

THE MAGISTRATES' ASSOCIATION
JUDICIAL POLICY & PRACTICE COMMITTEE
RESPONSE

Audit Commission/HMIC consultation on Police Authority Inspection

1. Do you agree with our proposed assessment themes, key questions and assessment criteria? If not, what do you think is missing?

For the inspection process to work and be of value, what is being measured and the acceptable baseline must be absolutely clear. We are satisfied that the four proposed assessment themes are sufficiently simple and readily understood. The key question for each theme and detailed bullet point assessment criteria underneath then clarify exactly what evidence the inspectors will be looking for during the inspection.

Regarding the second assessment theme, it should be appreciated by the inspectors that an authority may be impeded in delivering priority services due to nationwide resourcing issues beyond local control.

2. Do the proposals provide a clear focus on how police authorities make a difference to securing improved policing outcomes for local people? If not, please suggest how we could make this focus clearer.

Police authorities have a hugely important job to do in ensuring that each police force continues to provide an effective service to its community. These proposals recognise that the public want increased engagement in policing at local level.

As magistrates serving our own communities, we particularly welcome the special emphasis on consideration of the views of the public and local accountability. We are pleased that the proposals highlight the core need for police authorities to engage closely and consult with their communities as well as the public's role in scrutinising and holding the force to account for its level of performance and delivery of value for money. We are satisfied that the proposals are clear, evidence-based and focussed on discernible results.

3. Do you agree with our proposals for scoring?

We accept that the four-point scoring scale is consistent with the approach agreed by all of the Comprehensive Area Assessment inspectorates and we broadly support the descriptors of performance for each score as clear and easy to use. However, the proposed scoring scale of just 1-4 marks for each theme is narrow and leaves a great deal of scope for the subjective opinions of individual inspectors, which will distort comparators between police authorities.

Effective comparisons will be further blurred by the rounding up and rounding down envisaged. In addition, a published overall result of 1-4 may not be particularly meaningful or as readily understood by the public it is meant to serve in comparison with something more commonplace such as a 0- 3 star rating, a rating of 'poor', 'fair', 'good' or 'excellent', a mark out of 10 or a percentage score.

The current proposal could result in police authorities that receive the same score being reported on very differently to the public in the detailed commentary in the full individual inspection report, which could be seen as unbalanced and unfair.

Although authorities will be given the opportunity to comment on their inspection report prior to publication, (page 16, paragraph 24), no real indication is given as to what, if anything, happens to those comments and whether the draft may be changed as a result.

4. Which of the options for peer involvement do you think we should adopt and why?

We endorse the laudable proposal of placing a peer inspector from another police authority on inspection teams and favour the broader and more inclusive Option 1. What matters is recruiting the most suitable people to be peer inspectors who possess the appropriate level of experience, interest, aptitude and time available to carry out this important role. That person will need to have the extensive practical working knowledge and capability required to comment on the performance of others, share good practice and provide any necessary follow-up support to raise standards, especially after sufficient and appropriate training has been provided. In some instances the best person to do this will be the chief executive and in others an authority member.

5. Do you agree with our proposals for the police authority inspection framework?

The Association welcomes the principle of independent inspection for all police authorities in England and Wales and the overall approach proposed as being in the interests of increased local accountability and public confidence. Open dialogue with affected stakeholders and piloting of the approach before it comes into effect in July, coupled with phased roll-out over an 18-month period, should help to smooth the path towards implementation and iron out any difficulties that arise in practice.

We would prefer a strong recommendation, or even a requirement, that a self-assessment is carried out before inspection (page 19, paragraph 35). This exercise would be good practice in getting an idea of the areas the inspectors will look at, what evidence is needed to satisfy them and what aspects of performance need to be improved before that happens.

The scope and timetable for these inspections is sufficiently clear in terms of exactly what inspections will focus on and how they will operate. The inspection process needs to be workable and cause as little upheaval as possible, so we are pleased that the impact on the delivery of front-line services is being minimised by a proportionate approach to inspection which keeps evidence requests and days on site to a minimum.

However, we would have liked to know more about what will happen after the full baseline inspection of all 43 authorities is completed. Ensuring continuous good performance and improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of the police force is an ongoing process. Although we understand the need for frequency and perhaps scope of inspections to be based on an assessment of risk and performance levels, further inspections should not just be triggered by a poor inspection report. There will need to be sustainable follow-up checks for all authorities with a maximum interval between them in order to ensure all 43 continue to deliver good results to local people.