

The death of CPA

As the local government performance regime switches to a new era of area-based assessments, Heather Jameson, Deputy Editor of The MJ, mourns the passing of Comprehensive Performance Assessments.



Last month, the Audit Commission put on a House of Lords reception to mark the passing of the Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPA). Commission staff, dignitaries, politicians and journalists showed up to pay their last respects to the performance regime, which has dominated local government for the past seven years.

If this had been a wake, there would have been a question over the popularity of the deceased. Audit Commission staff – presumably there out of duty more than devotion – visibly outnumbered the other mourners, and there were certainly no tears. You couldn't help but think that someone somewhere was having a much better party than this to celebrate the passing of local government league tables and the shift to a new inspection regime.

But let's put down the party hats, balloons and streamers for a while and consider the life and death of CPA. Looking back to its beginnings, it shouldn't have happened. The great new hope of the Audit Commission was Best Value – a shiny new way to check councils were doing what they were told.

Best Value was barely up and running before the commission realised there had been a dreadful mistake – it just wasn't doing what it was supposed to, and they had to come up with something quick to revive their credibility.

The concept of Best Value did have a lot going for it. For a start, it wasn't Compulsory Competitive Tendering. The Thatcherite rules to ensure cost was king and the private sector could undercut councils and do a cheap job of variable quality was so universally loathed that any subsequent regime was bound to be better.

Where Best Value fell short – as with all the previous tools to measure a council's performance – is that it didn't measure the council at all. What it measured was frontline services – not the capacity of the council as a whole, and certainly not the ability of the members.

True, a council with failing frontline services is failing its residents, but the old view that a local authority is only as good as its services was no longer enough. In an age of community leadership, service provision was the basic building block of an authority, not the whole picture.

Those at the top of the organisation were also made to face the spotlight of inspection. CPA was hurriedly put together, and local authorities were measured in record time. The first CPA league tables were launched in 2002 – to much furore.

Like it or loathe it, CPA has left its mark on local government. There have been casualties: councils named and shamed; politicians' careers ended; and chief executives invited to spend more time with their poor families. And there have been consequences: driving up chief executive salaries; a reality check for 'coasting' councils; and perhaps even the

improvement of local government.

If the final scores are to be believed, councils have made a massive turnaround in the seven years since CPA was born. It would be cynical to think the Audit Commission – the very inspectors of CPA – had a more vested interest in improvement than anyone else. But the league tables were for a different audience – officially for the public, but unofficially to prove to central government the sector is not quite as inefficient as it likes to make out.

The last league tables were a bit of an anti-climax. Completely overshadowed by child protection failures, the whole process fizzled out and the death of Jade Goody was of far more interest on the national stage than the demise of CPA.

A new era has come to councils. Local government must now work in partnership with the rest of the public sector, sharing services and resources to deliver the best possible services for residents and the lowest possible costs.

Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAA) reflect the new ways of working, and judge councils for their work alongside others, rather than in isolation. Gone are the league tables in favour of flags to wave in celebration of a job well done – or indeed to flag-up poor performance.

It is unlikely that local government will mourn any form of inspection, but I for one will be sad to see the end of the league tables. Not because they are a quick-fix-news-hit, but because fear of falling down the tables has kept local government on its toes for the past seven years.

So let's say farewell to CPA – gone but not forgotten.

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