

A MODERN APPROACH TO INSPECTING SERVICES: A CONSULTATION BY THE AUDIT COMMISSION

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This is a consultation outlining the Audit Commission's proposals for inspecting local public services in England from 1 April 2005. It seeks feedback on a number of specific issues.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 A new inspection regime is proposed which reflects the changes within local government and the Audit Commission over the last four years. These changes are designed to help deliver their central theme of Strategic Regulation, as highlighted in their earlier consultations on CPA post 2005.
- 2.2 The new inspection framework is being designed to be consistent with the development of CPA 2005 and the Audit Commission's review of housing inspection.
- 2.3 The proposals for change underpin the over-riding purpose of inspection - to act as a catalyst for improvement.
- 2.4 The Audit Commission intends to develop partnership working with other inspectorates to co-ordinate timing and eliminate duplication and overlap.
- 2.5 User focus, diversity and human rights will be core to all inspection work.
- 2.6 A copy of the document detailing the Audit Commission's proposals has been placed in the Members' Library.

3 SPECIFIC CONTENT

- 3.1 It is proposed that Audit Commission inspections will:
- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective
 - act as a catalyst for improvement
 - concentrate their work where it will have most impact with proportionate activity and an assessment of risk
 - be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefit

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- maintain high standards using relevant evidence, transparent criteria and open review processes
 - enable continuous learning

3.2 The Commission says the principles underlying their work will be to:

- maintain independence
- report to the public
- work with other inspectorates to develop a more holistic approach
- share learning with inspected organisations
- use a proportionate approach to recommendations, balancing the benefits flowing from change with resource considerations

3.3 The selection of organisations and services for inspection will take account of:

- categorisation under CPA – inspection will be reduced in high-performing organisations
- improvement planning discussions with the organisation
- significant weaknesses evidenced by performance indicators or previous inspections
- the need to inspect two or more organisations at the same time for services that cross organisational boundaries

3.4 Inspectors will judge organisations on:

How good is the service?

- What has the service aimed to achieve?
- Is the service meeting the needs of the community and service users?
- What is the user experience?
- Is the service delivering value for money?
- Is it accessible and responsive?

What are the prospects for improvement?

- What is the service's track record for delivering improvement?
- How well does the service manage performance?
- Is the capacity available to improve?

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- 3.5 Key Lines of Enquiry will be used to evaluate organisations on these two criteria
- 3.6 The issues raised in the consultation (detailed in Appendix 1) relate to:
- Continuation of the four-star rating for 'how good is the service' (there is a five-point rating for CPA)
 - Continuation of the three-point rating for 'prospects for improvement'
 - The high-level questions to be asked to form the basis of both judgements
 - The means for measuring value for money
 - The introduction of self-assessment for service inspections
 - The intention to prioritise recommendations, be specific, and identify potential benefits/costs of implementation
 - Management of the appeals procedure through the Commission's local Regional Director

4 OFFICER COMMENTS

- 4.1 Officers have considered the consultation document and a suggested response is detailed in Appendix 1.

5 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Authority's failure to fully consider the implications of this consultation could result in an inspection regime that the Council does not consider appropriate.
- 5.2 Failure to develop partnership working will impact on cross-cutting inspections

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None identified at present

7 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Changes proposed to the inspection regime will be statutory.

8 PARISH IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The emphasis on partnership working will impact on the delivery of services at parish level.

9 RECOMMENDATION

9.1 It is proposed that the Committee RESOLVES

To consider the implications of a new inspection regime for the Council and to submit the responses detailed in Appendix 1, subject to further Member comments.

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Background Papers:

None

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