



**Libraries
Connected**

**Public Library Service
Accreditation:
Accreditation Design**
Final report of process and learning
prepared by Shared Intelligence

March 2022

Acknowledgements

We greatly value the input that has been provided over the two year long process to design an accreditation scheme for English public libraries. It was important that we undertook a co-design process which was tested, critiqued and challenged and would like to thank everyone that took part in this process.

We would like to make a few specific acknowledgements to:

Reference group members from the following library services: Oldham, Northumberland, Kirklees, Windsor, Shropshire, Newham, Sandwell, Somerset, Bradford, Bristol, Kent, Barnsley, St Helens, Wakefield, Hampshire, Newcastle, Isle of Wight, York, Lancashire, and Lambeth. Thank you for the time committed to ensuring development of a scheme which is fit for purpose and for the reflection, conversation and challenge that you provided.

Pilot library services, Northamptonshire, Reading and Suffolk Libraries, for the dedication to testing the scheme, the time and resources that were contributed, the thoughtful reflection and challenge and patience.

Project Board members: Mark Freeman, Libraries and Information Services Manager at Stockton Libraries; Isobel Hunter, Chief Executive, Libraries Connected; Melinda Haunton, Programmes Manager at The National Archives; Nick Poole, Chief Executive of the CILIP, the library and information association; Liz White, Head of Strategy Development at British Library; Sue Williamson, Director Libraries at Arts Council England; Lauren Lucas, Adviser – Culture, Tourism and Sport, Local Government Association (LGA), and Amanda Bennett (Project Board observer), Senior Libraries Development Advisor, Welsh Government for the expertise, support and challenge that was provided.

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1. Introduction

Purpose of this report

In late 2019 Libraries Connected commissioned Shared Intelligence to undertake a two-year long project to deliver a process of consultation and co-design to scope out and develop a form of accreditation for English public libraries. In September 2021, a final draft scheme was agreed by the project board which has overseen this project, and shortly after the Libraries Connected board of trustees ratified that decision.

This report has been written at the end of the project and its primary purpose is to document the process through which the accreditation scheme has been developed and to provide insight into the evidence and rationale behind decisions and design features of the scheme. This is important in order to give confidence in the credibility of the in-depth engagement process that has taken place.

This report also documents some of the main data and findings from the project as well as learning from the process which will be useful to Libraries Connected and those who eventually run the scheme.

Background to the accreditation scheme

The public library sector in England had a set of national standards between 2001-2008 which were replaced by a single national indicator as part of a rationalised set of indicators for local authorities, which themselves were scrapped in 2010. There is currently no accreditation framework for public libraries in England although the work described in this report builds on several previous pieces of work which have brought the sector to this point.

In 2019 the *Libraries Blueprint report* from Libraries Connected and CILIP identified a clear appetite for user and outcome-focused accreditation across the sector. Prior to that, in 2017 one output from the Libraries Taskforce was a set of strategic outcomes measures for public libraries, and another was the Libraries Taskforce and LGA Benchmarking Framework for learning and improvement. This work builds on all these precursors and seeks to deliver the brief set by Libraries Connected:

'To develop a scheme that provides a comprehensive assessment of a library service to demonstrate how it:

- *Monitors and responds to user and community needs*
- *Develops resources, activities, services and collections to meet these needs*
- *Is managed, funded, staffed and resourced to meet these needs.'*

It was agreed with the project board at the outset that to meet this brief would require a process which allowed involvement in many ways from those who work in libraries, national policy makers, and a broad spectrum of other stakeholders including library users. It was also agreed that in order to do this, the process should be given enough time to work at a pace which enabled wide engagement; hence the two-year process.

Interim report

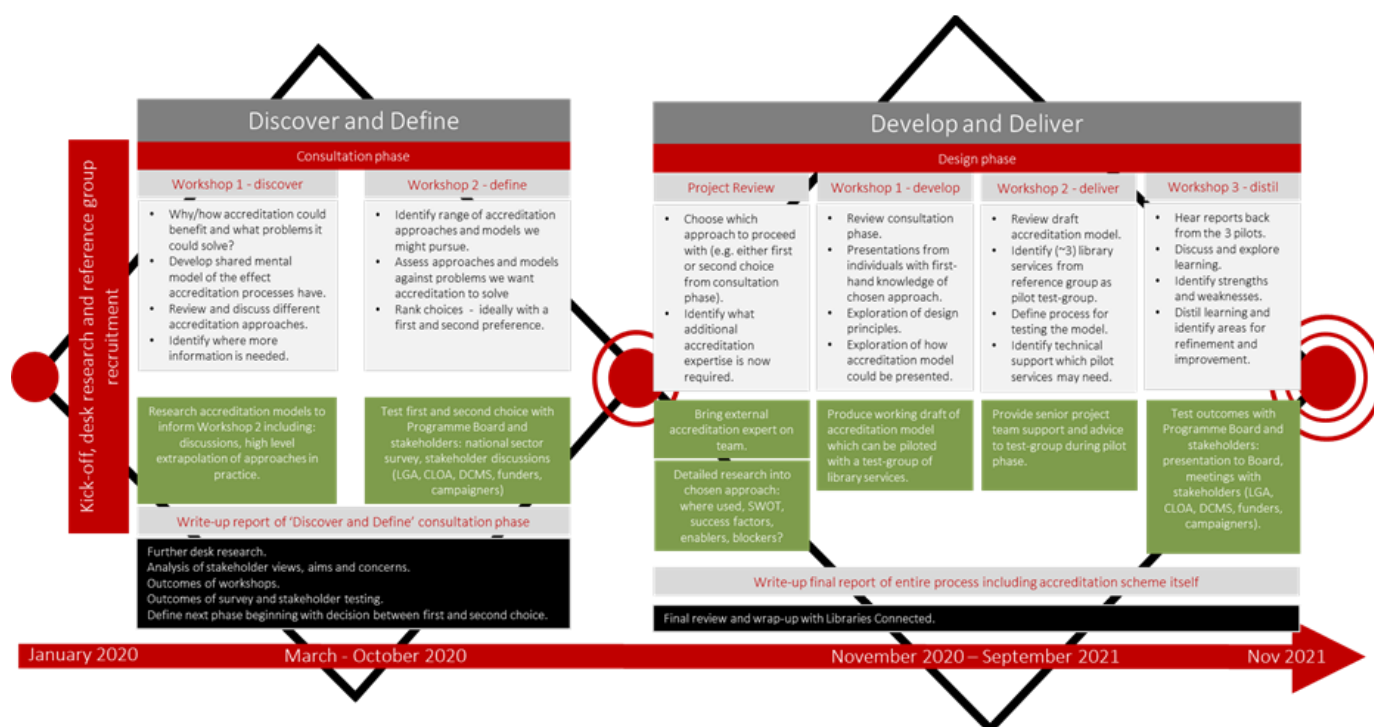
We published an *interim report* following the scoping phase of the project in November 2020. This is available online and details the scoping process that was undertaken and the findings that were made which underpin the design element of the project.



2. Methodology

A highly collaborative two-stage approach

The Design Council's double diamond process has provided the over-arching methodological framework for our approach. The two-stage double diamond framework met the desire from Libraries Connected for distinct 'consult' and 'design' stages. The double diamond is an inherently co-productive process, focused on end-users, and on the question: What problem are we trying to solve? It also ensures progression from diagnosis and exploring options (in the first diamond), to designing solutions and testing them in practice (in the second diamond).



Our approach

The following factors underpinned our approach to the project:

1. Reference group

Our approach was built around working collaboratively with a reference group made up of individuals from library services including heads of service and public-facing managers. Attendees for reference group meetings were drawn from a group of 20 individuals. This group has been central to the exploration of options and choices over the design of the scheme.

2. Real-life pilot process

The most ambitious part of the process was the real-life testing of a prototype scheme with three self-selected pilot services in the 'second diamond' phase. This required a significant input of time from the pilots themselves, but ensured we had a process which had been tested in the real-world not just designed on paper.

3. Engagement with sector stakeholders

Wider engagement, both with depth and with breadth, has been central to our process. The Project Board played an important role in this engagement, both steering the project and providing detailed input on the shape of the emerging scheme. We have also consulted at multiple points in the process with DCMS, LGA, CLOA, funders and library campaigners.

4. National survey

The national survey at the start of the process (the results of which are in our interim report) provided breadth of evidence about the appetite and expectations of the scheme among those who work in libraries.

5. Expert input

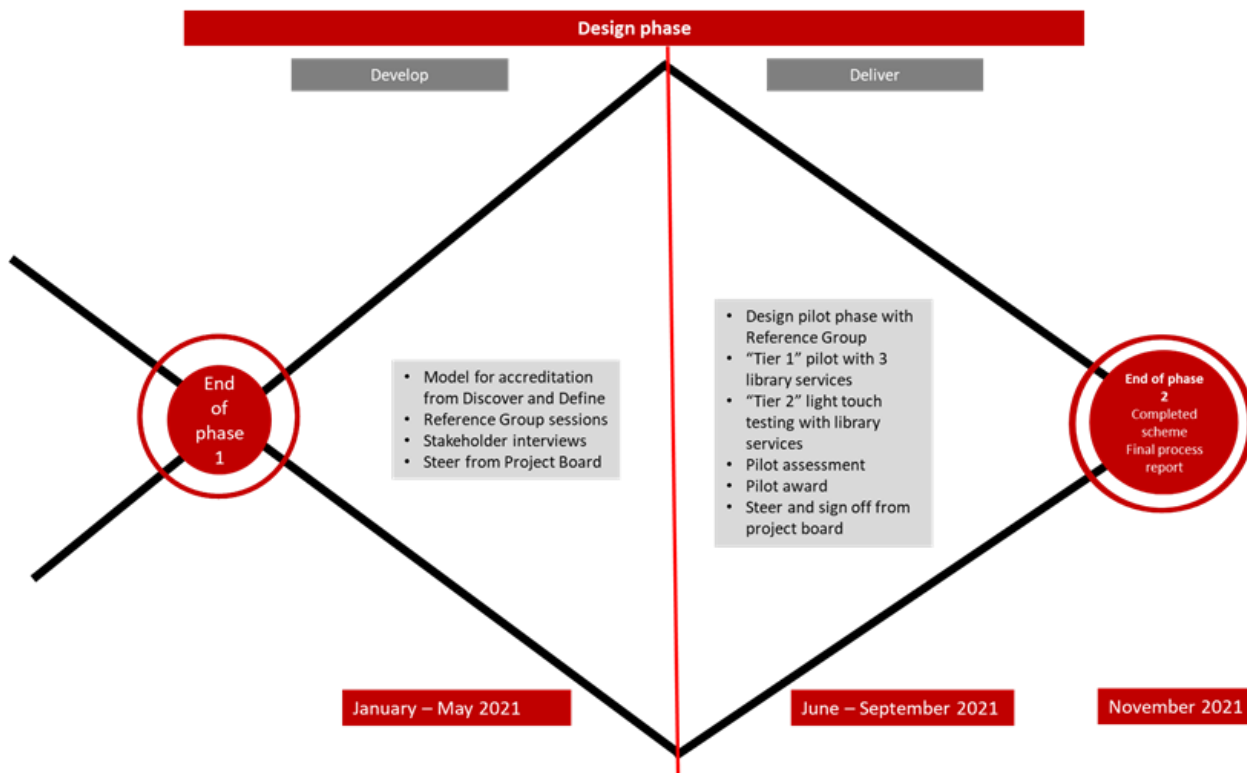
We originally envisaged securing input from an 'accreditation expert' to develop the scheme. The approach we ultimately took brought in expertise in more targeted ways:

- We secured input from two experts (working alongside two local authority Elected Members) with experience of similar processes to take the role of 'external challenge assessors' in the pilot testing
- We secured input from Arts Council England staff with direct experience of running the museums accreditation scheme, to undertake the 'mock' assessment of the materials submitted by the pilots.

Methodology for the 'second diamond'

Our interim report focused on the first of the two 'diamonds' in the double diamond process. The second diamond in the process, Develop and Deliver, seeks to design a solution to the problem or problems identified in the first diamond. During the Develop phase in Spring 2021 we co-designed a series of iterations of the accreditation scheme over two workshops with a reference group of library practitioners, and with regular input from the project board. We then undertook real-life testing of the draft scheme (the Deliver phase) with three self-selected pilot library services over summer 2021.

The following paragraphs summarise our methodology for the second diamond; Develop and Deliver.



Develop phase

We began the design of the accreditation scheme by applying five core principles which had been developed in the earlier scoping phase:

- A scheme with a self-assessment, validated through a peer check and challenge process taking into account the local context and reality of the service
- Using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative measures
- Based on self-assessment and peer check and challenge a tier of accreditation is awarded (Gold, Silver, Bronze) or if accreditation is not awarded then the library is classified as 'working towards' accreditation
- Library service given an improvement plan and support to improve or maintain their accreditation level
- Involvement from key sector stakeholders, including Heads of Service and other library staff, as well as individuals from outside the library sector.

Detailed research into accreditation approach

We undertook a detailed review into a number of existing accreditation-type schemes to gather detailed insights into how each scheme works which could inform the new scheme. We reviewed the following models:

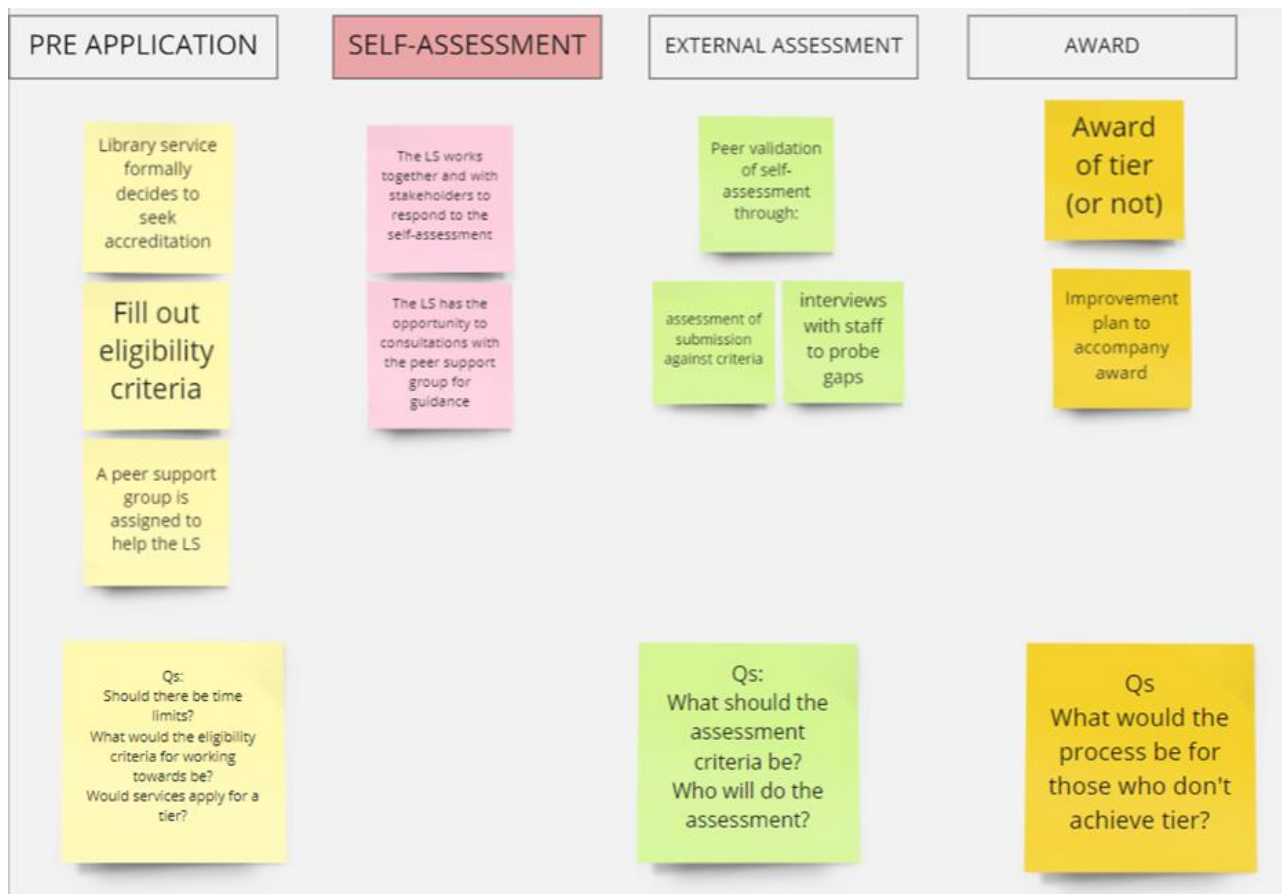
- Welsh Public Library Standards;
- Northern Ireland Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries: Public Library Standards
- Scotland's How Good Is Our Public Library Service;
- ACE UK Museum Accreditation;
- Archive Service Accreditation;
- Quest Leisure and Sport Accreditation.

Co-design with reference group

We engaged with our reference group holding two online workshops during the develop stage. We took the existing accreditation-type models, the processes they used and the self-assessment they had developed to the group to understand what might work well, or not so well, in the context of English public libraries.

We began to develop a core process sketch which outlined a number of stages and a set of activities within each stage. We also started to log some of the outstanding questions that need to be addressed, around time limits, eligibility criteria etc. A Miro online whiteboard from that discussion can be seen below.





This discussion provided us with the outline of a set of self-assessment question categories which we used as a framework to work up further. These included people (staff, volunteers, customers), place (communities, accessibility), delivering local priorities, leadership and governance, use of resources (people, stock, finances), and equalities and inclusion.

For each heading we discussed what type of question we might want to ask library services to provide evidence for. Below is another Miro online whiteboard showing more detailed development of self-assessment categories and questions.





Type of evidence was another topic of discussion which focused on needing to be as efficient as possible, to allow for different types of information being available in different services, not being overly prescriptive, and making sure that there is a good balance between collecting stories and qualitative data and quantitative data.

The reference group also discussed how to determine the overall accreditation outcome for a library service. Using our findings from the scoping stage and considering scoring processes from other accreditation schemes, we began to design a scheme which would have more than just 'pass/fail' outcomes and would have different levels of 'pass' e.g. 'basic accreditation' and a higher level for those achieving high impact. We considered questions such as:

- How do we aggregate scores for specific questions into an overall accreditation result?
- What sort of evidence would be required to reach accredited or high impact?
- How can we ensure that we develop an assessment process which is clear and transparent?

Following the co-design reference groups, we undertook detailed desk work to take all of the ideas from the reference group and incorporate these into our first full version of an accreditation scheme. This process included meeting with the project board, who provided knowledge, expertise and challenge, and consulting with stakeholders such as ACE, DCMS and the LGA.

From these discussions it became clear that there was appetite within Arts Council England to become the organisation which would own the eventual accreditation scheme, subject to National Council agreement and resource, making it more important from that point onwards for them to be involved closely in the design and testing of the scheme.



Deliver phase

The deliver phase ran from May until September 2021. The aim of this stage was to carry out a live test of the draft scheme, in particular the self-assessment questions and the check and challenge process, in order to understand what worked, what didn't work and what changes needed to be made.

In consultation with our reference group, we designed a process to pilot the scheme:

- A two tier system for testing the self-assessment questions
- A mock desk review
- A mock external check and challenge with four assessors
- A mock award panel decision

Testing the self-assessment

We designed a two tier system for testing the self-assessment to ensure that we captured both depth of feedback from the tier 1 library services and breadth of feedback from the tier 2 library services.

Tier 1 testing

Tier 1 was real life piloting of the scheme with a group of 'guinea pig' library services who would go through a process close to our intended accreditation process. We set two research questions for the Tier 1 testing:

- How do we ensure that the pilot is indicative of a full accreditation scheme?
- How will we know that this is a successful pilot?

The reference group helped to co-design a tier one process of real life testing with three library services. The three services needed to cover a range of locations, urban and rural settings, range of service size and a range of funding. Library services could apply to be our guinea pigs, and we received eight applications. The three services chosen were: Suffolk, Reading and Northamptonshire Libraries. The testing process ran for a month and involved:

- A kick off meeting to introduce the pilot library services to the project and ensure they understood the aims and process of the pilot.
- Each library service providing evidence for the questions in the draft self-assessment.
- A weekly check-in with each service lead and Shared Intelligence to help answer any queries or questions on the self-assessment process.
- A wider session with staff involved in the process

Below is another Miro online whiteboard showing a summary of the discussion around designing the pilot process.



QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE PILOT PROCESS



Completion of the self-assessment

Each library service was able to decide for themselves how to present their self-assessment responses. This was to ensure a process that was flexible enough for each service to work with.

Desk review of evidence submitted

The initial desk-review of the self-assessment submissions was undertaken by an officer from Arts Council England with experience in the UK Museums accreditation scheme. This was the most in-depth analysis of the evidence provided by each library service in the whole assessment process and provided the baseline scores of the service to be investigated in the check and challenge.

A check and challenge process with four external assessors

External check and challenge was designed to provide independent validation of each self-assessment. We recruited four independent assessors, all of whom had previous experience in reviewing cultural activities or peer review, including two experts in cultural sector accreditation and two assessors who are elected Members with experience of Peer Challenge.

We designed a virtual half-day session with each library service, modelled on peer-review type processes. We requested that the external assessors were able to speak with Heads of Service, Councillors, and frontline staff. The assessors met in advance to prepare for the session which involved reviewing the desk assessment and agreeing issues to focus on in the half-day session. Each session involved three assessors.

A summary report was completed for each library service following the check and challenge. This included a recommended score, rationale for scoring and suggested areas for improvement. This report was then submitted to the mock accreditation panel.

Mock accreditation panel

The aim of the panel meeting was to decide the accreditation outcome for each library service along with the key areas of improvement.

The existing Project Board took the role of accreditation panel. The external assessors also attended and presented a report for each library service and answered questions from the panel. The panel then debated what they had heard and decided on the accreditation outcome for each library service.

Accreditation report

Following the panel meeting and the discussions undertaken about each library service, a report was drafted for each participating library service with result, rationale, and recommendations for improvement and support.

Tier 2 testing

This tier of testing was open to all library services who were interested in helping by undertaking a light-touch testing of the draft self-assessment. Interested services were invited to a kick-off meeting during which we explained what we wanted to ask of them.

Each library service involved in the Tier 2 testing was asked to read and review the draft self-assessment document. The intention was for them to provide feedback based on reading it, but not attempting to answer every question. We created a survey to capture responses on whether they felt these questions could be answered and, having seen the scheme, they would be likely to apply for accreditation.

Ten library services helped us by undertaking the Tier 2 testing. Alongside library services, Tier 2 testing of the self-assessment document was also undertaken by members of The Library Campaign, the national group who support and advocate for library friends and user groups.

3. Findings from the Deliver stage

What worked well

Feedback from those involved in testing suggested that it aligned with the intended purpose of accreditation, that of being an improvement tool. Two thirds of Tier 2 library services either agreed or strongly agreed that the self-assessment would help a library service to develop and improve. This was evidenced by Tier 1 library services, who reported that the process of doing the self-assessment, and giving it the time it required, was a useful exercise in itself as it provided the services with the space and time to reflect on their service.

The structure of the questioning within the self-assessment and the flexibility around format of response meant that library services could focus on particular features of that library service, and go into the required amount of depth. This meant that it was quite easily adapted to the different library services we had piloting it.



The process of completing the self-assessment helped library services to think constructively about the evidence that they collect, and where there were any gaps in their knowledge or stakeholders they had not developed a relationship with. This led to one of the Tier 1 library services to restart conversations with customers which has been paused.

What worked less well

Library services highlighted a number of areas that didn't work so well in the self-assessment. These relate to the overall process of accreditation, the design of the self-assessment, and specific topic areas in the self-assessment.

In terms of the overall process, the main area that was criticised was the lack of transparency in the documentation about scoring criteria. It became clear that library services found it very hard to answer the self-assessment without knowing the criteria used to judge their answers. This would help the services understand the level at which the bar was set for each question and therefore what sort of evidence would be required.

In relation to the format for responding to the self-assessment, while flexibility was seen as having some benefits, it also made it hard for them to judge how much or how little to include. On balance those who took part in the testing wanted more prescription about how to answer each question in order to reduce the amount of time spent on completing the self-assessment. More generally there was a substantial amount of duplication in the draft self-assessment due to it being a draft scheme which needed more refinement, which increased the time spent on completing the self-assessment.

The final element where clearer instructions were clearly needed related to the suggested evidence and data source list. Lack of clarity in the pilot process led to the pilot library services tending to throw everything in, in the hope that some might be what was required.

Library services also fed back on specific topics and question that they recommended changing. In general, both the library services and the external assessors wanted headline context about the library service; size, type of community they serve, and budget. Library services also thought it would be useful to be asked in the self-assessment what they expected to score.

Library services also asked for more focus on customer experience in the self-assessment questions, and more references to the Universal Library Offers.

Testing the self-assessment

We asked library services involved in the Tier 2 testing whether they would apply for accreditation after reviewing the draft self-assessment. Four out of nine said they would definitely apply, two said they would not, and three were neutral at this stage. We also found that five out of nine library services would be comfortable having their service's accreditation decided on the basis of the self-assessment questions. This suggests there is already appetite among a significant proportion of library services to apply for accreditation. It is also worth noting that in the original survey in spring 2020, 33/35 heads of library services who responded supported idea of accreditation in principle.



Testing the desk review

A colleague from ACE undertook the significant task of carrying out a desk review of the self-assessment submissions from the three pilots. They reviewed all of the evidence submitted by each library service and populated a framework which summarised the quality of evidence for each question, gave a suggested scoring for each question, a rationale for each score, and suggestions of areas to probe further during the external check and challenge.

What worked well

We found that the structure devised for documenting the results of the in-depth desk review of self-assessment evidence provided a good structure for the subsequent steps in the process (external assessment, and accreditation panel discussion) and also provided good overall transparency.

What worked less well

Given the flexibility of approach to completing the self-assessments, we found that the variability in the volume and quality of evidence submitted presented challenges for the assessment process, especially lack of consistency between submissions.

The fact we had not set clear assessment criteria meant that scoring in the Tier 1 pilot was very subjective. This is something which, as mentioned, the library services found difficult, but it made it difficult for assessment also. We realised that it would be an even bigger problem if there were multiple people undertaking the desk review.

Testing the external assessment 'check and challenge'

The external check and challenge sessions used the desk review results to identify areas to probe, meaning that each check and challenge focused on issues particular to each applicant.

What worked well

The overall check and challenge process worked very well. The fact that we undertook the check and challenge sessions online meant that the assessors were able to engage with a lot of people whilst requiring only limited resources and causing limited disruption. Having three assessors for each assessment meant that discussions were kept fresh, engaging and with good momentum throughout.

Similarly, involving assessors with libraries knowledge and also wider cultural sector knowledge was a successful approach. It meant that check and challenge had a broad range and depth of knowledge and expertise.

What worked less well

Owing to the fact that this was a pilot, with less time than the 'real' version, meant that the perspectives of those involved in the check and challenge were not as broad as they might be in a full scheme (e.g. in a full scheme there might be different check and challenge assessors for a large rural county, compared to a small urban unitary council). Also, pilot library services found it hard in the time available to secure attendance from stakeholders and politicians, which meant that two of the three check and challenge meetings were essentially the same individuals who had filled in the self-assessment.



Testing the mock accreditation panel and reporting

We undertook a mock accreditation panel with the project board taking the role of the panel. We presented the combined results of the self-assessment desk review and the check and challenge results, along with a suggested accreditation outcome based on the evidence.

What worked well

In the de-brief with the project board there was strong support for the mock panel process. Furthermore, the project board and others involved felt the process as a whole was an effective foundation for an improvement-focused exercise.

In terms of the mock panel process, it was clear that with knowledge and experience brought by the external assessors through check and challenge, combined with the initial detailed desk review of the self-assessment, a credible process had been developed and the award panel had confidence in the information presented to them, and therefore their decision-making.

What worked less well

Similar to previous phases of the pilot, it was clear that pre-stated assessment criteria are essential in order to create a process that is fair and transparent. Although the panel trusted the information presented to them, they also recognised that they were only seeing a fraction of what had been submitted, and were only hearing a summary of the desk review and check and challenge process.

The panel agreed that more context about the library service (size, budget, type of community served, etc.) would be useful and would help ensure library services are assessed in the context of the resources that are present for them.

One area where the mock panel/project board did want to see a specific change to the scheme was in the description of the levels of accreditation; in particular they wanted an alternative to the term 'basic accreditation'.

4. Post-pilot refinement

A number of changes have been made to the scheme in light of the learning from the pilot phase. We changed the terms used to describe the three possible accreditation outcomes to:

- Working towards accreditation
- Achieved accreditation
- Achieved accreditation – high impact.

Other changes were made to the self-assessment questions to provide greater transparency around criteria and levels of accreditation, to reduce the variability in the volume and quality of evidence submitted, and to reduce subjective judgements.

We also made changes to the assessment process to address concerns raised about clarity of roles, and the basic arithmetic and logic of the scoring mechanism.

The working assumption has been that scheme ownership would be taken on by Arts Council England, subject to agreement and resource available, but further refinement was made to the governance assumptions to fit more concretely with Arts Council structures and ways of working.



5. Conclusion and next steps

Over the past two years this highly engaged and patient process to develop and test an accreditation scheme as outlined above has tapped into the knowledge and insight of a large number of library professionals and wider stakeholders, including those representing library user groups and library friends. It has also built on existing schemes in public libraries and other related fields.

This work has resulted in a workable and viable improvement-focused accreditation scheme that has been shown to work in real life testing, but also provides a foundation for future evolution. In the course of developing the scheme, Arts Council England have played an integral role in direction-setting and helping with the practical testing, and are now investigating options and seeking agreement to take on the scheme and lead it to launch.

The revised and refined accreditation scheme will be published alongside this document and from that point forward it will be up to the sponsoring organisation to move the scheme towards a launch with the first cohort of applicants, who are likely to come from those who have shown interest in the course of this work.

Next steps

While the revised drafting of the accreditation scheme has enabled many issues to be addressed, there remain some various outstanding questions and issues that will need attention in advance of the accreditation scheme being launched. These include:

- Further testing of the scheme with local authority chief executives and councillors to ensure this process has political buy in
- Further work to describe and communicate the benefits of accreditation
- Fine-tuning of governance including the appointment of an accreditation panel
- Decisions about how often the award would need to be revalidated, which are linked to decisions about how many accreditations can be handled each year
- The development guidance on the time commitment required for a library service to complete the process
- Design of support for those services that do not meet the accreditation standard
- Discussion with Share the Vision who we understand are working towards a complementary accreditation scheme (the libraries Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise), and who hope to align their scheme with this one post-launch.



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