

# **Museum Accreditation Scheme**

## **Review of Progress in the Yorkshire Region**

### **1.0 Purposes of the Paper**

1.1 This paper has been written to record the manner in which the museum Accreditation scheme was applied to museums in the Yorkshire region over the six-year period spanning 2005 – 2010, and from this experience to generate recommendations for the benefit of those administering the scheme in future years. For the moment, they will be addressed to MLA.

### **2.0 Summary of Main Recommendations**

2.1 Formalised regional input into the Biennial Return programme needs to be instituted to allow a staged rolling timetable across the region.

2.1 The current division of responsibility between pre-application advice and post-application assessment needs to be retained.

2.3 The Biennial Return programme needs to be published to all museums in the scheme.

2.4 The distinction between the rôles of Curatorial Adviser (CA) and Museum Development Officer (MDO) needs greater clarification.

### **3.0 Background**

3.1 Following the national launch of the Museum Accreditation Scheme in November 2004, the then Yorkshire Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (YMLAC) was charged, in concert with its sister regions and the Home Countries, with hosting a regional launch event to supplement it. The regional event in Yorkshire was held on 12 January 2005 at the National Railway Museum, and the scheme formally launched by Baron Hattersley of Sparkbrook.

3.2 At the same time, regions were also required to produce a 5-year programme of work, covering the period from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2009, to indicate when and in what order existing Registered museums would be processed through the new scheme. This was to cover all 163 Registered museums in the region, although it was subsequently established that the three centrally-funded national museums, v.i.s. the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television (latterly the National Media Museum), the National Railway Museum and the Royal Armouries, would be subject to a separate programme governed directly by MLA. The only externally-imposed proviso was that Hub museums and others with Designated collections were to be dealt with first.

3.3 This report details the progress and outcomes of the Accreditation scheme in the Yorkshire Region.

## 4.0 Regional Programme

4.1 As it was known that MLA intended to give applicant museums 6 months to submit their applications from the date of receipt of the invitationary letter, it was decided to divide the 5-year period up into a series of ten 6-month *tranches*. The first was scheduled to commence on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2005, in order to succeed the regional launch. This initial 'delayed' start was then repeated throughout the 5-year period, as it was subsequently felt convenient to avoid the clerical effort of producing and distributing invitations to apply occurring over the Christmas period. The second annual *tranche* then ran from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 31<sup>st</sup> December, and it is understood that a number of other regions subsequently followed suit with similar 6-month *tranche* programmes of their own. Initially, invitationary letters were sent to museums by the regional agency, but upon its closure, the responsibility for this reverted to MLA in Birmingham. As a consequence, those falling under both of the 2009 *tranches* received their letters directly from MLA, with input from Renaissance Yorkshire over who was the most appropriate addressee in each case.

4.2 Upon instruction from MLA, all regions were required to arrange for the Hub museums and those with Designated collections to be invited first. As each *tranche* in the Yorkshire region would ideally contain 16 prospective applicants and the number of museums then administered by the Hub services, plus Harewood House (the only non-Hub museum in the region with Designated collections), totalled 30, this effectively dictated the programme for the first year. The remaining 4 years of the programme were then compiled according to following underlying principles:

- English Heritage, local authority and university museums should precede those in the independent sector.
- The amount of time between a museum gaining Full Registration and being invited to apply for Accreditation should be maximised, with an anticipated 'gap' of at least 5 years.

4.3 Again, as there was a serendipitously equal split between the numbers of publically-administered and independent museums, the former were programmed to apply in 2006 and 2007, with the latter scheduled for 2008 and 2009, which broadly followed the sequence of initial entry into the Registration scheme anyway. In hindsight, however, the wisdom of deciding to leave all of the smaller independent museums until the end of the programme was 'tested' in light of the un-anticipated demise of the regional agencies. For, just as those museums requiring the greatest degree of support were about to prepare their applications, MLAY ceased operating, so that the strength of support available to them was reduced just when ideally it should have increased. Thus the Accreditation-specific workload of the MDOs increased significantly at this point.

4.4 With MLA's approval of the programme, it was first published at the region launch, and was subsequently publicised as widely as possible, through the MLAY and Yorkshire Hub websites and at as many sub-regional meetings of museums as possible. It was also conveyed to museums that

they should not feel necessarily constrained by the programme, so that on the one hand they were entirely free to submit applications in advance of being invited, and that equally, should they need an extension of their submission deadlines, their cases would be considered sympathetically. In addition to this, prospective new applicants were not governed in any way by the programme, although where new applications were prepared by existing governing bodies, it made sense to submit them in concert with those from their existing Registered sites.

4.5 By and large, these various measures, which were 'tailored' to suit the particular situation in the Yorkshire region, contributed significantly the relatively smooth 'passage' of the introduction of the revised standard across all museums within it, and although ownership of the regional programme for inviting existing Registered museums to apply for Accreditation was transferred to MLA in 2008, the programme itself remained substantially unchanged until it ended in December 2009. As it had been based originally on detailed regional knowledge, and as the Biennial Return will assume far greater importance in the maintenance of the Standard, it is felt imperative that regions retain a substantial degree of influence over its timetable. **It is therefore recommended that regions are consulted in detail when the programme for the issue of Biennial Returns is being drawn up**, ideally through the preparation of proposed drafts by the regions themselves. In this way, the respective workloads of the regional adviser, the MDOs, the CAs and the museums themselves can be pre-planned and prepared for, which in turn will smooth the way for the introduction of the new version of the standard across the region.

## **5.0 Division of Responsibility**

5.1 In the first year, the tasks of advising museums and making initial assessments of their applications remained unified within the Regional Agency. During this year, there were in effect only 6 applicants, i.e. the five Hub member museum services and Harewood House. However, it was soon realised that dealing with just 6 clients in this way would not be repeated in subsequent years, as most of the other local authority services had far fewer sites than their city counterparts, and most independent governing bodies managed a single museum each. In addition, it also became apparent that the task of advising and supporting museums to achieve the significantly enhanced standard of Accreditation over Registration was much more time-consuming, not least because of the need in many cases to explain to applicants exactly what was required of them – 'interpretation' of the new standard with respect to an individual museum's situation constituted a significant proportion of the overall support given to that museum.

5.2 For these reasons, as well as from a long-standing desire to separate the advice and assessment functions to avoid the potential for major conflicts of interest, in November 2005 the Regional Accreditation Officer (RAO) post was created and positioned within the Yorkshire Renaissance structure in order to provide more effective separation.

5.3 Early the following year, the assessment function was also devolved to an external consultant, thus allowing the three functions of the overall regional

management of the scheme, the provision of intimate pre-application advice to museums, and the independent assessment of applications, to be provided by different agencies working in concert with each other. One of the most significant benefits of this way of working was to separate the pre-application advice function from that of initial assessment of applications by placing them with different agencies, and it soon became known informally as the 'Yorkshire model', which was subsequently replicated, with only slight variation, by many of the other regions.

5.4 From the initial introduction of this division of responsibility, clear lines of communication between the RAO, the external assessor and while still extant, the regional Accreditation manager based in MLA Yorkshire, were established, so that local knowledge could be exchanged and points clarified between each party, while at the same time allowing the separation of interests to be maintained. By this means, it was felt that both the quality and the integrity of the scheme were preserved, with each of the three agents free to focus on the needs of the individual museum, the needs of the regional programme and the needs of the standard respectively, and in particular, the creation of a "Paper Wall" between the advice and assessment functions in this way was a crucial feature of the successful administration of the scheme in the Yorkshire region. **It is therefore strongly recommended that this division be retained in the future.**

## **6.0 Museums' Access to Information**

6.1 From the outset, it was felt that all existing Registered museums within the region should know when their invitations were scheduled to be received, so that a) they would not arrive at museums unexpectedly and b) museums could start preparing for their submissions as soon as they wished. Consequently, widespread publicity was given to the timetable from the outset, which appeared on the MLA Yorkshire and Renaissance Yorkshire websites as well as being featured in all contacts made with individual and groups of museums.

6.2 Following the creation of the RAO post, this widespread publicity was supplemented by a pre-invitationary letter, sent out by him personally, to each museum three months in advance of the scheduled date for the receipt of the official invitation to apply. Again, this had two aims – a) to 'soften the blow' of the receipt of the official invitation even further and b) to reinforce the message to applicant museums to start preparations as early as possible. This latter point was particularly beneficial to those museums with 'unfortunate' planning and accounting cycles, where 6 months' notice based on half-calendar year periods had a tendency to cut across their decision-making routines.

6.3 Soon after his appointment, the RAO was also requested to address groups of individuals at specific locations in order to explain the scheme in more detail and to answer questions directly. In support of this, a Powerpoint presentation was written for general consumption, which contained not only the invitation/submission timetable for the institution concerned, but also a summary of the standard's requirements, along with hints and tips on addressing the work successfully. This was found to be particularly useful in

reassuring some applicant museums that the requirements of the scheme were within their capability; that they were in many cases already complying with the standards required. It also became quickly apparent that the 'message' was as important to governing bodies as it was for staff, so that a less detailed version was prepared for this kind of audience, which included a greater degree of justification of the scheme's existence. Over a four-year period, a total of 21 presentations were made to museum staff and other groupings, such as the Federation and the Military Curators' Group, with another 14 given to governing bodies. Once the basic 'thread' of the presentation had been created, it was a relatively simple matter to 'personalise' it for the benefit of each individual audience.

6.4 Experience in the Yorkshire region has been that the provision of continuing dissemination of information on all aspects of the standard, including its content and administration as well as the timetable for individual applicants, has been of significant factor in the relatively smooth passage of the introduction of the Accreditation scheme across all museums. **It is therefore recommended that this provision, including the widespread publication of the Biennial Return programme, is continued.**

## **7.0 Involvement of CAs and MDOs**

7.1 In the last two years of the scheme, when it became the turn of the smaller independent museums to submit their applications, the involvement of both the sub-regionally-based MDOs, and the CAs where required, became crucial. The pre-application advice and assistance rôle expanded significantly at this point for the following two principal reasons:

7.1.1 Because very few governing bodies in the independent sector manage more than one museum site, the number of individual applicants almost mirrored the number of museums. Thus for almost every application, one-to-one direct support needed to be given, which contrasted with the 'blanket' support previously given to multi-sited applicants, mainly in the public sector.

7.1.2 The case for Accreditation needed to be made more intensely to museum staff and governing body members who were not themselves museum professionals.

7.2 However, during this process, not only did some CAs find themselves potentially working in isolation, but they were also unsure about whether they were accountable to MLA or to the Museum whilst engaged in the process. For many, there appeared to be a degree of vagueness over the boundaries of their remit – should it cover all aspects of the Standard or should it be restricted to collection care and management? And with the involvement of MDOs, what should their relationship with them be? Should their individual remits overlap, or should there be some kind of demarcation line between their respective rôles? Although each had access to the Curatorial Advice Pack, this issue is not addressed anywhere within it. **It is therefore recommended that the division of responsibilities between these two functions is defined more clearly**, which it is felt would be assisted

significantly through greater national coordination and control of CAs, so that their individual development needs are addressed more effectively.

## **8.0 Regional Administration of the Scheme**

8.1 Once the first year's worth of applicants had been dealt with, it became increasingly apparent that the manner in which the electronic application was intended to have been applied to the process had two major drawbacks:

8.1.1 Blanket dissemination of the URL at the outset through the medium of the invitationary letter had the potential to create undue concern among some applicants, not least because the format of the online application form was often dissimilar to the printed version.

8.1.2 The ability of the RAO to monitor application forms was hampered by having to gain access to online drafts through using applicants' user names and passwords.

8.2 These issues were addressed in the Yorkshire region by the creation of a locally-produced *Microsoft Word* template of the application form and by withholding the URL from applicants until both parties were satisfied with the content of the Word draft. The former allowed draft responses to each of the questions to be emailed between the applicant and the RAO as frequently as was required, which in turn took much of the pressure off the presentation of the latter, as in most cases the task was reduced to a cut-and-paste exercise towards the end of the process. Indeed, once the smaller independent museums began to be involved towards the end of the programme, it became routine for the RAO to sit at the side of many of the applicants at the point of presentation of the URL and for the online form to be filled in and submitted at the same sitting. The degree to which this process produced a sense of relief for the applicant at this point should not be underestimated.

8.3 Another aspect which emerged fairly early on in the programme was the apparent duplication of effort faced by existing Registered museums applying for Accreditation whilst closed for major developments. Following 'case-law' established during Registration Phase II, museums applying under these conditions are constrained to being awarded no more than Provisional Accreditation, which is then accompanied by a substantial list of Required Actions covering at least Sections 2 and 3 of the standard. In practical terms, revisiting these two sections in their entirety, plus parts of other sections where the final outcome was not known until the site re-opened, was found to be tantamount to preparing a second application. After the first two years of the scheme therefore, the advice in the Yorkshire region to those museums which were closed for refurbishment at the time of their anticipated invitation to apply was to request an extension of their submission deadlines. This not only saved a significant amount of nugatory work (and seemingly needless Panel business as well) but it also had the advantage of allowing existing Fully Registered museums to retain that status until their appearance on the Panel agenda where Full Accreditation was the predicted outcome.

8.4 This realisation also led to a more general policy of advising museums of the likelihood of applications failing to achieve Full Accreditation. With a

degree of experience of the outcomes of Panel decision-making generally over the first two years of the scheme, it became possible to advise museums on the quality of their intended application, and in individual cases for the RAO to caution against submission until this level had been reached. In this regard, the 'gate-keeping' of the URL by the RAO also acted as a quality control measure, by minimising the likelihood of the submission of potentially unsuccessful applications. The success of this policy was borne out by the fact that only six awards of Provisional Accreditation were made across the region over the 5-year period, which compares with over triple that number of similar awards made in the Yorkshire region under Registration Phase II. Of these six, three were awarded before the regional policy was introduced, and of the other three, two applications were submitted despite reservations expressed by the RAO and/or MDO/CA, and the third was submitted without any reference to the RAO at all (the URL was apparently gleaned from a neighbouring museum).

8.5 Finally, it became apparent approximately half way through the process that museums remained relatively unsure of the mechanisms by which the various forms of support they had received had been delivered. As a consequence, once each museum had progressed successfully through the process, and the award of Full Accreditation was made public, Renaissance Yorkshire wrote each one a letter of congratulation, in which they were reminded of the sources of the support they had received.

8.6 By these various mechanisms, the local administration of the scheme was tailored to match the specific needs of the museum population within the region. As it is felt that for any nationally-based scheme to operate successfully at regional level there must be the freedom to implement minor variations to take account of regional differences, it is assumed that such freedom will continue, and that therefore no specific recommendations to this effect need to be made.

## 9.0 Other Observations and Comments

9.1 Over the 6 year period, a total of 24 museums were Removed from the Register in the Yorkshire region. Details of specific museums are contained in the attached summary table of statistics. However, these 24 may be broken down as follows:

• Closed permanently or ceased qualifying as museums	13
• Incorporated into other sites	4
• Closed and reopened elsewhere or in another guise	2
• Declined to apply for the standard	<u>5</u>
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>

9.2 With the addition of 10 successful new applicants over the same period, the overall regional population of Registered/Accredited museums has declined by just under 10%. This is approximately double the attrition rate experienced in the Yorkshire region during the roll-out of Registration Phase II, although it is felt that factors other than the increase in minimum standards required by Accreditation, such as the economic climate, may have played

their part in this process. Although it is currently not clear exactly by how much the standard will be 'stiffened' in its next iterative version, any increase in requirement is expected to cause some further 'attrition' to the Accredited museum population in the region.

9.3 Comment on design and content issues arising from both the printed standard and the application form have been made elsewhere, and once MLA had been notified of the potential effects of perceived 'tardiness' in the assessment process, this was addressed, partly by incorporating a system of reporting to museums progress on their applications. Other issues which were addressed satisfactorily during the course for the process include effective dissemination of hard copies of the standard, the application form, CA Guidance Notes and other publicity material.

## **ATTACHMENT**

### **Accreditation Results Summary – Yorkshire Region**