

Comprehensive area assessment: a quick brief for staff

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) and associated assessments such as joint area reviews of children's services and social services star ratings. CAA results will be published annually, with the first due for publication in 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 assessments

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, now and in future. Reports will cover an area corresponding to that for the local area agreement (LAA). It will be based on the 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 for councils and FRSs including managing finances, governing the organisation (including commissioning / procurement; use of information and risk management) and managing resources (natural resources, physical assets and people).
- 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.

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 us?

CAA is an opportunity to judge local areas more on their own terms, not just according to national priorities. The Audit Commission wants it to be a tool

for local people to hold partners collectively to account for the delivery of better outcomes. It reinforces the position of partnerships at the heart of delivering effective services and improving outcomes for communities.

For officers and staff across key partners the following are likely to be key issues:

- Understanding your partners well – their different cultures, decision making and planning processes and performance drivers.
- Sharing performance data to help the delivery of local priorities.
- Making sure that all performance data is reliable, accurate and up to date. It may inform CAA.
- Providing information to help councillors and partnership governors to understand local needs and priorities to guide decision making
- Understand poor performance and using this to help plan and achieve future improvements
- Recognising and assisting the legitimate role of scrutiny in challenging the performance of both councils and partners.
- Helping inspectors to understand local needs and priorities and what you are doing to address these.

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