



SOLACE Response to the Audit Commission document:

CPA –the next steps

[Consultation on single tier and county council CPA strategy 2003 to 2010]

Introduction

It is important that the future framework for assessing Councils' performance is developed in partnership with those who have a stake in local government. It is therefore welcome that the Audit Commission is consulting on the next steps for the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

In our response, we shall only selectively be giving views on the specific questions which are raised in the consultation paper. Councils who have been through the process are better placed to speak on the strengths and weaknesses of the specific issues. Instead, we shall primarily take this opportunity to pose some questions as to the principles underlying the CPA and highlight areas where more thinking is required.

As we have in the past, we would be pleased to meet with the Audit Commission and discuss the points raised in more detail.

Defining the Objectives

The clarity and the quality of objectives is fundamental to the success of achieving any outcome. And it is in relation to the stated long-term objectives of CPA, in Section 3 of the consultation paper, that we concentrate our remarks.

Our primary concern is that the requirement to align CPA "with existing performance frameworks" significantly reduces the feasibility of achieving the other stated objectives. We are concerned in particular that the pressure to use what information already exists, and to avoid the implications and difficulties of developing new frameworks of assessment, has blinded us to the weaknesses in the available material. It seems to us that the validity of existing methods of quantitative data collection and qualitative judgement-making has been accepted too easily. Furthermore, the requirement to conflate quite different kinds of performance information to construct a final numerical score lacks the sophistication necessary to produce "intelligent accountability" and real assessments of performance.



Thus, the reliance on existing performance frameworks militates against the proper assessment of a Council's impact on its community. More specifically, in relation to the other stated objectives:

- All evidence shows that citizen and user experiences cannot be assessed by simple questionnaires. More sophisticated assessments will be required if this is to be an accurate indicator.
- The emphasis on shared priorities is welcome. However, we are sceptical whether existing performance frameworks are capable of assessing performance against these broad quality of life outcomes.
- The reliance on service performance assessments excludes information on inter-departmental and inter-agency working.
- While the impact of diversity and deprivation is incorporated in various ways into SSAs, the impact of an area's characteristics on the associated need, demand and cost of service provision should not be ignored in the CPA.
- The cost effectiveness of an activity depends on the priority it is given (by local people, the local council, Government) and the breadth of what is being assessed (how is a "service" defined?), as well as on the monetary costs of how it is organised and managed.

The importance of the democratic and political process

A connected concern we have is the concentration on service performance to the exclusion of representative and participative democratic performance. Most councils see their local democratic responsibilities as fundamental to what they are and what they do. The CPA seems to ignore this role and the complexity that this brings to resource allocation and prioritisation. The result is that the CPA looks very managerial in character and can seem to exclude the role and impact that elected Members have on performance.

If the Audit Commission is truly looking for views on its objectives for CPA, we would say that it would better not to confuse measuring indicators with assessing performance and intelligent accountability. SOLACE would be willing to elaborate on these views in more detail and to work constructively to produce a framework more aligned with its purpose.



Specific issues

In terms of specific issues raised, SOLACE would like to confine its comments to the rules covering the movement of councils between categories. The proposed rules governing progression and regression are becoming too complicated. The consultation paper sets out many technical procedures and qualifications that will govern which authorities move and which don't. For example, it says that "progression through categories needs to be based on significant and measurable improvement in service scores". This is opposed to having merely crossed the "2002 threshold." While we understand the desire to increase the threshold to demonstrate continuous improvement, the short term implication is that higher scoring authorities will be categorised below others with lower scores. The overall impression some authorities may take away is that the proposed complexity is necessary primarily to prevent too much movement too quickly in order not to undermine the original CPA judgements. Given the importance of CPA scores for the reputation of local authorities and the staff and councillors associated with them, our concern is that councils' categorisation should not be artificially manipulated.

Conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the consultation paper but have some concerns about the principled underpinning of where CPA is going. Our conclusion is that if there is a genuine opportunity to reflect on what "intelligent accountability" means for local authorities, then we should focus on achieving that rather than simply doing what comes most easily.