

Archive Service Accreditation: Challenge paper on inclusive practice

A report from Shared Intelligence

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The UKA rchive Service Accreditation Partnership, comprising the Archives and Records Association, Archives and Records Council Wales, National Records of Scotland, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Scottish Council on Archives, The National Archives and the Welsh Government Museums, Archives and Libraries Division are planning a 10-year review of Archive Service Accreditation and considering a range of issues the review needs to address. 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 is how accreditation assesses and 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 of archive services, do not often 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 the ability of archives to invest in change.
- 1.3 The aim of the project is to help the Archive Service Accreditation Committee define what needs to be achieved by the 10-year review, specifically in relation to inclusive practice. To do this, TNA commissioned Shared Intelligence, an external organisation, to scope the issues and bring external challenge and critique ahead of the main accreditation review process.

Purpose

- 1.4 Archive Service Accreditation has been developed over time and in response to challenges and priorities facing the archives sector. A lack of explicit support for inclusive practice within the standard was raised with the Accreditation Committee in 2019 by the Archives and Records Association (UK & Ireland), as not reflective of the archive sector's development and needs¹.
- 1.5 The Archive Service Accreditation Committee agreed that further work to bring challenge and critique to the review of Archive Service Accreditation was needed. This

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>

will help frame the task of incorporating inclusive practice across all three modules of Archive Service Accreditation. This includes supporting archive services in their work to remove barriers to participation, reach new audiences and think innovatively to engage more, and different, people with their work and in their collecting practice.²

2 Methodology

2.1 In order to bring the external challenge sought by the Accreditation Committee, Shared Intelligence has interviewed individuals from inside and outside of the archives sector who we believe have useful perspectives on inclusive practice. Our brief was not to redesign the detail of the current Archives Service Accreditation Standard but to find out what inclusivity means to different organisations and relate this back to archive services.

Working Group

2.2 The process included one workshop with a working group. The members of this group were identified by the Programme Manager of Archive Service Accreditation and comprised members with experience in the archives sector.

2.3 An introductory workshop was held in to establish what the state of current thinking about inclusion within archive services.. The group then discussed the current presenting issues that have emerged across the sector relating to inclusive practice. These issues subsequently set some challenges and questions to consider when taking the research out to the external scoping interviews.

2.4 The workshop showed that sector support for the work that Archive Service Accreditation had started was strong, but there was still more detail and challenge needed to ensure that it can be embedded and sustained. It was established that inclusive practice goes further than just workforce diversity and development, but instead should cover across 4 themes:

- Access, inclusivity of physical and digital archives, and physical accessibility.
- Sector and workforce cultures/behaviours
- Representing communities and creating reciprocal relationships
- Sensitivity of content, descriptions and preservation.

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://nationalarchives.gov.uk/roadmap-to-developing-archive-service-accreditation/)

Review of National and International examples of inclusive practice

2.5 We undertook a rapid review into several existing archives policies and strategies to gather headline insights which could be of use in providing examples and challenge.. We reviewed the three examples:

- Our Way: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols, National Archives of Australia (2021)
- Libraries and Archives, Canada Indigenous Heritage Action Plan Implementation Report
- 2021 CRKN Virtual Conference | Shifting the Future: Shifting Paradigms – creating more equitable and inclusive practices at the Archives of Ontario, Canada (15th October 2021)
- Sámi Archives, a physical place of deposit operated by The Archives of Finland.
- Lueck, A. J., Law, B., & Zhang, I. (2019). Inclusivity in the Archives: Expanding Undergraduate Pedagogies for Diversity and Inclusion. In R. Jeffries (Ed.), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity in Contemporary Higher Education (pp. 1-12). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-5724-1.ch001

2.6 The headline impressions from this were that in all cases and recommendations, inclusive practices were based on iterative processes in which greater engagement with communities has provided insight that has enabled archive organisations to present materials in ways which are more respectful of the communities from which those materials originate. Engagement has also enabled archive organisations to improve searchability and access. The responsibility of record-keeping in some contexts can be enormous, in particular where archive collections are the window into past abuses and harms. In other cases, archive collections (or lack of) are an embodiment of more subtle inequalities. In all cases, it is clear that the journey towards inclusive practice requires additional effort, resources, and skills and knowledge. In other words moving to more inclusive practice does not come for free and is not 'one size fits all'.

Committee meeting and additional research into *digital* inclusion

2.7 After producing a first draft of this challenge paper dated 13 April, we presented our findings at the Archive Service Accreditation Committee meeting in May 2022. While the paper was well received, the Committee asked for further work to be done to understand the challenges specifically around *digital* inclusivity. In response, we conducted further research and sought interviews with 3 more organisations: the Royal College of Nursing Library and Archives (which has a significant digital collection), The Museum of British Colonialism (a digital-only museum), and Futurelearn (a MOOC founded by the Open University).

Scoping interviews

- 2.8 Initial conversations with the working group enabled us to identify a long-list of potential interviewees. To date we have conducted 12 telephone interviews with representatives from within and beyond the cultural sector, including organisations in other countries. The purpose of these calls was to gain examples of inclusion work in many areas of arts and culture, and beyond, but to view it more holistically in terms of what an inclusive standard can look like, rather than trying to gain insight into what could be done at project level.
- 2.9 The scoping interviews were used to gain insight and examples of deliberate action by organisations to improve their inclusive practice. We have used the three modules of Archive Service Accreditation to group our findings as themes and challenges.
- 2.10 This paper draws on interviews with relevant staff or board members from:
- The National Trust
 - The Football Association
 - Welsh Assembly Government
 - Bòrd na Gàidhlig (Gaelic development agency, Scotland)
 - National Archives of Australia
 - People's History Museum
 - Arts Council England
 - University College London
 - Saami Archives, The National Archives Finland
- 2.11 Additional interviews on digital inclusivity
- Royal College of Nursing library and archives
 - The Museum of British Colonialism
 - Futurelearn

3 Themes and challenges

Learning from International examples.

- 3.1 A major question in archive services in some other countries is whether archive materials belong with the communities that created them and what access those communities should expect. There is a normative view that inclusive practice means

that communities deserve control over materials that relate to them. But how far should this and can this go? What is appropriate in the archives services to which Archive Service Accreditation relates? What should accreditation expect in terms of local authorities, and universities having control over materials versus the descendants and communities of those who created them? How big an issue is this among those seeking accreditation?

- 3.2 The lack of archival records relating to communities or major issues can be interpreted as a reflection of the significance of these people and stories to those who use or wish to use archives. The choices of selection, ordering, and presenting documents and artifacts are also influential in shaping users' narrative and perceptions. For digital archives this also extends to choices over metadata terms. What role can accreditation play in 'decolonising the archive' and assessing acquisition policies, cataloguing policies and the lack of public records of certain communities and issues?
- 3.3 International examples of engagement in archives reinforce the idea that engagement methods are not one size fits all. The importance of bespoke approaches reflective of each context is mentioned a lot. Different communities have different archival needs. Is it possible for accreditation, which is about standards, to encourage difference? What are the resource implications of bespoke approaches when resource and capacity is a major issue?
- 3.4 A representative from the Saami Archive described inclusivity as fighting a battle on two-sides. By the Saami community they were seen as part of a government institution that had previously played a role the discrimination of their people and culture, while to the National Archives and other government agencies they were viewed as a Saami institution
- 3.5 Many of the international examples of inclusive practice are shaped by large and specific issues to each country. For example in Canada and Australian archives, efforts to be more inclusive have been driven by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), alongside a succession of revelations about past abuses and wrongdoing. How can Archive Service Accreditation use examples of good practice from other countries but tailor this to UK context in an authentic way without 'dragging and dropping'?

Challenges in organisational health

- 3.6 Inclusive practice is often led by example, by sector or organisational leaders. Does the Archive Service Accreditation Committee have the appetite to lead the sector by example, by practicing the inclusivity it seeks to achieve? For example, does the

Committee itself demonstrate inclusive practice, does it have plans for improvement, is it transparent about its goals and values?

- 3.7 Creating a workforce that can deliver inclusive practices and processes requires a long-term commitment to training for all levels. Can the archives sector make this commitment to training, does it have the resources, does it have access to the expertise? Is it realistic to test this through accreditation? How could this training consider differing practices and process across individual archives? This must also take into account digital inclusivity. Do staff currently have the digital skills to ensure users can better access materials online? Can the speed of sector workforce development keep up with the rapidly growing quantity of digital materials, and rapidly developing technology to access them?
- 3.8 Beyond training and awareness which are relatively short-term actions inclusive practice is also a generational change, i.e. it can take many years to achieve and is focused on better futures. Could Archive Service Accreditation include objectives about bringing the next generation of workers into the sector, from the communities the archives serve, or currently under-serves?
- 3.9 Part of inclusive practice could be giving recognition to very small community archives who serve marginalised communities. Can Archive Service Accreditation be used to embrace archives on the periphery e.g. community-led archives, even those currently considered outside of accreditation?
- 3.10 The issue of inclusive practice has been described as a long term challenge requiring sustained effort. There can be limits to what can be achieved through encouragement, sometimes other organisations have had to present inclusive practice as a non-negotiable not an optional extra. This may be a real issue in the cash-constrained context of public sector archive services who cannot prioritise anything beyond the day-to-day. Are archive services willing to wait years or even decades for real impact and appreciation for this work? How hard should accreditation push? Can inclusive practice be presented as a non-negotiable?

Challenges in collections management

- 3.11 Much of inclusive practices with collections centres on consistent respectful treatment of materials; not just respectful of their physical condition, but of their significance to those who are connected with those materials. For example, the Australian NAA are now permanently redacting documents which record the names and locations of sacred sites, this is because under Aboriginal custom these should never have been written down. How far should Archive Service Accreditation go in encouraging and testing for respectful treatment?

- 3.12 Inclusive conservation principles ask, “what is the importance of this, for whom, and why?”, and the answers will be created with those who are connected to the materials (geographic communities, family descendants, communities of identity). How far could Archive Service Accreditation go in requiring archives to answer these questions? What evidence would they need to produce? Might there be trade-offs between principles built around preservation and record keeping, versus built around inclusivity?
- 3.13 Inclusive practice should enable archives to be more accessible to wider audiences, but often materials are kept geographically distant from those who for whom they have most relevance. This is especially important in the most sparsely populated parts of the UK. What should accreditation require in terms of archive material being kept in closest/most accessible locations to where it relates? Could technology help? Is there capacity to use technology in this way?
- 3.14 Technology may enable people to share and keep ownership of records and materials more equitably than many local archive services currently can. Should the role of technology in inclusive practice be addressed in accreditation? If there are choices over who accesses the ‘real’ physical materials and who accesses digital versions, what should take precedence? At what point in the conversation about ownership does an archive become a facility for storing material rather than record keeping? How best is it to approach the digitisation through accreditation considering issues around capacity and resource?

Challenges in stakeholders and their experiences

- 3.15 In some areas of inclusivity, archive services can only play a tiny role. For example while archive services might want to promote the Gaelic language, the biggest driver of Gaelic revival is that it is now available on Duolingo, and Amazon Alexa. How does Archive Service Accreditation recognise that in some cases the role of archive services is very limited and other forces are the main drivers of change?
- 3.16 The formulation ‘creating equally positive experiences for all stakeholders’ avoids the trade-off trap (i.e. the idea that to serve one community more means serving another community less). What would this mean for archive services? Where might the tensions lie? Are there expectations of archives that some users’ needs take precedence, for example are some users seen as ‘serious’ users and others seen as having secondary call on time and resources?
- 3.17 The physical space and experience of users in physical archives need to embody inclusive values. For new users, an archive service can be an intimidating and formal place with strict guidelines and rules of use. Do archives services need to consider (and respond to) how welcoming their space, their practices and their guidelines are for new

users? But this requires investment; is it fair for accreditation to require this investment?

- 3.18 We heard from other organisations how important it is for individual user experience to match sector or organisational promises. How can accreditation support archive services to strike the balance between positive messaging and ensuring this is backed up by user experience?
- 3.19 Archive services themselves can be viewed as an imposing and intimidating institution to those that are not familiar with them. How can Archive Service Accreditation help to increase the visibility of archive services to the wider community? How can archive services become more welcoming as an institution to those outside usual users like research and academics? How much time and effort are archives willing to put into attracting new audiences that may only start coming through the doors in years and decades time?
- 3.20 How do you embed relationships between archives and communities so that engagement isn't just purely instrumental (to get the materials then go) but reciprocal? What are the resources implications of sustaining multiple community relationships? Can archive services better show to communities that they get something in return and there is value in having a strong long-term relationship? What is a reasonable test for Archive Service Accreditation to set if inclusive practice inherently requires more effort than the status quo?

Challenges around digital archives and inclusivity

- 3.21 Staff skills are vital for digital inclusivity, except there is a double challenge of having staff who have both skills and knowledge relating to inclusion *and* to digital archives.
- 3.22 Just as with choices over what physical materials are kept, the process of selecting what gets digitised is also a key factor in creating accessible and inclusive archives: what gets chosen, what is the criteria, who does the choosing?
- 3.23 Related to this is the huge growth of 'born digital' material (as opposed to digitised material) which raises additional challenges. Many archivists find it harder, rather than easier, to select and collect digital-only materials. Yet at the same time, under-represented groups can be more likely to leave digital-only records e.g. online discussion boards, fanzines, and other informal digital content. This is partly because they are not reflected in established records (e.g. they might be less likely to be covered by local newspapers). One archivist we spoke believed we are already in a 'digital dark age' where archives being collected now rely almost entirely on digitisation of physical materials and miss a huge proportion of contemporary 'born digital' materials, which disproportionately affects minority groups.

- 3.24 Digital resources can be a way to attract new users because they can reach different audiences and overcome negative perceptions of an organisation's physical presence. For example, we have seen examples of higher education institutions challenging their elitist image by providing new and free to use online courses, but this also requires careful selection of digital resources which resonate with those it is targeted at.
- 3.25 Some of those we spoke to believed that too often the act of digitising content or getting digital content online is seen as the end of the task, when they would argue it is only the first step in a wider strategy. Once material is online it needs user guides or engagement events to promote digital collections, and these in turn require resources. Do archives have the resource or the skills to create user guides or to promote digital collections? Should accreditation ask how digital resources are promoted and leveraged – not just whether they exist?
- 3.26 It is clear that many organisations struggle with the challenge of measuring the impact of action on inclusivity, let alone the impact of digitisation on inclusivity, but those who have made progress tend to look at who is accessing materials, what they do, and what happens as a result. Digital materials however, provide routes to insight about the use of materials which cannot be gathered for physical collections e.g. digital comments, repeat visits, evidence of 'viral' discussions. This relates to a larger question of whether accreditation should ask about impacts and outcomes, rather than outputs.

Themes and challenges

- 3.27 We hope these challenge questions are helpful in deciding how to use the 10-year review to support more inclusive practice in the archives sector. Not all these questions will be directly relevant, but we hope they all prompt constructive discussion. We heard many specific examples from the interviews and we cannot repeat every single one, but it is clear that even for organisations, sectors, or geographical contexts which are very different from UK archives, there are strong common threads and fundamentals.