

LGA Improvement Board - 9 September 2008

Comprehensive Area Assessment: Self Assessment Tool – Summary of Learning and Issues from Testing

1. Councils and partners have tested the self assessment in the following six areas:
 - Barking and Dagenham
 - Enfield
 - St Helens
 - Stockport
 - Suffolk – across the two tiers
 - Trafford
2. This note gives a high level summary of the learning and issues raised by the process alongside proposed next steps. This note has been produced in collaboration with the councils and is based on three feedback sessions, one in London, one in St Helens and the other in Suffolk.
3. It should be noted that this was a trial exercise. Each council said that they did the best they could but it was within extremely tight timescales that ultimately meant that their involvement with partners was more limited than they would have usually expected. All councils said that their self assessments were still ‘live’ documents and that they were doing more work with partners following the end of the trial.

Value of the Self Assessment Tool

4. Feedback on the experience of the councils was that the exercise was useful as an improvement tool in its own right. They found the experience to be useful in further developing their partnership working to achieve local outcomes. They also found that it was useful to help them think through the issues and areas that they need to address in readiness for CAA.

“It is certainly very useful as a tool for thinking beyond the boundaries of an individual council. It helped to think about the whole picture – how are all the public sector

organisations and other stakeholders performing in the borough? Is the total more than the sum of the parts and if so how is that measured? And are the pieces in place to deal with the challenges and risks in the future?"

"It has also been helpful in identifying the gaps in information or understanding."

"It helped us work through, as a partnership, where we need to be. We will continue the process, including developing a gap analysis, which will form the basis of our partnership improvement programme"

Issues Highlighted

5. The trialling highlighted some issues that needed further clarification before further developing and widening the use of the tool. These issues are considered below, alongside thoughts on the way forward or where further work is needed.

Focus of the Self Assessment

6. Each of the self assessments had a slightly different focus – some concentrating more on the council and others more on the partnership for the area. This is one of the issues more generally with CAA. The real benefit of the self assessment is for it to be used on a partnership level, looking at how they work together to deliver real outcomes in the area. This could be described as LSP plus. Clearly this would draw on the underpinning sustainable community strategy and the LAA. The next phase of the self assessment will highlight that the focus of it will be ‘the area’ and the partnership working together in that area.

Content of the Self Assessment

7. Councils have provided more detailed comments but there was broad agreement that the headings tested were too detailed and too prescriptive. Essentially, they stopped the partnerships from being able to tell their own local story.

There was also a perception that the headings are too subjective in what defines a good outcome for a partnership.

8. The headings also need to be refocused to ensure they are more outcome focused and forward looking. Most councils said that their experience was that they really got to the key elements of the self assessment towards the later sections, which considered risks to meeting desired outcomes.
9. Some councils felt strongly that the headings for the next version should focus more clearly on the three questions put forward by the inspectorates in the Area Assessment. However others felt that it was more important to look beyond the Area Assessment at what really mattered to local partnerships, with more focus on the forward look – where a partnership is working to get to and how it is planning to get there. There could be clear linkages to the three questions but that this wouldn't be main driver. Also, the self assessment could more closely pick up issues such as the health of the democracy and partnership governance strengths and gaps than currently highlighted in the area assessment, which would also be worked through to ensure that a partnership was more able to ensure it was working to achieve its outcomes.
10. More explicit emphasis is needed to enable partnerships to pull out cohesion issues and how partners are working together to protect vulnerable groups.

Citizen Involvement in the Self Assessment and Community Empowerment

11. The councils did not feel the need for a stand alone exercise to involve citizens in developing the self assessment. It would be more important to use the process to reflect on the wider issue of citizen involvement and engagement in setting local priorities and working towards improving outcomes in the area. This would be of more value than a stand alone 'tokenistic' exercise to involve citizens in the self assessment itself.
12. It was reflected that the self assessment does not currently fully pick up the issue of community empowerment. However, it was agreed that tool should be used for the partnership to agree their local definition of community empowerment, what they are working towards and how successful they are in their aims in this area.

Self Assessment as Part of the Planning and Performance Management Cycle

13. All councils felt that for the self assessment to work as a process it needs to be embedded in the planning and performance management cycle of the partnership. This could mean that a partnership would do a more in depth exercise in the first year and then take stock and make amendments annually. One council said that they would use the self assessment as the basis for identifying work programmes to be taken forward by the thematic partnership groups. Another council was more advanced in its work in this area and felt that the self assessment work would not serve such a key purpose.

Challenge and Robust Evidence

14. It was widely acknowledged that the self assessment should be both sufficiently challenging and based on robust evidence. It was also recognized that there would need to be a cultural change for both the councils and the inspectorates to ensure that this could be the case under CAA. This would mean that partnerships would need to feel confident that in acknowledging work in progress, it would be receive positive recognition from the inspectorates for self awareness and commitment to tackle an issue.
15. The gap analysis included in the St Helens self assessment provided a real assessment of the challenges faced by the partnership and other councils said that they were planning to revisit their self assessment to do the same exercise and use it as part of their own improvement planning.

Two Tier Self Assessment

16. Suffolk also found the experience of developing a self assessment to be very useful. Key learning points from a two tier perspective included the need to be clear that the primary focus of the self assessment would be the outcomes in the area rather than the relationships between partners, which while important should not be the starting point. It is important to ensure ownership across the LSPs, so this may involve initial sign off at a cross partnership level. It is also important to have recognition where there is capacity to do this work, which in

this case was at the County Council but also noting that there also needs to be parity of esteem across the two tiers. There also needs to be a balancing act in ensuring that the key issues are being covered in the self assessment and to avoid using it as an exercise to directly compare LSPs.

Next Steps

The self assessment is being tested as part of the inspectorate CAA piloting in Stockport and Barking and Dagenham. The self assessment tool will be remodelled based on the feedback of the councils and inspectorates. The revised approach will be tested further by other councils. Ultimately, it is intended that a tried and tested tool will be available to all councils and partners to use to help drive improvement and help them prepare for CAA.