



Coalition and co-creation: the genesis of Archive Service Accreditation

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ABSTRACT

The recent creation of Archive Service Accreditation as a new standard for UK archives (2008–2013) is a major development in the archive and museum sectors, involving strategic and professional bodies across the home nations. This article explores the making of the new standard, revealing its close relationship with the UK's long-running Museum Accreditation standard and the debate and deliberation that went into building a complementary scheme. The article revisits the original aims of Archive Service Accreditation, setting the context and chronology for the standard's development during a time of major change for the archive and museum sectors. The innovative co-creation approach to writing the standard is explored, reflecting how this process shaped subsequent approaches to archives developments and what it revealed about professional worldviews. Most importantly, the article discusses key decisions and areas of difference which shaped the eventual approach to the standard, highlighting those areas of discussion which emerged through co-creation and the learning from Museum Accreditation in the design of the programme. The implementation of Archive Service Accreditation in the years following co-creation allows for a long view, reflecting on where areas of debate remain and which elements of Accreditation have become core to archive work.

KEYWORDS

Archives; standards; accreditation; museums

Introduction

Archive Service Accreditation was born out of the 2009 government policy on archives, *Archives for the twenty-first Century*, developed by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales, and The National Archives (TNA).¹ The policy identified a number of key challenges facing the archive sector, and defined five development priorities. Supporting these, and in particular the priority to develop 'bigger, better and sustainable services', was the intent to develop an accreditation scheme for archives.² This ambition was driven by two factors: firstly, the success of the long-running UK Museum Accreditation scheme, then managed by MLA in partnership with the strategic bodies for museums in the devolved nations; and, secondly, by perceived weaknesses in the existing standards framework for archives.

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The scheme was developed in four project stages spaced over several years. Between emerging as a concept in 2009, to the scheme's formal launch in 2013, major changes in the policy and machinery of government greatly altered the working environment of the UK cultural sector. The 2010 general election saw the first hung parliament in the UK in 36 years, the defeat of the Labour administration after 13 years in office, and the first coalition government since the Second World War. The Comprehensive Spending Review in England which followed in October 2010 resulted in the biggest reductions in UK Government department budgets in decades,³ and the abolition of 192 government agencies including the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.⁴ But amid this turbulence, the development of Archive Service Accreditation successfully rode the waves, to be applauded after its first year of operation by the All Parliamentary Group on Archives and History, as one of the most important and pioneering strategic advances for the archive sector in recent years (Figure 1).

The process of programme development brought to the surface a range of professional debates, particularly around the connections and differences of practice in archives and museums. This article explores that cross-over and serves as a summary record of the research, thought processes and testing on which the standard was built. The discussion attempts to draw out key themes of wider interest, and lessons learnt. The article is structured in three parts and combines the insights of [Katrina Thomson (part one) and Janice Tullock (part two)] before concluding in Part 3 with reflections by [Melinda Haunton (part three)], on the scheme's delivery in practice over the past four years.

In writing this article, the authors acknowledge the relatively light referencing to published resources. Evidence throughout relies on internal project documents which were



Figure 1. Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service, one of the first six archive services to be awarded Accreditation (All Party Group on Archives and History Reception, Houses of Parliament, Westminster, October 2014). L-R Victoria Bryant, Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service Manager; Lord Clark of Windermere, Co-Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Archives and History; Councillor Lucy Hodgson; Lisa Snook, User Services Manager. Photograph courtesy of Simon O'Connor and Archives and Records Association (UK & Ireland).

neither designed nor cleared for publication; standards regimes which have since been revised; and online discussions on a long-closed forum. This supports the value of documenting the origins of this major programme in a format which will have public longevity.

PART 1: scoping and framing the concept

The team

The ambition to create a standards scheme for archives which would work in harmony with the UK Museum Accreditation scheme was embedded in the project's ethos from the outset, and reflected in the make-up of the project team. The project was jointly commissioned in April 2010 by TNA and MLA, which until the dissolution of MLA in 2012 shared responsibility for the strategic development of the English archives sector.⁵ The lead consultant team consisted of a partnership of two independent heritage consultants, Janice Tullock and Katrina Thomson – experienced practitioners in archives and museums, respectively.⁶

From inception, the scheme aspired to be 'owned' by the UK archives sector, spreading benefits beyond the remit of the commissioning bodies, and embracing England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as the British Crown Dependencies of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. The project board accordingly included senior representation from the strategic and professional bodies across the four nations, namely: TNA; MLA, from 2011 Arts Council England (ACE); National Archives of Scotland, from April 2011 National Records of Scotland; CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales⁷; Public Record Office of Northern Ireland; the newly fledged Archives and Records Association (ARA); Scottish Council on Archives (SCA); and Archives and Records Council Wales.

This stakeholder mix (including government divisions, non-departmental public bodies/registered charities and independent organizations, each at different junctures in their development, and varying significantly in their scale and remit) was to prove one of the project's greatest strengths, but also a complicating factor. Meetings were conducted on a roundtable basis and each partner considered equal; however, roles and financial contributions were apportioned according to each organization's statutory and national responsibilities, and their relative resource and capacity. While a Memorandum of Understanding was drafted by March 2011, its formal adoption was delayed until 2013 due to protracted uncertainties in the political and funding environment following the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review in England, and the subsequent transition of MLA's functions and responsibilities.

Aims and objectives

The first phase of the project had a simple core aim: to research potential models, mechanisms and indicative costs for the creation of a national standard to replace TNA's existing Self-Assessment scheme for local authority archive services. Self-Assessment had been introduced in 2007 to support TNA's legislative duties under the Public Records Acts. Based on a questionnaire, it ranked organizations using a graded 'starring' system and was intended as a tool to help archive services evaluate and benchmark their performance on a national level. In its short lifetime, the scheme had provided TNA with some valuable strategic data; but the process was generally viewed by the sector as onerous, inflexible and 'top-down'.

The internal validation method was considered by many to be flawed and, as a consequence, the scheme had gained little traction with governing bodies at regional and local levels.

In many ways, it was the sector's frustrations with Self-Assessment that helped to articulate clearly its objectives for accreditation, in the context of the goals set out by *Archives for the twenty-first Century*. Consultees were in broad consensus:

- They valued having a regular and structured process for professional reflection; however they wanted a scheme that didn't just 'rate' performance, but which would also drive a culture of continuous improvement.
- They called for a more user-focused and outcome-based approach, which acknowledged differences at local, regional and national levels.
- While local authority archive services and Places of Deposit were seen as a priority, the sector ideally wanted a scheme that reflected the full diversity of the archives landscape, including archive services in museums and universities, and business and private archives.
- Although the benefits of aligning with Museum Accreditation were acknowledged, the scheme had to meet the specific needs of archives and not be shoehorned into a museum model.
- It needed to be affordable in terms of staff time and administrative costs, for both the managing bodies and applicants.
- To streamline data gathering efforts and ensure efficient use of resources, it had to recognize other existing public sector tools and standards.⁸
- Advice and guidance should be easy to access, and unified across the four nations.
- For the scheme to have 'teeth' and be an effective instrument in sector advocacy, it had to be both enduring, and flexible enough to adapt to ongoing change in the external political environment.
- Above all, it should be created and driven by the archives sector itself.

Comparator analysis

Objectives established, the process of creating the new standard began with identifying existing schemes which might supply useful insight. The study methodology was built around direct consultation with sector representatives through workshops and interviews, combined with extensive desk research. In total, a sample of 27 accreditation and self-evaluation schemes were surveyed. In addition to UK Museum Accreditation, nine were examined in depth, including established museum schemes in America and New Zealand, and the Excellence Model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), which formed the basis for many improvement tools then in use in the UK culture and sport sectors.⁹

Self-improvement vs. standards

A fundamental finding from this comparator analysis was confusion in discourse between self-improvement tools and accreditation or standards schemes. For project purposes the distinction was defined as follows:

- *Self-improvement tools* do not seek to accredit, recognize, badge or rank services or organizations. They are structured, but non-prescriptive instruments, commonly referred to in terms of ‘frameworks’. Organizations may use these to evaluate their service provision across a range of key indicators or themes, and to develop plans to help improve performance. They are generally voluntary, internal, confidential processes which may be wholly self-assessed, or include external validation. The ultimate goal of performance improvement is to achieve sustainable excellence.
- *Accreditation schemes* certificate excellence, or the achievement of defined standards of performance at a particular moment in time. They are externally validated processes that offer a formal, public badge of approval that organizations may use to benchmark themselves against peers and competitors. Most accreditation schemes are voluntary. Many incorporate self-evaluation and peer review as an integral part of their assessment and award process.

Numerous schemes studied as part of this scoping exercise were found to combine, in varying permutations, elements of both self-improvement tools and an award or accreditation scheme. At that time, Museum Accreditation was undergoing a thorough, sector-led review (from 2009 to 2011). The review’s consultation process identified the combination of self-improvement tools with accreditation as a serious potential risk. Feedback from the pilot of Museums Galleries Scotland’s newly developed Quality Improvement System (QIS) had highlighted the confusion caused by allied schemes that appeared too similar in purpose – thereby potentially diluting sector take-up and impacts.¹⁰

Throughout, project partners were concerned to avoid any unnecessary duplication of effort and to ensure that ‘cross-domain’ organizations (i.e. museums with archive collections, or archive services with museum collections) did not go through two accreditation processes that asked for the same evidence twice. Early on, partners decided that museums and archives accreditation should not be interdependent – that is, achievement of one award should not be subject to success in the other. Rather, importance was placed on ensuring that the two schemes complemented each other in language, structure and process, applying the principles of a holistic collections management framework, as recently published in PAS197:2009.¹¹

The need for all-round clarity on the relationship between the new archives scheme and other key supporting standards, improvement tools and data gathering processes was therefore established as a critical principle from an early stage. It was agreed that the new archives scheme should distinguish itself as an accreditation standard, driving improvement through external validation. At the same time, it should signpost organizations to relevant improvement tools already in use or under development in the sector, as a means to achieving and sustaining accreditation status, rather than attempt to absorb the whole job of an improvement tool in its own right.

What is an archive?

A second fundamental challenge uncovered through consultation was the lack of a single, consistent description of what constitutes an ‘archive’. The UK Museum Association’s 1998 definition of a museum underpins the scope and parameters of the Museum Accreditation scheme, determining eligibility for participation.¹² No similarly common definition then existed for archives, with the word being used interchangeably to describe both the physical

material, and the place or institution where such material is kept. Project team discussion delved deep into the question of what accreditation was aiming to evaluate: the collection, or service, or both?

Understanding of the definition of archives, and their relationship to records management, was found to be surprisingly tangled, especially in museum collections. Because of the scale of the task in hand, it was agreed that records management, archaeological archives and digital-only collections should remain out of scope in the scheme's first iteration, but that 'hooks' should be created to acknowledge the interface, to retain options for extending the scope in future years, if feasible and desirable. To aid this definition, a guidance note 'What is an archive?' was written by TNA staff in consultation with the project team.¹³ This provided the springboard for developing a suite of eligibility criteria, focusing on collection nature, size, public access, workforce and site, which were subsequently tested with the sector during co-creation.¹⁴ Calculatedly broad-ranging, the criteria were designed to meet the aim of creating a standard open to the entire sector, including privately owned institutions.

Key learning points

Comparator analysis revealed that the most successful standards schemes were modular and proportionate in their structure and approach – i.e. that they were weighted, tiered, or scaled in some way, to take account of the different sizes, circumstances and expectations of different service types. The use of peer reviewers as part of the validation process was demonstrated by several schemes to offer two-way benefits, creating a self-sustaining mechanism for building sector capacity, skills and confidence. All models evidenced the need for clear, co-ordinated, easy-to-access guidance, with an emphasis on quality rather than quantity of material. Too many support options were seen to have a negative effect, over-burdening and demotivating organizations.

Preparing for co-creation

The Accreditation 'building block'

At the time, no other country or nation, anywhere, had established a standards scheme specifically for archive services. The scoping exercise therefore concluded that no existing model was wholly transferrable to the needs of UK archives, and that a bespoke solution based on Museum Accreditation, but blending features and influences from a range of additional sources was required.

The principle of sector involvement and ownership was embedded in the approach from the beginning. However, a provisional framework was still needed on which to hang the co-creation process, and to provide a platform for detailed content development. To achieve this, a visual analogy of the 'Accreditation building block' was developed – a cube template with each face representing a core component of the scheme's composition (Figure 2).

Multiple options for each component were debated by the project team, drawing on learning from other schemes, and ensuring recommendations were tested in the project's co-creation phase. In brief, the recommendations centred on the following propositions:

Modules: As a starting point, it was agreed that the scheme should adopt the same three section headings as the revised Museum Accreditation scheme:

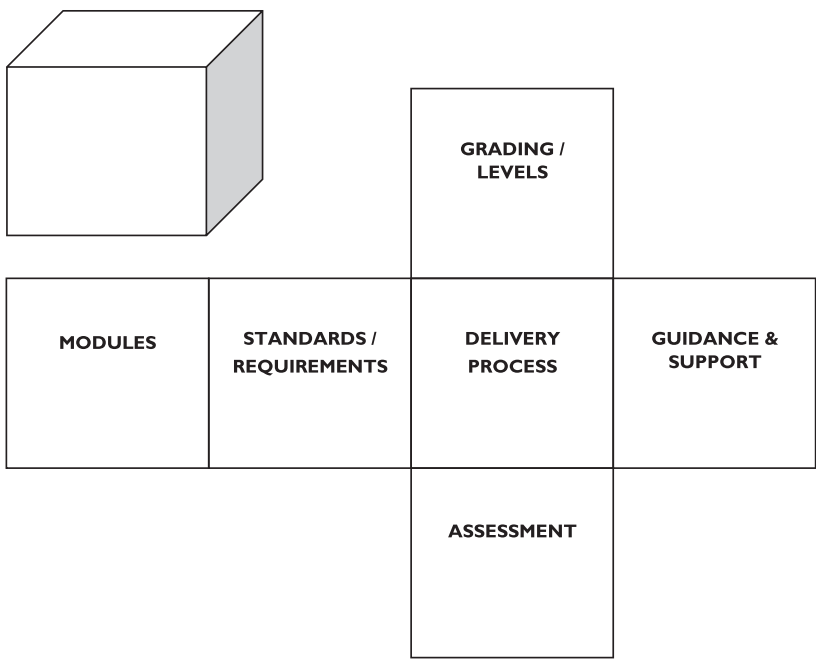


Figure 2. Archive Service Accreditation ‘Building Block’ (2010).

- Organizational Health
- Collections
- Users and their Experiences

Standards/requirements: These three modules provided the framework for detailed development of the standards/requirements of the scheme. A mapping exercise between TNA Self-Assessment and Museum Accreditation demonstrated significant areas of cross-over, highlighting many commonalities. It also flagged where there was need for archive-specific requirements and guidance, and where differences in professional terminology and established practice could present barriers to integration.

Grades/levels: Among the knottiest questions faced by the project team was how to address fairly, and pragmatically, issues of scale and proportionality. Museum Accreditation is a single-standard scheme, but operates a ‘one bar, but not one size fits all’ approach, based on a tenet of ‘reasonable expectations’ and ‘appropriateness’. Early consultation with the archives sector had nonetheless indicated a preference for a multi-level scheme. Various approaches were accordingly explored during scoping, co-creation and pilot.

Delivery process: By the end of the scoping phase, the partners had agreed in principle that each nation would assume responsibility for managing applicants from their own national constituencies, including assessment. Country-wide unity would be created through a common application process and shared UK protocol, co-ordinated nationally by TNA.

Assessment: It was proposed that assessments should include an element of peer review, administered by the assessing body within each nation. This would be overseen by a moderation process fulfilled by a UK committee, including representation from museums and,

ideally, libraries and other sectors with a stake in good archival practice (e.g. education, business, health).

Support and guidance: Consultation had exposed the need for more joined-up support and guidance between strategic organizations, across nations and sectors. With central funding sources under threat, promotion of a culture of sector-led self-support was recommended, to be led by ARA and dovetailing with relevant museum networks and training offers. A central UK digital resource was considered essential, building on existing digital provision.

The language of localism

In the project's early stages, external communication was carefully guarded due to awareness of the need to manage sector expectations in an environment of unpredictable change brought about by the deep public spending cuts – likened at the time by local government consultees to being in the midst of 'moving tectonic plates', with the fundamentals of old ways of working shifting and, in places, 'volcanoes exploding and earthquakes'. The move from concept and scoping into co-creation and pilot was to demand a communication strategy linking all partners, in order to engage the sector and win support at both local and national levels.

Particular tensions were identified in the local authority archives sector. As a service with a limited statutory basis, archives were not (and are still not) in a position to wield a 'carrot and stick' with an accreditation scheme. Discussions with Local Government Improvement and Development (LGID)¹⁵ underlined the need to avoid the directive, 'old landscape' language of audit and obligation in the scheme's communications, in order to win local authority support in a new environment of localism.¹⁶ Nonetheless, it was recognized that accreditation provided a crucial opportunity to offer clarity to authorities over their responsibilities for records under relevant statutes, and to highlight the risks associated with failure to meet these obligations.

In an attempt to strike this balance, the style and tone of the project narrative was consciously modified away from a vocabulary of centralized regulation and audit, towards a more inclusive language of professional best practice, improvement and public value. This harmonized with the team's awareness that a strongly regulatory tone would be unsuitable, if the project was to achieve its aim of attracting applications across a varied archive sector. To promote shared understanding and encourage sector participation in co-creation, the projected benefits of the scheme and its synergy with Museum Accreditation were communicated through creation of a '6 Ps' mnemonic. This was subsequently adopted in the revision of the Museums Accreditation standard, published in 2011 (Figure 3).¹⁷

PART 2: Co-creation in action

From September 2011, the project moved into a new and critical stage. This focused on developing the mechanics of the scheme along with the Accreditation standard and associated guidance, through a co-creation process. These outputs would then be piloted and refined before implementation.

By this stage, the 'building block' framework and the concept of using three headline modules in parallel with Museum Accreditation were well established among the partnership, but the content of the standard had still to be formed. To kick-start co-creation, the

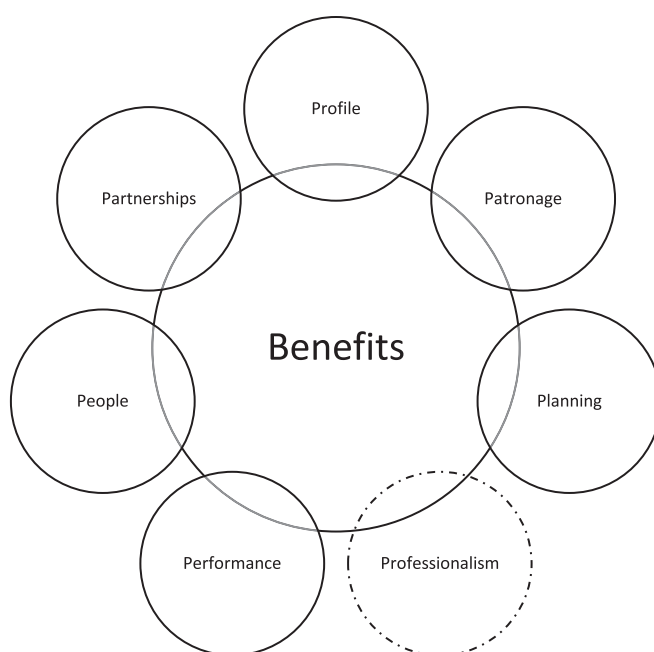


Figure 3. Intended Benefits of Archive Service Accreditation (2012). Following co-creation, the seventh P (Professionalism) was added.

project consultants adopted a ‘straw man’ approach, by developing a rough first draft standard – or as it later came to be nick-named a ‘destruction document’.¹⁸ Devised to remove the horror of the blank sheet and to counteract circular, abstract debate, the purpose of this first draft was, first and foremost, to stimulate productive discussion and collaborative problem solving. Intentionally imperfect and designed to be unpicked, it did not seek to perform the function of a formal consultation draft, or to pretend to be close to the likely eventual standard.

The first version of the ‘destruction document’ analysed existing archival standards, as a starting point. However, these were found to be insufficient for the needs of a modern archive service, particularly in terms of digital representation and varieties of access beyond on-site research. Elements were therefore added, such as requirements for digital preservation.

Co-creation

Co-creation was a new way of working in the archives sector, moving away from a process of centralized internal development followed by formal consultation, which had made previous decision-making seem remote. Sharing a consciously deficient document for wide comment was a particular source of discomfort, and a real change from established practice for all involved. A minority of consultees did not grasp the ‘straw man’ concept and took rough draft elements as likely to be implemented, raising professional concerns. The reuse of content from existing standards and assessment programmes designed for the public sector, such as The National Archives’ self-assessment programme for local authority archives, caused concerns particularly among business archives.

This aside, there were distinct advantages to the co-creation approach, particularly around transparency of decision-making, communication and sector engagement. Accreditation marked a decisive shift in archival standards. The ambition to create a standard applicable across the whole of the archives sector needed to be built on varied professional knowledge and experience, and to achieve wide buy-in for successful delivery. Publicly debating the standard for a period of months offered opportunities to secure all these elements.

The definition of co-creation used was ‘the practice of collaborative product or service development: developers and stakeholders working together’.¹⁹ The co-creative approach was designed to be as inclusive as possible, with entry into discussions free to all who wished to participate. Initial plans were for open recruitment to a series of traditional working groups; but practical concerns made this unworkable. Instead, the team used a range of online and in-person methods, to ensure a visible, transparent process, and maximum engagement. All methods aimed to encourage and inspire participation, to allow ease of contribution, and to facilitate honest discussion and debate. They included:

- Open-invitation workshops across the UK, to introduce the aims of the scheme, test principles and processes, and consider some content of the standard.
- A webinar on the same pattern, allowing input from those not able to attend the workshops, including single-staffed services.
- A publicity campaign, to raise awareness of the scheme’s development and generate support for the workshops and webinar.
- Online structured discussions, to provide space for in-depth debate on the full detail of the programme.
- Online discussion feedback, including a précis of past debate and opportunities for participants to rate and discuss other comments.
- Further communication activities, including Twitter, to share the content of discussions beyond the online platform, drive traffic to the discussions, and encourage ongoing conversations.²⁰

Although formal consultation responses were not sought, several groups also gave collective feedback on the co-creation document, which was incorporated into the co-creation discussions.

Responding to the co-creation standard: creating a pilot draft

Collectively, these methods generated over 1000 contributions from more than 500 contributors, ranging from the particular to the general. All feedback was collated and analysed to produce the final standard. A fundamental change arising from this feedback was the renaming of the scheme to *Archive Service Accreditation*, to address sector confusion over what was being accredited, and to distinguish the programme from the collections-focused Designation Scheme.²¹

Co-creation raised a number of key issues:

- Respondents found the use of certain language and requirements from Museum Accreditation unfamiliar, and therefore difficult to apply to archive services. The requirement to have a collections development policy rather than the more familiar collecting policy was one area of initial concern.

- There was strong support for a commitment to professional skills and expertise, leading to the addition of a seventh 'P' (Professionalism) to the benefits mnemonic.
- The definition of 'users' in the museums standard was found to be limiting for archive services that served a wider stakeholder constituency, including depositors and parent organization. As a result, module three was renamed 'Stakeholders and their Experiences'.
- Access requirements modelled on museum norms and based on mainly physical, on-site access to interpretative information and education, were found difficult to relate to archive services. The requirements to provide general public access were particularly taxing for private sector archive services whose primary community is often internal and where commercial sensitivity restricts some open access.
- Respondents were resistant to creating separate requirements for digital preservation and access, preferring digital formats to be integrated throughout.
- Pro-active collection development, rather than a permissive collecting policy, was felt by some to be beyond the scope of certain archive services, particularly those serving an institutional rather than public purpose.

This feedback led to a number of key decisions in producing a full draft standard for piloting. The most significant was the decision to work within the archive service's own definition of its role. Museum Accreditation requires accredited museums to have a 'clear statement of purpose'.²² However, it was recognized that many archive services exist as teams or departments in organizations with a purpose well beyond delivery of a heritage and information function. It was therefore seen as essential for each archive to express its particular purpose, in terms of its parent organization. In Archive Service Accreditation, the wording of the requirement consequently became:

The archive service is guided by a mission statement that defines its purpose in relation to its collections, and connects the organisation's governing document to appropriate archive service policies and plans.²³

By defining the individual mission of each archive service, it became possible to embrace differences between services within one overarching standard, and to address challenges introduced by the inclusive eligibility criteria. For example, Archive Service Accreditation requires that, 'The archive service has a clear policy on access and engagement, which specifies the ways in which access is provided and enhanced for all stakeholders, appropriate to the organisation's mission statement ...'²⁴ – thus recognizing that not all archive services are primarily designed to meet the needs of a public audience.

These important differences in mission and potential audience were further addressed by requiring a definition of the archive's community, based on a definition developed in the Public Services Quality Group Standard for Access to Archives:

In its specific sense ... the word 'community' does not necessarily refer simply to the population of a political unit or physical area) ... The archive service will probably serve multiple communities: local, national and international; different communities of researchers and of other types of direct and indirect users and of non-users ...²⁵

The draft standard used for piloting referred to this definition throughout, specifying that the response to each requirement had to be appropriate to the archive service's community and mission. For example:

2.2 The archive service has co-ordinated plans in place ... to continuously improve collections development, information, and care and conservation, in order to meet the access needs and interests of its community.²⁶

In this way, supporting guidance on collection development could emphasize the role of active collecting in business areas for institutional archive services, and the role of appraisal, disposal and deaccessioning, overturning the assumption that developing collections implied a programme of acquisition beyond the parent body.

The pilot draft standard was based on PAS197:2009, making use of this code of practice designed to support integrated collections management. This provided a clear, shared structure and terminology with museums around which to build the accreditation standard, define its requirements, and order policies, plans and procedures.

At the time, PAS197:2009 was still very new. Some terminology was therefore unfamiliar to archivists, giving rise to initial challenge around the proposed wording of requirements. Guidance drafted for the pilot sought to provide reassurance, underlining that, in many cases, archive services would have relevant documentation under a different name. For example, the requirement for a 'collections information plan' could in part be satisfied by documents such as a 'cataloguing backlog strategy'; and 'collections development' requirements by more familiarly titled acquisition and disposal policies, collecting policies and terms of deposit.

Piloting the draft standard and scheme

By summer 2012, the co-creation process had created enough awareness of the scheme's development to enable the recruitment of 21 archive services to pilot the draft standard and scheme. These included services from local government, business, museums,²⁷ national bodies, universities and specialist repositories. Piloting tested how services moved through the accreditation process; whether the standard and guidance worked for multiple types of archive services; and whether the application form allowed services to demonstrate fully how they met the standard. For project partners, piloting enabled a better understanding of the resources required for implementation, including governance and peer review, allowing decisions to be made at national level about practical implementation.

Feedback was collected from the pilot participants and assessment teams, as well as wider sector responses to the published pilot draft documents. The piloting process highlighted the need for some revision, but also showed that, overall, the standard and the connections to PAS197 worked well. The application process proved beneficial for both established and new archive services; and it was notable that only one potential pilot service dropped out of the trials, despite the tight project timescale.

Changes included some re-ordering of requirements to aid clarity, and the addition of a new requirement to test the range of access methods available. Substantial amendments were also made to the application form to allow services to demonstrate the specificity of their work, by reducing tick boxes and increasing free text.

Pilot organizations noted that completing the application was an effective way for them to communicate with their parent authority, raising awareness of both successes and areas where they needed support. The final scheme therefore included a template assessment structure designed to report to the parent authority, and supported publicity and promotion of achievement.

A change of approach: moving away from levels

In response to feedback received in the project's scoping stage, the co-creation and pilot process tested various approaches for a multi-level scheme. Early drafts explored ideas of ladders or stepping stones of achievement, which later became a gold/silver/bronze approach. The pilot draft standard moved from testing multi-stage recognition to consider the value of a 'Distinction' award. However, feedback on all these approaches was mixed. The mismatch with Museum Accreditation was one area of concern; another was the potential devaluation of the 'core' award of Accreditation. In the context of intense pressure on public spending there was apprehension that awards above a core level might highlight areas for potential service reductions.

Feedback focused instead on the need for the programme to be truly responsive to the different types and sizes of archive. Accordingly, scalability indicators were developed to reflect legal and size differentials between archive services, and scaled guidance was drafted against individual requirements. These were included in the pilot, and simplified on the basis of pilot feedback. Archive Service Accreditation was launched with a single award of Accredited Archive Service. Provisional Accreditation was used as a means of indicating near-success while requiring the service to address specific areas within a set timescale. Archive Service Accreditation therefore operates with the same approach as Museum Accreditation.

PART 3: delivery and the future

The Archive Service Accreditation standard was published in July 2013. From this date, applications have been accepted through an online system, and the structures envisaged in delivering the programme have been in place. The Memorandum of Understanding was agreed and published with the standard, and the Accreditation Committee recruited to represent partners and experienced members of the archives sector.²⁸ The Committee first met in November 2013, forming themselves into the first awards panels and confirming the first six Accredited Archive Services. Assessors have been trained in all the home nations, have delivered assessments within their nations and worked in teams across borders to accredit national bodies. In England, peer review has also been implemented and proved a popular element of professional development as well as an active part of assessment processes. Three awards panels meet per year, making a total of 86 awards at time of writing, of which 73 are from archive services in the public sector, and 13 from private and third sectors. A small number of applications have been deferred or have not achieved the award. These in some cases reflect rapid and unexpected governance change in public sector services, and in others serious preservation concerns in services which had not been able to secure appropriate professional conservator advice. From these, as well as from the accompanying training programme across home nations, a substantial body of experience of how Archive Service Accreditation works in practice has developed. It has been possible to draw out statistical overviews of the applications, with an annual report made to the governing Committee.²⁹

The delivery of Archive Service Accreditation across four years as a live programme has demonstrated that the original design concepts are robust. The elements of the 'building block' post-co-creation have remained stable, offering sufficient flexibility to deliver a

coherent programme which nonetheless reflects differences between the home nations. As the programme approaches its fifth anniversary, the standard remains relevant. Given the substantial changes to the environment in which archive services are operating, and the variety of eligible services, the value of co-creation and of incorporating broad sector knowledge into programme design is confirmed.

Benefits identified by partners and participants

Working towards Archive Service Accreditation is a substantial commitment, and delivering the programme requires resources from many partners. It has been essential to demonstrate a range of benefits for applicants and for the archives sector to justify the programme and to ensure partners continue to develop.

Many of the anticipated benefits have been confirmed by feedback from applicants, including those services which were initially unsuccessful:

- *Performance*: applicants note the value of a sustained opportunity to review the service's management and policies, ensuring coherence and effectiveness. The flexibility of documentation accepted for applications ensures that services create only material relevant to their mission and purpose.
- *Planning*: having a universal standard which values organizational health and the experience of stakeholders as much as the management of collections has given individual archive services and strategic bodies a reference point and benchmark to use in discussions about their archive's future at a time of considerable sector strain and fears about sustainability.
- *Partnerships*: the UK Archive Service Accreditation partnership has endured through periods of considerable external change, and remained in close contact with Arts Council England and Museum Accreditation as explored in the penultimate section of this article.
- *Patronage*: Archive Service Accreditation is a reference point for a number of grant programmes, and those working towards an application note that highlighting areas of weakness against the standard has been essential in advocacy around resourcing.
- *Profile*: the process of application and award has created multiple opportunities to raise archives' profile, with celebrations attended by Vice-Chancellors, Chief Executives and Chief Operating Officers, among other top management. This visibility created by Accreditation has proven to be of substantial and lasting value.
- *People*: the ongoing commitment to sector involvement in the programme gives opportunities for archive professionals as Archive Service Accreditation Committee members and peer reviewers.³⁰ The Stakeholders module has raised the profile of the importance of working directly to the community the archive serves.
- *Professionalism*: anecdotally, elements such as requirements on professional staffing, and emerging precedents on minimum viable levels of resourcing have been successful in defending core capacity for archives which might otherwise have become unviable.³¹

Lessons learned

The experience of delivering Accreditation has highlighted some unforeseen areas, or aspects which required additional thought. Some of these relate simply to practicalities of launching a new standard, with a national training programme essential to inform, communicate and explore the potential of Accreditation with archive services of all types. Application numbers were initially low across all home nations, whatever the approach taken to scheduling applications.³² Another challenge relates to the environment in which archive services are operating at present. To be accredited, an archive service needs to demonstrate its governance is 'clear and legally robust'³³. With a substantial proportion of eligible archive services considering or undergoing governance change 2013–2017, practical issues of scheduling have arisen. A number of applications-in-progress have been suspended due to governance change.

Accreditation's approach, referring to underpinning standards but also directly to the individual archive service's mission and purpose, and its resistance to setting single templates for documentation, have been appreciated by many applicants. It has also meant the standard has remained stable during periods when reference standards are changing, such as the replacement of PD5454:2012 by two standards, envisaged for 2017–2018. However, the approach was new to the archives sector in 2013, and at times feedback requested more defined expectations, minimum resource levels and ongoing clarification of terminology. In some areas, new guidance was needed, as with policies on collections information, which had not been used before in archive services.³⁴ This was an area where familiarity and suitable guidance in practice resulted in increasing strength in applications, as demonstrated by the reducing number of services assessed as only partially meeting this requirement.³⁵

In some cases, published guidance has not been considered an appropriate response to the challenges facing archives. The Archive Service Accreditation Committee has on reflection decided not to publish minimum resourcing levels to preserve the service-specific approach:

It was agreed that although these [specific applications 2015–2016] were useful examples they did not constitute formal precedents as in all cases the individual service mission and situation was critical to understanding what a minimum might constitute.³⁶

The Accreditation approach puts considerable weight on scaled expectations, on the assessors, and their capacity to weigh up widely differing service offers. In practice, it has made the detailed exploration afforded by site validation visits essential for all new applications, despite agreement in the Memorandum of Understanding that visiting 25% of applications was an acceptable minimum.³⁷

Where the archives sector does not have underpinning standards already in place, assessment is also challenging, especially in the module on Stakeholders and Their Experiences. As the programme's annual report 2014–2015 noted:

The assessors discussed the difficulty of setting required actions in this module at their annual meeting (July 2014), and identified the lack of set standards and the need for flexibility in light of the different communities each service works with as a key part of the cause.³⁸

Feedback from applicants suggests that some of this module, particularly around access planning, is perceived as unclear. This may also relate to the lack of accepted tools and standards in this area.

Confluence with Museum Accreditation

Throughout the delivery of Archive Service Accreditation, the existence and experience of a mature Accreditation programme for museums was a constant reference point. Although the detailed content of Archive Service Accreditation reflects an archive-specific co-creation process, the mirroring of the two standards' structures signalled an intention to continue to develop the programmes in parallel. The Programme Managers of the two Accreditations act as observers on each other's programme committees, and regular contact continues between these annual meetings.

Museums with substantial and significant archive holdings are signposted to Archive Service Accreditation in the collections guidance for Museum Accreditation³⁹ and a number of museums of different types have successfully applied.⁴⁰ Feedback from museums working towards applications has shown the value of a standard which specifically reviews the needs of archives and their stakeholders, particularly the focus on documentation as a primary way into collections, and the opportunity to draw together a coherent overview of archives activity which may be delivered in a number of departments of larger museums. An area which is kept under constant review is the overlap of the programmes for some services. An aim of the development phase which has not been achieved is single submission of evidence: in practice, institutions applying for both Museum and Archive Service Accreditation often do submit the same evidence for some elements. The programmes agree that designing out this duplication is desirable, but there is no immediate opportunity for systems crossover. There is also recognition that while some programme elements may appear similar, they are assessed differently for archive services and museums because of the different needs of the collections and their users. A collections development policy or forward plan may meet the requirements of one programme but not give sufficient consideration to the specific requirements of the other.

With programmes at very different stages of development, the areas of divergence and confluence provide learning opportunities on both sides, particularly as both undergo light reviews in 2017–2018. Despite the maturity difference, some elements of review are common. The need to reach out to smaller organizations and emphasize the scalable nature of the programmes; the benefits of celebrating and communicating Accreditation; and the constant effort to simplify and clarify guidance are emerging themes across both.

The next challenge for Archive Service Accreditation is to increase content on the management of and access to born-digital record holdings. While the Accreditation standard constantly references analogue and digital materials, adding specificity and scaled expectations around provision for digital records is critical to the credibility of the programme in current archives activity. Work since 2015 with Archive Service Accreditation partners, the Digital Preservation Coalition and volunteer pilot services has developed and tested updates to the programme which are due for implementation in 2018.⁴¹ The updates are based on specialist international standards developed for digital preservation, and could have provided a point of divergence between the two Accreditation programmes. However, the underpinning structure has provided a framework flexible enough that the Archive Service Accreditation Standard needed little change, even as revisions are made to guidance and application questions to support digital improvements.⁴²

Conclusion

Returning to the original aims of the programme, as identified by the archives sector, helps to underline how much the process of iterative, co-created standards development has delivered. Archive Service Accreditation is a structured process for reflection, for recognition and for improvement, focused on outcomes and acknowledging the range of user and geographical differences which may drive archive services to different ways of working. The range of successful applicants in the programme's first few years suggests that Archive Service Accreditation does work for different types of archive services, and has successfully developed a standard which meets the needs of archive services specifically, although working alongside, learning from and cross-referring to Museum Accreditation. Emerging statistical reporting gives a picture of development areas across archive services, from analysing audience needs to digital preservation capacity, and legacy issues such as building stock and cataloguing backlogs.⁴³ This helps to guide strategic planning by the Accreditation partners and other overarching bodies.

At time of writing, a light-touch review of the programme is beginning. Clarity of some Stakeholders module content is one area for review, based on user feedback. However, the Committee are agreed that the core of the programme can endure for several more years without a fundamental change. After the extensive exploration of options for levels during co-creation and piloting, it is notable that there has been no strong feedback supporting the introduction of levels to the programme; the decision to remove them after piloting appears to be vindicated. The ease with which the substantial additional digital preservation content could be incorporated gives assurance the standard can continue to develop within its current framework at present.

The review will also explore methods of assessing and documenting how Accreditation is being used beyond applications. We have anecdotal evidence of services using the standard for planning, for defence of core capacity and for identifying areas where the service had overlooked potential opportunities, but more robust data would be helpful. Another focus will be to identify any barriers to participation affecting areas of the sector. The majority of early applicants are public sector archive services, and although this reflects past access to standards programmes, and partner priorities (for example, The National Archives' need to use Accreditation as its routine means of oversight for Places of Deposit), there may be other factors which can be addressed.⁴⁴ One element seen at introductory workshops is fear of what may appear a documentation-heavy standard, and relief when the service-focused approach is clarified. Ways to address this without expanding the guidance further would be beneficial. While the flexibility of the programme and acceptable documentary evidence should reduce the level of work to put together an application, this is an area which needs to be kept under constant review, to ensure the programme continues to be a support rather than a burden.

One of the core aims defined by early participants in developing Archive Service Accreditation was that it should be written by and with the archives sector. The process of co-creation has resulted in a programme which is explicitly the product of sector debate. Where co-creation was a novel, sometimes uncomfortable, idea for the sector in 2012, it has become part of professional vocabulary and practice. As a recent example, the new vision for the archives sector in England, Archives Unlocked (2017), was developed through co-creation processes, made possible by the pioneering approach to Archive Service Accreditation.

This comfort with the inclusive, public process of co-creation must be accounted one of the major achievements of the programme, and a significant sector change.⁴⁵

Notes

1. *Archives for the twenty-first Century*. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archives-for-the-21st-century.pdf>.
2. *Archives for the twenty-first Century in Action*, 5. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/archives-for-the-21st-century-in-action.pdf>.
3. BBC News, Spending Review 2010: George Osborne wields the axe, 20 October 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11579979>.
4. The Guardian, Quango Cuts: Full List of Bodies Affected. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2010/oct/14/quango-cuts-list>.
5. MLA was until May 2012 a non-departmental public body and registered charity in England, funded by the Department for Culture Media and Sport and with functions that spanned the UK. On 26 July 2010 it was announced that the MLA would be abolished, as part of proposals to reduce the number of public bodies funded by UK government. On 1 October 2011, its functions relating to archives were transferred to TNA and those relating to museums and libraries to Arts Council England (ACE).
6. Additional support was supplied in the co-creation phase of the project by an associate archive consultant, Alex Cave.
7. From 2015, once the programme was in live delivery, Museums Archives and Libraries Division of the Welsh Government (MALD).
8. For example, data gathered for the Public Services Quality Group (PSQG) Survey of Visitors to British Archives and CIPFA.
9. Also American Association of Museums (now American Alliance of Museums) Museum Assessment and Accreditation Programmes; New Zealand Museums Standards Scheme; Museums Galleries Scotland Quality Improvement System (QIS); SCA, Quality Improvement Framework for Archives and Records Management Services in Scotland (ARMS); Culture and Sport Improvement Toolkit (CSIT); Customer Service Excellence standard (formerly 'Charter Mark'); Artsmark; Welsh Public Library Standard Fourth Framework 2011–2014.
10. The Sport and Leisure Consultancy. *Quality Improvement System*.
11. *PAS197:2009: Code of practice for cultural collections management*. British Standards Institute, 2009.
12. ACE. *Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom*, 6. http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Accreditation_standard.pdf.
13. TNA. *What are archives?* <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/defining-archives.pdf>.
14. *Archive Service Accreditation Eligibility Criteria*. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-eligibility-criteria-may-2015.pdf>.
15. One of six bodies that form the Local Government Group overseen by the Local Government Association (LGA) in England and Wales. Founded in 1998 as the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA).
16. Gained force in England with the publication of the Localism Bill. Department of Communities and Local Government. "Decentralization and the Localism Bill." <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/decentralisation-and-the-localism-bill-an-essential-guide--2>.
17. ACE. *Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom*, 5. http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Accreditation_standard.pdf.
18. *Draft: Archives Accreditation Scheme. The UK standard for archive services*. <https://www.scribd.com/document/81443328/Archives-Accreditation-Discussion-Draft-Jan-2012>.
19. Fronteer. *White paper #1 Co-Creation's 5 Guiding Principles*. <http://fronteer.amsterdam/media/uploads/2016/10/161003-FRONTIER-WHITEPAPER-1.pdf>.

20. <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=ind1202&L=ARCHIVES-NRA&P=R17837&1=ARCHIVES-NRA&9=A&I=-3&J=on&X=056BAB71FDF24B5F8C&Y=janice%40janicetullock.co.uk&d=No+Match%3BMatch%3BMatches&z=4>
21. ACE. *Designation Scheme*. <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-collections-and-archives/designation-scheme>.
22. ACE. *Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom*, 7. http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Accreditation_standard.pdf.
23. *Archive Service Accreditation Standard* (2014) Requirement 1.1. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-standard-june-2014.pdf>
24. *Archive Service Accreditation Standard* (2014) Requirement 3.1 <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-standard-june-2014.pdf>
25. *Archive Service Accreditation – Glossary*. http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-glossary-june-2013_websites.pdf
26. See note 18 above.
27. Pilot archive services working in a museum context included the Bowes Museum, Museum of English Rural Life and Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums.
28. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/archive-service-accreditation/management-of-archive-service-accreditation/>
29. *Archive Service Accreditation Annual Reports*. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/archive-service-accreditation/accredited-archive-services/>
30. An ARA review of the impact of peer review within Accreditation showed that applicants and peers find this immensely valuable: View of a peer reviewer surveyed on behalf of Archives and Records Association, May 2015: ‘

For the peer, [benefits include] to see how other services operate, create new contacts, and develop general skills such as analysis and communication on difficult issues. For the service, some of the same, plus a sense that achieving accreditation is a process of development and not a tick box exercise.

31. Archive Service Accreditation training for applicants slide 7. <https://www.slideshare.net/mhaunton/updated-archive-service-accreditation-introduction-workshop-slides>.
32. In England, services are asked to notify the assessor body of an intention to apply to allow for resource planning; in Scotland, capacity to assess is limited so services must reserve an assessment slot; in Wales, MALD works closely with services to set a national assessment schedule.
33. Requirement 1.2, *Archive Service Accreditation Standard* (2013), <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-standard-june-2014.pdf>.
34. The National Archives. *Developing a Collections Information Policy*. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/developing-a-collections-information-policy-march-2016.pdf>. The role and value of such policies was discussed at the UK Archives Discovery Forum 2014. Feedback is available from: <https://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20141126083631/http://www.ukad.org/forum2014/>
35. Statistics drawn from the *Archive Service Accreditation Annual Report*. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/annual-report-2016-on-uk-applications-and-awards-for-archive-service-accreditation.pdf>.
36. *Archive Service Accreditation Committee Minutes*. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-committee-minutes-12-may-2016.pdf>
37. Accreditation Delivery Model 2.1, *Memorandum of Understanding* (2013) Available: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archives-service-accreditation-memorandum-of-understanding-2013.pdf>
38. *Archive Service Accreditation Annual Report*, 12. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/annual-report-archive-service-accreditation-committee-may-2015.pdf>
39. Arts Council England, *Accreditation Guidance: Collections*, 10. http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/FINAL_201406_GuidanceSection2_PrintFriendly.pdf

40. Examples include Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, the Bowes Museum, Museum of English Rural Life with University of Reading Special Collections, the V&A, Imperial War Museums, the Thomas H Manning Polar Archives and the University of Bristol Theatre Collection.
41. The revised application form incorporating additional digital preservation content was published for information July 2017. Available <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-application-form.pdf>.
42. *Archive Service Accreditation: Digital Developments*. Conference paper 2016. <https://www.slideshare.net/mhaunton/archive-service-accreditation-digital-developments-for-ara-conference-2016>.
43. Accredited Archive Services, statistics and outcomes. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/archive-service-accreditation/accredited-archive-services/>.
44. Concerns about the feasibility of applications from charity archives are expressed in McMurray, *Charity Archives in the twenty-first Century*, 45. <https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/our-impact/reports-and-reviews/charity-archives-in-the-21st-century>.
45. Consultation for *Archives Unlocked*. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/vision-consultation.pdf>.

Disclosure statement

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