

Briefing Note from the Audit Commission's District Council Reference Group Meeting – 25 January 2006

Introduction

Aim of the group is to provide the Audit Commission (AC) with a select group of district councils with varying CPA results to act as a 'sounding board' for proposals relating to the future of CPA. The agenda for the meeting included the following items:

1. Use of Resources (UofR)
2. Direction of Travel
3. District Council CPA
4. CPA Pilot Methodology

Use of Resources

This item included a general discussion regarding the experiences of preparing the UofR evidence and self assessments. The general view of those present was that:

- The exercise became a compliance / tick box exercise.
- The KLoE were not proportionate to the size and capacity of district councils

The AC recognised that the criteria were too demanding for districts and they are under review (e.g. the requirement for an audit committee could be removed!).

Future assessment of UofR will be based on an update / progress report – therefore resource implications should be lower in future years.

Proposals regarding changes to the UofR judgement will be published in February with further consultation for districts planned for July.

There is no approved date for implementation of new proposals for districts.

Whatever happens to CPA – UofR is here to stay.

Direction of Travel

The group received a presentation from Stephen Wilkinson of the AC who was responsible for co-ordinating the DofT for Single Tier & County Councils (ST&CC).

The DofT judgement (as apposed to the DofT statement for districts) looks at how the council is **improving outcomes** and how much progress is being made to **implement improvement plans**.

At the present time there are no clear plans or decisions to implement DofT judgement for district councils. This will become clear when the proposals for CPA are announced.

General feeling was that the current DofT statement that districts will receive this year will not be worth very much if it does not provide an indication of the

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general direction of travel (i.e. guidance issued to AC relationship managers is that they should be 'non-judgemental statements'!!!).

District Council CPA

This was the main item of business.

Results of the consultation indicated that an overwhelming majority (i.e. 85%) of respondents favoured the Group B options (i.e. a targeted approach to re-categorisation) with a preference for Option 4. Full analysis of the consultation will be available on the AC website in the near future.

Key messages that came from the consultation are:

- Mixed picture on whether it should be possible to compare districts with ST&CC
- District council performance should be assessed against local priorities
- There is a need for transparency and consistency (between the new and old system)
- The timeliness of PI data needs to be improved
- Corporate Assessment should be less resource intensive.

Reading between the lines my conclusion from the presentation was that the format of CPA for districts will be as follows:

- UofR, DofT judgement and a service assessment will be used to identify the potential for re-categorisation (i.e. shows whether a council is improving or declining)
- Re-categorisation will be based on a revised & cut-down Corporate Assessment (with reduced number of KLoE that are proportionate to district councils)
- Councils will be forced to undertake a corporate assessment if there is evidence that they are declining but it will be voluntary for councils who are improving.

The next steps are:

- AC board to agree overarching approach 25th January
- Analysis of consultation on AC website at end of January
- Consultation paper setting out the proposed model published in April.
- Further consultation on detail in the summer.

AC did not indicate when new arrangements would be in place but it would not be before end of summer / early autumn.

CPA Pilot Methodology

The AC has been piloting a new Corporate Assessment in six district councils.

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The CX from South Oxfordshire, who are one of the pilots, attended the meeting to give his views, which are summarised as follows:

- It was easier to do the self-assessment based on reduced number of KLoE.
- Council staff and AC inspectors had a better understanding of the process (i.e. because it was the 2nd time around).
- Inspection team were able to take into account up-to-date (and therefore un-audited) performance information (1st time around they didn't).
- The whole process did not feel too burdensome!
- The inclusion of a peer member on the inspection team helped (it is planned that inspection teams will include a peer officer and member).