

Local government scrutiny co-ordination Transitional arrangements 2009

April 2009

2009 TRANSITIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

In spring 2008, the Accounts Commission was asked to take on a gatekeeping and co-ordination role in respect of the improvement agenda for local government scrutiny. This improvement agenda was established following the Crerar review. The Accounts Commission has taken this improvement work forward by establishing strategic and operational groups comprising senior representation from all of the scrutiny bodies that engage with local government. The key improvement activities are set out in a workplan based on the key priorities set by the strategic group. This workplan and up to date progress monitoring information is available on the Accounts Commission's web page www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/scrutiny

The local government scrutiny co-ordination strategic and operational groups have prioritised the agreement of a joint scrutiny schedule for 2009. During 2009, planning and scheduling arrangements will be in transition as we start to move from our current separate planning systems to establish new joint arrangements for risk assessment and scheduling and co-ordinating our work for the future. Development work is already in hand to achieve this longer term aim but is yet to be fully developed and implemented.

Initial work had been undertaken during 2008 with a view to establishing a joint scrutiny schedule for 2009 setting out all planned scrutiny activity in the local government sector. However as thinking on the shared risk assessment (SRA) takes shape, the original data has been revisited with a view to refining it and taking account of the lessons learned from the early development work.

The purpose of this paper is to set out transitional arrangements for 2009 which will allow the agreement of a joint scrutiny schedule which will provide improved scrutiny co-ordination, and where possible lead to reductions in the overall level of scrutiny for local government. It also seeks to make clear the main differences between these transitional arrangements and those we plan to develop for the future. Appendix 1 summarises the proposed approach.

2009 JOINT SCRUTINY SCHEDULE

The agreement of a joint scrutiny schedule for 2009 is an important element of the scrutiny reform agenda, as it will provide improved clarity about planned scrutiny activity, and the process of agreeing it will promote better streamlined and co-ordinated scrutiny.

In order to agree the 2009 schedule, a Round Table event was held on the 23 February which all local government scrutiny bodies contributed to. Separate detailed guidance was produced for those taking part in the Round Table process. Further work was carried out during March to refine the outputs of this process and agree them at the start of April. The strategic group played an important role in finalising these outputs. The outputs from this process this year are:

- an agreed joint national scrutiny schedule
- a schedule of BV2 pathfinder councils
- a schedule of shared risk assessment development sites
- an agreed communiqué for local government and other stakeholders on our progress.

This year's assessment will not incorporate all of the design features of the final framework and as a consequence possibly appear less systematic than in future years. It is important, however, that progress towards achieving the planned longer term improvements is demonstrated by the way in which work is developed during 2009 as well as demonstrating some early impact for councils at a local level. The 2009 outputs differ from the planned approach for future years as follows:

- From 2010 there will be annual joint local scrutiny schedules as well as the joint national scrutiny schedule. This is not possible for 2009 as local scrutiny resources are not yet organised to deliver this.
- Pathfinder and Development Site activity should be largely complete.
- The streamlining opportunities arising from the structural changes to scrutiny bodies that are taking place will be clearer
- We will be clearer about how we will be able to place reliance on each others work.

There are significant opportunities to demonstrate a positive impact in the transitional year. These include:

- Improved co-ordination of local scrutiny activity.
- Changes to planned activity (for instance not undertaking some planned work).
- Changes to the timing of planned activity.
- Maximising the opportunities for different and innovative ways of working, for instance by joining up to deliver planned activity or developing new joint approaches.
- Improved national and local information and intelligence.

In order to demonstrate these potential impacts, it is important that the Round Table process establishes a clear 2009 planning baseline and work is in hand to deliver this. It is also important that the Round Table demonstrates some tangible progress in terms of our ambition of achieving better co-ordinated scrutiny activity which is proportionate and based on risk. As a consequence of such a proportionate and risk based approach, however, whilst planned activity for well performing councils will reduce, at others it will stay the same or increase depending on the outcome of the risk assessment process.

PUBLICATION PRINCIPLES AND APPROACH

By the end of April 2009, a joint national scrutiny schedule will be in place. The communication principles in this transitional year are as follows:

- The overarching communication principle is to provide greater clarity about planned scrutiny activity
- Plans will be jointly badged.
- The 2009 schedule will be posted on the Accounts Commission's web page alongside commentary on how scrutiny bodies have been working to reduce the 'scrutiny footprint' within our individual approaches.
- A jointly badged letter will be sent to all councils before easter 2009, setting out the progress we are making with the improvement priorities, providing details of the Development Site councils and signposting the key ways in which more detailed information can be accessed now and in the future.
- This year in undertaking our risk assessment work, we do not expect councils to submit specific additional self assessment information. We plan to review the routine arrangements for undertaking self assessment activity at Development Site councils and will use this to inform options for the development of the self evaluation input to the SRA model for the future. Our work is also taking account of the Reducing Burdens Action Group report and recommendations.

SRA DEVELOPMENT SITE ACTIVITY

In April 2009 the first version of the SRA framework will be available for testing. It is planned to undertake this activity at Development Sites between May and August 2009. Much of the SRA work is 'behind the scenes' so we do not anticipate that this aspect of our testing activity will be onerous for councils. The testing period is intentionally aligned with the timescales for BV2 pathfinder activity as it is likely that some form of risk assessment will be required at each BV2 pathfinder council. Furthermore, additional testing is planned to be carried out at other councils where we believe that there are further contextual opportunities to improve the scheduling and co-ordination of our joint scrutiny activity and learn from this for the future.

A key aspect of the development site activity will be undertaking work to develop the local networks which will provide the local information and intelligence to inform the shared risk assessment process in future years. These local networks aim to bring together the joint local resources which exist across the scrutiny bodies for instance, district inspectors, contact managers, local auditors, link inspectors, and regulation managers. All of these officers represent a valuable local resource with an ongoing presence. There are potentially significant benefits in better co-ordinating the knowledge and activity of these officers to support the shared risk assessment process as well as to deliver better co-ordinated, proportionate and targeted scrutiny work which has good local relevance and impact and which supports council improvement.

The outputs from the SRA development sites will inform planning for 2010. On this basis work currently planned at each of the development sites and BV2 Pathfinder councils may subsequently change as a consequence of the shared risk assessment process.

During September and October, the lessons learned from testing the SRA will be evaluated and appropriate refinements made to the approach. The refined model will be available from November in time for planning for 2010 scrutiny activity.

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

An important aspect of the transitional year arrangements will be to ensure that clear communication and engagement milestones are in place for all key stakeholders including councils. The tone needs to be set by establishing a clear message about the planned 2009 arrangements themselves, followed by

appropriate communication and engagement in respect of significant milestones. Work is in hand to address this within the operational group's communication strategy. The first key milestone identified by the strategic and operational groups is to write to all councils setting out details of the transitional arrangements for 2009 and the SRA Development sites. This letter will also signpost the way for councils to access routine updates on progress with the improvement priorities via the Accounts Commission web page.

The second significant opportunity for (selected) council engagement is through the BV2 Pathfinder and SRA Development Site activity during the summer. Arrangements have been outlined within project plans for regular feedback and engagement meetings with councils throughout the summer which provides an opportunity for us to share development thinking on a 'real time' basis.

The third significant communication and engagement milestone set out within the transitional arrangements is to hold a number of feedback meetings during September and October 2009 for councils. These meetings will allow for us to feed back some of the learning we have gained from the testing of the SRA approach as well as take council feedback and views on our proposed way forward. In future years, it is planned that local feedback meetings will be held for all 32 councils. If this approach is adopted it will be necessary to agree who will lead the feedback meetings and who from the council should be engaged.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR 2010 ONWARDS

From November 2009, a refined SRA model will be in place for rolling out in respect of 2010 planned activity. Development activity to address our systems and technological needs will be carried out once we have rolled out the SRA and learned the lessons from our Pathfinder and Development Site activity. On this basis, full implementation of SRA and joint planning and scheduling arrangements is scheduled for planning 2011 activity (around November 2010 onwards).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has set out a broad approach to the transitional arrangements for 2009. It has sought to ensure that timescales are aligned between related development activities and particularly to ensure a seamless alignment of BV2 Pathfinder and SRA Development Site activity.

Appendix 1: Transitional arrangements

2009



