

# NCC response to CAA consultation

## Introduction

The National Consumer Council welcomes the consultation process on the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

The NCC believes that discussion around the introduction of CAA offers an opportunity to start the process of putting citizens and service users at the centre of the regulation of local public services. In addition, it is essential that all aspects of the new CAA process are comprehensible and meaningful to local people. This includes not only the language that is used, but also what is measured and how it is measured, and the impact it has on the lives of local people and the places they live in.

The NCC broadly welcomes the approach outlined within the CAA consultation document. In particular, it is encouraged by the consultation's marked emphasis on the importance of the experience and views of citizens and service users from the very first paragraph of the document.

Nevertheless, the NCC considers that this approach needs to be made more systematic and consistent throughout the consultation document, within other related Government documents and guidelines and within the future development and practice of CAA itself.

The NCC is willing to work with the Audit Commission and the other inspectorates to help ensure this consistent approach is achieved.

## Key Messages

- 1) The Area Risk Assessment needs to include explicitly that the partnership's "understanding and assessment of the community's needs" is based on thoroughly engaging and empowering local citizens and service users, including seldom-heard groups, to enable them to articulate their views and experiences.<sup>1</sup> The starting point for CAA must be to assess risk against what really matters to local citizens.
- 2) The risk assessment has to ensure that the engagement of local citizens is ongoing, systematic and inclusive through a variety of engagement mechanisms and high-quality customer insight tools. It must be part of an overall strategy,

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<sup>1</sup> See NCC's forthcoming publication *Putting people into public services: Involving people*

rather than a “tick box” exercise.<sup>2</sup> There needs to be a clear commitment to involving citizens and service users at every stage within the risk assessment process.<sup>3</sup>

- 3) Reporting, accountability and feedback should be at the heart of the CAA process to ensure that citizens and service users can see if they have been listened to and how their involvement has made a difference.
- 4) The reporting of the risk assessment to local citizens should be integrated with the local partnership’s own public self assessment in order to minimise confusion.
- 5) Reporting to citizens and service users must include a variety of means, not only websites, to reach the full range of local communities.
- 6) Value for money assessments should not remain silo-based – an area-wide assessment is needed so local citizens and service can know if they are getting value for money across local services.
- 7) A panel of organisations representing the interests of citizens and service users (including the NCC) should be established to help advise on CAA. Key issues within the consultation document – e.g. the single score, the wording of the prospects for the area phrase, the forms of public reporting etc – should be thoroughly tested with this panel as well as the existing citizen panel.

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<sup>2</sup> NCC’s work with the Local Government Association (LGA) on customer satisfaction sets out practical steps to help local government and its partners to get a better insight into their customers’ experiences and views, and manage performance against what is important to service users and the public ([www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC149\\_customer\\_satisfaction.pdf](http://www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC149_customer_satisfaction.pdf))

<sup>3</sup> NCC has developed a route map for action, to help a new generation of regulators turn the rhetoric of people-focused assessment and inspection into practical action that delivers tangible benefits. NCC’s route map puts forward key areas for action, each of which is underpinned by detailed recommendations ([http://www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC189rr\\_engaging\\_people\\_healthcare\\_regulation.pdf](http://www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC189rr_engaging_people_healthcare_regulation.pdf))

## NCC response to specific CAA consultation questions

*Q1 Do you agree with the key questions, for the risk assessment, as the basis for the area risk assessment? Are there any others that should be added?*

The NCC believes that the overall commitment to putting citizens and service users at the heart of the CAA process is not sufficiently reflected in the proposed questions as the basis of the risk assessment.

The first two questions currently ask:

- “How well does the partnership understand and assess the needs of its communities now and in the future?”
- “Does it use this understanding to inform its local priorities?”

This could be interpreted as necessitating merely a research and intelligence-based approach to understanding and assessing the needs of communities. Indeed, many local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) do have significant research and intelligence functions that are applied to the development of their Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and Local Area Agreement (LAA). Such “understanding” is not necessarily based on the direct involvement of local citizens and service users (and importantly, non-users) themselves. If and when it is not, it may be flawed and inaccurate. Various government reports in recent years have demonstrated that directly involving citizens and services users can help agencies identify the types of services that are needed locally more accurately than service professionals and researchers. NCC’s report on intelligent commissioning shows that if the user perspective informs service design, huge benefits will be delivered in terms of service quality, user experience, efficiency and value for money.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore essential that the questions on which the risk assessment is based include an explicit reference to the need for such “understanding and assessment of the needs of its communities now and in the future” to be based at least in part on directly consulting and involving local citizens and service users. Indeed, this would seem to be in line with the new Local Government and Public Involvement in Health (LGPIH) Act duties: a) on local authorities to inform, consult and involve local people in the exercise of their functions; and b) on SHAs, PCTs, NHS Trusts, NHS Foundation Trusts to make arrangements to involve and consult patients and the public in the planning of the provision of services and changes in the way they are provided. In addition, the new Local Involvement Networks (LINKs) established by the LGPIH Act have been designed specifically to improve the channels of direct involvement of and discussion with those with experience and knowledge of local health needs.

The only way to develop accurate insight into the needs of local communities is to talk directly to local people and service users. This should be the cornerstone of the “comprehensive engagement strategy” that Government has recommended in the Local Government White Paper, the recent draft statutory guidance on place-shaping, and in the recent operational guidance for Local Area Agreements.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC175b\\_It\\_intelligent\\_commissioning.pdf](http://www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC175b_It_intelligent_commissioning.pdf)

Elsewhere in the consultation document (*page 24 Direction of Travel section*) there is a question that perhaps could be used in an amended form as a basis for a further question underlying the Risk Assessment, namely:

- “How effectively is the authority engaging with, and empowering, local communities to identify priorities and shape local services?”

Perhaps the additional question could be something like:

“How effectively is the authority engaging with, and empowering, all local communities, including the seldom-heard, to identify priorities and shape local services, and can the partnership demonstrate that this engagement and empowerment informs its understanding and assessment of the needs of its local communities?”

In addition, CAA needs to make clear that there is a diversity of local communities – communities based on geography, communities of interest and those based on common characteristics. It will be an integral part of the work of the local partnership to understand this diversity and the potential conflicts, and of the inspectorates within CAA to assess the differing risks to these diverse communities.

It would be helpful if related Government guidance on Local Area Agreements and the statutory guidance accompanying the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act both also confirmed explicitly the importance that the new CAA regime would place on citizens and users of local services being directly and systematically involved in identifying priorities and shaping local services.

*Q3 Should we adopt the term: ‘the prospects for the area and the quality of life for local people’ instead of ‘the risk assessment’ when reporting CAA results, or can you suggest a better description?*

The NCC considers that the answer to this question should come from local people themselves! In other words, on this question above all (though it is also true for many of the others), it is essential that there is widespread engagement with local citizens and users of local services to assess whether this phrase is meaningful and comprehensible, and if not, to work with them to find terms to express “quality of life” that are meaningful to the very communities to whom it refers. The quality of life that is referred to must reflect what local people believe is important, rather than be based on the prior assumptions of professionals. Otherwise, the wrong things will be measured and assessed, causing local people to become sceptical and disillusioned. In principle, the NCC believes that the simpler the term used for this purpose the better.

The NCC agrees that the term “risk assessment” would be inappropriate for use outside of public services professionals. It is a short-hand jargon term and has overly negative connotations that are best avoided in the broader public arena.

*Q4 How should we report on the national indicator set for local authorities and their partners?*

*Q6 How should we ensure that the performance information we publish is relevant and accessible*

*to councils and their partners, local people and central government?*

*Q11 Should there be an overall score?*

*Q15 How should we ensure that the reporting and scoring of the area risk assessment is relevant, accessible and meaningful to the council and its partners, local people and central government?*

*Q17 How can we try to make sure that our reporting is equally accessible to all people in communities?*

The NCC considers that the issues surrounding the reporting of performance information and the risk assessment are very important to the success of CAA to ensure that citizens and service users can check to see whether their involvement has made a real difference. This is closely linked to the central thrust of the NCC's comments concerning putting citizens and service users at the heart of the new CAA. It is essential that all these questions are put to citizens and service users for their opinions in whatever formats are most appropriate – focus groups, surveys, expert panels and so on.

From reading other government guidance and consultation documents, it is clear that there will be a whole range of performance assessments reported to the public concerning Local Area Agreements and Comprehensive Area Assessment. What is less clear, in terms of reporting to the public, is the relationship between all these judgements:

- the LSP's own self assessment against its LAA targets;
- the independent risk assessment under CAA;
- the performance against the national indicator set;
- the direction of travel and use of resources judgements about individual local public service providers.

The NCC is concerned that a plethora of such judgements may prove confusing and disempowering to local citizens and service users. In particular, there is a significant danger of such confusion between the LSP's self assessment and the independent CAA assessment, especially if they reach differing conclusions. This may be less of a problem on the proposed website to present all this performance information (see our comments on this below). But it is a much bigger problem in the event that such assessments are produced in printed formats. The NCC seeks assurance that there will be consultation with citizens and service users (and their representative organizations and advocates) over these publication and reporting issues to ensure that the possibility of confusion between potentially competing and contradictory assessments is minimized.

It is sensible to suggest that an existing or a new website should bring together all the performance information related to the quality of life and services in a local area. Nevertheless, it is essential that the website is not the only source proposed for such information. There remain significant sections of society that do not have access to the web, who are not web literate, or who simply prefer other channels to access this type of information. While this proportion may be decreasing, it remains important as, almost by definition, it includes the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in society. Local partnerships and the inspectorates need to develop communication

strategies to meet their reporting and accountability requirements that, in style and content, take account of the diverse needs of the communities they serve.

Again, consultation with such groups of citizens and service users is essential to come up with the most appropriate forms of reporting. Particular vulnerable groups may need specific customised forms of reporting – this may require the participation of advocacy groups in its dissemination and delivery.

While reluctant to pre-empt consultation with the public, the NCC considers that it may be appropriate to devise a standard format for reporting in published form a summary of all the above assessments. It will be extremely difficult for people to understand, interpret or compare such reports unless there is some kind of consistency. There is scope for talking to local citizens and communities to find out what would work best. Such a standard format might then be made available through local newspapers, in local libraries, sports outlets, doctors' surgeries and other local centres, and even potentially through the letter-boxes of local citizens. Such a standard format would be in addition to, not instead of, specific customised forms of reporting identified for particular communities.

*Q11 Should there be an overall CAA score?*

The NCC broadly accepts the arguments against having one overall CAA score for a local area, as it would fail to fully reflect the variety of performance and risks in the local area. Nevertheless, it does not consider that a pure narrative report would be sufficiently clear for members of the public. It therefore supports the proposal that there should be some form of scoring or highlighting of risks around different themes or client groups. Ideally, this should be done in a way that facilitates comparisons between local areas. While partnerships in local areas are free to choose their own targets, in reality there will be considerable similarity in the key themes and client groups that will emerge from these choices. There may therefore be some value in identifying nationally some core themes and client groups where risk to the delivery of outcomes will in general be assessed. This is another area that lends itself to consultation with citizens and service users to find out what would work best.

*Q18 Do you agree with these proposals about the purposes, principles and benefits of inspection and the circumstances in which inspection might be suitable? How will CAA be experienced by councils and their partners?*

The NCC has reservations about the approach to inspection outlined in the consultation document as there is no clear commitment to involving citizens and service users within the assessment process itself. The consultation document refers to examples such as the Housing Inspectorate's use of tenant advisors and the Healthcare Commission's use of Experts by Experience. Equally there are international examples to learn from, such as the citizen inspectors of Bobigny in France. But for the NCC, it is an essential element of the shift towards putting citizens and service users at the heart of the regulation of local public services, **that they are involved directly in the assessment process itself in a systematic and ongoing way.** In addition to incorporating citizens and service users as lay inspectors, such involvement may also necessitate broader changes in the way in which the CAA process is itself carried out. The Healthcare Commission's two test sites for LINKs can point to beacons of good

practice in capacity-building service users and subsequently making them part of the inspection team.

There are references within the consultation document to the fact that the CAA process will be part of an ongoing process of collaboration between regulators and local public services, rather than the result of a one-off inspection visit. The NCC would endorse such a shift, which in turn makes it easier to envisage how local citizens and service users might be involved in various ongoing ways with the regulators and local service providers, providing both specific and continuous input and feedback.

The NCC has carried out some innovative work with the Healthcare Commission in this area. The recommendations from this work include the need to provide appropriate mechanisms to allow citizens and service users (and their advocacy groups) ongoing input into the dialogue between the regulators and local service providers. The recommendations highlight the need for the regulators to find ways to capture, analyse and respond to non data-based “soft” intelligence on what concerns local people and service users. They also flag up the importance of accessing the experience and knowledge of front-line staff working in local public services for feedback on their effectiveness.<sup>5</sup>

One specific approach that the NCC would like to see given consideration is that local citizens and service users should be given the opportunity to directly contribute their own experiences and views on local priorities and services by posting “star ratings” on a website, or through other channels. Many private sector organisations now provide such customer ratings directly on their own websites. The NCC considers that in principle there may well be considerable value in providing local people and service users with direct access to the website envisaged for the CAA-related assessments to post their own views and assessments, which could be aggregated and compared with other areas.

Finally, there is reference in the consultation document to value for money, but no question was specifically posed on this issue. The NCC believes that this is a missed opportunity. Citizens and services users are very concerned about value for money and understand that local public services face financial constraints. With the new “duty to inform, consult and involve” and the emphasis Government is placing on participatory budgeting, it is essential that CAA should include more than just assessments of the use of resources of individual local services. Surely, there also needs to be some form of assessment of the overall value for money achieved by local public service partners, especially their effectiveness at achieving the outcomes supported by local people, and the extent to which local citizens and service users have been involved in budget choices.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC189rr\\_engaging\\_people\\_healthcare\\_regulation.pdf](http://www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC189rr_engaging_people_healthcare_regulation.pdf)

**Conclusion**

The CAA consultation document refers to the use of a panel of citizens in the CAA development phase to advise on the citizen perspective. The NCC welcomes in principle the establishment of such a group and would be interested to learn more about its make-up, composition and terms of reference. The NCC would also suggest the establishment of a panel of organisations such as ours who act as advocates for the public or citizen groups, in addition to the panel of citizens themselves. The views of both panels should be given significant weight on such issues as the single CAA score, the reporting format, the public definition of risk assessment and so on. In addition, the NCC welcomes the discussions it has already had with the Audit Commission and looks forward to further opportunities to influence the thinking of the Audit Commission and the other inspectorates drawn from our own experience and views on the major issues concerning CAA. The NCC offers its help to the inspectorates to develop CAA so that it genuinely puts citizens and services users at its heart.