



Comprehensive Area Assessment Framework document

Effective from 01 April 2009

Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) is the new framework for the independent assessment of local public services in England. This document sets out how CAA will be delivered from April 2009.
- 2 The inspectorates^I responsible for this document have been jointly commissioned to work together to develop and implement a methodology to deliver CAA and make the other necessary changes in assessment and inspection arrangements to implement the ambitions and commitments of the Local Government White Paper: [*Strong and Prosperous Communities*](#).^{II}
- 3 This White Paper set out proposals for a new performance framework for local services. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 put the legal framework for many of these proposals in place, including CAA. As inspectorates we have worked together, and with local service commissioners and providers, to develop CAA. Since November 2007 we have consulted extensively on the principles and overall approach and have tested it through action learning and trialling.^{III} We have also consulted citizens and people who use local services about what they want from CAA.
- 4 Around £200 billion of public money is spent on providing local public services each year in England. CAA is an important part of assessing and reporting on how well this money is spent, and making sure that local public bodies are accountable to the public for their service quality and impact. As well as providing information for local people, CAA will give government an overall picture of how well councils and their partners are doing in delivering key national and local priorities.^{IV} It will also provide constructive challenge and feedback to local service bodies to support their improvement efforts.

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- I** The inspectorates (Audit Commission, Commission for Social Care Inspection, Healthcare Commission, HMI Constabulary, HMI Prisons, HMI Probation and Ofsted) have developed CAA together. In April 2009, the Care Quality Commission will take over from the Commission for Social Care Inspection, Healthcare Commission and Mental Health Act Commission. In this framework document, 'we' refers to these inspectorates.
- II** Joint Ministerial Commissioning Letter, 3 April 2007.
- III** [Further information and links to websites discussed in this framework can be found on the Audit Commission website.](#)
- IV** Where we use 'councils' we mean principal local authorities; that is district, county and single-tier councils, but not town and parish councils (although we would expect these to have a significant role through community engagement).

- 5 CAA represents a fundamental change in our approach to inspection, reflecting the changes in local public services in recent years and in the environment in which they work. Since 2002, the performance of local public bodies has improved and they are increasingly working together to deliver further improvements. Independent assessments have been a catalyst for, as well as providing objective evidence of, this improvement. Local services have developed stronger performance management, more effective sharing of good practice and practical support for services in difficulty.
- 6 These improvements are very significant but it is also clear that examples of serious service failure have not been eliminated and there can be no room for complacency. There remains an important role for independent assessment especially to provide assurance on the quality and safety of key services such as health, adult social care and children's services. Important too are our judgements about how well local services are providing value for money at a time of great pressure on public spending.
- 7 CAA provides an independent assessment of how well people are being served by their local public services. It focuses on how well these services, working together, are achieving improvement and progressing towards long-term goals. At its heart is a new area assessment in which the inspectorates will provide their joint view on the short, medium and long-term prospects for better results for local people. This will be linked to assessments of the performance and value for money provided by the individual public bodies serving the area carried out by the relevant inspectorates. This document deals in detail with the area assessment and the organisational assessment of local councils. The assessments of NHS organisations, police authorities and forces, fire and rescue authorities, probation boards and prisons are described in the related frameworks of the relevant inspectorates.
- 8 The area assessment will draw on the detailed work of the inspectorates in their core areas of activity, the views of local people, people who use local services and other stakeholders, the new National Indicator Set and the information being used to manage public services locally. It will address local priorities and will always include a specific focus on people, including children and young people, who may experience disadvantage in accessing public services and whose personal circumstances make them most vulnerable.

- 9 The framework for CAA set out in this document defines the principles we will apply and explains how we will gather evidence to inform the area assessments, and the organisational assessment for each council. It also explains the relationship between the two types of assessment and how they will be reported. The framework clarifies how we will use these assessments to identify where inspection or other support for improvement is necessary, and how CAA will evolve over time.
- 10 The CAA approach allows the inspectorates to take account of rapid changes in the external environment in assessing the prospects for better outcomes locally. For example, the area assessments for 2009 will reflect the action being taken locally to mitigate the effects of the current economic downturn, and will take into account any impact on local priorities.
- 11 By refocusing our inspection effort as set out in this framework and the associated frameworks for individual services, we aim to deliver the required level of assurance on inherently high risk services, further reduce the assessment burden on high performing public bodies, act as a catalyst for better partnership working at the local level and support local accountability by providing clear information to local people.
- 12 This document is in two parts:
 - Part one: An executive summary.
 - Part two: The detailed framework setting out what we will do, how we will do it and how we will report our assessments.

Part one

Executive summary

- 13 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.
- 14 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.
- 15 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.
- 16 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.

- 17 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.
- 18 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.
- 19 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.

I [Sustainable Community Strategies Guidance](#)

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.

- 20 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).
- 21 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.
- 22 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.

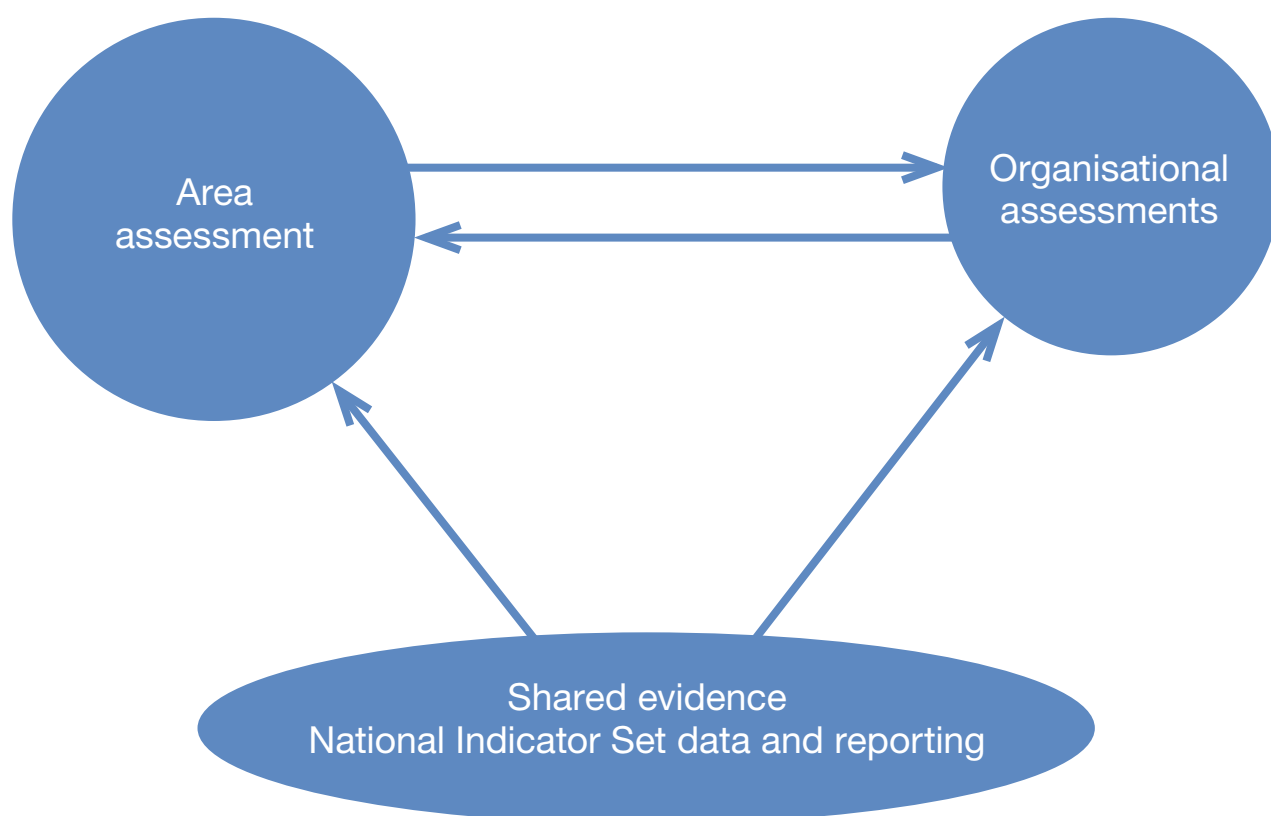
¹ By 'third sector' we mean voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals.

Framework overview

- 23 CAA is part of a new performance framework that is area based and focused on outcomes delivered by councils working alone or in partnership. It is designed to be more proportionate than previous frameworks and to be aligned with frameworks in other local service sectors. By bringing together evidence across different local services, CAA will be more effective in driving improvement than separate assessments for each sector can be.
- 24 CAA will have two main elements which will inform each other:
- an area assessment that looks at how well local public services are delivering better results for local people across the whole area, focusing on agreed priorities such as health, economic prospects and community safety, and how likely they are to improve in the future; and
 - organisational assessments for councils, combining the external auditor's assessment of value for money in the use of resources with a joint inspectorate assessment of council service performance.
- 25 The organisational assessments for the other main public bodies in each area are described in the respective frameworks for NHS organisations, police authorities and forces and fire and rescue authorities, and each of these include the external auditor's assessment of value for money.
- 26 For both elements we will use the performance reported against the National Indicator Set as a key source of evidence. We will also ensure that the links between the area assessment and the organisational assessments are managed so they support partnership and individual accountabilities.

Figure 1

The CAA framework



Area assessment

- 27 For the area assessment we will take the locally agreed priorities in the LAAs and the sustainable community strategies as our starting point. We will look at the prospects for future improvement in those outcomes that are most important, including over the longer term. We will take into account how well the local partners understand their local communities and reflect this in their priorities, as well as how well served local people are currently.

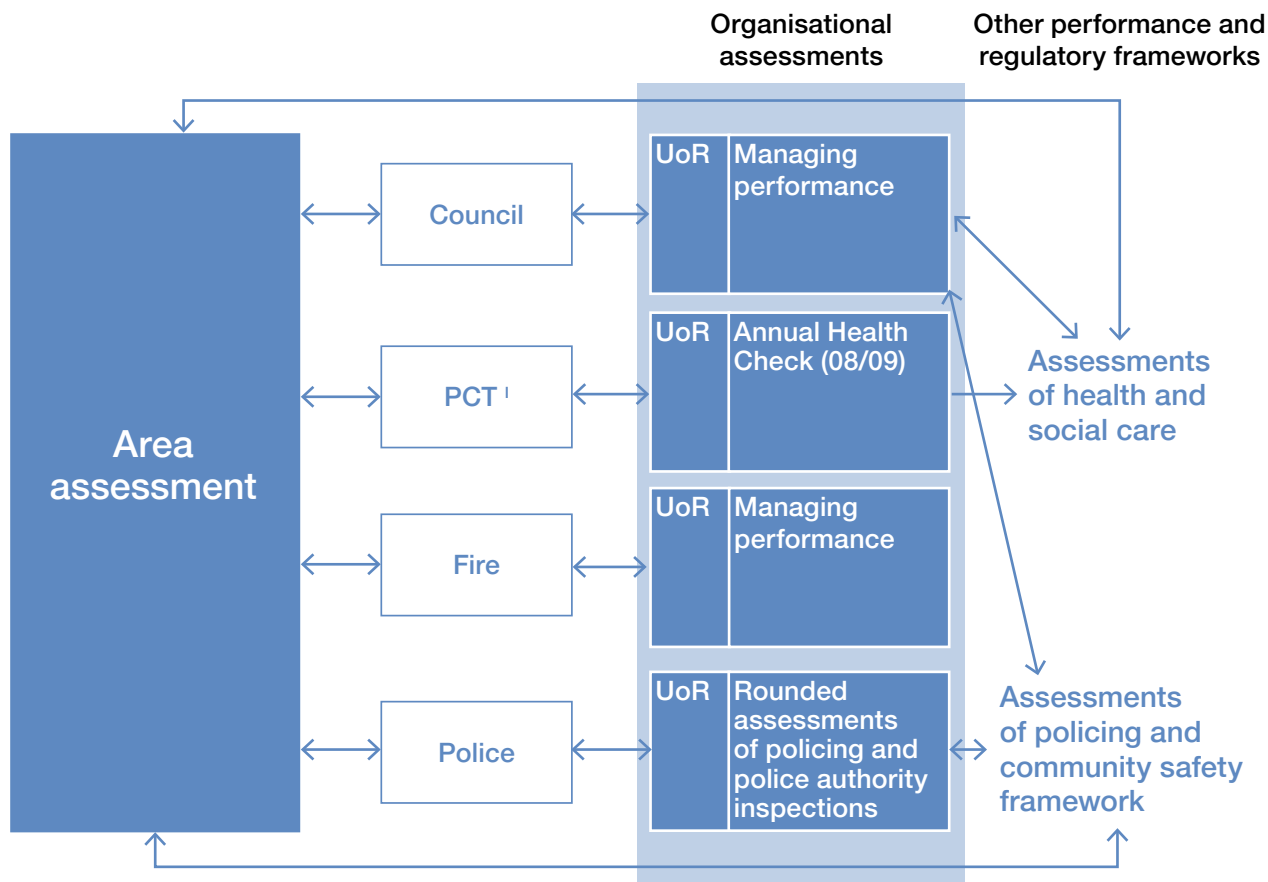
28 The area assessment will be reported as a narrative and will not receive a numerical score or other overall rating. If, in our view, the action being taken in the area to improve an important outcome is unlikely to deliver the improvement sought, we may highlight this as a significant concern using a red flag. Where we have identified exceptional performance or improvement, or promising prospects for improvement through innovation, we may highlight this as a source of learning for others using a green flag.

Organisational assessments

29 For councils, the organisational assessment will combine use of resources and managing performance themes into a combined assessment of organisational effectiveness scored on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest).

Figure 2

How CAA will align to other performance frameworks



Other local organisations such as housing associations and probation boards and trusts are also subject to inspection and assessment but do not receive use of resources assessments.

I National Indicators within Vital Signs Tier 3 will not be used to assess PCTs.

How we will carry out CAA and inspection

- 30 We will prepare our assessments using evidence from our other inspection work and draw on the information that is available nationally and that used locally as far as we can to avoid making extra demands on local services. We will apply the COUNT principle (collect once and use numerous times). CAA will not rely on the type of rolling programmes of major inspections, with detailed performance criteria and a focus on the corporate arrangements of local service organisations, used in previous assessment frameworks.
- 31 High performing organisations and partnerships delivering improvements in outcomes and value for money will receive less inspection. The more robust, relevant and timely the information being used to manage services locally, the less we as inspectorates will need to request additional information.
- 32 We will work with government offices in the regions, regional improvement and efficiency partnerships and others to ensure a coordinated approach to supporting improvement. We will work together as inspectorates to plan and coordinate any inspections that are needed so that they can provide the assurance or improvement support desired without undue administrative impact on the inspected organisations.

Reporting CAA

- 33 Our aim is that our CAA reports become a valuable resource for local people, elected councillors, the local strategic partnership and local organisations, national government and others with an interest in the future of the area. Our findings will inform the discussions between the local strategic partnership and the government office for their region and future versions of the LAA. As inspectorates, we will use the knowledge gained through CAA to better target our future work and we will coordinate our activity to better manage the impact on local organisations and services.