

Comprehensive Area Assessment - Update

Summary

This report updates member on the latest developments on the implementation of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

Recommendations

That the report be noted.

Action

Officers to continue to pursue the objectives agreed by the Board in March and keep the Board updated on progress.

Comprehensive Area Assessment - update

“CAA watch”

1. At the March Board meeting members agreed that the LGA should monitor councils’ experience of CAA to ensure that:
 - it delivers the intentions in the framework document and guidance,
 - the LGA is well positioned to take up concerns during the year and to influence the way CAA develops in year 2 and the future of inspection.
2. Currently we are able to gain informal feedback through the LGA’s CAA advisers group and through our contacts with other parts of the sector e.g. IDeA, CCN, SOLACE etc. This is very useful but it is restricted to officers and not necessarily fully representative. Lead members have therefore agreed that we undertake a full survey of Council Leaders and officers views twice per year.
3. Although CAA is an on-going process there are meant to be regular occasions in the year when the inspectorates will more formally share their thinking. In the first year of CAA this will occur:
 - in June, when we understand that Inspectorates will share with the LSP/council their understanding of the priorities for the area, what the data says about performance and issues for further investigation;
 - and in September when Inspectorates will share with the LSP/council their emerging conclusions and thoughts about flags and scores.
4. The surveys will be conducted immediately after these discussions.
5. In June we invited Leaders to feedback generally on progress so far and any concerns they might have. In September we will ask a set of questions focussing on high level strategic issues, following the questions to Leaders in January 2009 – which will enable comparison with the January results. The officer survey would focus on the extent to which the practical experience of CAA delivers on the ambition.
6. Taken together the results should give us a very good picture about the sector’s experience of CAA, whether the burden is reducing, potential flags and scores, etc and help inform the LGA Group support offer. The results would also enable us to make evidence-based statements about “CAA so far” before the summer recess and in advance of the November reporting.

CAA – feedback from councils

7. Feedback gained from early responses to Cllr Margaret Eaton’s most recent letter to Leaders and meetings with officers is that:
 - Councils’ relationships with CAA leads generally appear to be positive;

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- More of an issue is the apparent disconnect and difference of approach between appointed auditors and the work undertaken by the CAA Leads (CAAL). Auditors' work on Use of Resources appears to adopt more of a "tick box" approach;
- some councils still feel that they are being pushed towards CPA-style written self-assessment for aspects of CAA e.g. Use of Resources or Managing Performance, when the CAA approach is supposed to be far less prescriptive;
- inspectorate activity in some areas does not feel joined up – some councils are receiving multiple requests for the same information;
- councils are not yet convinced that the burden has reduced – there is a lot of work to do in a short space of time, given the curtailed timescale for the first year;
- there are concerns about the collective capacity of the inspectorates to deliver the area assessment.

We have shared this feedback with the Audit Commission.

Peer involvement in CAA

8. Good progress has been made with the Audit Commission following Gareth Davies' attendance at the last meeting of the Board to talk about member peer involvement:
 - The role description circulated at the last meeting has been revised to provide for a stronger member peer input;
 - Greater clarity about the sort of peers required has helped IDeA identify sufficient potential peers;
 - The process of matching peers to CAA leads has been undertaken by IDeA and is now with the Commission who aim to make the appointments this month.
9. IDeA and AC held well-attended briefing sessions for peers undertaking the regional advisory and CAAL support roles.

Consultation on CAA review process

10. Lead members have approved the LGA's response to the joint Inspectorate proposals on the process for LSPs to request a review of red flags and for councils to request a review of organisational assessment scores. The response reflected discussion at the last meeting and feedback from councils and proposed that:
 - assessment/scores should only be published if and when a review has been resolved;
 - at a minimum ten (not five) days be allowed for the application of a review;
 - greater flexibility be allowed regarding the admissibility of new evidence at the review stage.
11. A copy of the response is available on the LGA's website.

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Financial Implications

12. There are no additional financial implications arising from this report.

Implications for Wales

13. There is a different approach to performance management in Wales.

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