

An Innovative Approach to CAA

LINCOLNSHIRE
ASSEMBLY

From Possibility...

BACKGROUND

CAA (Comprehensive Area Assessment) is being implemented by the government to review how well local services work together in partnership to improve the quality of life for people in their area. It will provide a holistic view from seven inspectorates co-ordinated by the Audit Commission to assess:

- How well local priorities express community needs and aspirations
are we working on the right things?
- How well are outcomes and improvements being delivered
are we performing and improving if needed?
- What are the prospects for future improvement
are we likely to continue to perform and improve?

CAA looks across Councils, Primary Care Trusts, Police and other partners to see how effectively they are working together to address priorities for their local area. It is based on the areas covered by Local Area Agreements (LAA) and, when looking at local priorities, will focus on the LAA and Sustainable Community Strategy. There will be a single 'Area Assessment' covering the whole area but focusing on smaller localities if necessary together with individual 'Organisational Assessments' of the organisations named above. CAA aims to provide central government, the public and the organisations assessed with clear, impartial information on how well they are served by their public services as well as identifying barriers to improving performance and value for money.

The Audit Commission and Improvement & Development Agency have conducted a number of pilots with other areas but we believe Lincolnshire is the first county to have voluntarily developed their own innovative approach using facilitated self assessment with their key partners to assess their countywide focus and outcomes in preparation for CAA. Quotes in this case study are from partners attending the workshop. Lincolnshire has developed very open working relationships with the Audit Commission and Government Office so they both attended and exchanged views.

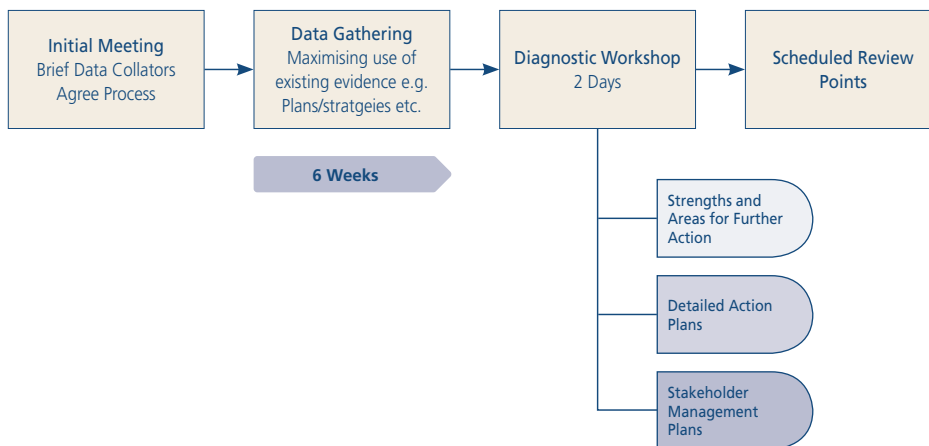
"There seemed to be a very positive atmosphere ... As a GOEM rep, we appreciated the invite and spirit of openness."

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OUR APPROACH

Partners in Lincolnshire asked county council Assistant Chief Executive David O'Connor to co ordinate preparations for CAA. He had previously worked with directors from Ad Esse and was confident we would be able to deliver the accurate diagnostic and action plan needed in a short time, to the right quality and, most importantly, with buy-in from all the partners. To do this David and Beverley MacIntyre from Ad Esse modified an approach they had developed and used together several times before when carrying out high level Excellence Model assessments.

The process allowed time for preparation and data gathering to enable all partners to be able to work together and agree detailed action plans in just 2 days.



“Very well facilitated event which delivered. The right people were in the room – fun as well”

A group drawn from the performance network in Lincolnshire reviewed, analysed, sorted and prioritised information to inform the diagnostic workshop. The emphasis was on understanding effectiveness, not how busy people were. This took a lot of time and work as the temptation was to include large amounts of information which would not always have been helpful or productive in the self assessment. One of the learning points was that people involved were mainly experienced in gathering evidence for audit and inspection where, if there was a gap, they would seek to fill it. But in this case, if there was no evidence readily to hand it needed to be logged as an area for further action. That approach produced a manageable set of evidence in standard format used to develop some suggested strengths and areas for further action as precursors to the workshop. This pre-work was vital in helping to arrive at detailed plans within the time available as there were representatives from the County Council, District Councils, Health, Police and Fire & Rescue and everyone's evidence and views needed to be taken into account.

The two day diagnostic workshop was a challenge but every partner took it very seriously and committed senior personnel.

“Groups worked together really well. There is a real will to move forward jointly and the benefits of doing this are understood.”

Invitations were based on ensuring that each organisation was represented and that there was also expert knowledge in each of the outcomes explored by Area Assessment. Many of those present had worked together on shared planning like the LAA or specific services but never on such a wide ranging basis.

“Invigorating – sense of ‘Team Lincolnshire’ shaping something really worthwhile.”

Ad Esse used 2 facilitators to help keep the groups to time and to ensure the outputs were delivered and agreed. They used the Area Assessment questions to focus the output:

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

“Challenging at times but well worth the effort!”

“Very helpful to have structured/disciplined approach to the analysis and planning.”

Many organisations carry out self assessments but the difference with this process was that we were using self assessment cross agency. This needed a lot of trust and willingness to work together within a developing shared understanding of each others needs and challenges. It was a real help that Lincolnshire already had strong partnerships in place. David observed

“Partners in Lincolnshire now have very high ambitions so we were not just focused on CAA but on the underlying best practice for partnerships represented by those key questions. The real prize for us is improved outcomes for people in Lincolnshire first with good CAA flowing from that.”

Agreeing priorities in such a complex environment reveals tensions that need skilled resolution to make sure the best overall solution is identified so the workshop was run to encourage these to emerge and be addressed.

“Discussions highlighted to me a need for better understanding of other partners’ roles and responsibilities.”

To Actuality...

MAKING IT REAL

Strengths and Areas for Further Action were developed, shared, agreed and used as the basis to develop overarching CAA action plans. The diagnostic workshop was critical to getting plans that could actually be delivered because all partners owned them.

Plans focus on high level issues, each with clear prioritised outcomes and accompanying actions, owners and timescales. Of course, some actions require further detail to be added later as understanding grows or as other actions are completed. The workshop also spent time identifying key stakeholders and used stakeholder analysis to help develop a strategy and stakeholder management plan. Within two weeks of the workshop all plans had been quality assured and ratified with clear monthly performance management arrangements in place.

“Worthwhile event – outcomes clear – review essential.”

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THE BENEFITS

It is all too easy to take a reactive approach to assessments and inspections – waiting to see what they ask and responding. However, partners in Lincolnshire have invested time in preparing for the CAA which has allowed them to shape their strategies and plans, facilitate effective delivery through partnership and stakeholder management and help ensure a positive outcome through their proactive self assessment. This not only has benefits for Lincolnshire and the people who live and work there but also for the Audit Commission who attended the last day of the workshop. They stated that this approach increased their ability to deliver a positive and valuable experience and helped develop clarity about how the CAA process can complement rather than duplicate activity.

For organisations considering a similar approach to CAA, the benefits are clear. A well developed high level plan that cuts across all key partners and is owned by everyone along with a stakeholder management plan. Ad Esse can help facilitate diagnostic self assessments and also help with delivery through their proven approach to delivering value for money using lean principles.

The approach taken in Lincolnshire was so successful that two follow-up sessions are to take place in February and June next year leading up to the countywide self-assessment for CAA.

“Really excellent to create an environment in which we were able to develop ‘collective ownership’ of our strengths and weaknesses.”

The final word goes to David:

“I don’t believe we could have progressed so positively and so quickly without external support and challenge. We learned a lot about the ways we work together and about what we need to do. Some of those learning points were quite basic, like allowing enough time for pre-work but others would not have emerged without the workshop. For example, we now recognise that we need to change the way we think about, present and share evidence with the Commission if we are to get the most from CAA within a ‘lighter touch’ using less of our and the Commission’s resources.”

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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