



# LIGHT TOUCH PEER REVIEW

for Museums, Libraries and Archives

Supporting self-improvement



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# 1. Introduction

## Light Touch Peer Review

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council is committed to working in partnership with local services to drive improvement in museums, libraries and archives. We are committed to the principles of [\*A Passion for Excellence. An Improvement Strategy for Culture and Sport.\*](#)

We recognise that the sector contains within it the professionalism, knowledge and expertise necessary to drive its own improvement. Helping museums, libraries and archives learn from each other and have access to best practice is at the heart of what MLA wants to achieve. As such, we have developed a Light Touch Peer Review approach. Building on our past experience of facilitating peer reviews, working with organisations experienced in facilitating peer reviews such as the Improvement and Development Agency, and working with the sector, we have developed an approach that supports improvement, is light on bureaucracy and can be adapted to local circumstance.

This Review is about helping services improve their positioning in terms of meeting and supporting local community needs and their performance in these will be increasingly important in a declining resource situation where the value of funding such services will come under increasing scrutiny. It applies equally to council, and independent services and can help improve services where weakness has already been identified, whilst also being of use to excellent services who wish to improve further.

It builds upon two pilots undertaken in early 2009. One with a unitary council's library service, and another with a district council's museum service. It has also been informed by MLA's experience of undertaking Peer Reviews of Library Services as part of the Framework for the Future programme, and also MLA London's Museums Peer Review. In addition, MLA has taken account of the DCMS Museums Peer Review Pilot which built upon Sir Brian McMaster's report *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement*, published in January 2008. This recommended the introduction of new systems of self-assessment and peer review for cultural institutions, focused on judgement rather than measurement, in order to encourage and reward excellence, innovation and risk-taking.

MLA's approach to peer review has been developed to support services which are delivered locally, and is therefore consistent with approaches to local government improvement, particularly those set out in *A Passion for Excellence. An Improvement Strategy for Culture and Sport.* However, this Light Touch Peer Review is not exclusively aimed at local government services, and can be of value to museums, libraries and archives, no matter who provides them, or how.

# 1. Introduction

## What is a Peer Review?

A peer review allows a team of people who understand the pressures and challenges of running museums, libraries and archives to review the practices of your service in a challenging but supportive way. This process allows a constructive discussion of your strengths and weaknesses and provides recommendations of how improvements can be made.

## Why have a Peer Review?

Peer reviews are about MLA helping museums, libraries and archives, and local councils drive their own improvement. Reasons to undertake a peer review vary, but might include:

- Help drive continuous improvement;
- Provide a progress check against previous peer reviews or external assessments;
- Undertake an external stocktake for a new manager, chief executive, executive member or leader;
- Advocacy for the service – it can raise the profile of a service and its contribution by having external people validating what it is doing;
- Inform improvement planning; and
- Draw upon professional networks, partnerships and best practice.

## A Peer Review process for museums, libraries and archives

Light Touch Peer Review is intended to be a tool to help improve services from the MLA sector. However, in some instances improvement is better driven through a focus on the whole of the culture and sport services provided by a council. MLA recommends that councils make use of the [IDeA's approach to peer review](#) in such instances. Peer review facilitated by the IDeA allows a council to look across the whole spread of its cultural services, and MLA sees significant value in this. Looking at a museum, library or archive service in isolation risks failing to make the connections with those services it works in partnership with, and those outcomes it is or should be contributing to that it can only do in tandem with others.

Light Touch Peer Review is a more targeted approach. It is about providing practical help and expertise to help you plan your service's improvement. The decision to pursue it may well emerge from a broader peer review or from processes such as Culture and Sport Strategic Dialogues which identify a particular need for a particular service to access an external perspective which can help it deliver on its potential. Or it may suggest that the service would benefit from being part of one of these more strategic and less service-specific approaches.

## 2. Undertaking a Peer Review

### Choosing to do a Peer Review

The decision to pursue a Peer Review may emerge in several ways. A council or a museum, library or archive service may decide as part of its ongoing dialogue with MLA that a Peer Review is an appropriate part of its improvement journey. It may decide itself to approach MLA for help in undertaking a Peer Review.

Once it has been agreed that MLA will support a Peer Review, then the following will take place:

- An initial inception meeting
- Review of key documents
- Preparation for the on-site meeting
- The on-site meeting
- Report back

### Setting up a Peer Review – inception meeting

The council or service will meet with the MLA Regional Manager to agree the scope, the date and the make up of the Peer Review Team.

### Working together

The Light Touch Peer Review approach that MLA has set out here is adaptable to local circumstance. It is not a template to be rigorously applied as a one size fits all. MLA will work with you to tailor it to your needs.

### Who are the peers?

MLA will bring together a Peer Review Team. It will consist of the following members.

- **MLA Regional Manager** The Regional Manager will be the Team Lead, and the main point of contact between the service/authority and the Peer Review Team. They may be supported by other members of MLA staff. In some instances, the Team will be led by the MLA Director of Engagement for the Region.
- **Peer** An experienced sector professional, with direct experience of running museums, libraries or archives, who can bring their perspective to your services. There may be more than one peer as part of the Peer Review Team.
- **Independent consultant** Who can provide rigour to the process, independence and expertise relating to improvement of cultural services in a local delivery context.

MLA will work with you to identify who best to approach to make up the Peer Review Team. We will take your views into account as we select the best people.

## 2. Undertaking a Peer Review

- MLA will use our relationships with the main professional bodies in our sector, the regional hub museums, regional cultural and sport improvement networks, regional improvement and efficiency partnerships and our own contacts to help identify an appropriate peer who meets the needs of your service and the aims of the Review.
- To identify an appropriate independent consultant, MLA maintains an approved list of consultants who have relevant skills and experience.

The team may be supported by others to perform discrete tasks, e.g. data analysis.

### Statement on the purpose of the Peer Review

While Peer Reviews are delivered in partnership with a council or a service, the Peer Review relies for its value on access to external expertise in a rigorous context. MLA owns the process and its outcomes, but we need to be clear about why a Peer Review has been chosen and what it seeks to achieve for the service and its users. As such, MLA will agree a short statement with the council or service about the purpose of the peer review. This should be communicated to stakeholders beforehand – especially to staff.

### Principles

We ask that the Peer Review Team and the council or service subject to Peer Review adopt the following principles.

- **Co-ownership** MLA will oversee the process, but we want to deliver it in partnership. MLA is not an inspector, we are facilitating a process that will enable improvement, and we expect that that recipients will fully participate in putting that process together. A Peer Review is about facilitating change in a service where the need for change has already been identified by those responsible for that service.
- **Transparency** We expect staff to be informed about the process and its purpose. We expect that the findings of the peer review will be shared with stakeholders.
- **Engagement** The process will not work unless the right people participate. This should include the senior management team and director for the service in question, and, if possible and appropriate, senior political and managerial leaders.
- **Improvement** MLA is investing time and resources to support improvement. We will respect the principles of self-improvement, but we expect that those choosing to be subject to a Peer Review do so in a spirit of driving their own improvement in the long term.
- **Light touch** The impact of a peer review should be positive and focused on supporting improvement. It should impose as few burdens as possible, be easy for a museum, library, archive or council to access and to undertake.

### 3. Preparing for an on-site visit

The peer review team will meet to consider their initial views of the service, drawn from desk research. To allow them to do this, the council or service will be asked to undertake the following.

- **Self assessment** Complete a self assessment of the service, using the *Culture and Sport Improvement Toolkit*, and submit this to MLA a week before the on site visit. The Council are asked to allocate a half day to this, and to involve at least the management team responsible for the service, and the relevant director.
- **Strategies and plans** To understand the strategic context for the service, and the partnerships which it operates within, provide to MLA relevant corporate and service plans for the service, as well as plans and strategies which relate to partnerships the service operates within. We would expect this to include documentation relating to the county/district Local Area Agreements and Local Strategic Partnerships, hub museums, and other partnerships (eg. PCT, police, LEA, regeneration and housing growth etc.).
- **Performance data** To understand how well the service is performing, we would expect the Council to provide performance information for at least the last three years, including data in income and expenditure. MLA will undertake analysis of this data.

*“The peer review undertaken of our library service was an extremely useful exercise. The opportunity for the service to be reviewed by knowledgeable, experienced professionals, acting as a ‘critical friend’ proved revealing in that it highlighted areas of really good practice as well as areas where other comparable library services had moved ahead.*

*The process, which only involved a day on site, is one which I would recommend to colleagues in other authorities.”*

James Coulton, Assistant Director of Community Services, Plymouth City Council

## 4. The on-site visit

The Peer Review Team will undertake an on-site visit. In most cases this can be completed in one day, but in some instances it will last for two or more.

This will allow the initial view formed on the basis of the desk exercise to be tested in discussion with managers, staff and stakeholders.

The Peer Review Team may choose to focus on certain CSIT benchmark themes which the self assessment or other process has indicated as being significant issues for further exploration. From this the Review Team may, in consultation with the service, decide to hone in on some key lines of inquiry. These will be agreed with the service and form the basis of the questioning on the site visit.

The service or the council are asked to ensure that the people we ask to meet are available, and that suitable rooms are provided.

Please note that we will not communicate the identity of stakeholders and staff giving us their views if they wish to remain anonymous.

In a council-run service, or one where partnership with a local authority is important, it is essential that elected members are engaged with the Peer Review and meet with the Peer Review Team.

The on site visit could include visits to venues and facilities. However, the purpose of such visits and their value to the Peer Review should be clearly identified from the outset.

A review could follow the specimen timetable on page 9.

*“It is those working in our museums, libraries and archives who will drive improvement. Peer review is about making that expertise available in order to benefit the sector’s users.”*

Roy Clare, Chief Executive, MLA

## 4. The on-site visit

Time	Tasks
9.30 – 10.30	Initial meeting between review team, and senior managers, to include relevant director. This will provide an introduction to the day, and will also allow the council or service to give their views, following completion of the self assessment.
10.30 – 14.00	<p>Peer Review Team to split into two: One part of team holds one to ones with members of the service management team. The second part of the team undertakes focus groups.</p> <p><b>Focus group 1 – stakeholders</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representatives of users (eg. Friends Groups, volunteers, etc, random selections). Consideration should also be given to non-users.</li> <li>• Partners – (schools, LEA, hub, council services of which the service is a client or contractor, finance, other cultural institutions, third sector, further and higher education, etc).</li> </ul> <p><b>Focus group 2 – staff</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross section of staff employed in the service.</li> </ul>
14.00 – 15.00	Meetings with Leader of the Council, Executive Member for Culture and Leisure and also the Chief Executive, undertaken as one to ones.
15.00 – 16.30	<p>Review Team consider findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Characteristics of service</li> <li>• Improvement priorities</li> </ul>
16.30	Review Team present initial findings to Senior Management Team and seek feedback.

## 5. Reporting back

The council or the service will receive an initial presentation from the Review Team on their findings. This is likely to take place at the end of the on-site visit.

Following the presentation of initial findings, the MLA Regional Manager will present, on behalf of the Review Team, a final review report by an agreed date. It will be short, but will include:

- The findings of the peer review – strengths and weaknesses of the service
- Evidence for those findings
- Suggested improvement priorities

The council or service will have the chance to comment upon this, but the report is owned by MLA on behalf of the Peer Review team. We expect that the council or service will share this report, as appropriate, with stakeholders and staff, certainly with those who participated in the review.

### **What happens if there is disagreement?**

MLA believes that by working in partnership with the council or service throughout, and ensuring that every finding by the Review Team is founded upon evidence, that potential for disagreement can be minimised.

If there is disagreement on the contents of the report, the Regional Manager will liaise with the council or the service to see if this can be overcome. If it cannot, then the relevant MLA Director of Engagement will meet with the most appropriate senior member of staff. In a local authority service we would expect this to be with the director responsible for the service, or the Chief Executive of the council. If a non-local authority service, we would expect this to be the Head of Service or the Chair of the Board of Trustees or equivalent. If no agreement can be reached, then the report will be presented to the council or the service with the recognition that the recipients disagree with its findings.

### **Next steps and ongoing support from MLA**

Within six months, the MLA Regional Manager will meet with the council or service to discuss the improvement priorities and agreed, and ways in which MLA can support a subsequent improvement plan. This might be through direct assistance from MLA, support that MLA brokers from a third party, or advice and guidance on where to go to access good practice.

We will conduct evaluation of our improvement offer so that we can improve it and that we want recipients of Light Touch Peer Review to participate in that evaluation.

## 6. Quality assurance

Although the process is intended to be light touch and there is ability to tailor the process to local circumstances the process is designed to be rigorous and robust. The quality assurance comes from four elements:

1. The quality of the people carrying out the review. The independent consultant will be drawn from a list of preferred suppliers. They will have gone through a procurement process that is designed to identify that they have the right level of skills and experience to help deliver a Light Touch Peer Review. The role of the independent consultant is not just that they bring their experience and knowledge of service improvement to the team. They also provide rigour to the process. They know about undertaking Peer Reviews and the broader context of local service improvement, and they are independent of MLA. MLA will broker access to peers who have the relevant experience and knowledge.
2. Adherence to a consistent benchmark, the *Culture and Sport Improvement Toolkit*, for self assessment and review purposes.
3. Independent review of each report by a senior member of MLA staff who has not been directly involved in the Peer Review to ensure consistency and standards are maintained. If the council or service want an independent review to be undertaken by someone from outside MLA, then we are happy for this to be the case.
4. Client feedback at the end of the process. We will ask all those who receive a Peer Review to complete a feedback form.

### Further information

Contact the MLA Regional Manager in your region.

<http://www.mla.gov.uk/about/region>



Leading strategically, we promote best practice in museums, libraries and archives, to inspire innovative, integrated and sustainable services for all.

Current news, developments and information on our activities are available to view or download from our website.

[www.mla.gov.uk](http://www.mla.gov.uk)

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