**Libraries Accreditation**

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction

Summary

Libraries Connected, the membership body for heads of library services, has been awarded a grant from Arts Council England to explore an accreditation proposal for library services. Accreditation and library standards have the potential to conflict with the LGA’s position on the importance of sector led improvement.

However, accreditation approaches have been shown to improve the quality of delivery in museums and, more recently, in archives. A well designed accreditation process therefore can be shown to improve performance without proving burdensome or requiring reporting to central government.

Isobel Hunter, Chief Executive of Libraries Connected, gave a presentation on the project at the last Lead Members meeting in October. At this meeting, Lead Members raised several concerns about the direction of the project.

Since then, the LGA has discussed their concerns about accreditation with Libraries Connected. They regard the LGA as a key stakeholder for the project and they have accepted these critiques and the need to maintain a sector led approach. The LGA has agreed to attend the Library Accreditation Project Board meetings in the capacity of observer. So far two meetings of the Project Board have taken place, one of which has been attended by a representative of the LGA.

Recommendation

Members of the Board should note developments on this project and maintain a watching brief as an observer on the Project Board.

Action

Officers to contribute to the project as directed.

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**Libraries Accreditation**

Background

1. Past iterations of library standards were abolished along with other indicators under the coalition government, and a recent review revealed those standards to have measured items that no longer reflect the contribution of libraries to society.
2. For instance, there was a strong emphasis on number of books issues, but not on outcomes related to community wellbeing, skills, or the use being made of computers/wifi for study and business development.
3. The idea of introducing *voluntary* new standards and/or accreditation was floated as part of the consultation to inform Libraries Deliver: Ambition for public libraries. 67 responses were against the idea or had no opinion, compared to 113 responses who would like to see it explored further or introduced.
4. The LGA expressed serious concerns about the proposal, based on previous experience of standards and indicators, and felt that a sector-led approach would be more appropriate. Generally speaking, heads of service and community groups tended to be in favour of the proposal, which director, chief executives and portfolio holders were against the proposal – although there were variations within these groupings.
5. The sector-led approach of support has been strengthened in recent years with the appointment of Libraries Connected as a National portfolio organisation for ACE, tasked and funded to strengthen the library sector. The LGA has also been awarded funding to conduct a number of peer challenges specifically for library services.
6. As an alternative to introducing a standards and accreditation scheme, Libraries Deliver included a commitment to develop a [strategic evidence-based planning toolkit](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/longer-term-evidence-based-sustainable-planning-toolkit) and a [benchmarking framework](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/benchmarking-framework-for-library-services) to support libraries services continually improve and assess their own performance. These were published in 2017 and 2018 respectively and are now hosted on GOV.UK as part of a suite of Libraries Taskforce documents.

**Update**

1. Libraries Connected, the membership body for heads of library services, were awarded a grant from Arts Council England in 2019 to explore an accreditation proposal for library services.
2. Isobel Hunter, Chief Executive of Libraries Connected, gave a presentation on the project at the last Lead Members meeting in October. At this meeting, Lead Members raised several concerns about the direction of the project, particularly around its need to be sector-led, flexible enough to respond to local need and driven by the needs of communities rather than top-down performance measures.
3. Following this meeting, the CTS team discussed these concerns in detail with Libraries Connected. They regard the LGA as a key stakeholder for the project and they have accepted these critiques and the need to maintain a sector led approach.
4. They have established a number of ‘design principles’ which have been used to brief the consultants who will deliver the project. These are that the scheme must:
   1. be developed through the principle of sector-led design to ensure it is fit for purpose​
   2. be built around user and community need​;
   3. support library services to deliver to their local authority’s priorities​;
   4. work as a service development tool, not as a minimum standard​;
   5. link to the statuary responsibilities in the Libraries Act to help define what “comprehensive and efficient” means for each library service and its local circumstances​; and
   6. be flexible and driven by local need, opportunities and resources. No two library services are the same.
5. The LGA has accepted a role as an observer on the Project Board for the piece of work. Libraries Connected have expressed their interest in the LGA eventually becoming an acting member of the group.
6. The other members of the Project Board are as follows: Mark Freeman, President, Libraries Connected (Chair); Melinda Haunton, Programme Manager Accreditation, The National Archives; Isobel Hunter, CEO, Libraries Connected; Nick Poole, CEO, CILIP;; Sue Williamson, Director Libraries, ACE; Liz White, Head of Strategy Development, British Library [observer]; Mary Ellis, Head of Libraries Development, MALD [observer]
7. Consultancy Shared Intelligence has been appointed to deliver the project following an open tender process.
8. The consultation phase of the project is due to be completed by September 2020. The final report and design scheme are scheduled for completion in September 2021.
9. The eventual management of the scheme is to be determined through consultation and over the course of the project. However, Arts Council England have expressed their willingness to administer the scheme alongside their existing management of the Museums Accreditation Scheme.

**Issues to consider**

1. Are Board members satisfied with officers’ current level of involvement in this project?
2. What are the key considerations they would like officers to feed back to the Project Board?
3. The proposal applies to England only. The Welsh Assembly has responsibility for library services in Wales and has commissioned a separate support package for Welsh libraries.

**Financial Implications**

1. None

**Next Steps**

1. The LGA will continue to sit on the Board in the capacity of observer. The next meeting will take place on the 25th February.