

LGA Improvement Board - 9 September 2008

Comprehensive Area Assessment – a draft briefing for members

Why should I read this? Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is to be abolished and a new approach to assessment is to be introduced from April '09. It is important that you understand what is proposed and are able to influence the way the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) develops so that it serves your needs as a councillor.

The local services inspectorates (the Audit Commission, Commission for Social Care Inspection, Healthcare Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation and Ofsted) have recently published their proposals for the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). This briefing explains what CAA is all about.

What is CAA? CAA is a new approach to assessing the performance of local public services in an area. CAA will look at how well councils and other local partners are working together to improve the quality of life for local people.

Why now? CPA has helped councils improve, so much so that most councils are now highly performing and don't really need an intensive inspection to tell them. With so much of what councils do now done in partnership with others however it makes sense to assess their activity collectively and provide challenge around whether those organisations are actually making lives better.

So what is involved? CAA involves two assessments:

- The Area Assessment – rather than a tick box criteria and score, this is a qualitative assessment of how well public services are addressing the issues that matter most, as expressed in the local area agreement and other local strategies, and whether things are likely to improve.
- The organisational assessment – for all councils and fire and rescue authorities comprising two assessments: Managing performance and Use of Resources, giving a score for each organisation.

How is CAA different to CPA?	
Comprehensive performance Assessment (CPA)	Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA)
Assesses the council	Assesses the way the council and local partners work together in the area
Assesses councils against hundreds of standard performance indicators	Looks at performance against the 198 national indicators
Assess councils on the same thing in every place	Focuses on what matters most in each area – Do you know what local people need/want, including those most vulnerable and do your priorities reflect this?
Focuses on how the organisation performs	Focuses on what the organisations achieve – are peoples' lives getting better?
Focuses on past performance	Forward looking focus – how likely is it that priorities for the area will be achieved?
An Audit Commission assessment	A joint inspectorate assessment

Involves regular programmes of inspection	Reduction in programmed inspection – in future inspection will be “triggered” by concerns identified through CAA.
Characterised by an inspection event	A more on-going relationship between inspectorates and local organisations.

Does this mean more inspection? It should mean less. Some inspection will stop. CAA will replace the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), Children’s services Joint Area Reviews, Annual Performance Assessment of services for children and young people and Social Services star ratings for adult social care. But inspection arrangements for specific services (e.g. schools, colleges, police, probation and health and social care) will continue.

Isn’t this just going to consume a lot of officer time and resource that could be better spent? A good question – the jury is out. But if it works properly CAA should involve less resources because the Inspectorates will start with the performance data you use to manage your own performance (as long as its good enough) and only undertake inspection activity where necessary. And of course some assessments are stopping altogether.

Nobody took much notice of CPA, why will CAA be any different? It’s true that very few people know their councils CPA score. But CAA aims to be different. It will make straightforward independent information available to people, in a way that is easy for people to find and understand, about their local services, helping them make informed choices and influence decisions. Take a look at the prototype web tool at <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/caa/consultation.asp>

This all sounds very well but doesn’t it just mean that the council will get blamed for everything? It shouldn’t work like that. If the Inspectorates have a concern about something it will use a red flag in the area assessment, say why they are concerned and who is responsible (the inspectorates say use of red flags will be limited). This will link through to the relevant organisational assessment (which all organisations will have – not just councils) and could affect the assessment score. There will be green flags to highlight exceptional practice that other areas can learn from.

I quite liked the CPA scores - it told you how well you were doing in comparison to your neighbours. Will this still be possible under CAA? Yes. The two elements of the organisational assessment will still be scored and no doubt somebody will be producing league tables. And you will also be able to compare your performance against all the indicators in the national set. The way they propose to report CAA should also help you identify good practice from elsewhere that you might be able to learn from.

I can see that CAA makes sense for cities and metropolitan areas - but what about in shire areas? Well it will be a bit more complex but will still work in the same way. County and district councils will each be subject to their own organisational assessment. The area assessment will take the priorities for the area identified in the LAA as its starting point and will look at the contribution that all partners make to it. So if shire districts are in the lead, or making a contribution to, some of the LAA priorities then CAA will assess the prospects for achieving them.

So its all sorted then? No, not quite! CAA will be a huge challenge for all involved. The inspectorates will have to be much more joined up, only collect information where they really need it and develop the skills and capacity to make forward (not backward) looking assessments. Government Offices will have to learn to rely on CAA for monitoring the LAA, and not conduct their own assessments. And it will also have implications for councils.

What should we be doing in my council? Well we are still at the consultation stage so

- make sure your council is talking about this with your local partners and that you all understand how big a change CAA is
- respond to the consultation – there is still a chance to influence this
- make sure you are on track to deliver the priorities in your LAA and sustainable community strategy. Consider using the IDeA/LGA self evaluation tool to check your progress
- make sure that you have got good performance systems in place across your local partnerships – the better your data then the less intrusive CAA will be for you
- make sure your council develops a good relationship with your CAA lead. They have been appointed by the Audit Commission to coordinate joint inspectorate activity in your area and they will be key to the success of CAA.

What does the LGA say about all this? External challenge is useful to help us and our local partners to learn and improve. We think the proposals are ambitious and reflect what the sector has been calling for – a reduced burden, a move away from rigid scoring, a focus on what matters locally – but time will tell whether the principles that underpin CAA can be turned into practice.

What happens next?

Now to mid October	Consultation period plus testing the proposals in ten trial areas
October/November	Analysis of consultation responses and trials
February '09	Final CAA methodology published
April '09	CAA starts
November '09	First round of CAA assessments published.

I am hooked - where can I find out more. Glad to hear it. Go to the LGA website and take a look at our “On the Day Briefing” and IDeA Knowledge to access support for CAA. For more detailed information have a look at the Audit Commission website and consider signing up to receive their electronic CAA newsletter.

