

Why is CAA such an important tool for central government?

One of the functions of CAA will be to provide central government with an overall picture, and independent assessment, of how well councils and their partners are doing in delivering key national and local priorities. Progress will be measured against the priorities set out by local partners in their sustainable community strategies and local area agreements (LAAs), and through their performance in the new National Indicator Set (NIS).

But for central government, CAA will also be seen as a key driver to delivering its community empowerment agenda. Central government's commitment to this agenda is clear. A principle of the Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' (2006) was "...to give local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives". Since then the agenda has continued to gather momentum, with a huge amount of policy activity focused in this area, including the last major white paper 'Communities in Control: Real people, real power' (2008) and 'The (proposed) Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill' (2008).

CAA will support citizen and community empowerment by helping people to hold elected representatives and those providing local public services to account for their performance and use of public money. It will be a catalyst to help people make informed choices and to influence how their local services are provided and improved.

CAA is also flexible enough to respond to changing priorities. With the country facing a deepening economic and financial downturn, CAA will be able to judge how effectively local partnerships are working together to respond to the needs of their communities, and minimising the impact of the worsening economic climate. And through our national reporting, CAA will share the best examples of effective partnership working with others, as well as highlighting those areas where inadequate action is being taken.

There's no doubt that CAA represents a fundamental change in our approach to inspection reflecting the changes, and improvements, in local public services in recent years and the environment in which they work. Lessening the burden of inspection on local services has been an important factor in developing CAA, in line with government thinking. But while public services have improved, it's clear that examples of serious service failure have not been eliminated. For government and for the public, 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.