

Comprehensive area assessment: a quick brief for councillors

What is comprehensive area assessment (CAA)?

CAA is the new external assessment of how well local public services are performing. From April 2009 it replaced comprehensive performance assessment (CPA). CAA results will be published annually, with the first due for publication by early December 2009.

CAA seeks to assess the improvements being made by local public services to the quality of life of its residents and the outcomes they are helping to achieve. It also seeks to assess how well some of the key partners (councils, fire and rescue services, police and primary care trusts [PCTs]) manage their resources and performance. To do this, CAA includes two elements:

- an area assessment
- organisational assessments.

Area assessment

This looks at the difference local public services working in partnership (and with the business, community and voluntary sectors) are making to the quality of life in an area, both now and in the future. Reports will cover an area corresponding to that for the local area agreement (LAA). It will be based on three key questions:

- How well do local priorities express community needs and aspirations?
- How well are the required outcomes and improvements being delivered?
- What are the prospects for future improvement?

The area assessment will not be scored or carry a 'star rating'. It will be a narrative report providing an overview of key priorities for the area, overall success and challenges, and a summary of prospects for improvement.

Area assessments may award green or red 'flags':

- Green flags highlight exceptional performance or outstanding improvement from which others can learn.
- Red flags represent significant concerns about outcomes or future prospects where more or different actions required.

Organisational assessments

Organisational assessments will be carried out annually at all councils, fire and rescue services (FRSs), police authorities and PCTs. They will include two elements:

- Use of resources, including managing finances, governing the organisation and managing resources.
- Managing performance, looking at how well the organisation is delivering priority services and outcomes and its capacity to deliver future improvements.

The organisational assessment will be scored from 1 to 4, with a rating from 'performs poorly' to 'performs excellently'.

Who will be doing CAA?

The Audit Commission is working with the other inspectorates to deliver CAA

together. These include the Care Quality Commission (for health and aspects of social services), HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, Ofsted, and HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation. A comprehensive area assessment lead (CAAL) from the Audit Commission will coordinate the assessment in each area.

CAA will be based on ongoing sharing of information and understanding with the inspectorates, rather than set-piece inspections – other than those needed to safeguard vulnerable groups or where there are concerns about performance.

Reporting CAA

CAA assessments will be published by December each year. They will be put on the web under the 'oneplace' brand which the Commission hopes will raise public interest in the results and increase their use as a tool to hold public services to account.

CAALs will share emerging findings with local areas on a regular basis during the year (January, March and June), with draft area assessments shared in confidence through strategic partnerships by September. This should allow areas to comment and agree the evidence being used to form judgements.

What does it mean for councillors?

CAA is intended to assess how well councils and their partners are improving outcomes that are important for local people. Councillors have a key role in agreeing local priorities and need to demonstrate an understanding of their communities. They need to challenge the performance of their council and partners in achieving those

priorities. They should explain the legitimate political choices they make so inspectors have a proper understanding of place to inform their judgements. All elected members have a role to play:

Council leaders and executive members

- Providing community leadership and vision, and exercising that through partnerships.
- Managing and understanding performance to deliver better outcomes.
- Building relationships with comprehensive area assessment leads (CAALs).

Overview and scrutiny

- Constructive performance challenge.
- Developing partnership scrutiny, building on wider powers to call partners to account.
- Ensuring performance management and self-evaluation systems are robust.

Ward members

- Understanding local communities.
- Making sure this intelligence is used in shaping policy and priorities.
- Explaining performance to constituents.

More information

Detailed guidance on the CAA framework:

www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/audit/caa/pages/caaframework.aspx

For how the IDeA can help councils and partners, see the IDeA's CAA resource:

www.idea.gov.uk/caa