Taking a closer look

Inspectors have been piloting a new comprehensive performance assessment for district councils. David Curtis and Abdool Kara outline what they have learnt.

Comprehensive performance assessment for districts will look very different from CPA for single-tier and county councils. The Audit Commission knew this was likely when it embarked on its consultation with authorities last year - and it is a theme that has come through loud and clear both in the feedback from councils, and our experience on the ground testing different approaches.

Following our initial work with pathfinder councils last year, we are in the process now of piloting a CPA model with the district councils in West Sussex: Adur, Arun, Chichester, Crawley, Horsham, Mid Sussex and Worthing. The districts' contribution to the pilot has been enormously positive, and is helping us develop an approach to district CPA that is both proportionate and drives improvement, without being too burdensome for councils. This is not a simple task, considering both the very varied character of England's district councils and their particular priorities.

We started last year with an attempt to reach an assessment of overall performance of pathfinder district councils through looking at two broad themes - housing and public spaces. Our intention was not to give a service 'score' on both these elements in the same way as for the single-tiers and counties, but rather to derive an overall corporate and performance assessment.

Although the housing responsibilities of district and single-tier councils are much the same, we recognise that the nature of the councils themselves is vastly different. We therefore need an approach that is not only significantly different from that for large urban mets, but also flexible enough to be applied to all the wide and varying types of district council.

In light of consultation and feedback we have revised our approach to the county trial in West Sussex. There are now three parts to the assessment. Central is a corporate assessment of the council using a self assessment which has been subject to peer challenge. In addition, and complementing this, we have undertaken two diagnostic assessments in housing and public space. The diagnostic is not the same as

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We're keen to avoid, as are authorities, the sense that this is a never-ending cycle of inspection. inquiry is near its final form and will not change to any significant degree. In a few weeks we will publish the revised guidance on preparing for the diagnostics, including the new decent homes module. We have written to all district councils with a suggested timescale for the visits, and most should have a reasonably clear idea of when their CPA process will start. So far, we have accredited three organizations to carry out the peer challenges – the Improvement and Development Agency, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers. Once the finalised date for their CPA is set – and this should be published very soon – councils should make contact with one or other of these organisations to arrange for their peer challenge.

We are planning to finalise the overall approach in mid-March. We also at that time plan to consult on the assessment framework – that is, how the various different components including the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate and external auditor assessments will be weighted and added together to come out with an overall CPA score. Rather than publish all results together in a single national report, as happened with the CPA for single-tier and county councils, we are going to carry out inspections in groups of counties and stagger publication of the reports accordingly. As the district visits will take us into 2004 this is the most sensible approach as it ensures reports are timely and relevant, and that councils can get on with their improvement work at the earliest opportunity. As in last year's CPA, the views and feedback from councils will not just be important in shaping our approach – it will be critical. The whole point of CPA is to create a tool for improving public services. This information will provide a baseline of performance across districts and give individual councils a very clear idea of where their weaknesses lie, and where they should focus to improve. If CPA is to be judged a success it should result in better local services – be it housing or any other service – and a more satisfied and more strategic perspective than a service-led inspection. We want to emphasise the importance of the programme to provide the basis for improvement of services.

We anticipate that the diagnostic work and corporate assessment report should require a week's preparation, including a tour around the district, then a week on site at the council, followed by a week writing up the report. Prior work done by the council in its self-assessment will be critically important. The self-assessment aspect of the single-tier and county CPA was strongly welcomed by councils, finding it an extremely useful exercise in focusing on the authority's aims and achievement in a way that had not been done before. We have built on this for districts – the CPA process begins with a self-assessment, which is then subject to challenge from peers, after which the diagnostic work on site at the council will start.

We want to give as much help to councils as possible to get the best out of the self-assessment and inspection process. We will give guidance on what areas they should consider and will contact councils with offers of workshops and support to help councils get the process underway. The material used for West Sussex can be accessed from our website and can provide the basis of early work. The corporate assessment guidance and key lines of