
The Accreditation Scheme for
Museums in the United Kingdom

Working with your Curatorial Adviser: information for museums

Introduction

This leaflet is intended for those museums that need to appoint or continue to work with a Curatorial Adviser in order to reach or retain Accredited status under the new museum standard. The Accreditation Scheme – previously the Museum Registration Scheme – sets minimum requirements across the whole range of museum activities, and provides paid staff and volunteers with a way of assessing their own approaches and performance against an externally recognised standard.

The advice offered here applies whether your museum is

- Fully Registered under Phase 2 of the Registration Scheme
- working from Provisional towards Fully Registered or Fully Accredited status
- going on to apply for Accredited status under the new standard
- considering entering the scheme for the first time.

1. The Scheme

The Museum Registration Scheme was first launched in 1988. It has been endorsed by a wide range of organisations including the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the local government associations, and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) is responsible for maintaining the standard as part of its work to develop capacity and promote innovation and change. The revised Standard was published in 2004 after extensive collaboration with the museum community; it is available on the MLA website.

The scheme is implemented by MLA working with the Regional Agencies for Museums, Libraries and Archives in England, the Scottish Museums Council and the Northern Ireland Museums Council and CyMAL – Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales. These bodies are subsequently referred to as the ‘assessing organisations’.

2. Accreditation requirements for curatorial advice

Appropriate access to professional advice on key aspects of museum work is a requirement for all museums applying for Accredited status, whether this is provided internally, by a member of staff, or externally by a Curatorial Adviser. Applicants for Accredited status must also give details of the arrangements they make for obtaining professional advice.

The minimum qualifications and experience required by the Accreditation scheme are

- Curators must have a relevant degree, or a diploma in museum studies (or equivalent), or experience of the principles and practice of museum management
- Curatorial Advisers must have a relevant degree, or diploma in museum studies (or equivalent) AND recent relevant experience of the principles and practice of museum operation and management

Interpretation of ‘equivalent qualifications’ and ‘relevant experience’ will be determined on a case by case basis.

Small or volunteer-run museums may not have access to a professionally trained and/or experienced curator. If this applies to you, then your governing body must formally appoint a Curatorial Adviser, and evidence of this must be provided as part of the Accreditation application process. You should then seek your Adviser’s guidance in preparing the Accreditation application, and ask him or her to counter-sign the application form – it will be invalid without this signature. Thereafter, your Adviser will also provide a brief report to your assessing organisation as part of the Accreditation monitoring process.

3. Selecting a Curatorial Adviser

Begin by discussing this appointment with your assessing organisation – this will be important when considering the feasibility of applying for Accreditation for the first time. Your assessing organisation may also be able to suggest potential advisers.

Think about the kind of advice you most need – this may help you decide whether your Curatorial Adviser might be

- based at another museum in your locality
- have existing links with your museum
- be a specialist in a related area of interest

Your assessing organisation will be able to offer guidance on this.

Then ask the potential adviser if he or she can consider taking on the role. If this is acceptable, the appointment must be formally made at a meeting of the museum’s governing body. A copy of the minutes confirming the appointment must be sent to the assessing organisation and to the Adviser.

Finally work with your Adviser on drawing up an agreement which sets out your respective roles and responsibilities – you can use the template included here.

4. Who can become a Curatorial Adviser

You may already have a museum professional on your governing body, who would be willing and able to take on this role. Before taking this step, you must check that the advisory duties will not conflict with those of a governing body member. If this is the case, you will need to find a second museum professional to act in an advisory role in relation to this Scheme.

Your local authority may employ a Museum Advisory or Development Officer who provides advice and support to museums throughout a defined area. These officers are eligible to act as Curatorial Advisers, although it may not be possible for them to accept an invitation. Staff working in the Hub museums in England may also be able to act as Curatorial Advisers.

Assessing organisation staff cannot take on the role of Curatorial Adviser within their own area, but will always be able to offer advice and support on museum issues.

The Accreditation Committee, composed of senior museum professionals, takes decisions on all applications and ultimately has responsibility for determining whether the qualifications and experience of Curatorial Advisers meet Accreditation requirements.

5. Changes to Curatorial Advice arrangements

There may be occasions when your Curatorial Adviser has to give up this role. If this is the case, you must inform your assessing organisation immediately, and take steps to appoint a new Adviser so that Accreditation requirements can continue to be met, following the guidance set out here.

Although you may need to appoint a Curatorial Adviser when you first apply for Accreditation, you may not need to retain him or her indefinitely. If a previously unqualified curator acquires the necessary skills and experience through following a recognised programme of training, the Accreditation Committee may decide that a Curatorial Adviser is no longer necessary. Your assessing organisation can provide advice on this. You may feel it appropriate to continue to work with your Curatorial Adviser in the short-to-medium term, as your member of staff gradually assumes their new responsibilities.

If you decide to appoint a curator without the required qualifications or experience, a Curatorial Adviser is likely to be necessary. Again, you should discuss this with your assessing organisation as it may affect your Accredited status.

6. Relationship between the museum and the Curatorial Adviser

Some basic principles govern the relationship between you and your Adviser

- good communication, mutual trust and friendship are essential to a productive, effective partnership.
- your Adviser should not become involved in or be considered responsible for the actions of the governing body.
- your Adviser and your governing body should ensure that the Adviser does not carry out programmes of work at the museum.

A written agreement may be useful here too, setting out your respective expectations and responsibilities.

7. The responsibilities of the museum

Curatorial Advisers can only fulfil their role if they have appropriate access to both information and individuals involved in the museum. You must, therefore,

- seek the Adviser's advice when preparing the Accreditation application
- make good use of your Adviser's subject expertise, knowledge of other museums, awareness of current museum issues and familiarity with sources of advice and information
- send all papers and minutes of the governing body to your Adviser, whether or not he or she is due to attend a particular meeting
- inform your Adviser of all dates of governing body meetings well in advance
- give the Adviser an opportunity at governing body meetings to report on the museum's progress in achieving or maintaining Accreditation standards, provide general reports on museum issues, or identify agenda items for future meetings.
- provide access to all aspects of the museum's work
- provide a single contact who can be readily available to discuss museum issues

8. The responsibilities of the Curatorial Adviser

Curatorial Advisers assess the overall performance of their museum, and make suggestions on how that might be approved. They are specifically required to

- assist the museum to gain and maintain Full Accredited status by endorsing your application when the required standards have been met
- make good use of their subject expertise, knowledge of other museums, awareness of current museum issues and familiarity with sources of information in advising your museum
- receive all papers and minutes of the governing body
- attend and contribute to at least one meeting a year
- visit the museum at least once a year
- provide information and advice in relation to the Accreditation Standard
- provide details of where they can be readily contacted
- make a report to MLA covering the museum and its ability to meet the Accreditation standard

Additional reports or further visits may be appropriate, especially in the early stages of a museum's development.

9. How to make the best of your Curatorial Adviser

Curatorial Advisers are not necessarily able to provide specialist advice across the full range of museum disciplines, but they should be able to point you in the direction of other sources of information and guidance. They will be able to help you identify when specialist help is required, and may also be able to suggest suitable projects for grant aid and identify possible sources of funding. They will also

- encourage you to keep in contact with other museums and museum colleagues, such as regional museum officers, specialist curators groups, regional curators groups and your assessing organisation
- encourage those responsible for day-to-day management of the museum to acquire and develop their own museum skills – MLA's free publication, *Developing and Training Staff in Museums and Galleries*, may help you here.

You may feel it helpful to have more than one Curatorial Adviser, particularly if your museum's area of interest is highly specialised. Again, you should talk to your assessing organisation about this first.

10. Payment and liability

Curatorial Advisers often donate their time, and that of their employers, to the museums they work with, so it may be appropriate to offer to pay travelling expenses. Alternatively, you may have agreed with your Curatorial Adviser's employer to pay for curatorial advice.

Payment may be made to the Adviser for work carried out in his or her own time which is beyond the usual responsibilities of an Adviser.

A Curatorial Adviser, whether paid or unpaid, should give advice honestly and prudently. If that advice is given in good faith, MLA believes it unlikely that the Adviser would be held liable for costs or damages if something went wrong. However, it is sensible for both the museum and the Adviser to consider the possibility. Ultimately, the only way of covering this eventuality is through professional indemnity insurance, which will probably prove too expensive for the majority of small museums. MLA, therefore, recommends that the Adviser and the museum's governing body should agree a waiver whereby the Adviser, acting in an individual capacity, will give professional advice honestly and to the best of his or her ability, but will not be held responsible for loss, damages or costs arising from that advice. The Outline Agreement document included in this leaflet gives a suggested form of words.

If the Curatorial Adviser is also a member of the museum's governing body he or she will be unpaid and responsible to the same extent as any other member for behaving prudently. General guidance on the responsibilities of trustees can be obtained from your assessing organisation.

If Curatorial Adviser is not a member of the museum's governing body, everyone should be aware of the danger of the trustees relying too much on his or her advice, and inadvertently delegating management and policy decisions to the Adviser. There is a risk of the Adviser becoming a 'shadow trustee', and thus subject to the responsibilities and penalties associated with the office of trustee.

11. Outline Agreement document

This is a suggested form of words which can be used or adapted. You can also use the version of this form provided on the Accreditation pages of MLA's website.

Information for Curatorial Advisers, or for those considering acting in this capacity, is available on the MLA website.

Agreement between

[Name of museum]

and

[Name of Curatorial Adviser]

[Date on which this agreement starts]

[Date on which this agreement ends]

[Museum contact name]

[Museum address]

[Museum telephone number]

[Museum fax number / email]

[Curatorial Adviser contact name]

[Curatorial Adviser address]

[Curatorial Adviser telephone number]

[Curatorial Adviser fax number / email]

Introduction

This agreement outlines the responsibilities of the Museum and the Curatorial Adviser.

The Agreement will be reviewed regularly.

Curatorial advice to specified levels is provided free of charge/ at an agreed charge (and the Museum will meet the cost of travel expenses, if applicable)

Accreditation Status of the Museum

Date museum entered Registration Scheme

[Please state date]

Current Registration status

[Please give status: either 'Full', 'Provisional', or 'application in progress']

New Museum Accreditation Standard re-application date

[Please state date, if applicable]

Required Action points

[These are as set out in the most recent decision letter]

Responsibilities of the Museum

- Appointing the Curatorial Adviser and adopting this Agreement through the minutes of the governing body
- Making good use of the Curatorial Adviser's subject expertise, knowledge of other museums, awareness of current museum issues and familiarity with other sources of information
- Sending all papers and minutes of the governing body whether or not the Adviser is due to attend a particular meeting
- Informing the Curatorial Adviser of all dates of governing body meetings well in advance
- Giving the Adviser an opportunity at governing body meetings to report on the museum's progress in achieving or maintaining Accreditation standards, provide general reports on museum issues, or identify agenda items for future meetings.
- Giving access to all aspects of the museum's work
- Providing a single contact who can be readily available to discuss museum issues

Responsibilities of the Curatorial Adviser

- Assisting the museum to gain and maintain Full Accreditation by providing appropriate information and advice on Accreditation and museum issues
- Endorsing the museum's Accreditation application
- Making good use of their subject expertise, knowledge of other museums, awareness of current museum issues and familiarity with sources of information in advising your museum
- Receiving all papers and minutes of the governing body
- Attending and contributing to at least one meeting a year
- Visiting the museum at least once a year
- Making an annual report to MLA on request covering the museum and its ability to meet the Accreditation Standard

The Adviser should give advice honestly and prudently but will not be held responsible for loss, damages or costs arising from that advice.

Signed (on behalf of the museum)

[Please sign and print name]

[Please state date]

Signed (Curatorial Adviser)

[Please sign and print name]

[Please state date]

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) is the national development agency working for and on behalf of museums, libraries and archives in England, advising the government on policy and priorities for the sector.

Current news, developments and information are available to view or download from **www.mla.gov.uk**

**Copies of this publication can be provided
in alternative formats. Please contact
MLA publications on 020 7273 1458.**

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