



Comprehensive Area Assessment

A guide to the new framework

From 01 April 2009



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- 1 People deserve clear and impartial information about how well they are being served by their local public services, how that compares with elsewhere, and what the prospects are for the improvement of quality of life in their area. This information will help people to hold elected representatives and those providing local public services to account for their performance and use of public money. It will help people make informed choices and influence local decisions.
- 2 From April 2009 CAA will provide:
 - a catalyst for improvement: better local outcomes, more effective partnership working, more responsive services and better value for money;
 - independent assurance for citizens, service users and taxpayers;
 - an independent evidence base for central government on progress with national priorities and improving local services; and
 - a means of focusing, rationalising and coordinating inspection.

- 3 Individual assessment regimes will continue to provide assurance on the performance of services meeting the needs of people whose circumstances make them vulnerable (for example, inspection of care services and safeguarding arrangements for children and adults) and other services dealing with inherently high risks (such as probation services). In addition, and for the first time, we will bring together our work to provide an overview of how successfully local organisations are working individually and together to improve their area. Local services increasingly work through formal arrangements, such as children’s trusts, care trusts, crime and disorder reduction partnerships and others, with local strategic partnerships coordinating overall. CAA will allow us to reflect how well these, and less formal joint working, are improving outcomes for local people.
- 4 An illustrative example of how we will report our findings can be found at <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/caademo/>. We will also publish the detailed guidance we give our staff responsible for carrying out CAA.

- 5 What matters locally varies from place to place. Led by locally-elected councillors, councils and their local partners have developed sustainable community strategies to set out the local challenges and agreed priorities for their areas and how they plan to achieve sustainable development.^I In addition, they have agreed with central government new local area agreements (LAAs) setting out improvement targets up to March 2011 for those issues that are most important locally and important to government.^{II} Longer-term goals are set out in sustainable community strategies and local development frameworks. In CAA we will consider progress towards achieving local priorities, in relation to these different timescales.
- 6 Government has also introduced a set of national indicators to reflect its priority outcomes delivered by councils alone or with partners and to provide a consistent way of measuring progress. This National Indicator Set replaces a number of different information sets and simplifies and reduces the amount of performance data collected by government. CAA will report performance against the National Indicator Set, including the statutory education and attainment targets.

I Sustainable Community Strategies Guidance (Ref. 1)

II LAAs will be the only vehicles for agreeing targets between local government and their delivery partners and central government (except for the statutory education and early years' targets). See Communities and Local Government, Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities: Statutory Guidance for further information. (Ref. 1)

- 7 Examples of the issues being tackled by local partnerships include supporting the local economy; responding to the needs of the rapidly increasing proportion of older people; reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training; addressing shortages of affordable housing; improving environmental sustainability; reducing crime; preventing violent extremism; and tackling the causes of poor health. These issues are neither the preserve of any one public body nor issues for the state alone. They highlight the importance of effective local political leadership and governance, including purposeful engagement with local people whether as taxpayers, residents, service users, employers or volunteers.
- 8 In this context, the current focus of inspectorates in assessing individual services and organisations is no longer sufficient. The power of CAA to support improving outcomes in an area will come from the added value of joining up the assessment of local services. CAA will focus on outcomes and how well local public bodies work with each other, the private and third sectors, other organisations working locally, including town and parish councils, and their local communities.¹ It will be forward looking and assess the prospects for future improvement. Individual inspection regimes will continue to provide assurance on the performance of services meeting the needs of people whose circumstances make them vulnerable (for example, inspections of care services and safeguarding services for children and adults).

¹ By 'third sector' we mean voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals.

- 9 Citizens expect local services to work together to make efficient and effective use of their collective resources to meet the needs and priorities of the community. They expect maximum value for their money and easy access to high quality and responsive services. Financial resources are under great pressure, making the search for efficiencies and value for money more critical than ever. CAA will provide independent assessment information to strengthen the ability of people to influence how services are provided and improved.
- 10 CAA will come into effect at a difficult time for the global and national economy and the effects are already being felt in local areas across England. With its emphasis on sustainable development, CAA has been designed to be flexible and adapt to such changes. We will judge how well councils and their partners understand the local impact of the recession and how well they are responding using the tools and influence available to them to mitigate the impact on their communities and prepare for the upturn. We will highlight examples of effective partnership working on the local economy as a source of learning for others, as well as highlight areas where inadequate action is being taken.

References

- 1 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongsafeprosperous>

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