

Comprehensive Area Assessment

Telling people how it is



The new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) is changing the way local public services are assessed. The results will provide, for the first time ever, a comprehensive resource for the public on how well their local area is doing.

In Ambridge, if you want to know what's going on, then Lynda Snell is your woman. In Walford you might ask Dot Cotton. But the information you get certainly isn't going to be impartial – or based on evidence.

In the real world there is no one place where you can get independent information about how local public services are doing, but all that is set to change.

A new website is on its way which, for the first time, will offer comprehensive information about how well problems in different areas are being tackled. These might be issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, the quality of the local environment, obesity or affordable housing. It will look at how local public services – including children's services, health, social care, waste and recycling, fire and the police – are doing and how they are working together to meet the needs of the people they serve.

From 10 December, the new Oneplace website is where you will find the first results of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). CAA is a new way of assessing and reporting on public services in England. Until now, public bodies and services were looked at separately. Now, for the first time, six inspectorates – the Audit Commission, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), HM Inspectorates of Constabulary Probation and Prisons and Ofsted – are joining forces to make joint judgements.

The new approach is different from what has gone before. Instead of a regular programme of inspections, local assessors (CAA Leads) working with colleagues in the different inspectorates, will report on how well services meet local people's priorities. They are doing this by talking to service providers, councillors and community groups, and by using information already produced by public bodies to monitor their own performance. CAA aims to reduce the work public bodies need to do for the assessment.

As one CAA Lead, David Jennings, says: 'The difference is that now we're able to bring data together across the inspectorates and that gives CAA a unique ability to join the dots within a locality on issues that are obviously related – such as the economy, training and education – and to get an overall picture rather than a segmented one.'

How are officials experiencing the new approach? Mick Burrows, Chief Executive of Nottinghamshire County Council, says: 'CPA was done to us, but this is about a whole partnership approach. I can already see CAA promoting stronger partnership working and am confident that this will lead to better services for the people of Nottinghamshire.'

Another new aspect of CAA is that joint inspectorate teams will focus on results rather than how things are done. Are services making a difference and are they helping improve people's

lives? And that's good news according to Darren Johnson, the Green Party councillor who chairs the London Assembly – particularly against the backdrop of a recession.

'When times are tough, people are entitled to ask whether they are getting value for money out of their public services. What really matters to people is the difference that they see on the streets – what is the local crime rate, do they have a good waste collection service, how do their local schools compare with others? That's more important to them than the structures and processes that underpin local public services,' he says.

By the end of the year you'll be able to go to Oneplace to find overall assessments of different areas, as well as in-depth information about the performance of councils, and fire and rescue bodies. The assessment will be written in plain language, and through an innovative partnership with Directgov, Oneplace will have a potential audience of 18 million Directgov users every month. As Steve Bundred, Chief Executive of the Audit Commission, puts it: 'Through Oneplace, CAA has the potential to be the most public-friendly reporting system for local services.'

One aspect of Oneplace that should make it easy for people to see at a glance how an area is tackling local priorities is the way it literally flags up success or concerns. A green flag

What are the top five things to know about CAA?

- 1 It assesses how well people are being served by their local public services
- 2 It looks at how public services work together, as well as the performance of individual organisations
- 3 It focuses on local, as well as national priorities
- 4 It provides robust but proportionate assessment of local services
- 5 CAA assessments will be reported directly to the public in straightforward language on the Oneplace website

denotes exceptional and outstanding improvement or innovation that others can learn from, and a red flag indicates where we have significant concerns about outcomes and future prospects, where more needs to be done.

Flags will point to where support may be most needed and highlight where one public body could learn from the success of others. However, as priorities differ from area to area this does not mean it is possible to count the flags and put together a league table.

You can find further information about CAA and see a preview of the new website by going to www.audit-commission.gov.uk/oneplace



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From 10 December 2009 you will find the results of Comprehensive Area Assessment on the Oneplace website.

For more information, go to
www.audit-commission.gov.uk/oneplace

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