

Local Area Agreements

LAAs are another opaque acronym to arrive on the scene. Intended to give local authorities the flexibility to decide on local priorities so they can deliver services more in tune with local need, they hold dangers for drug and alcohol services. When's the last time you heard a local Council or councillor calling for resources to be targeted at helping substance misusers ?

What is a local area agreement?

A local area agreement or LAA is a three-year agreement between the Government and local authorities and partner agencies setting out the priorities for a local area. A key part of the Government's plan for modernising local government, they are intended to loosen the straitjacket of centrally-imposed national targets and give councils more flexibility to decide on local priorities so they can deliver "local solutions for local needs". In other words, they should allow boroughs to curb spending on areas that are a high national priority but are not an issue at local level, and divert it to areas where there is more local need.

Of much relevance to drug and alcohol treatment agencies?

Definitely. LAAs allow local authorities consolidate the numerous funding streams going into local areas (about 100 in total) including the pooled treatment budget (PTB) and DIP funding. There are also plans to include Supporting People funds within LAAs. Funding streams can be realigned, pooled and in some cases put into a single pot to be dished out again according to local priorities. The danger for substance misuse agencies is that given substance misusers come way down local governments priority list, money could be diverted from drug and alcohol treatment. A survey of councils taking part in the first round of LAAs found that most wanted to change the way drug and alcohol funding was allocated.

What is the timeframe on this?

LAAs are still very much in their infancy. Introduced in July 2004 they were piloted initially in 21 areas including Greenwich and Hammersmith and Fulham. A further 15 London councils are now in the latter stages of negotiating

agreements for the second wave of LAAs due to begin in April. These are Barking and Dagenham, Brent, Camden, Croydon, Enfield, Harrow, Hounslow, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Kingston, Lewisham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest and Westminster. LAAs will be rolled out to remaining London boroughs in 2007. Local authorities are very enthusiastic about LAAs. So many applied to take part in the second phase that the Government allowed more participate than planned. However, despite this steady progress, it is likely to take some time to switch to a new way of working



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BRIEFING

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- observers say it is unlikely funding streams will be effectively integrated for another 10 years - and it is still uncertain to what extent Government departments will prove willing to let go of the purse strings and devolve control to local councils.

What is the sector doing to protect investment?

Both the Department of Health and Home Office have said the drugs pooled treatment budget and DIP money can be included in LAAs central pot if it is likely to lead to better outcomes for clients. This is likely to provide some safeguard in the short term but things may change as the process unfolds and local authorities get better at negotiating with Government offices. Concerned at the prospect of the PTB being diverted into non-drugs activity - which would put it in a very difficult position given its job is to performance manage the PTB - the NTA has ensured regional managers are included in teams negotiating LAAs.

Drug and alcohol action teams too are trying to position themselves within local partnerships to ensure drug and alcohol services get their fair share when funds are allocated. "We are restructuring to make sure we have a strong voice and the ear of the partnership director," said one DAAT coordinator. Given the substantial variation in both the stability and strength of DAATs across London, it is likely some will fare better than others. "DATs are not the bright young things they once were and have been significantly weakened by the merger with Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships," said one observer. "There is a lot of jealousy around at the pooled treatment budget and the danger is local authorities will think "that will do nicely to shore up a shortfall in young people's services or improve enforcement". It is vital mechanisms are in place to ensure drug and alcohol get their share when the pie is carved up." Another DAAT coordinator said a more imminent danger was community safety money being diverted away from drug services.

Finally, a bit more detail about how LAAs work

LAAs concentrate on 4 priority areas - safer and stronger communities, children and young people, healthier communities and older people and economic development. Funding within these four blocks will be pooled and consolidated. They are overseen by the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), a multi-agency body incorporating a range of local partners including the voluntary sector, though local authorities will be responsible for their delivery. The details of each LAA have to be thrashed out in negotiations between the local authority and LSP and regional Government office - in London's case the Government Office of London.