

## **Local leadership, better outcomes and the CAA: conference report**

### **Leeds, 24 April 2009**

The IDeA arranged this event for councillors, partner representatives and officers from across the three northern regions (north east, north west, and Yorkshire and Humberside). The event was intended to place comprehensive area assessment (CAA) in the broader context of local leadership and accountability, partnerships and the underlying driver, achieving better outcomes for communities. There was a particular emphasis on the implications for councillors.

Presentations included:

- 'CAA – a new way of assessing services': Ian Carter, Head of Local Government Strategy, Audit Commission and Gill Robinson, CAA Methods Manager, Care Quality Commission
- 'CAA in practice – lessons from a trial area': Jane Scullion, IDeA North West Regional Associate and former Assistant Chief Executive Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council
- 'The role of scrutiny in partnership accountability and delivery': Jessica Crowe, Director Centre for Public Scrutiny
- 'Working with CAA to achieve better outcomes – opportunities and challenges for elected members': Councillor Steve Houghton, Leader Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council and Chair, One Barnsley local strategic partnership
- 'Support for the transition to CAA': David Alston, IDeA Deputy Regional Associate

### **Plenary discussion**

Delegates identified the following key issues and questions:

- How will a consistent approach by the Audit Commission's comprehensive area assessment leads (CAALs) be ensured, both regionally and nationally? Their role in coordinating CAA will be key.
- Need to ensure that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) has a full understanding of the role of police authorities. There are differences between these bodies and the police services which HMIC are familiar with inspecting.
- The judgement on partnership performance through the CAA may be perceived to rest mainly on the council. This poses a reputational risk, particularly where there is underperformance. It will be important to effectively influence partners that are not performing well.
- How will the Audit Commission develop the engagement with and role of councillors and peers in the CAA process? The Commission has acknowledged that the involvement of political leaders will be important in getting a proper

sense of place, and is developing proposals in response to representations made by the LGA.

- Are there any lessons from the pilot process for scrutiny? How can it help to achieve a greater focus on outcomes and involve partners?
- Will CAA really shift the focus from process to outcomes?
- Better sharing of performance data will be a crucial element of more effective partnership performance management.
- There was some concern expressed about the meaning and use of green and red flags in CAA reporting. It was confirmed that these would be used according to the CAA framework published in February 2009.
- Is there a risk that many areas will be 'red-flagged', despite their best efforts to meet demanding/aspirational targets such as to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, which may have negotiated in response to national priorities?

There was limited opportunity to respond to these questions in the plenary session, although a number were addressed in the subsequent presentation on scrutiny and in the workshop sessions, the key messages from which are summarised below.

## **Workshop sessions**

Delegates had the option of attending two of the following three workshop sessions:

- A: the role of members in CAA
- B: delivering better outcomes through partnerships
- C: CAA and partnerships: new scrutiny guidance

The main messages from these workshops are presented over the following pages.

## A: the role of members in CAA

Delegates were split into two groups – officers and councillors – and asked:

- What are the key challenges for councillors?
- What are the potential solutions to these challenges?

The workshop was run twice. See the table below for a summary of responses. Common threads included the importance of raising councillors' understanding of CAA through member development; communications; relationships with partner organisations and public involvement/engagement. There is a need for realistic expectations of the extent of public engagement.

	<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Solutions</b>
Councillor responses	<p>Identifying and personalising relationships with key partner organisations</p> <p>Ownership of partnership issues and priorities by members of those partnerships</p> <p>Lack of understanding of partnership organisations by councillors</p> <p>Demands on councillors time</p> <p>Dilution of the councillors role through increasing partnership working</p> <p>Red flags – reputational risk</p>	<p>Improved understanding of different partnership cultures and recognition of mutual needs</p> <p>Enhanced communication with public and partners</p> <p>Member development</p> <p>Councillors to engage more with inspectorates</p> <p>Engage with the public more – so they understand issues and challenges</p> <p>Use partnerships to release more resources through joined-up working and pooling etc.</p>
Officer responses	<p>Number of partnerships and lack of knowledge of these</p> <p>Clarity of member role regarding CAA and partnerships</p> <p>How to explain CAA to electorate and communities</p> <p>Ensuring 'buy-in' to the CAA and wider partnership agenda by members / partners / public and staff</p> <p>Influencing partners to achieve better outcomes</p> <p>Legitimising political agenda through CAA</p>	<p>Member development</p> <p>Strengthening knowledge of partnerships – two way information flow</p> <p>Develop a range of media to communicate with members</p> <p>Use simple, clear language that will keep people interested and engaged</p> <p>Use good data and intelligence to make evidence-based decisions</p> <p>Be clear from the outset about the outcomes you want to achieve</p> <p>Ensure representatives have the authority to front issues to influence partners plans and ambitions</p>

## **B: delivering better outcomes through partnerships**

Key messages:

- Given CAA, one challenge is the understanding of each other's roles. This is particularly difficult for voluntary and community sector groups. Some councils find engaging with the private sector difficult.
- There was an unwillingness to engage by the public but Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council had a 'Love it/Hate it' campaign last year. 7,000 participants engaged in extremely successful consultation on what public like/do not like about the borough.
- Politicians' in-fighting puts people off.
- Important to deliver what the public want. Listen and demonstrate that you are responding even if changes take a long time to come through.
- Is there enough sharing of data and information across partnership boards? This is about trust and relationships and also technical issues affecting data sharing, e.g. non-compatible IT, data protection etc.
- Hard to reach groups are an issue. Could broaden out citizens' panels for use by partners?
- Are we being complacent about our understanding of diversity, for example in areas with a small ethnic minority? Does this mean they are become more marginalised?
- Partnerships could develop a far deeper understanding of marginalised groups needs by working through the third sector which has these relationships.
- Creation of trust between partners is absolutely essential, the experience of a number of officers is that partnerships are often driven by the particular personalities involved, and partnerships can often be a long way off being robust enough to withstand changes in personnel.
- The difficulties that districts face, given complicated local partnership structures, is recognised. We still need a better understanding of the role districts play in CAA – there is a sense that CAA was created with only unitary local government structures in mind.
- It is questionable whether the LAA priorities really reflect local priorities.
- If politics really plays out and elected members prioritise one priority over another – what will this mean – a sea of red flags?

## **C: CAA and partnerships: new scrutiny guidance**

The workshop provided: an overview of the key features of the role and opportunities for CAA scrutiny; and the new guidance being finalised by the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) for the IDeA.

- New powers arising from the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and Police and Justice Act 2006 for scrutinising partnerships.
- CAA offers further opportunities for overview and scrutiny committees (OSCs) to develop scrutiny of partnerships.
- Scrutiny and CAA will be a two-way process: inspectorates will use scrutiny reports as evidence, and scrutiny can use CAA reports to shape its work programme.
- The new IDeA scrutiny guidance has a particular emphasis on 'critical friend' challenge to the locality self evaluation. It sets out different ways this can be done, steps for planning and carrying out the challenge and examples of questions to use.
- Challenging a locality self evaluation enables scrutiny to hold the LSP to account and support the LSP's work in delivering and improving services.
- For LSPs, the benefits are more confidence that their self evaluation is accurate and valid, and consequently the possibility of more proportionate inspection.
- CAA is an ongoing process and its proposed regular dialogues may highlight problem areas that the OSC can look to address in its annual work programmes.
- The guidance also suggests other ways scrutiny can begin to engage with CAA and challenge and improve the effectiveness of local partnership working:
  - talking to partners to encourage them to understand the potential benefits of scrutiny as an improvement tool and a way to bring a fresh approach to problems
  - exercising their community leadership role by voicing their views and contributing to the development of the area and the improvement of local services
  - working with partners to identify potential 'partnership inquiries', such as thematic multi-agency issues, for the scrutiny's annual work programme in order to make recommendations that aid policy development
  - thinking about how to add value to the delivery of partnership programmes and the achievement of area priorities by, for example, identifying risks to LAA delivery and recommending action.

Delegates then considered the question 'how well placed is overview and scrutiny (O&S) for scrutinising partnerships and playing a role in the CAA process?'

Issues raised included:

- Need clearer guidance on how O&S can work with police authorities in their scrutiny role, what their respective remits are, whether there is any overlap and, if so, how to deal with that.
- How can O&S look at sub-regional partnership working and multi area agreements (MAAs)?
- The lack of mutual awareness among LSP members and OSC members.
- A preference by some LSP members and agencies for scrutiny to focus on LSP activities as opposed to governance – yet partnerships may perform poorly against accepted standards of good governance.
- A tendency for scrutiny in some authorities to get caught up with the very parochial, distracting it from its focus and work on some of the broader strategic issues.
- How well does 'critical friend' scrutiny of CAA self evaluation and partnerships work when you have a party with an overwhelming majority?
- Scrutiny needs to be able to pursue issues and activities across different organisations.
- An interest in the joining up of scrutiny by agencies, as exemplified in the Cardiff's Local Service Board Scrutiny Body.