Diversity Peer Challenge

South Tyneside Homes

8-9 December 2010

Report

1. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of a Diversity Peer Challenge organised by the Local Government Improvement and Development and carried out by its trained peers. The report satisfies the requirements of the Social Housing Equality Framework (SHEF) for an external assessment at the Achieving level. The Peer Challenge is designed to validate an organisation's own self-assessment at the Achieving Level by considering documentary evidence and by carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees and other stakeholders.

The basis for the Peer Challenge is a benchmark against five areas of performance. They are:

- Knowing your customers and Equality mapping
- Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment
- Customer engagement and satisfaction
- Responsive services, access and customer care
- A progressive and Diverse workforce

The Peer Challenge is not an inspection. It offers an external assessment of an organisation's own judgement of itself against the Equality Framework benchmark, by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equalities and diversity agenda in their own councils.

Peers were:

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This peer challenge was the national pilot for the SHEF at the Achieving Level. LGID is grateful to South Tyneside Homes (STH) for making itself available as the first Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) in the country to undertake the challenge at this level. In addition the team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by STH and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions.

2. Area profile and context

South Tyneside is part of the Tyne and Wear conurbation, situated on the coast next to the River Tyne. It is the smallest metropolitan borough in England, covering 64 square miles. There is a population of 151,000 people who live in over 68,000 households. The population is expected to increase to 154,500 by 2029.

South Tyneside was profoundly affected by the decline of traditional coal mining, shipbuilding and heavy engineering during 1970's and 1980's. As a result of this almost two thirds (61.5 percent) of the borough's residents live in areas which rank in the top 25 percent for

deprivation nationally. This profile represents a higher proportion than any of the other areas in Tyne and Wear and is also significantly higher than the regional average of 45.3 percent.

The majority of South Tyneside's population is White British. According to the 2001 Census its Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) population is 2.8 percent. 2007 population estimates suggest that this has increased to 5.6 percent, a figure which includes long-established Yemeni/Arab and Bangladeshi communities. Whilst there a number of Black African, Black Caribbean, Chinese, Asian Pakistani and Indian communities in South Tyneside, very few from these communities are STH customers.

Unemployment increased from 4.5 percent of the economically active population in 2008 to 6.6 percent in 2010. This is high compared to the regional average of 4.9 percent and the national average of 3.8 percent. Low income levels in the area are reflected by the fact that around 70 percent of STH's customers in receipt of Housing Benefit.

Additionally, there is a high percentage of households with one or more persons with a limiting long-term illness. In South Tyneside this figure is 42 percent as compared with the national average of 36 percent

The proportion of older people in South Tyneside is increasing. At present, 18 percent are aged over 65 and by 2029 this group is forecast to form 25 percent of the population. The number of people aged over 85 is projected to increase by 83 percent during the same period.

STH was set up as an ALMO in 2006. The organisation manages 18,178 homes and 705 leasehold properties in a borough where which 29 percent of all properties are rented from the Council. STH employs over 650 staff made up of direct labour force and housing specialists.

STH has from its inception aspired to work towards the achieving level using both the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG) and subsequently the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) as guidance in this journey. Its stated aim in relation to equality and diversity is contained within its Single Equality Scheme. It states that:

"We aim to give people the opportunity to live in integrated and cohesive communities free from discrimination, harassment, bullying and prejudice, where people have the freedom to flourish and develop in fair communities based on respect and a shared vision of the future and are provided with housing services and employment opportunities that meet their varied needs".

Following this Diversity Peer Challenge, the peer team reached the following conclusion:

South Tyneside Homes has been successful in reaching the *achieving level* as set out in the Equality Framework for Social Housing

In reaching this decision the team felt that some key strengths of the organisation include:

1. Demonstration of a very comprehensive knowledge of its customer base through its residents' profile data capture processes.

2. Clear evidence that all frontline staff are integral to STH's data gathering. The IBS system is being fully utilised as a resource and comprehensive central point by all employees resulting in an effective and appropriate process for undertaking this function

3. An overall culture of shaped by visible, inspirational leadership which drives the culture of a 'can-do' organisation. There is strong personal and collective leadership demonstrated by the Board of STH and all of the Executive Management Team

4. A clear commitment to customers and all issues pertinent to the equality and diversity agenda at all levels of the organisation

5. A proactive and robust Corporate Equality Group which links strongly with both internal and external stakeholders.

6. Staff interviewed that feel valued for who they are.

7. A coherent organisational vision to provide fair and equal access to services for all tenants and to build cohesive communities underpinned by clear examples of pro-active engagement with by all staff

8. Clear use and understanding of Equality Impact Assessments as a means of improvement and service innovation

9. Evidence of a strong commitment to E and D through procurement approaches

10. A strong customer focus in designing and providing services

11. A culture of communicating effectively within the organisation and with external stakeholders

12. A cohesive rrelationship with Unions clearly helped by the fact that the values and culture of the organisation are supported by the unions with a mutually shared commitment to E and D matters

STH has a stated objective of being assessed as Excellent against the SHEF by 2015. STH's self assessment identified some areas in which it has identified room for improvement. In order to support STH in this ambition the review team outlines the following areas on which it feels STH should focus as part of this progress. Some reflect areas STH has itself recognised whilst other areas were picked up during the time on-site:

1. Data collation in relation to sexual orientation and transgender is a relatively recent focus of STH. The organisation is very aware of this and the need to improve. The emphasis on improving in this area is one which needs to be maintained

2. Whilst STH has made it a priority to ensure that contractors' delivery reflects STH's commitment to, and requirement around, E and D issues, it is important that this energy is maintained and built upon to ensure this trend continues

3. There is an opportunity for STH to ensure that all consultative fora are fully engaged in the EIA process thereby providing a further level of challenge

4. The review of the bullying and harassment procedure needs to be completed. While there are some processes and documentation already in place staff awareness of the precise detail of some elements of these processes could be improved

5. There is an opportunity to link the appraisals process more be directly to Behaviour Matters with accompanying guidelines in E and D competencies for managers and staff. There are plans for this to be done during 2011 and it will be important for this to be implemented

6. STH to work with partners to ensure a smooth process is developed in relation to the transition of refugee families from UK Border Agency (UKBA) housing providers to STH

7. STH is well regarded by its partners in terms of its willingness and efforts to collaborate and deliver joined up improvement where possible. Some partners indicated that they would welcome the opportunity to be involved at an earlier stage in development of initiatives. There is an opportunity for STH to work with partners to identify how this might be achieved

3 Detailed findings

3.1 Knowing your communities and equality mapping

Strengths:

- STH demonstrates a very comprehensive knowledge of its customer base through its residents' profile data capture processes. Currently STH holds detailed information on 92 percent of its clients and it is clear that the organisation is keen to build on this high level as evidenced by its stated aspirational target of achieving 96 percent. There is a clear commitment to building on this performance whilst turning over one hundred and thirty properties a month, undertaking approximately ten thousand liaison visits a year and undertaking fourteen thousand different pieces of work in that time.

- In terms of utilising ICT as a tool for knowing its communities, the IBS Housing Database system is key to STH's achievement of this high level of customer awareness. It is being used at all levels to ensure the profile data is utilised across the entire organisation.

- There is clear evidence that all frontline staff are integral to STH's data gathering and IBS is being fully utilised as a resource. The commitment to real time improvement of data held on customers is supported by effective use of technology Use of IBS is not limited to Housing Officers but is used by other staff who are customer facing (e.g. joiners and electricians). These staff take handheld devices out with them on every visit which means they have access to relevant information on any customer at any given time whilst also being able to immediately update information held in order that the organisation is always very quickly appraised of changing requirements of customers

- It is a particular strength of STH that is has this one comprehensive point of reference which all staff are committed to updating and maintaining irrespective of their role and position in the organisation. All staff regard IBS profile data as invaluable to personalising STH services in order to meet residents' needs and as a result it is a very well utilised and recognised resource

- STH's approach to information gathering is both efficient and appropriate and utilises a range of methods in order to do this. Appropriate information is gathered efficiently across the customer base. This includes STH's Getting to Know You' (GTKY) forms, staff conferences and tenant conferences. All of these are a vital part of the organisation's efforts to ensure it understands its communities and effectively maps all information. The importance of this function is also very well understood by all staff and there is a clear commitment by all to ensure the organisation does this as well as is possible

Areas for consideration:

- Data collation in relation to sexual orientation and transgender is a relatively recent focus of STH. The organisation is very aware of this and the need to improve. The emphasis on improving in this area is one which needs to be maintained

3.2 Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

Strengths:

- The overall culture of STH is shaped by visible, inspirational leadership which drives the culture of a 'can-do' organisation. There is strong personal and collective leadership demonstrated by the Board of STH. The Board structure is fit for purpose and has robust governance arrangements. It is made up of 12 people: 4 tenants, 4 Council representatives and 4 independent members. A conscious effort has been made by STH to choose its Board based on their skills and the knowledge they can bring in ensuring they have the capacity to run a large and complex housing and construction business. There is also an ongoing commitment to developing these skills further whilst using co-optees on the various sub-committees to ensure appropriate skills are present at all times. The sub committees of the Board are proactive and visit service areas to ensure there is a one organisation approach to E and D

- E and D is a standing item on the Board's agenda. Further to this it receives comprehensive reports on the Single Equalities Scheme every six months which enables it to effectively review equalities performance, impacts and objectives. STH considers board development as a priority and significant levels of E and D training is delivered to it.

- STH Board members are extremely committed and have a passion for ensuring the organisation knows, and responds to, the needs of its customers. There is a collective passion and shared responsibility for this agenda and it is clear the board as a whole sees E and D as integral to their leadership role for STH.

- The Great Company Committee is a body within STH which has a specific role in reviewing and scrutinising the organisation's work and performance on its commitment and progress in relation to equality, diversity and access. It receives regular reports on STH's approach to equality including progress delivering the Single Equality Scheme, an Equality Annual Report and specific reports on Community Cohesion.

- There is a proactive and robust Corporate Equality Group which links in strongly with various voluntary and community groups, the CREST forum (which is a conduit for better engagement with BAME communities), a contractors equality group, tenants and residents groups as well as the BLISS=Ability Forum (the network which focuses on people with a disability). These link in well with the Great Company Committee which in turn links into the South Tyneside Homes Board.

- The Chief Executive is widely described by all staff as inspirational and is seen to embody and promote all of the positive characteristics of the organisation's culture and commitment. She and her Executive Management Team (EMT) are recognised by all staff has having taken the organisation forward in the last few years and are a main reason for the strong degree to which E and D values and beliefs are clearly embedded across every level of STH. Overall it is evident that E and D

progress by STH is being made as a direct result of the strong leadership and commitment demonstrated at the highest levels of the organisation

- In particular staff at all levels of STH allude to a 'real' open door policy demonstrated by the Corporate Management team which means all staff feel that they have high levels of access to STH's leadership. Everyone is very approachable and the recent stability in the senior management team is described as having had a positive impact on STH staff as a whole. Staff indicate that there is a 'no blame' culture in place. This allows for lessons to be learned from any mistakes which are made due to a collaborative, nurturing and open culture

- A point raised by the staff interviewed is that they feel valued for who they are. The fact that the Chief Executive and senior managers remember people by names was repeated often and is something that it very much valued by all.

- There is a coherent organisational vision to provide fair and equal access to services for all tenants and to build cohesive communities. There is pro-active leadership in engaging with residents which is demonstrated by EMT members attending residents' meetings.

- STH has an empowered and effective Corporate Equality Group whose effectiveness is supported by a culture of robust performance management of E and D. The organisation proactively uses the Covalent software package which allows managers to update details of the progress they have made in delivering specific actions as well as collating their evidence. This system allows STH's performance team to monitor services performance in relation to delivering specific tasks and holding them to account if timescales are not adhered to. All Department Management Team meetings have E and D as a standing item on their agenda and information is passed up and down through teams for discussion and comments and wider input.

- Progress against objectives is assessed through a series of measures. These include:
    1. monthly updates on service plans at STH's Corporate Performance Group,
    2. regular data collection on customer satisfaction with services (utilising STH's VMS system),
    3. monitoring of progress against the achievement of challenging and smart targets,
    4. monitoring the percentage of key performance indicators in the top quartile of performance
    5. provision of monthly update reports at to STH's Corporate Equality Group

- There is a clear commitment to STH's staff evidenced by external awards (Investors in People Gold Award, Two ticks) and an internal recognition system (the Star awards). STH has a stated ambition to become Stonewall Diversity Champions and is also striving to achieve Excellence for Customer Service. This commitment is further evidenced by the organisation having made concrete financial commitments to E and D with a ring-fenced budget in 2011 so as to ensure that STH continues to maintain its offer to groups it currently supports.

- All new policies are subject to Equality Impact Assessment (EIAs) and across the organisation there is a demonstrable understanding of the importance of, and reason for, undertaking these assessments. This understanding is irrespective of the role performed or level of staff seniority indicating that there is a genuine embedded culture of assessing the E and D impacts of everything STH does. This is evidenced by training offered on EIAs and the revision of 50 high impact EIAs during 2010 alone.

- This has resulted in service delivery innovations to ensure STH is meeting the needs of its customers as comprehensively as possible. One such example is the development of the School Run service which came directly out of an EIA undertaken by STH. Also STH's Sheltered Housing programme EIA informed STH that to add greater value to service delivery would require it to not limit itself to achieving DDA compliance but rather to shape services in a more focussed manner to meet the needs of specific communities (e.g. considering the needs of customers suffering dementia as distinct from the needs of customers with a physical disability). Tenants were involved in discussions and consideration of the best ways forward and STH undertook significant work in relation to the demographic of each sheltered scheme as a result of which the organisation is well appraised of the different needs for each group. This has resulted in the delivery of services which clearly serve the requirements of each different group.

- STH Staff, at all levels, demonstrate a keen understanding of the E and D priorities of the organisation. There is a shared commitment to giving all customers a decent standard of homes whilst bearing in mind equalities and individual needs. Staff are committed to tailoring a service to meet need and offer choice and overall the culture of STH is about being open and encouraging challenge as a means of continuous improvement. There is an annual service planning process which includes E and D and each team has a dedicated officer from the service improvement team thus ensuring E and D is in all policies and strategies and reflected in all service plans. As a result there is clarity about the links between targets in service plans and how they impact on corporate priorities or the Single Equalities Action plan for example.

- STH demonstrates a clear commitment to continuous improvement in its use of EIAs. The organisation keeps its work on EIAs under constant review and is delivering further training to ensure knowledge and understanding levels are maintained at a high level among all staff. This is very important in the new service planning process and a further link is also established in performance management terms as this information is monitored via Covalent. It is clear that undertaking robust and impactful EIAs are a part of STH's common practice.

- STH is committed to working in close partnership with its contractors with E and D occupying a central position in these relationships. Contractors have a very high regard for STH and praise its genuine will and commitment to work with and on behalf of its residents. Contractors were also of the opinion that STH could be regarded as particularly successful in comparison to other organisations in relation to engaging residents. Overall they regard their partnership with STH as being very strong and working well as evidenced by the fact that they are invited by STH to

residents groups to give talks and engage with customers. One such example is where STH have asked contractors to go to Mosques to talk directly to Muslim groups

- The strong values held by STH in relation to E and D is evident through its procurement process and work with contractors. There is clear evidence that STH monitors E and D as part of its procurement (both during the procurement process and post-contract being awarded). STH's pre-qualification questionnaire includes Equalities as a central theme which is further expanded during the tendering process. Method statements are required about meeting needs of specific groups (e. g. adaptations for older people) and any further E and D training required also built into contracts. There is a resident liaison role to ensure individual needs are met and providing a means of tenants being able to provide a further level of challenge. STH works jointly with its contractors to implement any measures required and is proactive in working to up-skill small local suppliers in order to improve their delivery. STH is a member of the North East Purchasing Organisation (NEPO) and is committed to following good practice guidelines

- STH demonstrates a clear commitment to holding contractors to account in this regard. For example measuring tenants' satisfaction levels with contractors' delivery is considered hand in hand with E and D issues and there has been occasion where an organisation had its contract suspended because of evidence of poor customer service. Assessment of performance information includes in-depth consideration of E and D strands to understand where issues are and targeting information gathered to the various equalities constituency groups. A Contractors E & D Group meets monthly and there is evidence that this has become a forum for learning and sharing of best practice between contractors (for example one contractor revised its data collection and policies as a direct result of learning from other contractors).

- Contractors undertake EIAs and they share their information (e.g. in relation to intelligence on Vulnerable groups). There is also a synergy in approach to ensure tenants receive a consistent experience as both STH staff and contractors utilise similar approaches in their delivery. All use the same technique to provide a unique experience for people under Decent Homes. STH requires that its contractors provide an annual position statement on E and D whilst there is also a Directors' group meeting for high level discussions.

- STH has recently purchased ARCH (a multi-agency hate incident database) in partnership with South Tyneside Council, Northumbria Police and other partners. The purpose of this has been to ensure STH is able to share information on hate incidents within the borough and to deliver a co-ordinated and effective response to victims. This, in addition to STH's systems, is designed to improve the organisation's ability to monitor community relations and tensions. This is in order that it is able to improve its response to such matters in a better co-ordinated manner whilst utilising intelligence gleaned through the system

Areas for consideration:

- Whilst STH has made it a priority to ensure that contractors' delivery reflects STH's commitment to, and requirement around, E and D issues, it is important that this energy is maintained and built upon to ensure this trend continues.

- The Great Company Committee plays a significant role in the internal scrutiny of E and D issues. In order to maintain its impact in this area, it would be beneficial for review to take place in order that any areas in which it could have further impact can be identified. The inclusion of this recommendation is not in any way intended to suggest a weakness in the work of the Great Company Committee but is rather an encouragement to STH to ensure it is able to capitalise on all opportunities to continuously improve the contribution of this committee.

- The introduction of the ARCH system gives STH increased capacity as regards it ability to deal with hate crime. However this system is newly implemented and STH should seek to accelerate the rate at which it is embedded across the organisation in order that it can have an impact comparable to systems such as IBS and Covalent.

- STH is well regarded by its partners in terms of its willingness and efforts to collaborate and deliver joined up improvement where possible. Some partners indicated that they would welcome the opportunity to be involved at an earlier stage in the development of initiatives. There is an opportunity for STH to work with partners to identify how this might be achieved.

- A further opportunity relating to partnership working lies in STH giving consideration to undertaking EIAs jointly with partners where services are being provided jointly. This would further enhance the delivery of partnership initiatives in better proofing them to identify any potential E and D gaps which may not be picked up through EIAs undertaken by individual organisations.

- The information obtained through EIAs can be relevant to legal considerations of actions undertaken. While the reference to this is not intended to suggest that STH is weak in this area, the team wished to encourage STH to ensure that all mitigated outcomes or actions derived through EIAs link directly to finance, legal and reputational considerations.

- STH currently commits an annual budget of thirty thousand pounds to its E and D related work. There is a great deal of good practice and positive support for E and D. It is important that, in the current challenging financial climate, STH is clear on how it will deal with potential funding reductions and welfare changes. There is a recognition that STH needs to direct a significant proportion of its resources towards caring for an increasingly elderly population in South Tyneside. There is also a commitment to increasing tenant involvement in the budget setting process to ensure STH is delivering what tenants really want/need. In light of the likelihood of a number of competing priorities, there could be a challenge posed to STH's resilience in maintaining and building on its positive E and D practice

3.3 Customer engagement and satisfaction

Strengths:

- STH has done a great deal of work to ensure it has robust means of encouraging and utilising resident involvement. There are numerous examples of how the organisation strives to utilise the input of customers on an ongoing basis. Examples of this commitment to high levels of tenant involvement include

    1. involving customers in policy formation,
    2. involving tenants in undertaking EIAs,
    3. having tenants support mystery shopping activity,
    4. utilising the views of tenants in staff appointments identifying the most appropriate ways of setting these to meet customer need,
    5. engaging the views of customers through Choice Days and Tenant Conferences for example and
    6. utilising tenants as part of the process of performance monitoring and also in procurement decisions

- STH has uses tenants to assess satisfaction data from fellow tenants in a well coordinated manner. There are systems in place to capture tenant feedback. An example of this is the 'You said…We did' slot at staff and residents' conferences to inform of outcomes as a means of updating stakeholders about progress being made on the intelligence gathered. STH's GTKY forms are another effective means of securing and utilising up to date information on customers. Data captured in this way has been used for service improvements. STH utilises Choice days for resident groups and individual interviews as a means of identifying and responding to needs.

- The IBS system is an integral tool and allows for the collection, collation and interpretation of very useful data on customers whilst allowing STH to provide a bespoke service for customers. Following the revision of the system, this process ensures that the customer information screens carries current and relevant details at all times and are updated on a regular and ongoing basis. This is a way in which various operatives can, and do, feed tenant data back up into STH's central data collection and collation work.

- A further element of this outreach is the way in which STH has set up relevant focus groups which play a key part in consultation and providing feedback on what has been found through EIAs being carried out. Part of this proactive engagement with a tenant focus group led to changes in relation to the school run repair times.

- STH's systems have a language section (distinct from the ethnicity section) and allows the production and holding of letters in different languages whilst also flagging up where newsletter needs to be sent in a particular format (e.g. a different language, Braille, large print etc).

- STH is very proactive in seeking and responding to customer suggestions for improvements. This is evidenced in the improvements which have occurred in the

layout and structure of the STH website. This was instigated on the back of customer views being considered and there are examples of service delivery changes as a result of customer voice being heard referred to earlier in this report. Customers allude to the fact that STH delivery is underpinned by a clear commitment to 'going the extra mile' for customers. Engagement in this regard is also clear through the use of the tenant service repair group in collecting tenant satisfaction data. This proactivity is also pragmatic in its approach and clear communication is maintained with customers in order that expectations are managed effectively (e.g. STH has been up front in making sure individuals involved in the various fora do not expect priority service as a result of being on a forum).

- STH has a one stop shop customer services centre. This work was inspired by STH's determination to remove any risk of tenants encountering multiple points of contact and has resulted in streamlining of processes. STH's proactive analysis of information and feedback mean that the organisation has discovered that 70 percent of customers prefer phone contact and so this is provided as a primary means of contact in response to this expression of preference.

- Additionally, STH has a new Cloud-based (online) telephony system which features an enhanced speech facility and also allows e-mail communication. Type-talk is also available and deaf customers can also use e-mail and SMS texting. This one stop centre has also had the impact of freeing up officer time thus improving their availability to undertake home visits and engage with customers more directly.

- STH is proactive in addressing one area in which it wishes to be stronger. This relates to increasing the proportion of its workforce from BAME communities. STH has recognised the importance of making additional efforts to engage with these and other minority groups and is working closely with CREST. This collaboration is helping BAME communities to have a stronger voice in terms of contributing to STH policy.

- There is evidence of STH staff making proactive efforts, and achieving success, in undertaking more effective dialogue with these communities. There are good relationships with the Yemeni community and proactive engagement with Mosques as part of this outreach. Part of the impact of this engagement is clear from the efforts of STH holding surgeries after meetings to address the needs of individual residents and efforts to ensure all meeting facilities are appropriate for the needs of all communities. There is also proactive work with Arab women through STH staff. Significant effort is going into STH's efforts to remove any misconceptions about Sheltered Housing among these communities. The ARCH shared database for hate crime is another initiative that STH is utilising as a means of meeting the needs of such communities.

- STH has close working links with BLISS=Ability which has worked with STH to engage all different groups including the deaf community which has resulted in the Forum meeting in the Deaf Club so that they are fully included. STH operatives who go out on site carry induction loops as part of their core equipment not only to make sure this is available to individuals who are known to require this support but to ensure this facility is available in the event that they encounter individuals who

require this but about whom this is not known. Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for both Bliss and CREST include STH engaging different communities and offering work placements.

- STH is also very proactive in its engagement with younger people. The work with Jarrow School is well-received STH has sponsored a school event and used it to publicise their services as well as sharing information on how best to use and access these. Also STH has worked closely with local businesses in going into schools which has aided the work done on promoting apprenticeships and providing mentoring for pupils

- Additionally the work with schools has focussed on making children and young people more aware of their environment as well as better understanding the impact of anti social behaviour on society more widely. Other engagement has resulted in STH requesting a suggestion box in school to feedback information to STH. This led to reports of racist graffiti allowing STH to respond proactively to this.

- STH has worked proactively with people not in work, education or training (NEETS) including help with writing application forms and undertaking interviews. STH has encouraged the use of allotments whilst also using apprentice joiners to build fences.

- It is clear that STH has made significant progress in this area of its operation. This view emerged clearly from external stakeholders as well as from the views expressed by staff (both longstanding and more recently recruited). In both instances the reason for this improvement is attributed to 'good, strong leadership and clear vision'. STH is viewed as being very proactive in seeking how they can constantly improve and there is a clear indication that there has been a big organisation culture shift towards making a positive difference in these areas. STH at every turn is keen to take into account future needs and as such does not simply rely on its current position or achievements. It is clearly STH's intention to achieve, and maintain, high standards that are genuinely sustainable.

Areas for consideration:

- STH is self aware in focussing on the areas in which it could strengthen its engagement still further. This needs to continue in relation to BAME and disability groups to further achieve its desire to continuously improve

- The work with LGBT communities is an area of relatively recent focus for STH in terms of collecting data. While there is a clear indication that good progress is being made with these communities, it is an area on which STH needs to focus into the future in order that it is able to make further improvements.

3.4 Responsive services, access and customer care

Strengths:

- There is a very high level of commitment from the STH staff to provide high levels of customer care and ensuring services are responsive to customer need. Across every level of the organisation the focus on good customer service and effective engagement of tenants is exceptional. This was clear from all interviews with all staff and was echoed strongly in all meetings with tenants, contractors and other partners.

- It is an integral part of STH's operation that every property in the organisation's stock is continuously assessed to ensure DDA compliance. The organisation's staff are a key part of the organisation's efforts in relation to safeguarding all customers. This includes the use of the 'Concern Matters' cards which allow staff to note and report any issues that they feel could be problematic for tenants. This has resulted in instances where staff have, without prompting or obligation, raised concerns about the level of fuel tariffs paid by clients. They have subsequently undertaken proactive research as to the best tariffs charges available through different providers in order that customers benefit from possible fuel cost savings.

- STH seeks to employ innovative ways of communicating with its customers including the use of drama groups and DVDs in order that relevant information is made available to its customers in a variety of media formats.

- STH's appointments system is very much informed by the needs of it customers and the organisation has responded to feedback on the need for individual customer requirements to be factored into the way in which appointments are set. Alongside operational staff, tenant liaison officers are extremely effective in supporting and raising the profile of customer need through use of 'befriending' to personalise the service as much as possible

- STH responded to the requirements of tenants in terms of access via telephony. An example is the recognition of the number of tenants whose sole access to telephones was via their mobile telephones. Recognising that this could equate to additional cost to customers who were potentially facing challenging financial situations, STH initiated an '0300' coded telephone number which has significantly reduced the cost of tenants contacting STH

- All STH staff are committed to being an easily accessible face of the organisation and are committed to identifying all potential vulnerabilities among customers. This has included scheduling meetings and engagement activity to suit the work patterns and circumstances of tenants (e.g. scheduling of meetings in the evening). STH staff at all levels of the organisation were very open in their shared commitment to their customers and expressed the view that they were not simply handing 'keys to a property' when the received and took on customers but that they firmly believed in the principle that they were 'giving the keys to a home'. The clear understanding is that whatever they do is potentially life changing and that this cannot be taken lightly under any circumstances. In all they do staff say they focus on the 'so what' element of their actions in order to focus fully on the outcomes for

their customers. This is evidenced by the swift turnaround times between visits and the subsequent contact from customer services staff to collate feedback on customer satisfaction. The organisation implements and adheres to a target of undertaking all repairs with three days of them reported. Staff are committed to 'staying until the job is done'

- There is evidence of the speedy passporting of information into STH itself as well as into partner organisations to ensure quickest possible response to the needs of customers. This is done via the use of the handheld devices that all staff carry on visits, marking of tickets (hard copy records of customer profiles) and access to hearing loops. The organisation has also taken feedback on the access to information and has made certain that the appropriate font is used at all time. Staff are also equipped with handbooks which ensure that they are always appraised of how best to respond to the needs of any customer or situation they encounter in which the needs of customers need to be addressed. Again this is underpinned by a culture expressed on numerous occasions as being based on vulnerable people being 'everybody's business'.

- There is a willingness to learn from any feedback and tenants are actively encouraged to provide feed back as a means of helping STH to continue to improve. STH actively sought the views of clients in designing its response capability and on the back of this has made its services available to customers on a twenty four hours a day, seven days a week 'open all hours' basis. STH has also liaised closely with organisations such as BLISS and CREST in shaping the access it gives to customers ensuring there is a well developed sensitivity around the cultural and other needs of different client groups (e.g. religious considerations). In addition STH has close working links with occupational therapists and ensures that these are utilised to the benefit of customers with as quick a turnaround time as is possible in every situation. .

- STH has a potentially unique advantage in its ability to connect with its tenants as a number of these are actually STH staff. This means that the relationship between staff and customers is a very good one and there is a genuinely vested interest among these staff to do the best possible for tenants. There is also a clear commitment to addressing digital literacy among customers. There was also a proactive involvement from employees and partners in putting in place 'Concern Matters'

- STH's newsletter to tenants is called 'Housing Matters' and this is very highly regarded by customers as a well utilised source of information and a means of customer views also being sought and heard. A tenants readers' panel quality checks this literature to ensure it is fully fit for purpose

- Another example of STH proactively seeking and responding to the views of customers was in receiving feedback about how best to undertake the presentation of empty homes to potential residents. On the back of this dialogue STH has produced a fact sheet for accompanied viewings in order that potential clients are give a clear understanding and insight into the kinds of issues they need to consider as well as the types of frequently asked questions that will help them in their decisions. There are plans for the establishment of a 'one stop shop' for

getting a house which will further enhance the ability of potential residents to make informed choices.

- STH is developing proposals within its structure for a scrutiny panel which will ensure an extra level of challenge. This will utilise the views of customers and other stakeholders and is again an indication of STH's willingness to be held to account in order to continuously improve.

- STH is also very proactive in its efforts monitor the services delivered by contractors to ensure they are complying with E and D terms and conditions   and this is being implemented via the requirement that contractors make available a clear annual position statement specifically focussing on this area of their operation

- STH is very committed to utilising the input of appropriate fora as a means of providing opportunities for continued and improved engagement.

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Areas for consideration:

- There is an opportunity for STH to ensure that all consultative fora are fully engaged in the EIA process thereby providing a further level of challenge

- As mentioned previously, there is further work to be done with LGBT communities to identify ways in which these can engage more fully with STH. There is a clear indication that this is an area which has improved significantly in recent years but the efforts of STH to continue to improve in this regard is key to the ongoing improvement of the organisation.

- The mechanisms for monitoring E and D on contracts have been put in place relatively recently. It is therefore quite early for an assessment as to the changes in behaviour that this is helping to deliver. STH would do well to continue to keep this area under review in order to ensure that STH's monitoring of its contractors influences the E and D performance of these companies.

3.5   A progressive and diverse workforce

Strengths:

- STH's commitment to the agenda is demonstrated by the instigation of the E and D manager post which was created with the specific aim of driving the agenda across the organisation. All indications from staff and partners organisations point toward this having been being a significant element in a positive shift in the culture of the organisation which has been achieved in the last few years.

- STH is self aware about its workforce issues. The organisation undertook a review of the targets it had set itself for recruitment and is keeping this monitored in order that these are realistic and achievable. There is a clear commitment to delivering on representation issues this as evidenced by STH having exceeded their targets for employing young people

- STH's equal pay review for Green Book staff (including the job evaluation) is complete and there is a clear timetable in place for achieving the same with Red Book staff. The negotiations with unions are ongoing but the tone of discussion suggests a mutually respectful and cohesive approach with all sides committed to the best outcomes for the workforce of STH. STH has pilot schemes in place to test the appropriateness of approach ahead of any full roll-out across the organisation

- STH staff feel that the Chief Executive has ensured everybody feels part of the same team by having a consolidated wage scheme which has been positive for staff morale across the organisation

- The relationship with the Unions is a cohesive one clearly helped by the fact that .the values and culture of the organisation are supported by the unions. Equality and Diversity is high on the Union agenda and this has created a positive synergy with those of the organisation. All policies, including E and D go through the Unions, as do EIAs indicating a mutually respectful and collaborative relationship between the two.

- STH staff very much value the workforce forum for frontline staff as they feel this gives them a meaningful voice and the ability to speak up. Also E and D Training and development are in place for all staff and Board members at STH and staff regard this as a valuable investment in them by the organisation.

- Staff at STH feel very valued by the organisation and made it clear that they in turn value working within a culture in which they are encouraged to challenge and make suggestions. There are team briefings to follow all board meetings ensuring a cascade of information whilst in turn staff queries and issues are fed back up to the board. There is a good transparency and an opportunity for openness across the various levels of the organisation

- STH has instigated culture change through its staff conferences. The first of these was held in 2008 and the format of these events has been evaluated and has evolved to ensure they meet the needs of staff and also contribute to the future

direction of STH. Examples of the impact of these conferences include the consideration of staff appraisals as a result of which E and D has become a more integral part of this process and is discussed at each staff review. Also staff and tenants looked at the STH mission statement and vision and simplified it alongside the three organisational priorities.

- STH works hard to equip its staff with appropriate and focussed training in relation to E and D via the investment in high quality training and the production of the detailed Diversity Handbook. This document in particular is a detailed compendium of all information staff are likely to require in understanding the background to a wide variety of equalities constituencies allied to references to other sources of information staff are able to use in engaging with these communities. Staff indicated that this was a valuable resource to them and one which is an important reference point in working with customers.

- STH has invested in a wide range of publications as a means of communicating with staff as well giving them an avenue for the expression of their views or concerns. These include Staff Matters, Managers Matters, Concern Matters and Behaviour Matters. These are a valuable means of STH positively supporting its organisational development and HR functions. It is an important means of ensuring that two-way dialogue between senior staff and all of the organisation is always ongoing

- Behaviour Matters in particular is a key tool for supporting and driving the appropriate behaviours that are championed by the organisation and is well embedded. It has been bought into by all staff in no small part due to the fact that its development was proactively contributed to by a very mixed group of employees. It is used to recruit and promote people with the right attitude, set standards of behaviour, agree expectations, challenge inappropriate behaviour to improve performance and develop staff in line with the organisation's behaviours. It is already playing a significant part in ongoing training as well as induction of new staff. The effectiveness and implementation of Behaviour Matters is carefully monitored by Business Partners in the HR department of STH

- STH's Staff are engaged positively in service reviews and the development of new ways of working. Again this has been achieved through good communication and via the use and approach which staff have regarded as both innovative and enjoyable.

- STH can also point to a an innovative approach to flexible working including the 'Stuck not sick' scheme which ensures that staff prevented from attending work due to a range of situations - (e.g. inclement weather, needing to care for a family member or having to wait for utility firms etc) - do not have to log themselves as being absent due to illness. This is again a clear indication of the culture at STH which seeks to ensure that the well-being of staff is paramount in the consideration of its leaders.

- STH takes a very proactive approach to EIAs in this area and is strong on implementing improvements. Policies which have been subject to EIAs recently include:
    1. Behaviour Matters,
    2. Organisational Development Strategy,
    3. Appraisal process,
    4. Induction process,
    5. Training,
    6. Recruitment,
    7. Retirement,
    8. Discipline and Grievance,
    9. Parental leave,
    10. Redeployment,
    11. Compassionate leave,
    12. Stuck not Sick Policy,
    13. HR service,
    14. People Strategy,
    15. Home working.

  STH demonstrated its commitment to continuous learning and improvement and utilised the information from these assessments. Some measures have included:

  1. the strengthening of the equalities information sought in relation to learning and development,
  2. extended compassionate leave if people need to leave the country for funerals becoming available
  3. the decision to streamline processes by integrating the organisation's People Strategy with its Workforce Development Plan and
  4. strengthening the 'golden thread' which runs through STH's customer service strategy, service plan and Individual Appraisal.

- STH has a particular strength in terms of recognising and celebrating the good work and achievement of staff through it employee recognition scheme, the Star Awards and this is clearly valued by all staff. The award is sponsored by partners as a means of raising the profile of the scheme.

- Overall STH is regarded as a great organisation to work for by its entire staff. Over the course of the numerous interviews and focus group this came to the fore time and again. The leadership of the organisation has engendered a workforce which fiercely committed to the organisation, its values and all it seeks to achieve. It is clear that the culture of the organisation which seeks to put tenants first is effective as a result of the energy of its staff.

- Employees are proud of the organisation and proud to be part of it.. This is evidenced in some of the quotes the team picked up during its time on site:

❖ *"I enjoy coming to work."*
❖ *"I love my job."*
❖ *'I felt supported when I needed help from the company…it was all about me'*
❖ *'I love getting up in the morning to come and work here'*

- ❖ *'We feel part of the team….'(from a resident)*
- ❖ *'It is not them and us….it's us' (from a resident)*
- ❖ *' the involvement team have tenant involvement running through them like a stick of rock'*
- ❖ *'our relationship with tenants goes beyond the front door'*
- ❖ *'I got a call from my manager to be complimented'*
- ❖ *'Real dialogue is happening' (more than one source)*

Areas for consideration:

- There is an opportunity to link the appraisals process more be directly to Behaviour Matters with accompanying guidelines on competencies for managers and staff. There are plans for this to be done during 2011 and it will be important for this to be implemented

- The review of the bullying and harassment procedure needs to be completed. There are some processes and documentation already in place and the commitment to appropriate behaviours is clear within Behaviour Matters. However staff knowledge of the precise detail of some of these measures could be improved to ensure that there is a higher level of awareness than is currently the case. The process by which staff can register complaints and concerns in relation to harassment for instance could be better communicated as not all staff were clear about how this process works.

4. Examples of innovative projects and initiatives

- ❖ STH Diversity Handbook
- ❖ The Matters 'family' – Behaviour Matters, Staff Matters, Concern Matters, Staff Matters and Managers Matters
- ❖ The use of IBS and Covalent (including the use of hand held devices)
- ❖ The 'Stuck not sick' policy
- ❖ The use of conferences for improvement (both staff and tenants)
- ❖ Handbook for residents to use when viewing properties.
- ❖ The school run timetabling of appointments

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