

Comprehensive Area Assessment 2009 – Overview

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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1 Purpose of Report

This report informs Members of the recently launched Comprehensive Performance Assessment process introduced by the Audit Commission. The new assessment process for fire and rescue authorities replaces the Comprehensive Performance Assessment regime.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is recommended to:

- a) Note the contents of this report; and
- b) Approve the undertaking of a formal operational assessment peer review during 2010/11.

3 Background

The 2006 Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' set out proposals for a new local performance framework, including Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). CAA represents a fundamental change in the approach of the public service inspectorates. CAA came into force on 1 April 2009, replacing Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) and is the new way of putting information in the hands of taxpayers, service users and citizens.

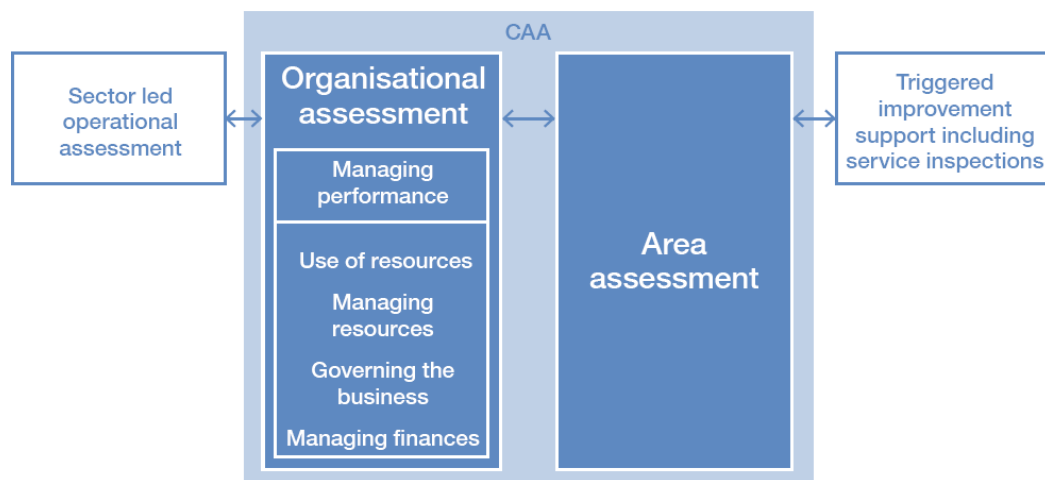
CAA has been developed to work closely with the new Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and the National Indicator Set as part of a single system.

It represents a significant change in the approach to assessment and inspection, reflecting the changes in local public services and the changing needs and expectations of citizens. A core principle of CAA is that it should be rooted in the needs and aspirations of local people and will focus on outcomes and quality of life in an area. CAA is not an 'inspection event' but an annual assessment with two components – an Area Assessment and an Organisational Assessment.

4 CAA Overview

CAA is very different from CPA in that it focuses on outcomes for local people (particularly through the Area Assessment) rather than on processes. CAA will also consider how well local public bodies work with each other, the private and third sectors¹, other organisations working locally, including town and parish councils, and their local communities.

CAA has two elements, **Area Assessment** and **Organisational Assessment**, which will inform each other. The Audit Commission represents the relationship between the two in the following way:



Area Assessment

The area assessment is reported as a narrative accompanied by green and red flags. There is no overall score. The assessment focuses on three questions:

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

¹ The 'third sector' may be defined as voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals etc.

Organisational Assessment

This is an expanded 'Use of Resources' assessment, which was part of CPA. It will be used to measure partner organisations as well as councils. It will be scored, and scores will be affected by relevant green and red flags in the area assessment.

5 Area Assessment

While the three main questions of the area assessment will be applied collectively to the local partners, there are specific areas where the fire and rescue services are seen to have an important contributory role. These include:

- engaging more effectively with local communities to build up a comprehensive risk profile for the area;
- involving local communities in developing fire prevention and protection priorities;
- engaging effectively, ensuring that partners are engaged in larger scale emergencies, civil contingency and local resilience; and
- delivering any fire-specific priorities within the Local Area Agreement; contributing to broader local priorities, such as tackling anti-social behaviour in an effective, well-co-ordinated and prioritised way.

In relation to the Fire and Rescue Service the Audit Commission will draw on a range of evidence including:

- the organisational assessment;
- performance data in the National Indicator Set;
- the conclusions from the peer assessment of operational service delivery; and
- nationally available fire data.

6 Organisational Assessment

The Audit Commission will assess the effectiveness of each fire and rescue service through an organisational assessment, which combines the auditor's assessment of value for money (through the use of resources themes) with an assessment of the fire and rescue service's performance (through the managing performance theme) into a single judgement. Alongside the area assessment it will publish a short report for each fire and rescue service that includes the overall assessment score.

The organisational assessment will reflect how well individual fire and rescue services are delivering against the priorities and objectives contained in the National Framework 2008-11. The Audit Commission will assess how each fire and rescue service is effectively balancing its prevention, protection and response functions. In doing so, it will consider how well equality and diversity are integrated into all aspects of the service. It will also assess the impact and effectiveness of the service's contribution to broader partnership outcomes in the LAA.

The Audit Commission will draw on a range of evidence, including evidence from the sector-led operational assessment, where this is available. It will involve peers from the fire sector in the managing performance theme of the organisational assessment. Assessment of progress against the requirements of the National Framework will be carried out on a three-year, cyclical basis.

In undertaking the managing performance assessment, the Audit Commission will draw on a range of evidence, for example:

- The National Indicator Set;
- The LAA;
- The Sustainable Community Strategy;
- Local performance management information used to monitor local priorities, including any self evaluations and evidence from scrutiny;
- Findings from the operational assessment;
- Briefings or evidence from other agencies, including the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser; and
- The views of people, who use services.

The sector-led operational assessment will provide an important evidence source for both the area and organisational assessments. The Audit Commission will rely on evidence from the operational assessment, subject to an evidence based 'reality check,' where this is deemed necessary. Where an operational assessment has not been carried out, it will use the managing performance assessment to conduct a sufficiently comprehensive assessment to meet the Audit Commission's public assurance responsibilities.

7 The Operational Assessment

The Operational Assessment (OpA) is a 'sector developed' assessment that focuses on the frontline delivery of services. It looks at how effectively a fire and rescue service is working operationally and, with its partners, to plan and deliver services to local people.

In December 2008 the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit (CFRAU) produced proposals for the new OpA process, and more recently (9 April 2009) finalised and issued the supporting self-assessment toolkit and accompanying guidance.

It is envisaged that, on a voluntary basis, fire and rescue services will, as a matter of good practice, complete and maintain a self-assessment of their operational performance, and verify this assessment through a robust peer review process at least once every three years. The peer review process is currently in the final stages of development by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA).

Officers have commenced preparations to prepare an operational self-assessment, utilising the new OpA toolkit, and it is recommended that the Fire Authority supports participation within the nationally recommended peer review process.

In making this recommendation, officers should point out that both CFOA and IDeA have stated that insufficient capacity exists nationally to peer review all fire and rescue services during 2009. Consequently, and when balanced against the Service's current 'Service Assessment' performance (where the maximum score of '4' has been achieved for the second consecutive year), it is recommended that a peer review is deferred until 2010/11. This will allow CFOA and the IDeA to focus resources on 'weak/poor' performing fire and rescue services during 2009/10.

As an interim arrangement, and to provide a degree of assurance to both the Fire Authority and Audit Commission, preparations are underway through West Midlands Regional Management Board to carry out 'critical friend' OpA peer reviews (using accredited reviewers) throughout the region during June/July 2009. There are no costs to the Fire Authority for the regional review.

8 Inspections

The Audit Commission will clarify to fire and rescue services and the public the purpose of any inspections undertaken. There will be no set number of triggered inspections, as circumstances will vary. Triggered inspection may occur at any stage in the year. In practice, it is expected that most inspections will be scheduled following periodic analysis of CAA evidence, or following the reporting of the annual assessments.

Although an inspection may be triggered at any stage in the year because of concerns about performance, a related red flag in the area or low score in an organisational assessment will lead to consideration of whether triggered inspection is appropriate. In some circumstances another type of improvement activity may be a more appropriate response, such as improvement support from the fire and rescue sector.

9 Timeline for 2009

The indicative timetable set out by the Audit Commission to undertake CAA during 2009 is:

April

CAA begins

April to August

Inspectorates begin gathering and sharing evidence

Early September

Cut-off for evidence to generate first set of reports

September

Draft final report for the Area Assessment and opportunity to discuss key issues arising with local partners. Organisational Assessments also discussed with relevant bodies

October

Final reporting of the Area Assessment shared with local partners. Period to challenge if there is significant disagreement about the Area Assessment's red flag(s) or organisational assessment scores

Early November

Resolve any remaining challenges through formal process

Late November

Publish first set of CAA reports

10 Financial Implications

The annual audit fee (circa £65K) set by the Audit Commission includes provision to undertake CAA during 2009/10. The fee includes a grant (circa £12k) from Communities and Local Government (CLG) to offset the OpA peer review costs. The fee was noted by the Fire Authority's Audit and Performance Management Committee on 12 March 2009.

The CLG grant does not include expenses, such as travel, accommodation etc arising from OpA. These are estimated to be in the region of £3k and will be met from within existing budgets.

11 Legal Comment

The Audit Commission Act 1998 places statutory responsibilities upon the Audit Commission to undertake assessments of local government bodies.

Local government bodies, including fire and rescue authorities, are required through the Local Government Act 1999 to participate in the assessments undertaken by the Audit Commission.

12 Equality Impact Assessment

Officers have considered the Service's Brigade Order on Equality Impact Assessments (Personnel 5 Part 2) and have determined that there are no discriminatory practices or differential impacts upon specific groups arising from this report. An Initial Equality Impact Assessment has not, therefore, been completed.

13 Appendices

There are no appendices attached to this report.

14 Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.

15 Further Information

Full details regarding CAA may be obtained from the Audit Commission's website at:

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/caa/framework.asp>

Implications of all of the following have been considered and, where they are significant (i.e. marked with an asterisk); the implications are detailed within the report itself.

Balanced Score Card		Integrated Risk Management Planning	
Business Continuity Planning		Legal	*
Capacity		Member Involvement	
Civil Contingencies Act		National Framework	*
Comprehensive Performance Assessment	*	Operational Assurance	*
Efficiency Savings		Retained	
Environmental		Risk and Insurance	
Financial	*	Staff	
Fire Control/Fire Link		Strategic Planning	
Information Communications and Technology		West Midlands Regional Management Board	
Freedom of Information / Data Protection / Environmental Information		Equality Impact Assessment	*