria	
Strengths identified through the Peer-Led Challenge	
Areas for improvement identified through the Peer-Led Challenge	
Evidence to support the above	
Ratings identified during the Peer-Led Challenge	

Section 3: Challenges

Criteria	Where do the Peer-Led Challenge findings differ from the self-assessment judgements?

Section 4: Agreed Themes and Priorities

Key Strengths

Key Areas for Improvement