



The Development of Accreditation – Gauging the museum sector's response

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A report to the MLA, produced by
Hopkins Van Mil: Creating Connections

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Preface

Over the last 21 years the Museum Accreditation scheme has been one of the most valued initiatives in the museum sector. The standard is a crucial tool in the process of helping museums become as effective as possible in providing services to individuals and communities.

We want to ensure that Accreditation is working hard to support all museums that want to improve and aspire to excellence. MLA is currently examining its wider applicability to support colleagues working to improve archives and libraries.

Accreditation is enshrined as an action in *Leading Museums*, the MLA's plan for the sector, where we say: *"MLA is reviewing and will develop its Accreditation standards scheme. The objective is to reduce bureaucracy and to extend its scope to include a consumer view."*

"Accreditation remains a key driver for measuring and encouraging best practice for museum governance, entrepreneurship, collections interpretation, management and sustainability."

Accreditation is there for every museum, from the smallest to the largest. It works across national boundaries and is truly UK wide. The whole sector has a stake in its current and future success. For this reason it was essential that MLA consulted widely.

This document outlines what MLA has been told about Accreditation and its future direction. The views of museum colleagues are very important to us and will inform the development of Accreditation.

We thank everybody for taking part.



Hedley Swain
Director Programme Delivery, MLA

Executive Summary

In June 2009 Hopkins Van Mil: Creating Connections was commissioned by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) to design and deliver a series of consultation events to gain an understanding of the museum sector's response to proposals for improving and developing the Accreditation Scheme.

The objectives of this programme of work were to:

- Provide MLA with a clear picture of the levels of support for the development of Accreditation;
- Assess the levels of resistance to the proposed changes;
- Encourage discussion to gain insight on views about developing requirements and refining the processes for Accreditation.

The outcomes of the programme are expected to be a:

- Strengthened Accreditation scheme enabling MLA to effectively raise standards in the museum sector in line with the requirements of today's museum users;
- Developed Accreditation scheme that has the support of the museum sector and its stakeholders.

As a result of this consultation work, which also included the re-design and analysis of an online survey completed by organisations and individuals within the museums sector, Hopkins Van Mil has made a number of recommendations to MLA. They cover the following themes:

- Appropriateness of the scheme depending on the size, collection and governance structure of the museum concerned;
- Improvement of the application process, review system, and the guidance which supports it;
- Introduction of development areas as scaleable and flexible options;
- Harmonisation with existing standards used by the sector including those for collections management, human resources, visitor services and education;
- Improvement of the visitor experience requirement;
- Development of the collections management requirement to include digital collections;
- Articulating the benefits of the scheme to National Museums;
- Reconnecting Accreditation with stakeholders, particularly funders, as a recognition for those museums which have achieved Accredited status;
- Putting more resources into promotion once MLA has improved the current Standard, making it crystal clear to the sector and beyond what it is that Accreditation stands for;
- Continue to consult the sector as the scheme improves and develops to ensure that there are no gaps between the expectations raised through this consultation process and what the improved scheme delivers when it is launched;
- Ensure that links are made across all current research being carried out into the use and value of the scheme and its future development.

Hopkins Van Mil's recommendations were drawn directly from our research findings and reflect the views of those who attended the consultation events and responded to the online survey. The main findings are discussed in detail in Section 1 (p9) of this

report. They cover the areas of Accreditation museums find most useful; areas in need of improvement; and development opportunities

In areas most useful, the value of Accreditation as a tool for coherent working on policies and plans for museums was stressed. It ensures that museums understand their responsibilities and fill gaps in knowledge and practice. Accreditation supports larger museums and those with employees to work across departments and with their governance structures to ensure the museum has the appropriate management structures in place. There was also recognition, particularly in the online survey, of Accreditation as a potential route to funding, and for public recognition.

In terms of improvement MLA was asked to focus on improving the quality of both the application process and the Standard itself. Hopkins Van Mil were asked to record the need for MLA to ensure that the application process uses appropriate online and hard copy tools to ease the burden on hard-pressed volunteers and museum staff; whilst the Standard is clear about using up-to-date and existing materials, signposts museums to appropriate guidance and advice and ensures that it remains about *minimum* standards.

Participants in the consultation process asked MLA to be very careful about developing the scheme any further without having got the basics right first. They were wary about adding more things for applicants to do and asked for MLA to ensure that monitoring was right first.

Hopkins Van Mil would like to thank all the museum staff and volunteers who gave up their time to take part in an event or complete an online survey form. This report is necessarily a summary of the views expressed and should therefore be read in conjunction with the appendices, which provide full transcripts of the event discussions as well as the responses from the survey.

Recommendations

Accreditation is regarded by the museum community as a significant achievement in terms of the development of a sector standard as such. Most museums are supportive of the scheme and are keen for it to be successful in the future.

The online survey and consultation events demonstrated clearly that there is unanimous support for improvement of the current Standard. MLA's proposal to decrease bureaucracy was embraced by all. MLA will need to tread carefully though, regarding the development areas identified by MLA's stakeholders in the scoping phase of the project. There is consensus in the sector that Accreditation should remain a minimum standard with opportunity for improvement for those museums aspiring to do so.

To achieve a strengthened Accreditation scheme enabling MLA to effectively raise standards in the museum sector in line with the requirements of today's museum users, we recommend the following.

1. One size does not fit all

Every type and size of museum involved in the consultation process emphasised that MLA needs to tailor the application, assessment and review process as well as development proposals according to the context in which museums operate. MLA must recognise that the museum sector is extremely diverse and the scheme needs to reflect this. National Museums, Local Authority Museums, University Museums and Independent Museums require tailored solutions to make the Standard more efficient and effective for them. Proportionality and appropriateness are key to retain and increase support of the museum sector for the development of Accreditation. (See Main findings, 2.1)

2. Simplify and improve, don't develop new areas (yet)

To get support for development of new requirements, MLA will need to build more credibility by improving the current standard, taking on board the views of the sector and ensuring the process is simple and effective. MLA must ensure that the review process is rigorous and appropriate supporting guidance is available online and through new and existing advice networks. The processes needs to change before the bar is raised. Only then will there be scope to develop a scaleable and flexible improvement tool including other areas of work which is acceptable to the entire sector. (See Main findings, 2 and 3)

3. Introduce development areas as options

When the processes are improved new development areas should be introduced as scaleable options enabling museums to select those development areas appropriate to their museum. This would encourage museums to aim for areas of improvement whilst at the same time ensuring their autonomy. To further increase standards in the sector Accreditation could identify areas of excellence and publish these as case studies. (See Main findings, 3)

4. Improve the visitor experience requirement

Combining the user services and visitor experience requirement is generally seen as a good way to assess a museum's achievements more efficiently. To bring the Standard in line with the requirements of today's visitors MLA should require museums to sign up to other quality assurance schemes such as VAQAS rather than develop an extended Visitor Experience requirement within Accreditation. (See Main findings 3.2)

5. Further develop collections management section

An improved Accreditation Standard can't ignore the vast amount of developments in terms of digitisation. The new Standard should recognise the need to look after digital collections (See Main findings, 3.4)

6. Harmonisation with other standards

Accreditation should make reference where appropriate to existing standards to avoid duplication of effort for museums. MLA needs to identify which standards are relevant to museums and harmonise the application and review process accordingly, ensuring that recognition is given where appropriate standards have already been met. Similarly MLA needs to ensure that Accreditation is better harmonised with other initiatives affecting the sector, such as the Museum Association's Effective Collections Programme and Collections Trust's PAS: 197, 2009. (See Main findings, 2.1)

7. Increased access to guidance and support

Hopkins Van Mil recommends that MLA develops a UK-wide guidance and support structure for Accreditation, comprising access to an evenly distributed face-to-face advisory service, effective sign posting to (on line) resources, and peer support from larger museum services including hub museums. (See Main findings, 2.3)

8. Articulate benefits to National Museums

To ensure continued participation of National Museums in the scheme MLA needs to articulate more clearly how the scheme benefits them, initially by scoping this out with joined up thinking between sponsoring bodies, eg DCMS and MLA. There is opportunity to build on recognition of the Nationals that collections management is a very useful area of Accreditation. (See Main findings, 3)

9. Reconnect Accreditation with stakeholders

As the route to funding is seen as the main benefit of Accreditation, MLA needs to ensure the scheme reconnects with stakeholders, especially funding bodies such as HLF. The current scheme demonstrates no real incentive for those wavering due to the administrative effort required by fulfilling the requirements of the scheme. (See Main findings, 1.1)

10. Promote Accreditation as a professional and public facing kite mark

The sector unanimously agreed that the Accreditation brand is not very strong. The majority of museums say that Accreditation should be both a professionally recognised award and a public facing kite mark. Once MLA has improved the current Standard it is timely to re-brand Accreditation as a UK-wide scheme. Before doing so MLA will have to be absolutely clear what the *core idea* of Accreditation is so that this can be articulated to the profession and the public. The letters 'MLA' should no longer figure in the logo; instead a recognisable icon should be sourced. (See Main findings, 4.2)

11. Continue consultation process

Through this consultation process expectations have been raised that MLA will listen to the museums views as expressed in this report and appendices. Hopkins Van Mil recommends that this constructive dialogue is maintained and that as the Standard is tightened, simplified and guidance better signposted MLA pilots its approach with the sector to ensure that there is a match between what they are now expecting and what MLA presents at the MA Conference in October 2010.

12. Cross reference research and draw conclusions

Hopkins Van Mil's study was conducted at the same time as the Impact Analysis undertaken by Jura Consultants. Hopkins Van Mil urges MLA to look at the commonalities and differences between these two reports and consider the implications of the recommendations in order to make effective use of the time and effort the sector has put into their contributions to the future development of the scheme. As the online survey comprised more research areas than the consultation events it is of equal importance to consider the full analysis in MLA's decision making process.

Main Findings

The findings described in this report are taken from the consultation activities described above. Where possible we have used the words of participants to explain the issue raised and have grouped them following the structure of the discussion guide for the consultation events (see Appendix 2). Across the 459 people who engaged in all activities during June and July we have gained a fascinating insight into the range of views on the development of Accreditation and the common ground. These have been summarised as 1.1 Benefits of Accreditation; 1.2 Areas in need of improvement; 1.3 Development opportunities; and 1.4 Branding. People attending the consultation were all asked to write down what their highest hopes are for the scheme. These are incorporated where appropriate under the above headings and given in full in the transcript of the events in Appendix 4.

1. Benefits of Accreditation

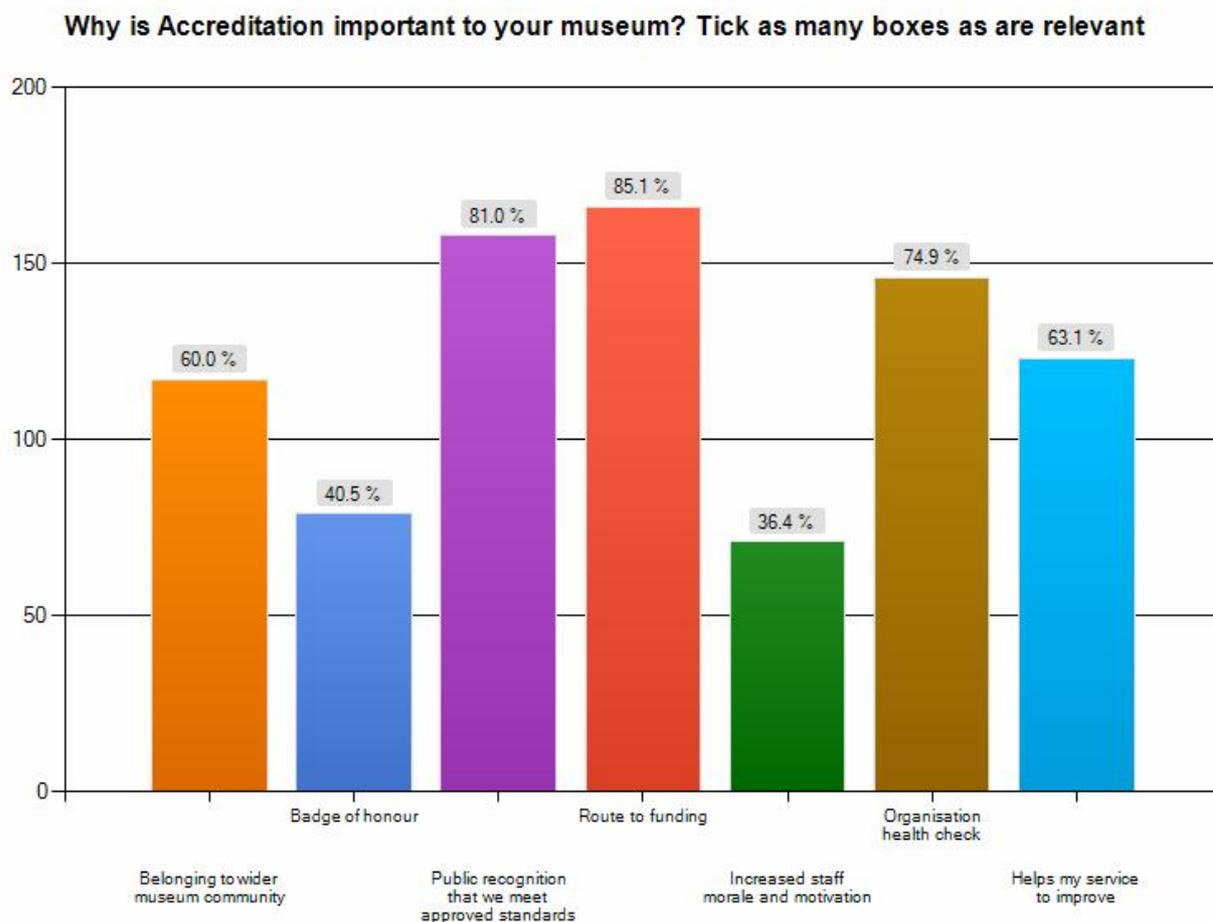


Fig 2. Benefits of Accreditation

In the online survey respondents were asked to tick the boxes reflecting why Accreditation is important to their museum. For the majority of respondents 'route to funding' (85%) and 'public recognition' (81%) represented the main benefits of Accreditation, closely followed by 'organisation health check' (75%). When broken down into museum type we see a similar pattern: for National Museums the route to

funding was seen as important by 85% of respondents, with belonging to wider museum community, public recognition and organisation health check all being given the next highest priority at 71%. For Local Authority museums public recognition was put first (88%); closely followed by route to funding and organisation health check which 85% of respondents considered an important benefit. 100% of university museum respondents considered route to funding a benefit and 60% saw public recognition as important. In the consultation events 'public recognition' was identified as an important issue when discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the Accreditation brand, a theme taken up again in section 4 of this report. See Appendix 3b for charts by museum type.

There are some differences between the survey results and the findings in the face-to-face events. These too are discussed in subsequent sections.

1.1 Route to funding

For 85.1% of the respondents to the online survey Accreditation's most important benefit is that it levers funding. A MDO responding to the survey said:

'For small museums struggling to see the advantages of the scheme, the route to funding is the only real incentive for them'.

This chimes with discussions at the consultation events.

'Local Authorities understand what Accreditation is', said one museum, 'and therefore continue to fund'.

The process also acts as a stick for governing bodies as they know they need to comply with requirements to guarantee continued funding.

National Museums mentioned access to funding from HLF and DCMS/ Wolfson:

'They know you've hit a certain level if you've been accredited'.

Most museums however, have not accessed funding as a result of Accreditation other than MLA funding through PRISM, the MLA/V&A Purchase Fund, and the opportunity to engage with the Acceptance in Lieu scheme, or guidance and support through Renaissance funding.

1.2 The Accreditation process

'Preparing for Accreditation required us to look at nationally agreed benchmarks of good practice in order to ensure we could meet the required standard. We found this an extremely valuable exercise in that it raised our aspirations and gave us something to aim for. It helped us identify and celebrate those things we were already doing well, and highlighted aspects that we needed to attend to. It is unlikely that we would

have brought this level of focus to our work without the impetus of Accreditation'.

This quote by the director of an independent museum illustrates well how most participants feel about the value of the process of working towards Accreditation. Although we often heard that Accreditation isn't a light undertaking, the benefits seem to outweigh the effort of getting the museum's house in order and a sense of achievement amongst staff and volunteers.

People appreciate that Accreditation focuses on core museum areas of work, flags up responsibilities, lays down the rules of museum management, and offers templates for essential policies. As one museum said:

'It is a vertical learning curve in how to run a proper museum'.

It allows a museum to identify gaps in structure and procedures and measure its performance against standards of good practice by networking with other museums.

Although smaller independent museums emphasised that proportionality and appropriateness must be key in the assessment process, others appreciate that the process is rigorous and non negotiable, as the carrot and stick mechanism is leading to raised standards.

In general Accreditation seems to have a greater impact on smaller museums, particularly volunteer run museums. For larger museums though, Accreditation is one of the few mechanisms offering an external perspective on their museum work, which is valuable too. A group of Museum Development Officers mentioned that the application deadlines imposed by Accreditation are key to making museums actively review their activity and identify areas for action and improvement.

A positive aspect of going through the Accreditation process is that it is engaging the whole organisation. Having a common purpose and a raised awareness of what is involved in running a museum generally boosts staff and volunteer morale. It helps volunteers feel that they belong to a profession. Participants at the Taunton event said:

'It reduces fear and builds confidence'.

Some museums mentioned that Accreditation helped to convince colleagues that the job had to be done. In general putting policies and plans in writing and agreeing on procedures seems to enhance internal communications. Again, this applies more to smaller museums than larger museums who reported having had difficulty getting buy-in to the process from all the levels needed.

A number of National Museums though, mentioned that Accreditation had encouraged the organisation to set up more project teams, moving away from silo working towards inter-departmental and over-arching policies and procedures for example regarding back logs in documentation. It was '*a spur for presenting and sharing what had been done in these areas*'.

1.3 Governance and museum management

'Accreditation has prompted some museums to really think about their current management structures and implement changes such as revise their constitutions, set up proper agreements and management bodies.'

This comment was made by Museum Development Officers in the South East of England. It summarises effectively what was expressed at the consultation events. For many museums Accreditation has been an opportunity to sort governance arrangements. One group said:

'Our governing body has to accept the parameters of Accreditation to continue receiving funding'.

The policy requirements are useful as they ensure that governing bodies authorise the documents and acknowledge their role. Museums report that by requiring governors to sign off the application and key supporting documents, the profile of the service is enhanced. A number of Local Authority Museums mentioned that as a result of Accreditation, the Council was now taking ownership of the museum. Security of tenure and legal protection for collections were mentioned as an important reassurance for depositors and investors.

An important benefit of Accreditation is that it helps museums identify gaps in their procedures, put in place processes and structures, and review outdated policies and plans. The organisational health check is rated as one of the main benefits of Accreditation.

Forward planning is considered to be the basis of further improvement in the museum. It is generally seen as a useful exercise to establish the status quo and plan for the next year with an emphasis on improvement *'without veering off down an unethical cul-de-sac'* (York participant). For some museums Accreditation was an important impetus in the development of a very first Forward Plan:

'We've been around for 25 years and we had never done one before!'

A National Museum said:

'We have lots of strategies and procedures but not so many policies. Accreditation made us look at this'.

Nationals also mentioned that Accreditation had enabled them to identify where work was required in order to bid for resources.

Museums appreciate that the forward planning process encourages ambition, having a mission and a vision identifying what the service is about. At the same time it ensures a focus on what is important or as someone put it:

'A Forward Plan balances agendas'.

The link to a financial plan is found to be useful too. A respondent to the online survey said:

'We used to be a bit vague about the budgets, partly because we had built up a reasonable reserve through the Friends. It was helpful to have to tighten that procedure'.

Another benefit of Accreditation is that management procedures in relation to staffing, employment and staff development are taken seriously.

'Accreditation encouraged professional development in our museum and became the basis for planning of staff training/ induction/ information sessions'.

MDOs in the North East reported that:

'Staff induction and training within small volunteer run museums has seen improvement as a result of Accreditation, with staff induction being formalised and offered more widely within organisations'.

And The National Trust made the following comment in the online survey:

'The main way that Museum Accreditation promotes staff morale and motivation is in the sense of belonging to a wider professional community, promoting CPD and qualifications that lead to career development'.

1.4 User services and visitor facilities

Accreditation puts emphasis on considering benefits of a museum's work for users. Many participants in the consultation events mentioned this as a useful exercise. It inspired discussions about outcomes expected and was seen as an excellent way to remind colleagues and volunteers about the importance of a visitor focus. A larger museum reported that its visitor development team had been taken more seriously since the museum had gained Accreditation status. A small independent museum said that Accreditation had been a positive stick:

'It gave us an idea what to do for our visitors and was a lever to open to the public on a regular basis, not by appointment only'.

1.5 Collections management

Collections management in all its aspects was identified as an extremely important part of Accreditation. It enabled museums, sometimes for the first time, to systematically work through backlogs in documentation, to put in place plans and procedures such as emergency plans and an acquisition and disposal policy. Museums mentioned the importance of having a clear statement on collections

management that is understood by all staff. Several museums said that the need to go through the process was tolerated and understood because of Accreditation and having the plans enabled managers to pin people down, ensuring that the work would be done. For most museums the collections management section in Accreditation is excellent for taking stock and developing a plan of action. For others it was a *'way to deal with the embarrassment of not being up to scratch in terms of documentation'*. A participant at one of the London events said:

'It had been the elephant in the room for a long time'.

National Museums feel that Collections Management is Accreditation's unique selling point:

'It's the only benchmark we have, which is probably the main benefit of Accreditation to a National Museum'.

Accreditation is a constant reminder of the importance of keeping documentation up to date and *'a great advocacy tool within the museum for this area of work'* reported the Birmingham group. It is a push for continued improvement in collection care which enables museums to put resources into the documentation process by getting buy-in from management and trustees. A participant in Cambridge summarised this as follows:

'Accreditation reminds people that collections are at the heart of what we do'.

A National Museum said that Accreditation *'helps to assert the importance of documentation if you don't have an engaged Director or Director of Collections'*.

Some mentioned that it is important that documentation plans and acquisition and disposal policies are not set in stone but living documents, which can be changed over time. MDOs in the North East said that:

'Accreditation has encouraged all museums to undertake risk assessments and put an emergency plan in place'.

This was confirmed on several occasions at the events. A London participant confessed that she had never written an emergency plan before and was glad that the museum was put under pressure to develop one as she had to deal with flooding shortly afterwards. *'It worked'*, she added contentedly. A York participant felt that Section 4.5 (Actions to minimise damage to collections) was particularly useful as it gave structure to risk assessment and led to improved understanding.

1.6 Access to guidance and support

All museums applying for Accreditation receive up to 1 year of support and guidance to ensure their museum operates in a way compatible with the requirements of the Standard. Until 2008 this support, training and advice was

managed in the regions by MLA Regional Agencies. Since January 2009 this has been managed / coordinated directly from MLA in Birmingham, using Renaissance funded Regional Advisors hosted at a hub in each English Region.

Museums overwhelmingly emphasised that the provision of pre-application advice through the Regional Accreditation Officer, Museum Development Officers (MDOs) and Curatorial Advisers is a considerable benefit. Some museums said they couldn't have achieved Accreditation without it. Others felt that they would have struggled to demonstrate that they had met the Standard without the existence of pre-application support. MDOs, Regional Accreditation Officers and Curatorial Advisers are all fundamental in raising the bar and in demonstrating how quality can be evidenced. In Wales and Scotland access to curatorial advice is even more important as there is no MDO structure. A participant in Wales said:

'Curatorial Advisers bring small independents into the fold'.

Museums also reported how Accreditation had encouraged them to look more proactively at how they could learn from peers. For some Accreditation had acted as a peg for partnership working.

1.7 Advocacy tool

Most museums see Accreditation as an important tool for internal and external advocacy. As a nationally recognised standard it is the bottom line for validation to external stakeholders. A participant in London said:

'Our stakeholders can't muck us around, Accreditation gives credibility'.

Local Authority museums report that Accreditation demonstrates to Councillors and senior politicians what running a museum is about. It educates them about museum management and the funding required to enable a museum to look after collections.

Accreditation also acts as a lever for partnership working as it is acknowledged that Accredited museums can demonstrate appropriate stewardship. A respondent to the online survey said:

'We get recognition from peers that we meet approved standards'.

Some museums reported that the Charity Commission had accepted or extended their charitable status because public benefit is evidenced through Accreditation.

Accreditation is an important confirmation that a small museum is doing the right thing, or in the words of a York participant:

'It is a pat on the back for smaller museums'.

National museums however, doubt if they need Accreditation to demonstrate that they meet standards. To some of them Accreditation seems a duplication of effort as they report on their work through their funding agreements with their sponsoring body and Annual Reviews.

Internally Accreditation is a lever to help to get the resources needed. External monitoring of the Accreditation status provides valuable advocacy to governing bodies. Accreditation is an important backup to communicate with trustees and gives cachet to the museum in general. A participant at the Wales event said:

'We take ourselves more seriously now'.

A Museum Development Officer reported that Accreditation is a way of helping to discriminate between museums who are 'serious' and those that are a little more than private hobbies and clubs, which is important when dealing with councillors who want to promote everything in their constituency.

2. Areas in need of improvement

At the consultation events participants were asked to identify 3 areas of Accreditation most in need of improvement. After discussion of the initial thoughts each participant was asked to prioritise the most important area for improvement. An overwhelming majority of the 'votes' went to the process itself, including application form, data collection, language use, links to other quality schemes, a focus on outcomes, assessment and monitoring, and the review process. A second area for improvement is the Forward Planning requirement. The third most important area of improvement is guidance and support, closely followed by Collections Management.

2.1 The Accreditation process

There is a general feeling in the sector that Accreditation is an enormous effort involving a lot of paperwork and bureaucracy. Smaller museums used the word '*insurmountable*' to describe the application process. Participants in the Oxfordshire Museum Council event asked the following to be noted:

'We are passionate about collections, that's why we run museums. We don't want Accreditation to kill that passion with bureaucracy'.

They said:

'Accreditation is very good if you have staff, but not if you are a volunteer run museum'.

Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) received similar responses in their consultation with the sector in Scotland:

'Accreditation presents the risk of diverting the goodwill and energy of the volunteers by burdening them with administration inappropriate to an organisation of their size and capacity'.

There is a lot of frustration about discrepancies between the standard, the hard copy application form, and the electronic application form with many comments about the online form not working. National Museums said that the current questionnaire undermines the scheme:

'It is really awkward to use – too restrictive. I couldn't put in the same level of explanation as I could in the paper form'.

Simplification of the process and avoidance of areas of repetition would be welcomed wholeheartedly across the sector. The following suggestions were made about data collection, language use, and the application procedure:

- Streamline data collection to minimise duplication / maximise use;
- Online form should remember text: 'You have to copy and past things in 6 times';

- Retain information from each round and send pre-filled forms to museums which they update with new information only;
- Be clear about which boxes are essential to meet the standard: *'At the moment it is smoke and mirrors, do they need the information because it's nice data or because its used for assessment?'*;
- Be clear about what you do with the data provided. *'What does it inform?'* and *'Do you advocate on our behalf?'* were questions raised by National Museums;
- Collect visitor numbers and other performance data and use data to draw out trends over time;
- Use clearer language and consider words carefully (e.g. 'should' instead of 'must'; 'may result' instead of 'will result');
- Include an overview page in the online application to show what the procedure is. Someone said: *'You get anxious when filling out the form. Will I be able to save it/ print it out when I'm halfway?'*;
- Always include 'other' with a free text box when giving options to encourage a true reflection of the situation;
- Dates in UK style (online form);
- Enable online submission of online application forms rather than requiring a printed version sent in the post.

Small museums appreciate that the application can be made in hard copy as well as online. They emphasise that many have no computer on site.

National Museums complained about the need to state the obvious. They emphasised that one size does not fit all:

'National museums don't need to be asked if they have a curator; it would be more appropriate to ask what type of curators and expertise they have'.

MDOs in the South East proposed making the assessment more transparent, i.e. by providing applicants and advisers with a check list or matrix showing the requirements according to the size and type of museum. This was underpinned by Museum Development Officers and Regional Accreditation Advisers across the country who acknowledged in a joint meeting that assessment is not a level playing field but a process appropriate to size and scope.

Museums would like to see more flexibility regarding existing documents and policies. MDOs in the South East said:

'If the standard is not individually tailored how do staff engage and learn what their organisation needs and doesn't need? How do they respect the system when it makes them carry out unnecessary pieces of work?'

A participant in the NMDC event said that MLA should assume that large museums comply with basic requirements, such as security measures, management arrangements, audited accounts, acquisition & disposal policy:

'We're Nationals!'

She proposed that MLA should audit National Museums, checking what policies, procedures and information are in place and advise what else needs doing. National Museums also said they need a lighter weight application process aligned with DCMS' funding requirements to avoid duplication of effort. A participant at the NMDC event formulated the following as her highest hope for the scheme:

'That there is demonstrable anticipation of issues and common understanding between DCMS and MLA. It is clear inefficiency to be answerable to 2 bosses'.

Another area that requires flexibility from MLA is acceptance of one application form for a multi site service. Local Authority based museum services and several National Museums develop corporate plans for all their sites but need to provide site specific forward plans in the current Accreditation process. One said:

'Duplication is mad. We had to do it for six sites!'

Distinguishing site specific data and shared data between a number of museums would increase the efficiency of the Accreditation process, and acknowledgment from MLA that multi site services are seen as one is an important political message. As one of the groups in York put it:

'It makes museums within a service inseparable'.

Some museums find that in the current process there is too much focus on inputs and activity based box-ticking instead of outcomes. They would like to see an outcome based process as a way to encourage thinking about demonstrating impact of work, particularly in forward planning and other policy areas. Increasingly museums need to demonstrate impact to parent bodies; Accreditation could help them in this process.

A substantial majority of museums represented at the events spoke about the need for Accreditation to accommodate proportionality issues, recognising that some areas are not achievable for smaller museums. It would help if guidance materials would include examples of policies, plans and governance arrangements for small, medium and large museums. The Standard starts at a fairly high level for small museums and is felt to seem unrealistic in the knowledge of the resources are available.

Museums are keen that Accreditation links into other relevant standards. There was mention of Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS), Investing in Volunteers, Investors in People, and Learning Outside the Classroom. In addition to this list National Museums mentioned the Human Tissue Authority and DCMS funding agreement requirements, and in Scotland standards for education. They said:

'This should enable us to skip various sections of the questionnaire and for there to be a better questionnaire flow'.

The sector would like MLA to take a central stand on what are useful standards for museums to comply with and recommend their use to museums applying for Accreditation. The process should allow for a simple tick box identifying an area of work covered by another standard and ensure that the work doesn't have to be done twice. At the Glasgow event the future introduction of QIS, Scotland's Quality Improvement System, sparked a debate about the need to apply consistent standards including Visit Scotland's to the museum sector to avoid duplication.

During the events a lot of time was spent discussing assessment and monitoring arrangements. Accreditation is generally seen as an effective museum management tool if reviewed rigorously. A Scottish delegate said:

'Accreditation is shallow on evaluation'.

There is concern in the sector that Accreditation is just a paper exercise with no substance behind it. A participant in Wales said:

'Anyone can say they have a policy and if they do there is no guarantee that they are using it'.

Proof should be sought of statements that museums make in their applications and decisions should not be made on trust. London participants said:

'Most people spin the truth. We need checks and feedback. It's not the plans that are important, it's their implementation'.

Accreditation is currently too much of a snap shot. A York participant commented:

'The process is devalued by not being policed – no one checks so what's the worth?'

For the scheme to demonstrate its worth the sector feels there is a need for more rigour or 'teeth'. Teeth for non-compliance for example:

'At the moment it doesn't matter all that much if you are struggling to meet your targets'.

Improved monitoring of performance against the plans submitted is seen as a way forward, as is an increase in on site inspections by an independent assessor or peer unrelated to the museum. MDOs and Regional Accreditation Advisers made the point though, that verification visits are popular with small museums but not with larger services.

Participants to the Glasgow event were keen to get clearer information from MLA about when a review will take place and what is required. A representative of a National Museum in Scotland said:

'I am unclear about how things will be measured'.

The current review process based on Biennial Returns is seen as being too time-consuming. Some museums expressed a preference for a modular review as part of an ongoing process. Others would like to see someone coming in to help the museum reviewing performance against the Standard. Regional Accreditation Advisers and MDOs wonder if Biennial Returns could be spread over the two years-rolling programme, e.g. in 6 month tranches. This would allow standards to be raised incrementally and would be more motivating. The MDOs and RAAs also highlighted the need for a team of reviewers to assess the returns. One of the Welsh groups proposed regional peer-consultation days, inviting museums in the process of Accreditation to share and check experiences. Surrey Heritage referred to the self assessment process in the archives sector with the National Archives providing verification visits.

2.2 Forward planning

The Forward Planning requirement is seen as an important element of Accreditation (see 3.1). There is a great appetite for a structure which is more flexible, appropriate to the size and type of museum, ideally supported by templates. The current tick box structure doesn't allow for differentiation. A participants at the Glasgow event said:

'It presumes a Local Authority or National model - hard to fit a university museum into the template. It felt like being a round peg in a square hole'.

Museums urge MLA to assess the content of plans for quality and appropriateness, not for structure or compliance. For example, Yorkshire MDOs mentioned that the recent requirement for balanced financial sheets was felt to be an unnecessary intrusion into management practice. They suggested that an analysis of budget content might be more appropriate. Museums feel it is important that a forward plan is a working document. Participants in London and York were very clear about the inappropriateness of the financial requirement in the forward planning section. Local Authority museums can not comply with this because they follow a different planning cycle. For LA museums it is better to look at the budgets for the current and previous year as provisional budgets are of no value to Local Authorities.

2.3 Guidance and support

Many museums acknowledge that support is needed to move forward following Accreditation. In Section 1.5 we mentioned that access of pre-application advice through the Regional Accreditation Officers, Museum Development Officers and Curatorial Advisers is seen as a considerable benefit. Access to guidance and support however is unevenly distributed across the UK. Museums in Wales and Scotland don't have access to Renaissance funded Museum Development Officers and not all museums have managed to get support from a Curatorial Adviser. Museums Galleries Scotland reported in their submission that capacity is especially stretched in the Highlands and Islands where there is a high ratio of independent and Local Authority museums.

From the online survey we know that 74.4% of the respondents feel that Accreditation should provide more guidance on what to include in a forward plan.

Improved and universal support can take the form of written guidance or face to face visits. It is important that there is an emphasis on practical assistance rather than judgement, and – in the words of one of the groups at the Glasgow event:

'It must be crystal clear what exactly is required to meet the minimum standard'.

Participants in Newtown, Wales, felt MLA could improve its communications with the sector, forewarning museums of additional documents required and giving a clear timetable for assessment and reviews.

'MLA should forward plan the way they tell us to forward plan'.

This sentiment was echoed strongly by those who took part in the Manchester event.

Templates are useful; participants would like to see more of them. In London there was a call for an Accreditation Resource pack, a guide book demonstrating how to raise standards in all areas of Accreditation. MGS reported that Scottish museums would be interested having case studies to encourage museums how to meet aspects of the Standard.

In their submission to the consultation the Museums Association said that Accreditation could do more to provide staff and stakeholders with training and support to ensure the standards that are set are fully understood and carried out:

'For example, it could be a requirement that trustees receive regular training in museum ethics'.

MDOs in the South East stated that in their view every museum needs a named contact person for Accreditation support. The sector itself calls for an engaged process too. A small independent museum at the Oxfordshire Museum Council event put it like this:

'More individual attention including site visits, as it would be helpful for us to be able to explain our particular situation to an assessor'.

There has been mention of mentors if regular visits and discussions with MDOs or RAs can not be guaranteed.

The Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC) mentioned in their submission that participants to the Accreditation development consultation event felt that the human contact with their Accreditation adviser/ assessor from NIMC was important. Museums in Northern Ireland prefer to send their biennial reports to the NIMC instead of MLA so:

'If in future they want to look at their former documents they would be able to source them easily'.

Throughout the consultation process it has become clear that the standard of advice of Curatorial Advisers is variable and their availability a lottery. The system is dependent on the generosity of museums and professionals who are often hard-pressed for time and funds. MDOs in the South East said

'MLA should consider allocating funds for training, maintaining and rewarding a network of officially recognised advisers'.

Participants at the Oxfordshire Museum Council's event made a plea for the availability of grants to get consultancy support.

Another option raised in York is that museums are encouraged to proactively seek support from peers. This chimes with the submission of the Cuckfield Museum Trust who said:

'It would be of enormous benefit to small museums like ours if the Accreditation process were to require larger museums to demonstrate clearly the support that they provide to small museums in their locality through, for example, the provision of specialist advisers, par-time curators, or mentors for volunteer staff'.

They continued:

'Could MLA put people in touch with others in the region who have been through the process, or could this could be a role for the Hubs? There is currently very limited support from Hub museums.'

Signposting to additional advice was referred to as being useful too. In London the suggestion was made that MLA mends the links on the Collections Link website and in Taunton Collections Link was mentioned as a portal for best practice examples. Sharing policies and documents between museums would be a good way forward as well. Would MLA or the MDO network be able to broker relationships?

2.4 Collections management

How the collections management requirement might be improved depends very much on who has been consulted. Some curators said that collections management deserved more emphasis. A Cambridge participant said:

'Collections are exclusive to museums and should be at the front of Accreditation'.

Some even expressed a concern that collections management might fall off the list in the review. National Museums feel that collections management is Accreditation's unique selling point (see 1.5). Others said that Accreditation is too focused on

collections management and that as a consequence there is no ownership of the standard across the organisation. Some participants noted a disconnection between collections management and user services and emphasised that collections management needs to tie in to learning and education policies as well.

As it is an extensive area of work the collections management section would benefit from a checklist to enable museums to identify gaps and add them to their forward plan as areas to work towards.

A clear area for improvement is the collections care section in Accreditation (4.5), which needs more structure rather than free text and a link to 'Benchmarks in Collection Care'. The Yorkshire MDOs reported that some museums had indicated that MLA's interpretation of timescales in Accreditation section 4.4 (documentation plan) is not nuanced enough to deal with complex, multi site and multi collection organisations. This resonates with the views of participants at the York event.

National Museums feel that Accreditation is too single-object based:

'We need group-level recording as norm'.

Some museums expressed a need for support helping them dealing with conflicting priorities in collections management and collections care.

'It would have been useful if we had had access to support prioritising what needs doing first/ what can be done with the resources available, e.g. which part of collection should we make available online?'

There was also mention that the Emergency Plan template is biased in favour of larger organisations with corporate plans and more resources. The Berkshire Museum network comments that:

'It requires far too much detail for a small volunteer run museum with a small collection.'

Other museums would like to see more guidance on emergency plans and clearer definitions.

3. Development opportunities

At the consultation events participants were asked to use laminated cards to rank development opportunities identified by MLA in its consultation with stakeholders. Views were sought on the following development areas:

- Ladder to higher achievement;
- Updated visitor experience;
- Increased forward planning;
- Learning plan;
- Community engagement;
- Research;
- Associate award.

Although most people were happy doing this exercise some felt it was too prescriptive. Participants in York said:

'We're squeezed into an MLA frame of mind'.

This group came up with a number of other development areas including audience development, and sustainability. The Museums Association is also keen for Accreditation to:

'Contain a requirement for museums to identify ways they can reduce their impact on the environment and plan for the impact of changes to the natural world in the future'.

The Museums Association made reference to workforce development as a development area as well:

'Accreditation should significantly strengthen the requirements for museums to develop their staff, improve pay, improve staff diversity, provide opportunities for entry and progression and implement succession planning. These elements should be included as a staff development plan'.

National Museums mentioned internal communication, commercial activity, staff development, and regional and international working as potential areas for development of Accreditation.

Participants at the Oxfordshire Museums Council event eloquently expressed the views of many small museums. They said that they didn't want Accreditation to develop at all if it then becomes harder for museums to apply for or retain Accreditation status:

'No more changes – PLEASE we have bust a gut to get this far, no time for more!'

A participant in York expressed the hope that the changes currently being considered do not alienate any of the museums currently in the scheme.

National Museums feel that development is at odds with DCMS' lighter touch approach of assessment. DCMS' visit frequency has been reduced. The Nationals weren't very comfortable ranking development options. Their message was that MLA should not try and develop the scheme until they were absolutely clear about its purpose and role. One participant formulated the following highest hope:

'That MLA understands and articulates its use – particularly to Nationals'.

Participants at one of the London events expressed concerns about further development of the standard if MLA is aiming to bring in areas of work that require qualitative judgment:

'Moving into more qualitative areas means there needs to be a far more labour intensive assessment process'.

They would rather see that Accreditation simplified into a system that requires quantitative (yes/no) answers to requirements rather than qualitative answers as they feel objective measurement should be at the heart of Accreditation.

Another concern expressed in London centred around adjusting Accreditation to political agendas:

'Developing the standard is in the interest of politics not in interest of museums; following political demands means there will always be changes'.

Below is a qualitative analysis of preferences based on comments from the consultation events backed up with quantitative data from the online survey.

3.1 Increased forward planning requirement

MLA wanted to test the sector's interest in making forward planning a more substantial area of work within the standard to support improvement. The online survey teased out which areas of work should be included in a Forward Plan. 92.2% of respondents to the survey were in favour of incorporating sustainability in Forward Plans, a finding which was confirmed in several consultation events. Other useful additions would be workforce development (86.2% of online survey respondents agreed) and succession planning (78.2%). The online questionnaire also revealed that Accreditation should provide more guidance on what to include in a Forward Plan (74.4% said of respondents answered 'yes' to that question).

At the consultation events we received mixed responses, ranging from museums who are very much against an increased forward planning requirement to those who feel that it would be extremely useful to have a firmer strategic planning basis with an integrated financial plan. There is no clear divide between types or size of museum, other than the National Museums involved in the consultation events who very strongly said that didn't see a need for providing more forward planning detail as they are ultimately accountable to the government department with whom they

have their funding agreement. However in the survey 74% of respondents from National Museums said that forward planning should become a key eligibility requirement for Accreditation to drive an organisation's improvement.

Rather than an increased forward planning requirement the sector would like to see a better structured requirement that is appropriate to the size and governance structure of the museum (see 2.1). MDOs and Regional Accreditation Advisers propose making the forward planning requirement more outcome focussed. This chimes with findings at the NMDC event and the submission of the National Council on Archives, who said:

'Instead of an emphasis on written policies, MLA should move towards a system of outcome based assessment. Accreditation should be a mark of what has been so far achieved by an organisation rather than based on an organisation's plan for the future'.

The Nationals said:

'Much more important than policies themselves is what we are doing with them'.

Forward plans need be seen as living documents with clear objectives in need of regular review. MDOs and Regional Accreditation Advisers said MLA needs to define the expectation of use as some museums fail to act on their forward plan.

3.2 Updated visitor experience requirement

61.5% of the respondents to the online survey said that Accreditation's user services and visitor experience requirements need to be expanded and brought in line with the needs of today's visitors. 67.7% said that the two sections should be combined into one section.

Although there was no clear consensus at the events about the need to update the visitor requirement, it is accepted that museums exist to provide visitors with a high quality experience. A Birmingham participant formulated the following highest hope for the scheme:

'That the future of Accreditation will focus on the quality of visitor experience and true potential spectrum of values museums offer to the public and to visitors'.

One of the Glasgow groups emphasised the need to measure the quality of the visitor experience.

The sector agrees that visitors expect more and that there is increased competition with other leisure facilities. Those in favour of an updated visitor experience requirement made suggestions to include assessment areas such as:

- o Meeting and greeting;

- Availability of shop to take away a souvenir;
- Catering facilities;
- Collecting visitor feedback;
- Information provision;
- Interpretation;
- Online provision;
- Access to the collection.

One of the groups at the York event said that:

'If the visitor experience carried more weight in Accreditation it would help to publicise the Scheme'.

An updated visitor experience requirement would inevitably link to audience development and community engagement. As with other requirements it will be essential that the standard allows for proportionality and appropriateness of assessment of the visitor experience based on the context in which individual museums operate. One of the York groups said:

'Beware of one size fits all'.

The London group expressed concerns about the affordability of introducing an updated visitor experience requirement:

'The only way this could be added to the scheme is by introducing a much more elaborate assessment or peer review element, which is going to be unaffordable in the medium long term'.

65.8% of the respondents to the online survey agree that Accreditation should strengthen the link with established quality assurance schemes offering a short cut for museums attaining additional accreditation. At the events alignment with VAQAS, Visit Britain and Visit Scotland requirements was seen as essential. A participant at the London event said:

'VAQAS does a good job already – would it mean the standard straying into other areas which aren't really MLA's specialism?'

To avoid duplication with VAQAS, participants in Birmingham felt that Accreditation should focus on visitor engagement with collections, as museums offer a different kind of visitor experience.

3.3 Ladder to higher achievement

64.6% of the respondents to the online survey said that Accreditation should remain one standard for all. The majority of respondents don't think that museums receiving government funding should meet a higher standard (45.5%). 76.4% indicated however, that Accreditation should develop an improvement framework above the standard to encourage appropriate development. At the consultation events the latter was referred to as the 'Ladder to higher achievement'.

Analysis of the findings reveals a great consensus with the views of MLA's Advisory Panel as recorded in the minutes of its meeting on 6 May 09:

'Scalability must be retained, and where someone wants to improve, support them; where museums are happy with the award, then that should be respected'.

The highest hope for the scheme formulated by a participant in Birmingham summarises the fear of many independent museums:

'That a ladder of higher achievement will not become a 'grading' system that will in fact penalise smaller museums'.

A participant in York however, said that it could be positive for smaller museums if MLA used appropriate scales:

'Then smaller museums could potentially achieve a higher standard than larger museums'.

The ladder offers scope to incorporate all areas of development identified by MLA and its stakeholders. As one of the Glasgow groups said:

'MLA should avoid adding any more compulsory plans. Everything could come under the Ladder to higher achievement, including -in the Scottish context - QIS'.

The sector likes the idea of an improvement tool but doesn't want to be squeezed into a framework dictating to them how they need to develop. In Birmingham it was suggested that a modular approach recognising good practice and organic growth would be appropriate, asking museums to complete one module per year for example. It would then *'raise aspirations and allow museums to play to their strengths'*. Another positive would be that the Ladder offers opportunity to build a community of sharing best practice, said the Birmingham group.

If a ladder to higher achievement were to be introduced it would be important to recognise that different areas of work can potentially represent different levels of excellence. Similarly, collections held on different sites should potentially be able to be at different stages on the ladder. Participants in Manchester said:

'You might aim in your forward plans not to bring certain collections up to the high standard'.

Although participants in York said that a Ladder would be a *'good way of showing that you expect different things from different sized museums'*, National Museums stress the need for autonomy. They prefer to be given options enabling them to select development areas appropriate to their museum:

'We measure our performance against a corporate plan and won't change direction because of Accreditation'.

Participants in York were concerned that a 'graded' or tiered Standard could be used as a motivation for disinvestment:

'A tiered system has the potential to damage the link between funders and Accreditation as there would be less clarity as to where the quality threshold lies'.

The Taunton group said:

'This will be divisive, demoralising, we like that all museums are working towards the same standard'.

Participants in Taunton also felt that the Standard is stronger politically if it's the same for all.

In London a key message was:

'Minimum standard assured = job done'.

London delegates also mentioned that it is more important to ensure museums don't fall below the standard with appropriate measures if this happens. This chimes with the views of MDOs in the South East who said that the processes need to change and improved before the bar is raised.

One of the Regional Museum Development Managers proposed an alternative model: a minimum standard with the opportunity to showcase other areas of excellence being validated by the scheme. She made the following analogy:

'The Museum of Nowhere could be Accredited, with an area of excellence in staff development; The Museum of Somewhere could be Accredited with areas of excellence in learning provision and Community Engagement; The Museum of Elsewhere could be Accredited with areas of excellence in staff development, learning provision and community engagement; Whereas the Museum Over there might only be Accredited'.

This view is reflected in a separate submission by the Museums Association's Ethics Committee and Collections Strategy Group:

'It is essential that a mechanism for further development is an optional addition so that it does not compromise the minimum standard scheme'. 'Arranged into modules the development framework would be flexible and attainable, allowing museums to specialise in one or more areas'.

3.4 Collections management

The collections management section was more often discussed as an area in need of improvement (see 2.4) rather than a development opportunity. Recognition of the need to look after digital collections however, was important to many museums. Accreditation can't ignore the vast amount of developments in terms of digitisation. Participants at the Glasgow and Cambridge events hope MLA will develop a digital preservation requirement.

The Heritage Diversity Task Force advised in their submission that:

'The Accreditation Scheme should be revised and more actively monitored to promote cultural diversity in collections'.

Several groups discussed that implementation of the MA's Effective Collections Programme will undoubtedly have consequences for the collections management requirement, for example with regards to loan procedures. 60% of the respondents to the online survey agree that Accreditation should promote pro-active loans to and from Accredited museums to increase use of collections, and 89.6% say the museums should let the public know what is stored in their collections. Many museums wonder if this should be a role for MLA or Accreditation:

'Encourage yes, but isn't that the work of the wider initiatives within the profession. I think you have to be careful not to try to enhance Accreditation by introducing lots of ideas'.

The Museums Association however, says that Accreditation should reflect the significant changes that have happened since the Collections for the Future's findings (2005) and the start of the Effective Collections programme (2006):

'Museums should be required to make better use of and provide access to their stored collections.'

The online survey shows that museums are generally in favour of including the acquisition and disposal policy in a collections development plan (67% positive). There is less agreement over the option to restructure the current acquisition and disposal policy to focus on what is to be collected in the future (47.6% positive; 35.1% negative; 17.3% don't know). A substantial number of comments were submitted, ranging from:

'This would create partnership working and links with other museums and encourage the development of exciting changing exhibitions'.

to:

'Most small museums can't afford the increased cost of insurance and transportation'.

A MDO in East Hertfordshire wondered if MLA would consider checking collecting areas in acquisition and disposal policies to ensure that there is no duplication between adjacent museums.

3.5 Research requirement

52.1% of the respondents to the online survey agreed that Accreditation should develop a requirement focused on researching collections to increase their use and benefit. Although the sector embraces research as a fundamental area of work that is vital to fully realise the potential of the resource held in trust for present and future generations, there are concerns too.

A range of views was given at the consultation events. It's important that a research requirement fits with the abilities and resources of a wide range of institutions. It should be about demonstrating that there is continuous active investigation going on to better inform the visitor and to enhance sharing of collections. Research activity would include a museum's own research as well as making the collection accessible for members of the public, such as volunteers with an interest in a particular research area, or academics with ambitions to use their research for a publication. Ultimately the research requirement would be about developing and disseminating knowledge about collections through learning and research.

For National museums the research requirement is more important than for others. Participants at the event in Newtown – Wales said:

'We need a centre of expertise in Wales'.

In general, participants to the events ranked the development of a research requirement as a lower priority.

3.6 Community engagement

Although warm towards the idea at first, the majority of groups at the consultation events came to the conclusion that there is no need to include a community engagement requirement in Accreditation. One of the London groups said:

'What are we there for if not to engage? It's the case we have to make'.

Local Authority museums are more positive. A Local Authority museum with 20-50,000 visitors per annum said:

'Absolutely - the biggest single weakness in the current scheme'.

National Museums however, don't see the need for a community engagement requirement, with 50% of those that replied to the online survey saying that this was not a necessary development for Accreditation.

It was suggested that community engagement could be measured and assessed under the updated visitor experience requirement, and included in the forward planning requirement. Some felt it is already implicit in the current user services requirement as a museum needs to indicate whether it is consulting with visitors.

A question that was often asked was:

'How many / which communities?'

It was stressed that a community engagement requirement should not be restrictive. A participant in York said:

'Communities need to be defined by museums not by the Standard'.

And someone in Taunton said that

'Community curation should be part of it'.

To make it work the sector would need to have access to case studies and data including qualitative research into the needs of communities.

Although 57.5% of the respondents to the online survey were positive about developing a requirement linked to the need to engage with local and user communities, they posted many comments. The comments addressed concerns about how this requirement would be measured; additional expense to the Accreditation process; and the fear that this will mean that MLA will *'impose specific systems which we are not equipped/ resourced to put in effect, e.g. focus groups, large scale surveys'*.

A number of respondents to the online survey referred back to Accreditation being a 'minimum' Standard, giving priority to improvement over development:

'Links are clearly a good thing, but they are not a minimum standard'. 'Don't add anything to Accreditation, instead reduce it to a non-bureaucratic core'.

3.7 Learning Plan

In the online survey 62% of the respondents were positive about inclusion of a learning plan requirement. At the events there were many positive comments made about the role of learning. As a York participant said:

'It's what we're here for, it is what starts immediately when people walk into the museum'.

The Museums Association said that in recent years learning has risen in status in museums to occupy a position near to or equal to that of collections. Therefore

'Accreditation should reflect and encourage the equal, strategic status of museum learning by making a learning plan'.

A respondent to the online survey said that including a learning statement as part of forward plan would be:

'An acknowledgment that learning is fundamental to the role of museums'.

One of the London groups recorded that it would be:

'Good, because it brings the education team into planning processes'.

There is however, no consensus about the need to make a learning plan a separate requirement. An online respondent commented:

'Learning should not be a separate plan but be included as an embedded part of the forward plan so that the museum is truly a learning organisation as envisaged in Inspiring Learning for All'.

Should a learning plan requirement be introduced then it

'Needs to be appropriate to the museum and holistic – e.g. recognising anyone that has a learning experience through the museum as per the DCMS' learners definition'.

As with all other development proposals, a learning plan requirement would have to be relative and appropriate to the size and type of museum. Many comments made reference to keeping the standard as a minimum Standard first of all:

'While museums should provide opportunities for visitors to enjoy and learn from collections, we would be wary of making the basic scheme too cumbersome'.

They implied that it would be more appropriate as part of a ladder to higher achievement:

'Perhaps if the scheme was tiered this could be introduced for museums trying to attain a higher Accreditation standard'.

According to a participant in York a learning plan should cover

'The whole range of information giving to passing on skills, developing understanding, and storytelling'.

One of the London groups said that:

'It should be showing how to use your collection to engage with audiences'.

Only 52.3% of the respondents to the online survey are positive about encouraging the use of the Inspiring Learning for All framework. This chimes with findings at the consultation events. Lincolnshire Heritage Forum reported that groups were generally supportive of including a learning plan requirement; however

'No-one was able to advocate the use of ILFA because of its intellectual inaccessibility. Knowledge of ILFA is largely limited to professional staff'.

At the Welsh event one group reported that ILFA is:

'Too opaque, I can't get through it. It's too elaborate, too difficult'.

3.8 Associate Award

Asked what would be the lowest priority for the development of Accreditation, the majority of groups ranked Associate Award for private collections or non-collection based organisations. The proposal raised questions such as:

'What would it achieve?'; 'Why can't they go through Accreditation?'

In York it was strongly felt that:

'This could potentially undermine the image of Accreditation and the image of the whole museum sector'.

One of the London groups said this would be *'misdirecting funds'* and all museums agreed that they make checks anyway when they lend to any other institution and an Associate Award would not be a fast-track for this process.

4. Branding

In addition to the three main objectives of this study Hopkins Van Mil was asked to gauge the sector's opinion about the Accreditation brand. Both the online survey and consultation events were used to tease out whether Accreditation should remain a professional badge of achievement or should develop into a public facing badge. At the consultation events Hopkins Van Mil engaged the participants in a discussion about brand values, the current logo and what the sector needs from MLA to effectively promote their Accreditation status.

4.1 Status quo

Overall the museum sector agrees that the Accreditation brand as it is now is not very strong. 58.5% of the respondents to the online survey said they use Accreditation in the promotion of their museum. The main reason for not using it is that museums feel that the brand is not understood by the public.

The sector isn't convinced either that the brand awareness amongst important stakeholders is as strong as it should be. Although the Heritage Lottery Fund prefers to fund museums which have Accreditation status or are working towards it, there is a perception in the sector that the link between Accreditation and HLF is weaker than it has been.

Some museums reported that even within their own organisations people don't know what Accreditation is. Statements illustrating the sector's frustration at the lack of branding and promotion of the scheme include:

'I'm very disappointed'

'How does this have same importance as Investors in People, et cetera?'

Larger museums say that displaying the Accreditation logo doesn't have priority:

'There are so many requirements for the use of logos of funders or other positive initiatives that the Accreditation logo is often not a priority compared to the promotion of other schemes.'

Or as another respondent to the online survey said:

'We use other badges such as the Visit Britain Rose which is better understood by visitors'.

Designated Museums use the Designation brand more than Accreditation and National Museums at the NMDC event in London mentioned that the public would assume that their museum were meeting these standards anyway.

For smaller museums however, Accreditation seems to have more cachet as is seen in the following quote from the online survey:

'I'm a curatorial adviser to many small museums, even if people don't know what Accreditation is, it has an air of importance about it - which impresses'.

Independent museums report that it makes volunteers feel good. They are keen to tell the world they have achieved Accreditation as

'It demonstrates that we are a proper museum'.

4.2 Professional standard or outward facing?

85.4% of the respondents to the online survey said that Accreditation should remain professional badge; 72.2% said it should develop into a public facing kite mark; and 81.5% said it should be both a professionally recognised award and a public facing badge.

Participants at the NMDC event said that National Museums don't need a kite mark for the public as they don't need to convince their audiences that they are good.

The Museums Association feels that turning Accreditation into a public facing badge of quality would undermine the minimum standard scheme and its existing brand value within the profession. They said in their submission that

'Because Accreditation is a professional minimum standard scheme, it is not a public guarantee of high quality. Expectations of the sector (including funding bodies) on behalf of the public and those of the public themselves can be vastly different'.

Participants in the consultation event run by the Northern Ireland Museums Council said that:

'Promoting the brand to decision makers, politicians, funders and potential donors was of great importance, more so even than promoting the brand to visitors'.

Others were very outspoken about the need for a publicly recognised standard.

'The public doesn't know but SHOULD know it'.

Surrey Heritage put it like this:

'The public needs to be educated as to what are 'safe' museums to bequeath to, to donate to, as well as to visit'.

MDOs in the North East reported that particularly the smaller museums would welcome the standard developing into a quality mark recognised by the public, as they are proud of Accreditation but get little recognition externally for their achievement.

However, some had concerns about the cost of the re-branding exercise that would need to be undertaken. One of the London groups wondered if public expenditure on this could be justified:

'Now is not the time to re-brand, money can be better spent'.

This was underlined by MDOs in the South East who said that:

'An effective campaign to improve public recognition would absorb funds best directed at ensuring that the standard is properly managed and supported'.

Scottish participants emphasised that they hope Accreditation will remain a UK-wide standard.

4.3 Logo

The sector is convinced that the current logo is not understood by the public and does not convey a positive message. Events participants agreed unanimously that the acronym MLA has no meaning to museum visitors and is not appropriate for Accreditation as the Standard has no relevance to libraries and archives. Participants in the Northern Ireland Museums Council's event said:

'The logo should say Accreditation, not MLA'.

The Birmingham group said that the brand is *'boring'* because there is no link to an icon, whether a person or an object.

A number of suggestions were made to make the Accreditation logo more effective and appealing:

- Use a recognisable icon;
- Ensure it's small, usable, downloadable;
- Include a strap line;
- Ensure a modern take on museums;
- Use a tick or a gold star;
- Bring logo in line with Designation logo (big A in circle);
- Use format of Charity Commission, one line + unique number for each Accredited museum;
- Translate in Welsh;
- Ensure that the logos for Accreditation and QIS (Scotland) fit together.

To increase brand awareness one of the groups in Wales proposed making use of the logo a requirement for Accreditation.

4.4 Brand values

To the public the Accreditation brand should communicate:

- Quality;
- Trust;
- Museum!;
- Universal;
- Permanent;
- Authenticity;
- Expert knowledge/ authoritative;
- Safe: to bequeath to, to donate to, as well as to visit;
- Fun;
- Accessible, user friendly, welcoming institutions;
- Professionalism;
- Good experience;
- Collections safe for future;
- Preserving our heritage;
- Meeting professional standards.

To the sector it needs to say:

- One of us, part of the community;
- Trusted;
- Achievement;
- Meeting professional ethics.

To other stakeholders it should express:

- Asset in the community;
- Accessible collections;
- Quality;
- Meeting a defined standard;
- Measurable achievement;
- Commitment to improvement;
- Bona fide organisation;
- Professional;
- Levers funding (a National Museum mentioned that one donor lent them an iconic bus worth £150,000 because of Accreditation).

4.5 What the sector needs from MLA

Whether MLA decides to re-brand or not, there is consensus in the sector that there is a need for an advocacy campaign led by MLA. Using the words of one of the York groups:

'MLA should get out there, doing their media job, being advocates for the sector demonstrating that museums have a public benefit'.

Effective promotion of the Accreditation brand would help protect the term 'museum', which is needed in the eyes of the Yorkshire MDOs *'to safeguard the reputation of the sector.'* To the public MLA should promote the benefits of donating objects to Accredited museums as opposed to private individuals and/or attractions. Participants in Birmingham proposed getting ambassadors for the scheme who would communicate that museums are great and that Accreditation is important:

'People relate to people'.

MDOs and Regional Accreditation Advisers called for an advocacy document for Accreditation which communicates the benefits of the scheme for them to show to museums considering joining.

In practical terms the following was mentioned:

- Offering links to Accredited museums online;
- Transfers of logo for use on windows;
- A 'proper' plaque (*'A certificate doesn't do it for us'* said one of the groups in Glasgow);
- Award ceremonies organised by MLA (smaller museums);
- Issuing joint press releases for newly Accredited museums;
- Publishing list of Accredited museums on Culture 24;
- Leaflet about what it means to visit an Accredited museum available online and in PDF and distributed to each museum in small quantities;
- Promotional materials in Welsh language;
- An annual high profile ceremony with the press / TV coverage. On the words of a participant in Wales: *'I want it like an Oscar – bit glamorous / wow. There are so few opportunities to celebrate our achievement – we want a statue!'*

5. Conclusion

In the brief for this work MLA asked that the following requirements were met:

By the end of the consultation events MLA needs a clear picture of the levels of support and what resistance there is, as well as a strong indication of consensus on development requirements and refining the process of Accreditation.

In this report Hopkins Van Mil has demonstrated that there is support for Accreditation as a route to funding and as a means of identifying areas of improvement for individual museums, providing a spur to them to work as a team to develop new, or improve on existing, policies and plans.

At the beginning of each consultation event the facilitation team used a future mapping warm up exercise. The results of these discussions are included in Appendix 4 and reveal much about the context museums believe they will be working through Accreditation in the near future. Issues raised included:

- Funding;
- Changes in Government policy;
- Uncertainty;
- Pressures on time;
- Recruitment and workforce diversity;
- Being responsive to user expectations;
- Digitisation and contemporary collecting.

With these expectations for the future it is unsurprising that the introduction of new development areas in Accreditation is no priority to the sector. The focus of attention for many participants, as we have shown, was on getting the process of Accreditation right first, ensuring that MLA demonstrates its understanding of the sector, and accommodates in a very practical way the many types and sizes of museums involved in the scheme.

Increased clarity of the standard, simplification of the process and adequate provision of guidance and support have priority over the introduction of new areas for development. This doesn't mean there is no appetite for development at all. In fact, many museums demonstrated that they are already delivering against one or more of the proposed development areas. However, they don't want to be measured against it through Accreditation as long as the process is cumbersome and lacking coherence with the requirements of main funders and parent bodies.

Accreditation is widely seen as an improvement tool with potential to encourage museums to raise standards further as long as development areas are introduced as scaleable and flexible options.



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