

Our approach to joint inspections triggered by Comprehensive Area Assessment

Consultation document

January 2010



for an independent overview
of local public services

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Introduction

- 1 Around £200 billion of taxpayers' money goes into providing public services for local communities and people in vulnerable situations. These services have generally improved significantly in recent years, but poor performance has not been eliminated and additional investment in public services has not always been well spent. The consequences of service failure can be high. In some cases, people's lives depend on public services. In others, the consequences for service users may be less grave, but taxpayers' money is sometimes still poorly used and the quality of service can let people down, often when they most need help. In the current economic climate, the challenge faced by all public services will be to deliver better outcomes for local communities while achieving significant reductions in costs.
- 2 Inspection has proved to be a powerful catalyst for the improvement of local public services that can make a real difference to people's quality of life. It shines a spotlight on services to highlight what needs to improve or to understand what is holding back performance. It also provides clear information for the public on how well they are served. For services that have a major impact on the quality of life of people who need them most, inspection provides assurance and evidence to support further improvement, and can provide a strong voice for those least able to speak up for themselves. Inspections also help to identify ways of providing better value for money and improving services at the same time as reducing costs.
- 3 The revised approach to inspection set out here will allow us to respond more flexibly and in a more proportionate way to local circumstances. It is tailored to fit the wider changes in how local services are assessed through the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). It will help ensure we target our limited resources to support improvement where the need is greatest and better understand the experience of those who rely most on public services.

Purpose and scope of the consultation

- 4 When we published our joint inspectorate Comprehensive Area Assessment Framework document in February 2009, we set out our plans for the inspection of local public services. We said that inspection activity will be more risk-based and tailored to local circumstances so that inspection will have greater impact where it is needed most. We also said that we were committed to working in partnership to coordinate inspection and inspection planning and reduce the administrative impact of inspection across each area and organisation.
- 5 This consultation document and the accompanying draft framework for joint inspections outline in more detail our approach and methodology for joint inspection activity triggered by CAA. In this document, 'we' and 'us' refer to the six inspectorates which are working together to deliver CAA from April 2009: the Audit Commission, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMI Prisons), Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMI Probation), and Ofsted.
- 6 Because inspections will generally be triggered by concerns or questions about performance identified through CAA, we will take a flexible approach to determining the scope of each inspection and ensure it is tailored to the performance issues which have triggered it. We will focus on issues which are important to local people, including those in vulnerable circumstances, and where performance failure would pose a significant risk to their future wellbeing and quality of life or to the efficient and effective use of public funds.
- 7 We will be using the approach set out in these documents for joint inspections that are being planned or carried out in the remainder of 2009/10. We will review our approach to take account of comments received from consultees and to take account of lessons learnt from implementing the new approach in some areas.
- 8 We welcome views on the proposals set out in this document.

Purpose of inspection

- 9 We will design all our triggered joint inspections to contribute to the improvement of local public services. We will focus our resources and effort to help make a real difference to the experiences of people who rely on public services and the lives of our communities. As set out in the joint inspectorate CAA Framework document, we will continue to carry out inspections where there is a clear need to provide independent:
- assurance – for example, on how well the place or area as a whole is being served; whether a minimum level of service quality is universally available to a group of people in particularly vulnerable situations; the reliability of self-evaluation information; or whether adequate or better outcomes for citizens are likely to be achieved;
 - diagnosis – for example, to enable deeper investigation where there is evidence of weakness or failure, or a high risk of performance slippage or failure. The diagnosis will be tailored to inform improvement support;
 - accountability – for example, to support the public’s right to know about the performance of councils and their partners, including issues relating to the sound management and protection of public funds; and
 - promotion of improvement – for example, to stimulate action to ensure continuous improvement in service quality and value for money.

Targeted and triggered inspection

10 In the CAA Framework document we said:

- programmes of rolling inspection would continue for only a limited number of services for people whose circumstances make them vulnerable and to minimise the risk of harm to the public by those who offend; and
- for those public services provided directly by councils on their own or in partnership with others, other inspections would be targeted and triggered by single or joint inspectorate concerns arising out of CAA assessments at any stage in the year.

11 As set out in the CAA Framework document, we will consider carrying out a triggered inspection in the following circumstances, balancing urgency and significance of service failure or performance on individuals and groups, and particularly those in the most vulnerable circumstances:

- where performance or improvement levels are unsatisfactory, declining or not improving sufficiently quickly;
- where a service, outcome or one or more service-user groups has been identified as being subject to significant risk;
- where underperformance can best be addressed by inspection, bearing in mind the other means available, such as local improvement activity, peer challenge or review, sector-led improvement support, directive action through the Secretary of State, improvement notices or intervention;
- where ministers have given directions for an inspection to take place;
- (in exceptional cases) where performance levels are currently satisfactory but are declining substantially and rapidly; or
- where there is indication of unsatisfactory performance but insufficient evidence available to make a robust judgement.

12 A red flag and/or a low organisational assessment score will not automatically give rise to an inspection. But such indicators of concern, risk or unsatisfactory performance will prompt consideration of whether an inspection is appropriate.

Our approach to inspection

- 13** We will focus our inspection capacity where it is needed most and ensure that organisations and areas do not experience unnecessary or unreasonable levels of inspection. We will carry out a joint inspection only if we are satisfied it will add value, and the issue in question cannot be addressed using inspections already programmed.
- 14** There is no set number of triggered inspections as circumstances will vary but we expect the number of joint inspections to be very small. The Audit Commission's CAA leads will work with other inspectorates, government offices in the regions, regional improvement and efficiency partnerships and joint improvement partnerships to ensure inspection planning is coordinated with wider improvement planning, including any plans for sector-led support in the locality.
- 15** We will not carry out an inspection if we consider that an alternative form of improvement support would be more appropriate.
- 16** When we identify the need for an inspection, we will clarify what the purpose of the inspection is and what the scope should be. Because inspections will generally be triggered by concerns or questions about performance identified through CAA, we won't use a prescribed list of service areas which we will, or might, inspect. We will instead take a flexible approach to determining the scope of the inspection and ensure it is tailored to the performance issues which have triggered it. We will focus on issues which are important to local people, including those in vulnerable circumstances, and where performance failure would pose a significant risk to their future wellbeing and quality of life or to the efficient and effective use of public funds.
- 17** Examples of inspection scopes which are emerging from CAA findings, which may be appropriate for joint work include anti-social behaviour and alcohol-related harm; Saturday night disruption in the town centre; domestic violence – cross agency working; gypsy and traveller outcomes; the local economy and skills across an area; rural skills and jobs. In some circumstances we may also carry out joint inspections of corporate or partnership governance arrangements.
- 18** We will take a more flexible approach to the way we carry out inspections. The length of time we take, the number of staff we involve and the skills we will draw on to carry out the inspection will depend on the purpose, scope and focus of the inspection. We may use peer officers and/or members and we may include service-user representatives in some inspections. We will provide training for inspection teams. We will always seek to carry out the inspection in the most cost-effective way and to minimise the administrative impact on the organisation being inspected.

Our approach to inspection

- 19** We will not require new and separate self-assessments from organisations that are being inspected. We will make use of performance information already being used by the organisation to evaluate and manage its own performance to help us make our judgements. However, we recognise that regular self-evaluation is a feature of effective organisations and partnerships, so if a relevant self-assessment has been completed recently, we will make use of it. The more robust the self-assessment, the more reliance we will be able to place on it.
- 20** Notice periods may vary. In most cases, we will give organisations formal confirmation about any inspection that will affect them at least four weeks before the start of the fieldwork. For inspections of strategic matters and inspections which involve a number of organisations, a longer notice period may be appropriate.
- 21** When we report the findings of our inspections, we will usually make two judgements. The first will be about how well outcomes are currently being delivered from the perspective of service users and citizens. The second judgement will be about prospects for improvement.
- 22** We will usually score our judgements on a four-point scale to provide clarity about current levels of performance and prospects and capacity for improvement as follows.
- Judgement 1: How well are priority services, outcomes and improvements needed being delivered?
 - Score of 1: performs poorly: does not deliver minimum requirements.
 - Score of 2: performs adequately: meets only minimum requirements.
 - Score of 3: performs well: exceeds minimum requirements.
 - Score of 4: performs excellently: significantly exceeds minimum requirements.
 - Judgement 2: How strong is the capacity to improve?
 - Score of 1: poor prospects: does not meet minimum requirements.
 - Score of 2: adequate prospects: meets only minimum requirements.
 - Score of 3: good prospects: exceeds minimum requirements.
 - Score of 4: excellent prospects: significantly exceeds minimum requirements.
- 23** In very exceptional circumstances we may consider it inappropriate to score our judgements. For corporate and partnership governance inspections, our judgements will distinguish only between performance that is inadequate and at least adequate.
- 24** To help us make our judgements, we will usually use key lines of enquiry, which are similar to those currently used for the CAA organisational and area assessments. We have developed characteristics which describe what you might expect to see where services, outcomes and capacity to improve are adequate or good.
- 25** We will use different key lines of enquiry and characteristics for police authority inspections, and corporate and partnership governance inspections, to reflect the particular focus of these inspections.

Our review procedure

- 26** We aim to provide fair and accurate judgements in our inspection reports and have quality assurance arrangements in place to ensure this. But we recognise that disagreements may arise from time to time about our judgements. We hope any disagreements will be raised, discussed and resolved as they arise wherever possible. But, where an organisation remains dissatisfied about one or more of our judgements, it may request a review. Reviews of inspection judgements will be dealt with under the *Joint Inspectorate Comprehensive Area Assessment Review Procedure*. The grounds for review must be one or more of the following.
- The award of a score does not accord with the relevant criteria for awarding the score.
 - The inspectorates have made a decision that is demonstrably unreasonable, in that it is not supported by the evidence.
- 27** The timescale for requesting a review under this procedure is five working days for inspections of a single organisation, and ten working days where the inspection covers more than one organisation.

More detail on our proposals

- 28** To provide a better understanding of our approach to inspection, we have produced a draft version of *Our Approach to Joint Inspection Triggered by Comprehensive Area Assessment Framework*. This sets out the overall framework for joint inspections in the future and it applies to joint inspections other than police authority inspections. A separate framework has been published for police authority inspections which are carried out jointly by the Audit Commission and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary,
- 29** Joint inspection guidance for staff will also be produced – this will be a new section of the CAA guidance, written as operational guidance for our staff who carry out inspections.

Your views

- 30** We are seeking your views on our proposals and draft framework during the period 4 January to 19 February 2010.
- 31** If you disagree with any of our proposals please let us know why and suggest any alternative approaches.
- 32** Please send your comments to caa@audit-commission.gov.uk by 19 February 2010.
- 33** We will share a summary of responses to our consultation with consultees and publish the final version of our framework for carrying out joint inspections from 2010/11 onwards in spring 2010.

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