

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES

RESPONSE TO:

‘Securing excellence; delivering for communities’ - Museums, Libraries and Archives and the Local Government White Paper

This response is framed around the three sections of the consultation paper. While specific comments are made in the body of the response, NCA shares strongly with MLA the view that ‘archives make a valuable contribution to this agenda but must be clearer about what their contribution is, and be able to evidence contribution better’. It supports the thrust of the proposals and would wish, particularly through the Public Services Quality Group, to take an active part in moving this agenda forward.

A Outcomes framework

1 Does the outcomes framework capture the sector's major contribution to communities (and/or) what other contributions should be included?

1. National offers – the most significant aspect of the framework is the way in which national offers in the library and museum domains, for example Bookstart, Rhyme Time and the range of Renaissance Hub projects, can be used readily to evidence contribution to the four policy priorities. For archives these national offers broadly do not exist and so it is consequently very difficult to provide a coordinated thread through the excellent local programmes that many individual archives undertake. As part of its long term brief it would be extremely valuable for MLA to pursue the development of such offers and to embed Strategic Commissioning (and specific projects such as Learning Links) more fully in this framework. One potential national project that could be used in the outcomes framework is the proposal for a *'Who Do We Think We Are?'* week for schools. This arises out of the Ajegbo report on Diversity and Citizenship in the Curriculum.
2. Safer and Stronger Communities: it is here that the evidential/civil rights value of archives could be stressed (for both individuals and communities), probably by the use of case studies around such issues as land ownership, court appearances, adoption and the whole range of Freedom of Information enquiries. More use could also be made of the NCA/PSQG National Visitor Survey postcode data in analyzing the use of archives by ward/indices of deprivation.
3. Economic Development and Environment: under current evidence of impact there is also the 2006 report for MLA London – London’s Culture Equation and the 2005 economic impact survey on Bolton’s museum, library and archive services.
4. Healthier Communities and older people – this is a particular strength of local authority archive services and should be much more promoted that it currently is. There is clear demographic evidence from the Visitor Survey and there should be an element under ‘sector contribution’ similar to that under Children and Young People i.e. ‘Provide opportunities for older people to undertake positive activities (PAOP)’. Equally the

provision and take up of volunteering opportunities for older people should be recognized in this section.

2 Would the framework be useful to you to advocate your place within LAAs

The simple answer is yes. It is likely that many archives will struggle to force their way on to the LAA agenda within their own authorities without a coordinated approach promoted within government and elsewhere by MLA. Linking with museums and libraries would be of great collective benefit here.

3 What are the main policy areas or sector activities what we should emphasise as being the sector's main contributions?

Archives can of course and do contribute to all four policy priorities but the weakest at the moment is the Economic Development and Environment section, although this is as much because of the lack of data and research as it is contribution. For tourism the domain is a relatively small one and is unlikely ever to generate the same tourist impact as say the national museums. However the skills development of users is an area that needs further examination but there is current evidence from the MLA Northwest region questions asked in the 2006 Visitors Survey.

As referred to above, the older people agenda is clearly a current strength that needs much more emphasis. For Children and Young People, the key areas are formal learning and PAYP with some evidence for family learning. For Safer and Stronger Communities, promotion of sense of place and identity is a key strength for 'traditional' archives as well as community archives.

4 What PIs can be used?

Participation is an obvious but complex area that cannot be confined to the number of individuals crossing the front doorstep of an archive. Distance use (letter, email etc), group use and web use are key aspects of an archive's work and in this respect are not comparable directly to similar services provided by libraries and museums. Equally, as the paper indicates, it is crucial for satisfaction and other outcome measures to be used in conjunction with a simple number count as archives are unlikely ever to match the 'raw' footfall of libraries and museums. While this is not a new issue, it is essential that some form of acceptable measurement tool be developed. In addition, where it is possible to achieve outcome PIs that can be used across archives, libraries and museums, this will aid partnership working at a local level.

5 Can you provide evidence of the sector's impact etc?

The last two NCA conferences *Evidence of Value: our value as evidence* (2006) and *Identity Papers? The Role Of Archives In Teaching Diversity And Citizenship* (2007) focused on the role archives play in wider agendas and information on these can be found on the NCA website.

B Performance Management Framework

Given that the thrust of the White Paper is about outcomes, it is essential that within the PM framework acknowledgement is made of the need for adequately resourced functions such as

cataloguing, preservation and conservation. For without these, the community engagement/participation agenda cannot be pursued effectively. The framework of standards and Self Assessment data will provide useful building blocks and the flow diagram on page 9 indicates how they will feed in, although more detail will be needed to flesh how the process will work. The development of suitable evaluation data post 2009 is crucial and NCA, and especially the Public Services Quality Group, would wish to play an active role in taking this further with MLA.

C Supporting Self Improvement

Clearly more information will be needed before a measured response could be given to the proposals in this section but a practical improvement model for local cultural services that is nationally validated would be of great value. NCA hopes that several archive services are included in the Single Improvement Tool pilot (we understand that this is the case in Gloucestershire) and that it will be able to contribute to its development before the launch next year. More information would also be useful on the Regional Improvement Networks - how they are progressing and how they will fit in this improvement package.

Geoff Pick
Vice Chairman
National Council on Archives
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