

NLGN Research Seminar

The Future of Assessment: local audit and democratic transparency post CAA practice

24 March 2010, London

Event synopsis

Chair: Nigel Keohane

Speakers: Olivier Roth, Cllr Richard Kemp, David Bowater, Hilary Thompson and Rob Whiteman

Outline of topic

How we assess and evaluate public services impacts explicitly on the services citizens receive. While standards have undoubtedly risen over the last decade, inappropriate targets have distracted policy makers from the needs of users, while centralised management has rewarded compliance rather than innovation. The emerging agendas of localism, personalisation and greater citizen-focus are now dismantling and undermining this outdated and centralised approach. There is recognition from all quarters that methods for local flexibility and discretion must be included in any reformed system.

The question is: what should a new audit system look like?

Cllr Richard Kemp

Richard Kemp's presentation touched upon his experiences in the early days of CPA, the transition to CAA, and his international experiences. He thought that, overall, inspections were broadly beneficial, and that an independent external spotlight could be a good thing if properly managed. In most foreign countries, however, "inspection regimes" were done and sanctioned at the ballot box during local elections. He reiterated the fact that no other Western country has anything remotely similar to the inspection regime in England, and that the UK was one of the most centralised countries in the Western World. He questioned the relevance of certain aspects of the inspection regime by pointing out that only 20% of money spent at council level was discretionary spending. While he thought the principles of CAA were good, he found them slightly ineffective in practice. He also raised the issue that inspections are currently mostly focused on councils, rather than on partners/partnerships.

What he wanted to see from a new inspection regime:

- More peer-review, from "critical friends", as both parties learn from it.
- Inspections only when there is no peer-review going on, if council is not engaging with LG family.
- Audit Commission as Gatekeeper of inspection regime: they decide what to inspect and when
- More work for district auditors.
- Councils should be forced to visit other councils that do things better than them to see what they can learn from it.

David Bowater

David Bowater's presentation touched upon the perceived inconsistencies in the awards of certain Flags, both green and red, and the possible remedies to this. He questioned whether inspection on "outcomes" were sufficient, and whether the one-size fits-all approach to "Place" or "area" was fair, using the example of housing in Cornwall. He also asked how much could the sector do for itself, and whether peer-review would/could replace consultancy? It would certainly be cheaper. He pointedly wondered if a fish knew it was wet, i.e., whether an external spotlight on certain aspects of performance might still be needed. He also pointed out that no partners/agencies were currently

invited to “risks summits”, but that surely all the improvement agencies had to work together to improve outcomes.

Hilary Thompson

Hilary Thompson’s presentation touched upon the importance of commissioning in the future, and of partnerships work. She talked about the values and safeguards to ensure that commissioning works effectively, and required more co-operation with citizens, and more localised solution. A “Beyond Beveridge Settlement”, involving a shift in culture (social security to social productivity), power (from centre to citizens), and finances was anticipated. She questioned what the future of assessment would look like: more commissioned? More plural? Should we retain independent regulation? Should it be lighter touch, risk-based? She reiterated the importance of building sector ownership of improvement processes, and evidence of best-practice.

Rob Whiteman

Rob Whiteman’s presentation posed the question of what was the future of public services; a question he envisaged would enable us to foresee the future of assessment. He argued that the recession heightened the need for localism, and that the subsidiarity principle should be applied. He also saw the future of funding as more localised, with less strings attached. He argued for a new deal, whereby citizens were part of the solution, where local authorities built on social capital. He argued that a grand narrative might not be necessary, and that performance management should be sector led. He raised an idea of self-accreditation schemes for councils. He deplored the adversarial nature of inspections, and thought the whole process should be owned by local government in order for it to be effective.

Discussion points

- A brief discussion followed these presentations. During this discussion, participants agreed that the theory/ideals of CAA were good: the improvement, the independence, the narrative, the focus on outcomes. The methodology of inspections was also discussed, with issues relating to the questions inspectors were asking to Local Authorities. They weren’t all the same, and the validity of the method was therefore questioned, since they weren’t collecting the same information from different councils. The Organisational assessment aspect of CAA was felt to be have worked better than the Area assessment. Problems were also raised with regards to the issue of “scores” (Flags, or marks, or stars), since quite often this would lead to discussions and actions designed to change the scores, as opposed to the service itself. The role of the Audit Commission was also discussed, and most participants were keen to see it as a “Gatekeeper”.
- A final discussion followed on from this presentation. Localism was seen as an important solution to the upcoming financial problems. The role and scale of inspections was discussed, and it was suggested failing councils should be offered “assertive wrap-around support”. The role of the third sector was also discussed, and seen as a plausible alternative or complement to the current methods of service of delivery. It was agreed that local government should be more assertive in its relationship with central government, in asking for more leeway and responsibilities in owning the assessment regime. The future role of the IDeA was also discussed, as a potential facilitator.