

Public Library Service Accreditation

Purpose of report

For information, discussion and decision.

Summary

Following a paper presented to the CTS Board by Libraries Connected last year, this paper outlines the progress made to date on the Public Library Service Accreditation project, including the findings of the research programme so far and the likely shape of a future scheme.

Board Members have previously determined that the LGA should sit on the Public Libraries Accreditation Board as an observer, rather than a full member. This was because of concerns raised by Lead Members and other member of the CTS Board about the potential for library 'standards' to conflict with the LGA's position on the importance of sector led improvement.

Now that the shape of this project is more defined and in keeping with sector-led approaches, the LGA has again been invited to become a full member of the group. CTS Board members are asked to discuss the project and determine whether this invitation should be accepted.

Recommendations

Board members are asked to note the progress and the projected direction of this project and determine whether they can give approval to the LGA becoming a full member of the project's Board.

Action/s

Officers to contribute to the project as directed.

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1. Under the current model for public library delivery, each local authority defines how it will deliver its responsibilities under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture Media and Sport has the duty to superintend and promote the improvement of library services, and to ensure that local authorities are meeting their library service responsibilities. What the Act means in practice is open to debate. There is currently no framework to support service planning and service design or to guide decision making.
2. Initial consultation undertaken by Libraries Connected with public libraries in 2018/19 showed clear appetite across the sector to develop something that would work as an improvement framework, in alignment with superintendence of the 1964 Act, and that would support libraries to deliver to the needs of their communities and foster national consistency.
3. The programme is led by Libraries Connected with funding support from Arts Council England. Consultancy firm Shared Intelligence has been appointed to deliver the programme of consultation and co-creation of an accreditation framework for public libraries in England. The programme commenced in January 2020 and runs to November 2021.
4. As the sector support organisation and the membership body for public libraries, Libraries Connected's ambition is to develop and deliver an authoritative, sector-led scheme, which supports libraries to make best use of their available resources to deliver a good quality service that meets the needs of local communities.
5. This scheme will provide a comprehensive assessment of a library service to demonstrate:
 - how it monitors and responds to user and community needs
 - how it develops resources, activities, services and collections to meet these needs
 - how it is managed, funded, staffed and resourced to meet these needs.

Public Libraries Accreditation – Board membership

6. Membership of the Public Library Service Accreditation Project Board is currently made up of:
 - Libraries Connected
 - Arts Council England

- National Archives
- CILIP – the library and information association
- British Library

Observers

- Local Government Association
- Welsh Government – Museums, Archives and Libraries Division

7. The Local Government Association is currently an observer on the project board for this work. This was initially because of concerns raised by Lead Members and other member of the CTS Board about the potential for library ‘standards’ to conflict with the LGA’s position on the importance of sector led improvement.
8. An invitation to full membership has been extended to strengthen the relationship between key stakeholder organisations.

Phase 1: Consultation

9. For this project Shared Intelligence are using the ‘double diamond’ approach to innovation. This involves two distinct phases, the *consultation phase* covering the first diamond and the *design phase*, covering the second.
10. The consultation phase of the project has now completed. A report on the findings from the engagement was presented to the Libraries Connected Board of Trustees in December 2020.
11. The consultation methodology included:
 - Desk research and literature review
 - Scoping interviews. 11 interviews were undertaken with people with experience of accreditation or part of the library sector, including elected members
 - Workshops. Two workshops were held with the project’s reference group, including Library Heads of Service.
 - Survey of library staff. A total of 475 responses were received from staff at all levels, heads of service to frontline staff, from all regions in England.
 - Stakeholder testing. The approach was tested out with stakeholders including the LGA with experience of libraries and different accreditation frameworks to collect their concerns and use their expertise to think more closely about the practical elements of designing accreditation.
 - Virtual consultation session. An online consultation session on the topic of, “What does quality mean for a modern library service?” was held as part of the consultation

phase. The event was attended by over 100 individuals. In the session participants were given three provocations, each defining the idea of what quality means in a different way and were then offered the opportunity to comment and discuss.

- Project board meetings with the group of sector representative outlined in paragraph 6. Six project board meetings have been held so far.

12. Throughout the consultation phase there were some clear and consistent messages from consultees.

- There is a high level of support for the idea of accreditation in the sector.
- There was a clear steer that any scheme should be owned by the library sector itself.
- It was felt that accreditation should be a voluntary scheme.
- A combination of self-assessment and independent validation was the preferred model.
- There was support for tiers or levels of attainment within the scheme.
- There was support for a 'pass/fail' element within the scheme, but with the acknowledgement that this would need to be framed positively to avoid the pejorative connotations of a 'fail' designation ('working towards accreditation' for example).
- The scheme should focus on outcomes for customers and the community.
- Accreditation should help library services to demonstrate its contribution to policy areas, both internally and externally.
- The Accreditation scheme should be linked to existing work, including the Universal Offer.

13. Based on this consultation phase, a system of accreditation began to take shape. From the discussions with stakeholders, particularly those with first-hand experience of different accreditation models, it was possible to begin refining these initial ideas and to understand what was feasible and practical. With this in mind, an early outline model for accreditation has been proposed.

Phase 2: Design. Proposed scheme outline

14. The next stage of the process involves detailed design, but some of the key features of the outline scheme emerging from the consultation are as follows.

- A self-assessment process undertaken by the library service, validated through an independent peer check and challenge process, taking into account the local context and reality of the service
- A mixture of qualitative and quantitative measures, mainly based on outcomes for communities, the service's contribution to local priorities and needs, but also

including some elements of internal practice such as leadership, how embedded strategies are and plans for workforce development.

- Following a process of self-assessment and peer check and challenge, a tier of accreditation is awarded (Gold, Silver, Bronze) or the library is classified as still “working towards” accreditation.
- Library services are given an improvement plan and support to improve or maintain their accreditation level.
- Involvement would be needed from key sector stakeholders, including Heads of Service and other library staff, as well as individuals from outside the library sector.
- Accreditation will be at a library service level, rather than focused on individual libraries.

15. From the model outlined above come five key steps in the accreditation process:

- Pre-application
- Application: self-assessment
- Assessment and Validation: external/peer assessment (check and challenge)
- Award
- Retention

16. The second phase of the project (the design phase), will look at each of these steps in greater detail over the next six months.

Implications for Wales

17. This Accreditation scheme applies only to English library services. The Welsh Government has its own Public Libraries Standards in place and representatives of their library team have also been attending the project board as observers.

Financial Implications

18. This project requires only officer time and can be delivered within existing LGA budgets. The source of funding for an accreditation scheme is yet to be determined during the design phase of this work, but is under consideration at Arts Council England.

Next steps

19. Libraries Connected will be undertaking a risk assessment to determine the next steps for the project. They will continue conversations with Arts Council England regarding the ownership of the scheme.

20. The LGA has been invited to join the project board as a full member with voting rights. The Culture, Tourism and Sport Board is invited to discuss this proposal. We would draw the Board’s attention to the following issues for consideration.

- How Public Libraries Accreditation might interact with the LGA's improvement contract with Arts Council England (ACE), particularly in terms of peer challenges.
- Implications for funding, and whether this will be linked to investment in the same way that museums without accreditation are excluded from bidding for certain ACE funding streams.