



Archive Service Accreditation: Report of sector workshops exploring inclusive practice

A report from Shared Intelligence

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The National Archives (TNA), along with the UK wide Archive Service Accreditation Partnership of the Archives and Records Association, Archives and Records Council Wales, National Records of Scotland, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Scottish Council on Archives, and the Welsh Government Museums, Archives and Libraries Division are planning a 10-year review of Archive Service Accreditation. This process is being led by the Archive Service Accreditation Committee.
- 1.2 One of the issues the Archive Service Accreditation Committee wants to address in the 10-year review is how accreditation helps improve *inclusive practice*. This is particularly challenging as archives hold materials which originate from periods when norms and expectations about inclusivity and representation were very different from now. Some items in collections represent the antithesis of contemporary practice, for example, materials which result from colonialism. It is also challenging because the current users of archives, and the staffing, do not always reflect the diversity of the communities whose records they hold. There are further practical issues around inclusion such as rurality, as well as resource pressures which limit what archives services can realistically deliver.

Background

- 1.3 A lack of explicit support for inclusive practice within accreditation was raised with the Archive Service Accreditation Committee in 2019 by the Archives and Records Association (UK & Ireland) who wanted accreditation to require more in terms of the diversity of collections, audiences, and workforce¹. The committee agreed to commission further work to prepare a set of challenges ahead of the 10-year review and to explore what role accreditation can play in promoting inclusive practice. The committee then produced its own 'roadmap' for using accreditation to develop inclusive practice. This included supporting archive services in their work to remove barriers to participation, reach new audiences and adopt innovative approaches to engagement².
- 1.4 After publishing the roadmap, the committee commissioned Shared Intelligence to define in more detail what could be achieved by the 10-year review of accreditation in relation to inclusive practice.

Challenge paper

- 1.5 The first phase of our work involved scoping research into inclusive practice in other comparable organisations. This was conducted through interviews with stakeholders with experience of inclusive practice within and outside the cultural sector. From this we produced a challenge paper for the committee, published in June 2022³.

¹ Archive Service Accreditation Committee Annual Meeting 2019, item 12: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-committee-minutes-may-2019.pdf>

² Archive Service Accreditation Committee: Roadmap to developing Archive Service Accreditation: inclusive practice within the national standard for archives 2021-2024 and beyond: [Roadmap to developing archive service accreditation \(nationalarchives.gov.uk\)](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-roadmap-to-developing-archive-service-accreditation-national-standard-for-archives-2021-2024-and-beyond.pdf)

³ Archive Service Accreditation: Challenge paper on inclusive practice, Shared Intelligence (2022) <https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-inclusive-practice-challenge-2022-07.pdf>

- 1.6 Following the publication of the challenge paper, the committee then asked us to test the challenge paper with a working group of practitioners from archive services through a series of sector workshops. Those workshops were intended to explore with the archives sector how feasible each challenge was in terms of accreditation, the importance of each challenge, and then to create an input for the commissioning brief for the 10-year accreditation review. In the final section of this report we present the findings of those sector workshops, taking each area from the challenge paper in turn. This results in a list of potential areas accreditation could include, but without going into the detail of how each would be tested or what evidence would be required.

2 Methodology

Working Group

- 2.1 Over the winter of 2022 and 2023 we held a series of three workshops with a working group of archives representatives from across the UK. The working group was recruited through an open-invitation advertised through The National Archives' communications channels. Thirty-one individuals participated from 28 different archives services including local authority, higher education and institutional archives of varying sizes.
- 2.2 The working group discussed the challenges from the challenge paper, grouped by theme. In the first workshop we covered:
- Inclusive engagement with communities.
 - Inclusive collection of materials.
- In the second workshop we covered:
- Inclusive engagement with users.
 - Building an inclusive workforce.
- 2.3 The third and final workshop was used to prioritise the challenges and decide which were the most important to address in the forthcoming review of accreditation, and which were best suited to accreditation.

3 Cross-cutting issues

- 3.1 The table in the next section documents the results of the workshop discussions. However, there are three cross-cutting themes within the detail which we believe are worth noting and will also be of use in the accreditation review, over and above the detail.

Talking to stakeholders

- 3.2 The first and most important cross-cutting theme in these discussions has been that inclusive practice begins with archives services talking to their stakeholders and to find out who is underrepresented – in collections, audiences, and workforce. Without this understanding, implementing any further changes related to inclusive practice becomes far more difficult. It was mentioned in several workshops that this could be helped by services using a framework or maturity model that would help them better understand what they have in place. A suggested outline could simply look like this: Level 1: do you have baseline data on who your communities are? Level 2: are you making incremental progress? Level 3: are you monitoring and what does that show?

Skills and knowledge

- 3.3 The second cross-cutting theme is that in order to develop inclusive practice, the workforce needs the necessary skills and knowledge. Without this, they might not know what to do or how to do it, or, they may know *what*, but lack the knowledge or confidence on *how* to do it.

Sector leadership

- 3.4 Lastly, implicit in many of these challenges is not just the role of accreditation, but the role for sector leaders to support archives services to take on these challenges by providing CPD opportunities and resources, frameworks and other resources, alongside visible leadership and direction.

4 Detailed findings and input to the accreditation review

4.1 The following tables records the results of our sector discussions and is intended as an input to the forthcoming review of accreditation.

- **BOLD** – indicates challenges sector stakeholders saw as high importance and suited to being tested via accreditation.
- **Light** – indicates challenges which were considered, but viewed as low importance and/or ill-suited to being tested via accreditation.

1. Inclusive engagement with communities	
Challenge area	Explanatory notes
1.1.1 The service has a community engagement approach which is two-way – not just about one-off acquisitions or projects, but long-term relationships between communities and archives.	<p>One of the biggest issues is that community engagement is often project-based and therefore short term, rather than ongoing. This leads to engagement relating only towards specific goals, and often being time limited. However:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While the working group saw long-term engagement as desirable, they recognised expectation levels need to be realistic. Additionally, instrumental approaches are not always bad. A service might do something positive with very instrumental or time-limited goals – eg to challenge perceptions. • Some people or groups <i>do</i> just want to deposit materials and do not want further relationships.
1.1.2 The service is able to deliver bespoke approaches to engagement for different communities	This is duplicative of ‘community engagement’.
1.2.1 The service has a community engagement approach which can identify and reach underrepresented groups in their community.	A precursor to this is understanding who are the service’s ‘communities’, ideally through a structured exercise to understand gaps and which asks who is represented and who is underrepresented in terms of collections, audiences, and workforce?
1.3.1 The archive service has a consistent approach in deciding the location of materials with the communities from where it came.	This is duplicative of ‘discussing ownership’.

1. Inclusive engagement with communities

Challenge area	Explanatory notes
<p>1.3.2 The service has a community engagement approach which includes discussing ownership of materials with communities.</p>	<p>Location is a complicated issue linked to ownership and access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most important question is whether a service has policies and plans to engage with communities about access and location and to discuss these issues with them. • There are many issues to balance: location, access, and technical preservation requirements. • There are particular issues with materials from geographically dispersed communities (eg global companies, or very isolated location). If held locally, then by definition materials are also far from most people in terms of physical access. <p>Accreditation cannot anticipate what is better in every circumstance: eg to be in an urban centre, a remote location, or securing investment for better facilities in remote places. The key is to talk to communities and discuss these issues. The working group did not think it was useful for 'closer to communities' to be seen as a normative standard.</p>

2. Inclusive collection of materials	
Challenge area	Explanatory notes
2.1.1 The service has policies to ensure treatment of materials aligns with the expectation of the communities to whom the materials relate, including acquisition, appraisal, storage and deaccessioning.	<p>The working group believed the role of accreditation should be to set high-level principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency about intent is key and this is achieved through clearly stated policies. • Meta-data is vital. Materials can often only be visible through meta-data (key words, descriptions). Therefore, besides the nature of the materials themselves, the nature of meta-data can be even more important in terms of inclusive practice. • Explain the aims of inclusive practice. In terms of inclusive practice it is important to be specific that the intention is to redress inequalities, which means it is <i>more</i> important to engage with <i>less</i> privileged groups and those who have less influence.
2.1.2 The service has policies for dealing with treatment of highly contentious material including offensive or sacred material including removal or re-cataloguing.	<p>Highly contentious materials raise many issues relating to inclusive practice and again, it is impossible to anticipate every eventuality. What is important is to have a transparent policy which is applied consistently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This might include sensitive content markers (increasingly common in the US), closed collections, removal, redaction, or deaccessioning. • This also raises questions about the capacity required for retroactive review, and for accreditation this becomes a question of setting realistic expectations.
2.2.1 The service has an approach which recognises the added risks of underrepresentation surrounding digital and born-digital materials.	<p>Printing out born digital materials can result in lost meta-data. Again, this can have disproportionate effects on records relating to communities with digital-only records.</p> <p>Issues of inclusion in relation to digital materials are often outcomes of resource pressures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital data deposits can be vast. Rather than 20 shoe boxes of physical materials, a hard disk might contain the equivalent of 200 or 2,000 shoe boxes. Many archives simply lack the resources to process these. But if those materials relate to communities whose only footprint is digital, then it is also an inclusion issue. • Similarly, there are format issues which are essentially resource issues. For example, floppy disks already need vintage equipment to process, this issue will repeat as other formats become obsolete.

2. Inclusive collection of materials

Challenge area	Explanatory notes
2.2.2 The approach ensures that that born digital materials are not overlooked and certain community groups aren't disadvantaged due to their use of these materials.	This is duplicative of 'digital and born digital'.
2.2.3 The archive has mechanisms in place to continue promoting and engaging digitised materials.	This is duplicative of 'digital and born digital'
2.2.4 The service has policies which enable them to understand who collections are reaching and how they are impact the people to whom they relate.	This is duplicative of 'identify and reach'

3. Inclusive engagement with users	
Challenge area	Explanatory notes
<p>3.1.1 The service has policies to “create equally positive experiences for all”.</p>	<p>The working group saw this challenge as one of the most important, but, because it is so important it is likely to be tested in many other ways besides accreditation.</p> <p>The working group felt this challenge must balance desirability with being realistic within existing resources. That said, accreditation could also be a lever for <i>changing</i> how resources are prioritised.</p> <p>Other observations about this challenge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding gaps is the starting point. • For institutional archives the priority is often to serve individuals within the business rather than those outside, in particular, staff needing information to inform business decisions. • This may be an area requiring scaled guidance on what would be expected from different sectors or different sized organisations. • For evidence, archives could show how they adapt to users’ needs. An example could be organising private access for a particular group if that enables them to use the resources. • Realism is important which means stating the measures very clearly. BFI diversity standards could offer a useful template.
<p>3.1.3 The archive service has policies in place for improved user engagement, specifically in ensuring it remains visible and welcoming to those outside its usual reach and in currently under-represented groups.</p>	<p>This is duplicative of ‘equally positive experiences’.</p>
<p>3.2.1 The service has data and insight about how welcoming their space, services and their guidelines are for different users – including gaps and areas for improvement.</p>	<p>Improving physical spaces is difficult. Many archives are in buildings where they have limited influence over the physical space. Again the starting point is understanding the gaps and problems.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical space constraints can be overcome by use of digital space. Digital content can help make a service more accessible, but then raises another resource issue. • Small changes can make a big impact and do not affect the space:

3. Inclusive engagement with users

Challenge area	Explanatory notes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="875 300 1973 360">• Changing language, signage, processes - one service no longer requires academic references as a condition of access which was exclusionary.

4. Creating an inclusive and representative workforce

Challenge area	Explanatory notes
<p>4.1.1 The service reviews the skills and knowledge of staff in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion and has policies and processes for improving skills and knowledge around inclusive practice.</p>	<p>Staff development is seen as essential to inclusivity. The working group saw this as requiring more than training courses and instead needing a well-planned staff development model:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sector wide support and leadership (eg from TNA) will likely be needed. • The priority should be skills to support users with different needs. • Things like cataloguing are important but only apply to some roles. • There could be three stages - (1) how to identify staff learning needs (2) training on terminology and cataloguing (3) using some form of maturity model. • There is a lot of training to choose from, is this something where national bodies (eg TNA) could help signpost and prioritise training needs and offers?
<p>4.1.2 The service aims to develop staff skills in order to retroactively remove or re-catalogue offensive or sacred materials.</p>	<p>This is duplicative of 'contentious material'.</p>
<p>4.1.3 The service aims to develop digital skills in staff to ensure digital content is up to date and that they are properly used and impact the communities they relate to.</p>	<p>The working group felt this is for archive services to prioritise rather than accreditation to set standards.</p>
<p>4.2.1 The service has policies and plans in place to diversify workforce, or actively seeks opportunities to begin bringing the next generation into the workforce from unrepresented communities.</p>	<p>The working group felt this was difficult to include in accreditation. It would be better to focus on careers, choices, pathways, apprenticeships at a national level. Also for many sectors this will be outside the control of the archive service itself and under the control of organisation-wide HR policies.</p>