

Comprehensive Area Assessment

A guide for councillors



‘CAA is a fundamental shift in emphasis. It is about how well different public bodies work together to improve local quality of life, based on the judgement of different inspectorates in partnership. By giving a comprehensive picture, CAA will help you and your colleagues shape where you live and help your local communities. And this outcome and partnership focus gives CAA the potential to become the country’s most user-friendly public service reporting system ever.’

Steve Bundred, Chief Executive, Audit Commission

‘CAA takes a more holistic view than CPA. It’s about more than how much you save, how efficient you are and how much your council tax is – it’s about a sense of place for your area and asks what local people think about you?’

Cllr Dave Goddard, Leader, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council

‘At the LGA we lobbied hard to ensure that elected councillors are involved in the CAA assessment process. It is important that councillors now take advantage of this opportunity and ensure the inspectorates fully understand the political vision for the area and are aware of your views about the delivery of better outcomes.’

Cllr David Parsons CBE, Chairman LGA Improvement Board on behalf of the LGA Group

‘CAA offers a fantastic opportunity for scrutiny members to become an indispensable part of the process that the council and its partners use to improve. It will cement scrutiny’s role as a constructive critical friend in many councils. In councils where scrutiny might not be so strong, it acts as an impetus for officers and councillors to think again about what scrutiny’s fundamental role is – hopefully leading to its use as one of a number of tools for driving up local standards of service.’

The Centre for Public Scrutiny

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HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, HM Inspectorate of Prisons,
HM Inspectorate of Probation and Ofsted – July 2009

What is Comprehensive Area Assessment?

Comprehensive Area Assessment, or CAA, is a new way of assessing local public services in England. It examines how well councils and other public bodies work together to meet the needs of the people they serve.

For the first time, six independent inspectorates will collectively assess services. We are asking: what do people say they want and what do they need; are they getting it; and what are the prospects for things to get better?

CAA will focus on what residents and local leaders – you among them – identify as priorities. In one area it might be the recession, in another the quality of healthcare or affordable housing, children's well-being, crime and safety, educational achievement or the quality of the environment. If your area is getting exceptional results or has improved in a way that others can learn from, we'll highlight it with a green flag. In places where we have significant concerns about the likelihood of improvement in agreed local priorities, we'll give red flags.

We'll give the public these assessments online, in print and through other media. They will make for an evolving picture of life in particular places. First results will be available on 10 December 2009 on the oneplace website.

How is CAA different from what's gone before?

CAA is a departure from Comprehensive Performance Assessments, which stopped in March 2009. The new approach:

- **is more wide-ranging:** CAA is not looking at councils alone but at how they are working with the police, probation, health and other bodies – the joint goal being a better quality of life in the locality.
- **focuses on ends:** Rather than examining the processes and structures of services, CAA looks at results. Are services making a difference; are they helping improve people's lives?
- **assesses local priorities:** CAA focuses on what's important to each local area – and that will vary. Do service providers understand their localities and what residents feel is important? How well are they collaborating on long-term problems?
- **is forward-looking:** Instead of appraising how things were done, CAA reports on what's happening now and on what needs to alter if the lives of citizens are to improve in the future.
- **is a joint assessment:** Through CAA we are collectively judging how well services deliver improvements for their communities.
- **will cut inspection and the work local services need to do to prepare and respond to assessment:** Programmes of regular inspection are now fewer. We are basing our assessments on information that you and the other bodies already produce. And we will draw on the regular conversation going on between inspectorates, councils and the police and fire services, health bodies and information from inspections of children's homes and schools.

Who is involved?

The six different inspectorates offering a coordinated overview of each area are the Audit Commission; the Care Quality Commission; HM Inspectorates of Constabulary, Prisons and Probation; and Ofsted. With the Local Government Association and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), we want councillors to feed in their experience and perspectives to enrich the assessments. We will also use the knowledge of experts and specialists to underpin the assessments.

What do CAA assessments look like?

CAA has two parts: we are assessing the area while we also check and report on the organisations providing public services within it.

In the **area assessment** the inspectorates together judge how well public services are meeting local priorities – and whether improvement is likely to continue. The **organisational assessment** examines the performance and value for money of councils and trusts, schools and other bodies, and how well they are working with one another. The Audit Commission will coordinate organisational assessments of councils and fire and rescue services. The other inspectorates will report separately – so the Care Quality Commission will do organisational assessments of PCTs, for example.

We'll measure how each area performs using national and local information that is already available. We'll look at local area agreements, sustainable communities strategies, the national indicators set by central government and, as a source of data on opinion and attitudes, the government's Place Survey. We'll also look at information produced by councils and other local organisations to monitor their own performance.

By bringing together assessments of place and of organisations, we'll be able to make a judgement on how well public services are tackling an area's problems and priorities.

You can see an example of what an area assessment will look like at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/oneplace

And you can find out more detail about CAA by visiting our dedicated web pages on www.audit-commission.gov.uk/caa

What will CAA mean for the elected member?

CAA will bring together in one place easily accessible information to help you challenge those running local public services to do better.

It will support you in place-shaping and community leadership. CAA will highlight where improvement is needed. Green flags will signal outstanding performance or innovation to inspire and challenge you. Red flags will point out areas of significant concern and where to focus your attention.

We will use information you are producing in scrutiny reviews. In turn, CAA reports should point to what is important within your area and what you may want to be the subject of future scrutiny.

If you are an executive member involved in the local strategic partnership (LSP) or, say, a crime and disorder reduction partnership, CAA should help you and your colleagues to review risks and find solutions.

Your questions answered

Does CAA mean more or less inspection?

Less. Some inspections will stop and we are streamlining others. CAA replaces Comprehensive Performance Assessment, Joint Area Reviews of children's services, Annual Performance Assessment of services for children and young people and Social Services star ratings for adult social care. We will inspect where we need to, for example where we have concerns about performance or outcomes. Inspection will continue for services for children in care or in vulnerable circumstances. Where possible we'll rely on the information you already collect to manage your performance.

When budgets are tight, isn't this going to consume officer time and money that we should spend elsewhere?

CAA should be a money saver. Organisations that work more closely together duplicate less and so ought to cut costs. With over £200 billion going to local public services each year, CAA is casting light on where it is well – or not so well – spent. And with government requiring 3 per cent efficiency savings each year in the period up to March 2011, the search for value is more critical than ever. By joining forces the inspectorates reduce the administrative impact of our assessments, allowing councils, PCTs and police services to concentrate on service priorities.

How will CAA help me as a councillor? Is it good for local democracy?

We believe so. CAA will give you and your electors more information; an independent assessment of what public services do in your patch; and how yours compares with other areas. Public reporting is a tried and tested way of pumping up the pressure to improve. CAA will help citizens hold public bodies and you, their elected representatives, to account. It also helps local bodies challenge themselves, providing the means for you to scrutinise performance more sharply.

Why will it matter to the public?

Increasingly, citizens expect direct access to information about services. CAA information will be both readily available and independent. It will strengthen citizens' capacity to challenge and to influence services. Because CAA looks at what matters to people in their area, reports should have a ready-made audience.

We will write assessments in straightforward, jargon-free language. Online reporting will make it easy to find data about the local area, and we'll provide alternatives for citizens not online.

Can we afford CAA when the country is in recession?

CAA is even more relevant now. Councils, PCTs and police forces have to prove their value for money, and the organisational assessment will look closely at this. Response to recession demands coherence, with services working together to meet need. This is the province of the area assessments.

Won't it just mean your council gets the blame for everything?

No. If we mark with a red flag a gap in tackling an area's stated priorities, it will be for the partnership to resolve this, not just the council. A critical area judgement may link with assessment of a relevant organisation, and could affect that organisation's score.

As a locally elected representative, how can I put my views across to inspectors?

Your LSP has a CAA lead who will be in regular contact with it and coordinate links with other local services. If there is something specific you would like to raise, contact your CAA lead. Details of the CAA lead for each area can be found at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/caaleads

Agreement has been reached with a group of peers to provide one-to-one support to CAA leads from autumn 2009. There are also expert advisory panels, made up of councillors and people with experience from a wide range of services, that are helping to shape CAA assessments.

So will inspectors talk to us to find out what is going on, especially those of us from minority parties?

CAA is not the same as CPA. In the CPA rolling inspection programme, a team of inspectors would appear at the council and stay for a week or two. CAA is different – it's more like a continuing conversation. We are talking to the council and other bodies regularly, including with elected members from all parties as well as the executives at all levels who deliver services. And CAA will evolve. In areas with county and district councils, CAA leads will work with the LSPs to bring in all local authorities. Priorities won't just be county-wide, though the assessment cannot cover everything each year.

CAA timetable

Summer 2009: CAA leads and other inspectorate staff will collate information and, talking to one another and to local partnerships, judge how effectively you are meeting local priorities.

September/November 2009: We will share draft emerging assessments with you. Before publication we will have time for a review, to resolve disagreements about red flags or organisational assessment scores. The review procedure is on the Audit Commission website.

10 December 2009: Launch of public website. First set of CAA reports published.

Early 2010: We will publish summary national reports on what we have learned from the first round of CAA.

Where to find out more

Go to the Audit Commission website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/caa to find out more. You can view an example area assessment and see how members of the public will be able to access information online about their area.

Also available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk are annual audit letters. These summarise in clear and accessible language how councils are performing financially. The site also has national reports and studies which examine services in the light of, for example, sustainable development, an ageing population or the impact of the recession.

Support from IDeA

IDeA has developed a locality self-evaluation tool to support councils within the CAA framework. You can find this on the IDeA website at www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8811984. IDeA also offers peer challenge to support councils in the self-evaluation process.

Information about the other partner inspectorates can be found at: Care Quality Commission

www.cqc.org.uk

HM Inspectorates of Constabulary

www.inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmic

HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation

www.inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk

Ofsted

www.ofsted.gov.uk



From 10 December 2009 you will find the results of Comprehensive Area Assessment on the oneplace website.

For more information, go to www.audit-commission.gov.uk/oneplace

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