LLibrar

**Public library service accreditation:**

**Consultation and scoping programme interim report**

November 2020

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# Introduction

In late 2019 Libraries Connected commissioned Shared Intelligence to undertake a two-year long process to deliver a process of consultation and co-design to scope out and help to develop a form of accreditation for English public libraries.

The public library sector in England did have a set of standards between 2001-2008 before being replaced by a national indicator as part of the new national indicators for local authorities, which themselves ended in 2010. In our work we have recognised the fact that there were some who found this incredibly useful as a tool. We have also recognised how the world, especially the world of public libraries and local government have changed in the last decade.

However, while there is currently no accreditation framework for public libraries in England the Libraries Blueprint publication from Libraries Connected and CILIP identified a clear appetite for this across the sector[[1]](#footnote-1).

In this project as a whole, and within this interim report, we have used the definitions given in the Blueprint report for ‘standards’ and ‘accreditation’ as presented below.

*‘For the purposes of clarity, the term ‘standards’ should be understood to encompass industry-led standards that are defined and managed by sector organisations and do not have any specific legal force in statute. The term ‘Accreditation’ should be understood to refer to the process of assessing compliance with those industry-led standards, and again not as enjoying any specific regulatory force. Neither term should be understood to refer to Government-mandated standards or norms, which fall outside the scope of this report.’[[2]](#footnote-2)*

An important feature of Phase 2 of the project overall will be to give more specific definition to the word ‘accreditation’ as it might apply to English public libraries.

This interim report comes at the end of the consultation phase of this project, before we move on to the design and testing phase in early 2020. The purpose of this consultation phase was to draw out and distil a wide range of opinions from across the library sector as well as wider local government and other key stakeholders in the Home Nations and the arts sector.

This report includes:

* A methodology for the consultation phase
* Our findings from our engagement
* The resulting model coming from our engagement and testing with the sector and other stakeholders
* The important choices which need to be made to inform the design of a framework in Phase 2.

# Methodology

For this project we are using the double diamond framework for innovation approach. This involves two distinct phases, the consultation phases covering the first diamond and the design phase, covering the second.

The first diamond itself had two stages. The discovery stage, where we collected as much information as we could through desk research, literature reviews, scoping interviews and engagement with the project board and reference group. And the define stage, where we distilled the information we had collected, tested ideas and findings through a survey and conversations with key stakeholders. These two stages allowed us to, instead of just designing an accreditation framework based on assumptions, go back a step and explore as wide a range of possibilities and opinions as possible to inform the design phase.

The following paragraphs summarise our methodology for the consultation phase, presented in Figure 1 below.

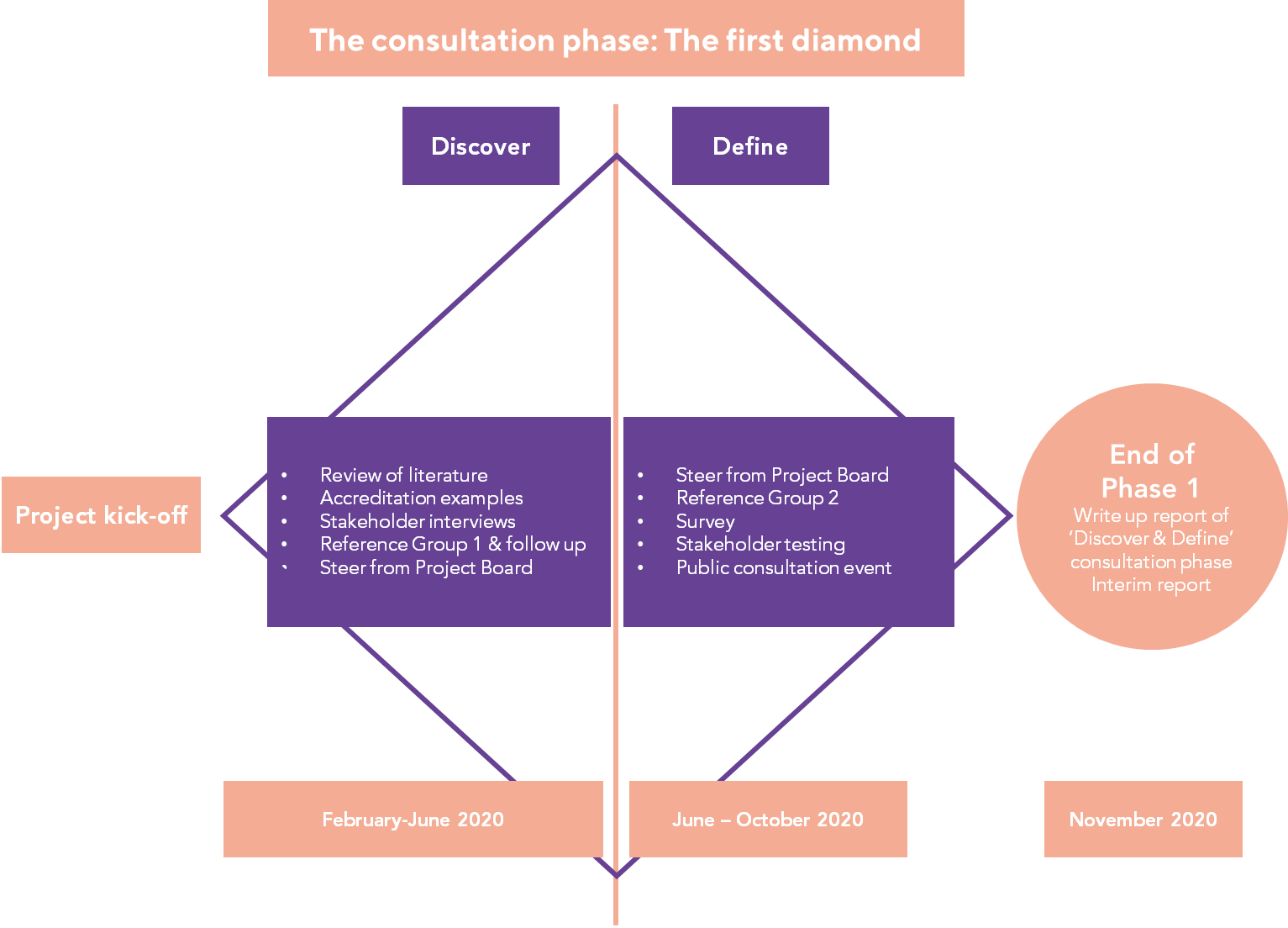


Figure 1: Process for phase 1

## Discover stage:

### Desk research and literature review

From the very start of the project we began to collect examples of accreditation schemes of all types to identify the different approaches which can be taken. These included examples from the libraries sector with a particular focus on the library standards in the Home Nations, as well as different types of libraries such as NHS libraries and academic libraries.

We also looked at examples from the wider cultural sector including archives and museums as well as a host of examples from other public and private sector spheres. We put out a call for examples on social media to expand our reach for accreditation examples and other literature on accreditation. Through the literature review we developed a deeper understanding of the various different approaches which we could explore and helped us to frame our questions for our reference group sessions.

### Scoping interviews

During this round of initial calls, we spoke to 11 individuals with some experience of accreditation or part of the library sector. In each call we tested out our planned approach so that we could make necessary changes and make additions or edits to our lines of enquiry. Our questions also covered the interviewees views on the purpose of accreditation for the sector, the problems and challenges it could help to address and the practical considerations of an accreditation scheme would need to account for. We also used these calls to supplement our literature list.

### Reference group

A key part of the process was recruiting a project reference group with whom we would discuss key research questions and work with to narrow down and approach to accreditation. During the consultation phase we met with this reference group of library staff on two occasions through digital workshops held on Zoom.

*Workshop 1:* The first workshop focused on understanding the key question of the purpose of accreditation, and the challenges which it could help to address. It helped us to identify important themes which we would need to explore later in the process and began to identify some of the principles we would need to consider when beginning to develop a model.

## Define stage:

### Reference group

*Workshop 2:* The second reference group workshop had two key aims. To come up with an approach or approaches to accreditation which would address the purposes and challenges identified, and to think about the practical elements of such an approach. In doing this we presented our synthesised findings from the scoping interviews and literature review, as well as the outputs from the first workshop. In the workshop the reference group looked at a range of different approaches and, using the online collaboration tool of Miro, looked at these in more depth.

### Survey

Following the reference group workshops, we were left with a single, albeit general, approach to accreditation with a number of choices which would need to be made about the specifics of the approach. Using these choices, we constructed a sector survey to test out what we had heard from the reference group with the wider sector. This was pushed out through the Libraries Connected weekly bulletin and on various library networks to be disseminated to staff. We received a total of 475 responses from staff at all levels, heads of service to frontline staff, from all regions in England.

### Stakeholder testing

Using the results of the survey, discussion with the reference group, project board and desk research we were able to build up a picture of an approach to accreditation. Again, there were several key questions on practicalities and choices on specific parts of the approach to be answered. We tested out this approach with stakeholders with experience of libraries and different accreditation frameworks and were able to collect their concerns and use their expertise of think more closely about the practical elements of designing accreditation.

### Project board meetings

Throughout the consultation process we checked in the project board at key points to get steer on upcoming activities, gain approval for our approach and sound out our findings.

### Virtual consultation session

During our consultation phase we held an online consultation session on the topic of, ‘What does quality mean for a modern library service?’. The event was attended by over 100 individuals. In the session we heard three provocations, each defining the idea of what quality means in a different way and then heard from a large number of participants. The event gave us lots of different perspectives on ways to address a key question which had been posed throughout the project to that point.

# Findings

In this section we will lay out the findings from the key engagement points throughout the consultation phase. This includes:

* Our findings from the scoping interviews with stakeholders which informed our literature review and reference group inputs
* Key findings from the literature review which also informed discussion in the reference group
* The output from our two reference group workshops
* The headlines from our sector survey
* Considerations from our stakeholder testing.

All of these findings contributed to narrowing down and creating a model for accreditation which is presented in the next section. The iterative process meant that at each stage we built on our knowledge and refined the model according to our findings.

The findings presented here are done in chronological order to show how they fed into each other.

## Discover Stage:

## Scoping interviews, literature review and reference group one

Our literature review and scoping interviews, as well as our reference group workshops, were based around the following research questions:

1. What are the problems or challenges that accreditation could solve?  
   What would the purpose of an accreditation system be?
2. What accreditation approaches have been implemented in the past/present?
3. What does an accreditation system that works well look like?
4. What does an accreditation system that does not work well look like?
5. What are the most important practical considerations of accreditation?

### Research question 1: What are the problems or challenges that accreditation could solve? What would the purpose of an accreditation system be?

Table 1, below, shows the synthesis from our scoping calls, literature reviews and the themes coming from the first reference group around our first research question around the purpose of accreditation and the challenges it could help to address.

While this list of the purposes which accreditation could have is not exhaustive, nor are the challenges it could solve, those seen in the table below represent the common themes coming out of the literature and discussion with stakeholders and reference group members. It shows that there is some consistency of thought around the multiple purposes which accreditation could have.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Purpose | Challenge they aim to solve (stated or implied from desk review, stakeholder interviews and reference group) |
| To enable libraries to demonstrate and define what they do | Outside of the library bubble, there is a lack of understanding of what libraries can and do, do and what they do not do. There is a need to develop this awareness and set clear expectations. |
| An advocacy tool to get buy in from officers, members and stakeholders | Linked to the above, developing a clear set of expectation will mean that getting buy in from senior leaders is easier. |
| To enable alignment with existing national or local strategies | There is a need to maintain a link between policy and practice and to make sure that they inform one another. There is currently a lack of future focus. |
| To drive improvement through benchmarking/performance assessment | There is a lack of consensus around what a service needs to or could look like. Accreditation would enable services to understand how they are doing and how they can improve. |
| To measure outcomes and impact | There is a need to change the narrative around what libraries do through the collection of metrics which move away from footfall and towards experiential data. |
| To reach a quality standard | There is no common level of service, and accreditation could get everyone to a certain standard (and beyond). |
| To provide evidence for change | There is a lack of consistency in opportunities provided to communities. |
| To motivate staff (including volunteers) and provide aspiration | There is currently no formal mechanism to demonstrate the value of what staff do, the benefits for the customer etc. Accreditation would help to raise aspiration and boost their confidence. |
| To provide confidence for funders | Many funders attach outcomes agreements – easier to get funding if you can show outcomes |

Table 1: What would the purpose of an accreditation system be? What problems or challenges could accreditation solve?

### Research Question 2: What accreditation approaches have been implemented in the past/present?

The literature and accreditation examples which we reviewed, as well as the discussions with stakeholders, helped to look at the different approaches which could be taken to accreditation. Table 2 shows five different types of approach which we identified and the purposes which those that approach had.

These five approaches or ‘archetypes’ became the basis for our discussions with both the project board and the second reference group workshop as we began to narrow down which approach might best suit the sector.

| Approach or ’archetype’ | Purpose / Challenge it aims to solve |
| --- | --- |
| 1. ‘Quality of practice’ sector-led frameworks | Aim is to create sector-defined coherence and quality in professional practice  Frameworks are created by practitioners according to professional ideals of ‘good’ or ‘excellence’  *– LGA library peer reviews, National Archives Accreditation, AIM Hallmarks* |
| 2. Impact demonstration tools | Aim is to increase impact, demonstrate impact, and provide internal motivation to learn and improve based on observed impact  Developed by practitioners and/or improvement agencies  *- Norfolk Libraries own impact toolkit, NI public library standards (original scheme), Kent Libraries Outcomes framework* |
| 3. Improvement tools | Aim is to address need for quality by creating practitioner-led support systems and defining pathways or ‘ladders’ for improvement (e.g. bronze to gold/levels etc)  Developed by sector of by sector support agencies  *– DCMS benchmarking toolkit, QUEST leisure framework* |
| 4. User or customer standards | Aim is to enable users to know what they can expect, build/retain confidence in the service and enable comparisons between services or with ‘good’ or ‘what should happen’  Akin to ‘charters’ and customer standards or quality marks  *- Scottish ‘HGIOPLS’* |
| 5. Frameworks to monitor national regulatory requirements | Monitoring of national requirements, where national regulatory requirements exist  ‘National standards’ in the traditional sense – developed by a national body  Nb – these clearly conflict with principle of devolution in local public services  *- UK Museums Accreditation Scheme, Welsh public library standards, NRS Scotland public records assessments* |

Table 2: What accreditation approaches have been implemented in the past/present?

### 

### Research Question 3: What do accreditation schemes that work well look like?

A further key feature of the discussions with the stakeholders and reference group was around what an accreditation system which works well looks like. Table 3, below, synthesises the discussions we had and looks at comments on existing or past schemes which had elements which work, and worked, well. It also draws together comments on considerations which individuals felt should be made when thinking about a future scheme and drawing on learning from other schemes which are currently operating.

Understanding what accreditation schemes which work well look like was important for us as we began to think about the practicalities of what library accreditation might look like in England and working with the reference group to narrow that down.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Comments on existing/past schemes | |
| Assessors who are practitioners but working in many different settings and bringing multiple perspectives. No Pass/Fail framework means it can focus on learning. (HGIOPLS) | Profile and visibility within sector. Realistically attainable and not a gold standard. Flexible and adaptable. (Archives Accreditation) |
| Specific, achievable, attractive – all encourage usage. Not compulsory so take-up is based on wanting to do it. Focused on what works (and why?). Not too easy, hard enough to be worth doing and to be respected. (English Libs Standards) | Assessment only valid for finite period (x years) so they remain current. Governed by sector and criteria established by collaborative peer process. (Welsh Library Standards) |
| **Comments about a future scheme** | |
| Tough enough to ‘mean something’ but not bureaucratically burdensome. (A test of what you do, not test of ability to tolerate long forms). Prescriptive enough to have value but not too prescriptive that it becomes onerous. | Should help shift perceptions about professionalism, what it is, and how it relates to all how work in the sector. Demonstrate full breadth of libraries contributions (culture, economy etc). |
| Some degree of auto-data filling to reduce the bureaucracy/ burden of process. Include data/metrics which go beyond footfall – genuine impact measures. | An output should be a resource of evidence of what works, best practice, which demonstrates the value of libraries. |
| It could be a way to leverage funding nationally - powerful to show what other library services are doing | A modular system - bite sized chunks rather than all or nothing. Some kind of ladder of achievement e.g. standard, better and best practice – to benchmarks where we are now, then track consider improvement. |

Table 3: What do accreditation schemes which work well look like?

### Research question 4: What do accreditation schemes that *do not* work well look like?

Just as it was important to understand what an accreditation scheme which works well looks like, it is equally important to know and understand the converse. From the conversations we had with stakeholders and members of the reference group it was evident that there were some pitfalls we had to be careful not to fall down. These were as follows:

* Superficial measures – footfall, loans, hours
* Nationally driven, prescriptive, lacking local buy-in
* Too much process, bureaucratic
* Accreditation as a form of performance management
* ‘This or nothing’ - ultimatum or coercion
* Single inflexible template, rather than core expectations or principles.

### Research question 5: What are the most important practical considerations and choices?

Throughout our first ‘discovery stage’ we explored a wide range of purposes, approaches, examples of schemes and other literature. We did this through our desk research and through conversations with sector stakeholders, our reference group and discussion with the project board.

From these conversations, there were a number of questions which came up which we felt were essential to consider as we progressed in the process. These important questions were as follows:

* What kind of scheme do we want?
* Who has the capacity to create and run a scheme, where do the resources come from?
* Who has the legitimacy to oversee it, set criteria?
* Who does the assessment?
* What would make a scheme ‘worth’ going for – what is in it for the library service?
* How often must accreditation be renewed to be credible?
* What central thing is being accredited – what is the long-term/lasting responsibility from which public libraries derive their public value?
* How do we balance desire for flexibility, with desire for accountability which is respected?
* How can a scheme be relevant to councils, Trusts, volunteers, third parties?
* How does a scheme support Heads of Service who are senior figures in their councils alongside those more junior?
* How does this contribute strategically to where we want to be – i.e. Blueprint?
* How can we future proof against the scale of change we are seeing now?

## Define Stage: Reference group two, sector survey and public webinar

The second stage of the consultation was where we began to distil what we had heard and gathered around out research questions and started to narrow down and apply this to an approach to accreditation.

### Reference Group 2

The second reference group was an incredibly important point in the project. The overarching aim of the workshop was to identify one or two potential approaches to accreditation to test out with the sector through a national survey and key sector stakeholders.

The reference group were presented with our findings from the Discover stage, detailed above, as well as five ‘archetypes’ which we developed from the five approaches to accreditation seen in Table 2 above. The diagram below shows these approaches.

**Impact tools**

**Aim:** to increase impact and demonstrate that impact

Developed by practitioners and/or improvement agencies

**User or customer Standards**

**Aim:** to enable users to know what they can expect, build/retain confidence in the service and enable comparisons between services / with ‘good’ / with ‘what should happen’.

Akin to ‘charters’ and customer standards/ quality marks

**‘Quality of practice’ sector-led frameworks:**

**Aim:** to create coherence and quality in professional practice

Frameworks are created by practitioners according to professional ideals of ‘good’ or ‘excellence’.

**Frameworks to assure adherence to national requirements**

**Aim:** to ensure national standards are being met where there is a national expectation or requirement.

**Improvement tools**

**Aim:** to create a route map and support system for managerial and service improvement

Developed by the sector or sector support agencies

Could include a ladder of achievement (bronze to gold) and be aspirational

Figure 2: Archetypal Approaches to accreditation

The reference group looked at each of the archetypes above and, prompted by the questions below, particularly question two, began to narrow these down.

1. What accreditation approaches might be pursued?
2. What accreditation approach would work in order to address the problems identified that we want to solve?
3. What are the principles which need to underpin the design of an approach to accreditation?

Those present at this reference group were attracted to three of the five archetypes which they found most relatable to their own ideas about what ‘accreditation’ would look like in practice:

* Improvement tools
* Impact tools
* User or customer standards.

They found it less easy to relate to *‘Quality of practice, sector-led frameworks’* or ‘*Frameworks to assure adherence to national requirements’*.

Focusing on the three archetypes just described, the reference group reflected on the following questions:

1. What are the practical implications of this archetype?
2. What problems would it address?
3. What are the potential pitfalls?
4. What are the principles which should underpin this archetype?

There were a number of themes within the discussion which will be useful for designing an accreditation scheme:

* **Defining the library offer:** 
  + Sense that accreditation will help with existential question of ‘what are libraries for’
  + Accreditation will push us to speak with communities about what they want
* **Buy in / incentivisation:** 
  + Talk of needing buy in from wider library sector, local authorities, central government departments and other partners outside of the sector (and funders)
  + Also need the buy in from staff who will carry out the accreditation process
  + This is also linked to needing to incentivise local authorities / services to take part (this is directly linked to the legitimacy and credibility of the scheme)
* **Source of legitimacy/ownership:** 
  + There needs to be an authority – at a national level – which has the convening power to bring together a diverse group of individuals (from inside and outside of the sector) to oversee accreditation, decide on a framework/measures and provide independent validation
* **‘This can’t just be the sector talking to itself’:**
  + This was mentioned on a number of occasions. It links into what we have heard about this needing to be about advocacy and outward relevance (both at a local authority and national level) to show what libraries do in ways which those beyond libraries relate to. And also highlights that there is a wider audience for accreditation – not just a service planning tool, it is outward looking (and needs to have some customer focus)
* **Demonstration of impact:** 
  + Part of this advocacy idea is that libraries need to demonstrate their impact to their communities and local authorities – and that the sector has struggled with this for many years – could accreditation finally crack this?
  + The measures of demonstrating impact would need to be decided on and agreed nationally but measured against local indicators – and independently verified to give credibility to the process
* **Meeting local / community needs:**
  + Sense that accreditation helps sector, and individual services focus more on local community needs – but also that users/residents must be involved in accreditation
  + As stated above meeting local and community need is important as it allows for local variation and prioritising around local authority priorities and local need. Suggestions were made that meeting accreditation could be based upon having practices in place which supported local need (local variation) as well as delivering on the core services of a library (national).
* **Evaluation / assessment (practicalities):** 
  + It was suggested that assessment could be done both internally with a self-assessment process and then independently validated or review by library peers as well as a cross-sectoral board.
  + Different levels of attainment – links into the idea of an improvement journey and the process being linked to a mechanism which showed services how to get to the next level.

#### Choices for any accreditation model – identified by the project reference group:

Assessment:

* Independently assessed vs. self-assessed
  + The Reference Group ideal scheme a scheme had an initial self-assessment which was then sent to an ‘awarding body’ for review and assessment.
* Is this something you can ‘pass’ or ‘fail’?
  + The group preferred having a clear distinction between pass/fail with some form of improvement toolkit or plan for those who did not pass (similar to archives accreditation)
* Simple pass/fail vs. tiers/levels of attainment
  + The group wanted a scheme which library services could ‘pass’ but also wanted different levels of ‘pass’ (gold, silver, bronze).
* Qualitative measures vs quantitative measures/ indicators
  + Strong sense that both qualitative and quantitative data was needed – including ‘stories’ of impact
* Data collection should be about contribution to local priorities not the blunt measures of footfall, no. of loans etc.

Purpose:

* Something that would be relevant to staff and internal stakeholders vs something of relevance to users and the public
  + This was all about improving outcomes and services for the customer as opposed only to improving practice.
  + This fed into the idea of…
* Quality of results/outcomes for customers vs. quality of practice
  + It was clear that accreditation would be about improving the customer and community outcomes (but based on local needs)
* Demonstrating libraries roles against other public issues – and needing cross-sector input

Ownership / authority:

* Sector owned and organised vs. government owned and organised
  + Clear steer that this should be by the sector – and that there should be a convening role played by libraries connected to bring the sector together
* Who within the sector should own this / be an awarding body?
  + There should be a board, chosen from within the sector as well as having partners from related sectors such as housing, health, education, culture and users.

Other comments:

* Recognising that measures will evolve over time, what you measure is down to local choice
* Defining what good looks like – isn’t that what the Universal Offers is for?
* The issue around ensuring it has teeth and ensuring that it is valued by the sector
* The issue of credibility and where this credibility comes from
* An observation that the choices made by the reference group would connote an expensive and time-consuming process

### Survey

The Reference Group 2 discussion formed the basis for the sector survey in July and August 2020 which we sent out to the sector to test ideas from the reference group. The key headlines are set out below.

#### There is a high level of support for accreditation in the sector

The survey showed that there was support for accreditation in the sector. As Figure 3 shows, 73 per cent of respondents thought that there should be some form of accreditation for English public libraries.

**Most respondents felt that accreditation** **should be a voluntary scheme**

Fifty-four per cent of respondents thought that any accreditation scheme should be voluntary, compared with 36 per cent who thought it should be mandatory. The figure of Heads of Service who thought a scheme should be mandatory was almost 50 per cent compared with just over a quarter of frontline staff.

#### Respondents wanted a combination of independent and self-assessment

In terms of how any accreditation scheme would be assessed, 64 per cent of respondents favoured a combination of both independent assessment and self-assessment. (Figure 4, left).

#### Respondents thought accreditation should be awarded on a pass-fail basis in tiers or levels

Sixty per cent of respondents thought that accreditation should be awarded on a pass-fail basis. Twenty-six per cent thought that it should not be pass-fail.

Among the 60 per cent of respondents who felt that that accreditation should be awarded on a pass-fail basis, 87 per cent said that it should be in tiers or levels of attainment. This was compared with only 13 per cent who said that award should just be on a simple pass-fail basis.

Among the 26 per cent of respondents who said that accreditation should not be pass-fail there were a number of reasons given. The vast majority of comments pointed to issue with the word ‘fail’, and the negative connotations it has. Many suggested that some kind of tier system, but without a failing category, was a better option.

Several stated that this would enable any scheme to have a focus on ‘continuous improvement’. Some of the examples of where this has been done included Ofsted grading, Care Quality Commission grades and NHS library standards. Comments also noted a number of questions around what failing would actually mean – for example, whether a library service could ‘fail’ in one or two areas of measurement but ‘pass’ the accreditation overall.

#### Any scheme should require qualitative and quantitative data collection

Almost all respondents (91 per cent) said that accreditation should require service to collect a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. (Figure 5)

#### The types of things accreditation should measure

Quality was the biggest theme in the answers to the question of what accreditation should measure. This included quality of stock, engagement, events and facilities. As well as this there were consistent responses around the idea that accreditation should measure delivery of the universal offers, customer experience, leadership and development and the contribution of the service to local priorities.

#### Respondents wanted accreditation focused on outcomes for customers and the community

Sixty four percent of respondents thought that accreditation should be primarily about outcomes for customers and the community rather than quality of practice. However, 74 per cent of respondents thought that accreditation should focus on both user experience and be used for service planning and improvement. This highlights the multiple purposes which any scheme would have.

#### Accreditation should help to library services to demonstrate their contribution to policy areas both internally and externally

Linked to outcomes for the community, respondents thought that accreditation should help services to demonstrate their contribution to key public policy areas such as Health and Wellbeing, Culture and Heritage, Employment and Skills and Housing. They thought that these should be demonstrated both internally within their own councils and the library sector and, in some cases more importantly, externally to other sectors and national government.

#### Respondents wanted a scheme owned and organised by the public library sector

Fifty per cent of respondents were clear that accreditation should be owned by the public library sector. (Figure 6, right)

#### It should be linked to the Universal Offers, local priorities and public libraries act

When thinking about whether accreditation should be linked to anything a majority of respondents (75 per cent) said that it should be linked to the Universal Offers. Sixty-eight per cent thought it should be linked to the Public Libraries Act and 67 per cent to local priorities. Fewer thought that it should be linked to national priorities (50 per cent) and even fewer to external funding bids (26 per cent).

#### Library staff felt that the credibility of the scheme with the public and the sector was the most important consideration

Overall, respondents felt that the credibility of any scheme for both the sector and public were the most important consideration. It was considered more important a consideration than both how time-consuming and expensive accreditation would be.

## Public consultation session: What does quality look like for a modern library service?

Our public consultation session looking at *‘what quality means for a modern library service’* started with three provocations offering very different ways of looking at quality. Looking at what the core services of a library, the quality and accessibility of digital technology and the role which services play at the heart of their communities.

The wider discussion sparked a wide range of thoughts on what quality means. From the quality and importance of physical infrastructure and the role of libraries as a private and communal space to the quality of professional practice and the sharing of learning.

Libraries as physical spaces for connecting individuals and communities was a big point of discussion. Participants gave examples of libraries being a place for intergenerational connection as well as being a place for wider activity as part of a hub including other partners at the heart of communities.

The discussion also covered how quality can be measured. The relative benefits of quantitative measures such as footfall, loans, and stock and qualitative measures such as impact and outcomes. Concluding that both were important.

One measure of quality mentioned was about libraries sharing best practice and learning within the sector. It was posited that services which could make time for reflection and learning and sharing the more widely could help to boost the quality of practice within the sector as a whole.

Contribution to other agendas and strategies and a local and national level was also mentioned as an indicator of quality. This, as with many of themes in the consultation session, echo things which we had heard throughout the consultation phase of the project.

Overall, the session enabled us to engage and hear a variety of views on thinking about what ‘core’ means for a library service, about the various ways of measuring quality and how those measures are effectively deployed.

# Discussion: A model for accreditation

Overall, as presented above, throughout the consultation phase we heard some clear and consistent messages, and a real system of accreditation began to take shape. From the discussions we had with stakeholders, particularly those with first-hand experience of different accreditation models, we were able to begin refining the model. We were also able to understand what was feasible and practical to undertake through our discussion with stakeholders.

Early outline of a model for accreditation:

* A scheme with self-assessment, validated through a peer check and challenge process taking into account the local context and reality of the service
* Using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative measures, mainly based on outcomes for communities, contribution to local priorities and addressing local needs but also some elements of internal practice such as leadership, how imbedded strategies are, workforce development etc.
* Based on these measures, a tier of accreditation is awarded (Gold, Silver, Bronze) or the library is classified as still ‘working towards’ accreditation.
* Library services given an improvement plan and support to improve or maintain their accreditation level.
* Involvement from key sector stakeholders, including Heads of Service and other library staff, as well as individuals from outside the library sector.

The early outline of a model in the above box was tested through a series of conversations with stakeholders in the library sector, local government and other stakeholders in the cultural sector. There was general agreement that this is a sensible model to use to inform the design phase of the accreditation, and offered a series of questions and statements to consider in that phase, including:

* The importance of having clear definitions and clarity of language:
  + A clearly understood and defined purpose, or set of purposes, for accreditation
  + A clear definition of the audience for accreditation
  + Clarity of language around – what is the scheme being called?
  + Does ‘working towards’ need to be defined in the same way as museums and archives?
* Would a model that is a very resource intensive approach to accreditation be feasible?
* How essential is having external check and challenge to the credibility and recognition of the scheme both within the sector and outside of it?
  + Would peer challenge be part of validation or part of improvement support before self-assessment?
  + How would a peer validation process involve the right peers in order to ensure ‘tunnel vision’ is reduced?
  + How might we balance peer voice with local context?
* The scheme needing a good mix of qualitative and quantitative measures – but being wary of hard metrics
  + Agreement that consistency of methodology will be essential as well as the ease of carrying out that methodology for services
* The potential issues with levels of accreditation: levels can help to stop a race to the bottom but can be incredibly hard to categorise and quantify.

### What does this mean for the principles which will inform the design of the content?

Based on our findings and the questions posed by stakeholders, we think that the following principles need to be considered during the design phase of this project. An accreditation scheme will need:

* To have a clear purpose and audience
* To be able to articulate what a library service does and does not offer
* To have buy-in from across the library sector, local authorities, government departments and other stakeholders, ensuring that all areas that library services impact are involved (health, housing, education, culture, economic development etc.)
* To use a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures
* To reflect the contribution of the service to local need and priorities
* To enable measures to be reviewed, reflected on and developed over time in order to reflect changing local priorities
* To develop a national narrative about the contribution of local services to national priorities
* To deliver the ‘core services’ of a library service.

### What does this mean for ownership and management of the scheme?

The findings above have provided us with the following questions:

#### What questions remain around the ownership of the scheme?

* What does ownership entail? Paying for all or some of it? Overseeing the process for deciding how it works/the rules? Providing staff to organise it? Overseeing the content of the scheme and keeping that context current?
* Which organisation(s) in reality are willing and able to play this ownership role?

#### What have our findings told us about the ownership and management of the scheme?

* Desire for the scheme to be ‘owned and organised by the public library sector’ as opposed to ‘independent body’ or ‘government’
* Needs to have the involvement/support of all existing key stakeholders (Libraries Connected, CILIP, LGA, ACE, DCMS, Library Staff, library advocates/user advocates – others?)
* Arts Council England have expressed a willingness to co-ordinate a scheme building on their operational capacity which oversees Museums Accreditation
* As we begin the ‘second diamond’ stage of development the question of ownership becomes key – who will deliver the scheme we are designing and what role will they play in the design phase?

### What does this mean for the structure and process of accreditation?

Our consultation process would suggest at least five key aspects of the possible approach to accreditation for English public libraries which need consideration in the design phase that will take place after the Libraries Connected project board has considered this report – and there may be others.

1. Pre-application
2. Application: self-assessment
3. Assessment and Validation: external/peer assessment (check and challenge)
4. Award
5. Retention

In the next section, we provide an overview of some of the questions under each of these headings which, based on our consultation phase, will need to be considered in the next phase.

#### Pre-application

The pre-application process would be the period when a library service decides to seek accreditation and officially become a service ‘working towards’ gaining that.

* Would this be an official process where library services have to fill out an eligibility criteria form and register to be officially ‘working towards’?
  + This would be similar to museums accreditation and ensure that there was not conflicting language around what ‘working towards’ means in different accreditation processes.
* Is this the stage at which a peer challenge is most useful for providing improvement support for a library service ‘working towards’ accreditation?
* How long should a library service have between registering as ‘working towards’ and submitting a self-assessment form?
* What would the eligibility criteria for ‘working towards’ accreditation be?

#### Application process: Self-assessment

After registering to be a service ‘working towards’ accreditation the service would have a set amount of time to submit their self-assessment form as well as core and supporting documents. The previous section lays out the principles which would inform the design of the content for this.

#### Assessment and validation – external/peer check and challenge

Once the self-assessment has been submitted it would need to be assessed to decide the questions which a validation visit would need to probe on and begin the writing of a report. A peer team would validate the library service and conduct interviews with staff and probe on any gaps in the application. Our consultation suggested that this team would be made up of a mixture of Head of Service, Councillors, other council officers and representatives from different sectors such as education or health, dependent on the local priorities of the service being assessed.

* Would peer validation be completely separate from a library peer challenge used for service improvement?
* Who is carrying out the initial assessment of the self-assessment forms?
* Who should the peer team be comprised of, and who would decide that? (What training would be made available to a network of peer reviewers/who has responsibility for creating a network of peers?)
* Is independent assessment of the self-assessment form needed in addition to a peer validation visit?

#### Award

The report and recommendation from the independent assessor/peer team would then presumably be formalised, e.g. by being agreed at some form of ‘awarding committee’.

* Should accreditation be awarded in three tiers (e.g. Gold, Silver, Bronze) or just a simple yes or no to accreditation?
* Would there be mechanisms which would allow those services which do not achieve accreditation first time around, but are given recommendations of how to improve, to become accredited without going through the entire application/peer validation process again?
* What else might follow from accreditation or non-accreditation (e.g. might it there be support for improvement, might there be grants for those who succeed in accreditation?

#### Retention

A crucial part of any accreditation system will be how long a service remains accredited once it has been awarded. Other accreditation schemes go for somewhere in the region of two to five years.

* How long should accreditation last?
* How many services could be accredited each year (what are the resource implications of 10 accreditation processes per year/or 20p.a./30p.a. and so on)?
* Are there other events that might trigger re-accreditation?
* What happens if a service fails to retain accreditation?

# Conclusion

The questions presented above amount to important considerations and questions going into the design phase of the project. This begins to give shape to an outline model and set of principles that we think need to be considered in the design of the content of an accreditation scheme for English public libraries.

Overall, in deciding which variants of the model of accreditation to take into Phase Two of this project, and thinking about the choices which need to be made, we think there are a number of important questions to consider:

1. Is the model of accreditation feasible to carry out in the library sector?
2. Would the model support improvement in the sector?
3. Would it help to address national consistency?
4. Would it be able to help services provide evidence of impact?
5. Would it help services to demonstrate their contribution to meeting community and local needs?

## Next steps

There are a number of choices, variations of the general approach developed throughout phase one of the project, which will need to be taken before the design phase can fully begin. Deciding upon an approach is the first step in this phase.

Once an approach has been decided upon, we will begin a series of workshops to develop the model for accreditation based on the principles drawn out in the consultation phase. We will meet with our reference group to review the consultation phase, explore the design principles and look at how these would fit into a model of accreditation.

We would then use an iterative approach to test what we have heard with library staff and the project board to refine a working draft of accreditation and choose three library services around the country (different geographies, sizes etc.) to pilot the model in while providing support and advice to the test areas and recording learning.

The reference group would act as a test group for the pilot and help us to discuss and explore learning from the process and identify strengths and weakness so that we can refine and improve the model. We will test outcomes of the pilot phase with the project board throughout and with key stakeholders at key points.

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1. <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/scoping-study-towards-a-blueprint-for-public-library-development-and-sustainability-in-england/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As above, p. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)