

Report of the Director of Learning Culture and Children's Services

The Regional Cultural Commentary and Improvement Planning

Summary

1. This report updates members on two recent initiatives that the Lifelong Learning and Culture team has undertaken as part of a drive for continuous improvement in the services that it provides:
 - The first Regional Cultural Commentary for York
 - Self-assessment using the "Towards an Excellent Service" model

These initiatives have both identified areas for improvement and these are highlighted.

Background

The Regional Cultural Commentary

2. Regional Cultural Commentaries have been introduced by the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) on a pilot basis and the team agreed to be part of the second wave of authorities in the region undertaking the process.
3. Regional commentaries have been introduced in order to:
 - Promote the contribution of the cultural sector in local government to improving public services and building and maintaining sustainable communities and to demonstrate its impact
 - Counter the perceived marginalization of culture in an ever strengthening performance management approach to public service delivery
 - Provide a basis to discuss service planning, delivery, and improvement in local authorities and explore the capacity and potential of regional agencies to support improvement
 - Provide a focus to discuss how national, regional and local objectives are aligned and can be developed, to ensure that Culture contributes to shared priorities and is incorporated in partnerships, Local Area Agreements, regional strategies and corporate plans
 - Provide the Audit Commission with a more qualitative view of a service and provide a more rounded view than that provided by the CPA score
 - Provide a key element in an emerging self-improvement strategy for cultural services alongside data monitoring, self-assessment and regional support

4. Regional Commentaries are underpinned by three basic beliefs on the part of the DCMS, namely that:
 - The regional agencies in the cultural sector have a real part to play in supporting and encouraging the provision of the best cultural opportunities and experiences to local communities through local government as both a direct provider and commissioner of cultural services
 - Better and more effective cultural provision will emerge from a more coherent and unified approach, built on clear leadership and joint strategic cultural planning, and
 - The closer alignment of national, regional, and local objectives with shared priorities is important to ensure that the cultural sector is able demonstrate its positive contribution to quality of life at local, regional and national levels
5. The scope of the Commentary is services provided by local authorities in the arts, heritage, museums, libraries, archives, and sport. The regional agencies involved are Arts Council England, MLA, English Heritage and Sport England.
6. The process is based on a two-way dialogue designed to ensure ongoing, structured, and constructive dialogue with local authorities after the Commentary has been completed, on the principle that the Commentary is a starting point for improvement and cooperation, not an end in itself.
7. The Regional Commentary process takes place against a benchmark, in effect a statement of good practice, or a desired position against which we can compare and evaluate. The DCMS strongly encourages local authorities to undertake externally validated self-assessment to inform the process of developing the Regional Commentary and to drive subsequent service improvement.

Towards an Excellent Service

8. *Towards an Excellent Service* (TAES) is a diagnostic self-assessment tool designed to enable organisations to define where they are against a model of best management practice. Developed originally by Sport England, it is the DCMS's recommended self-assessment model for cultural services.
9. TAES is based around eight key factors or themes that influence the quality of cultural services delivered to our users:
 1. Leadership
 2. Policy and Strategy
 3. Community Engagement
 4. Partnership Working
 5. Use of Resource
 6. People Management
 7. Standards of Service
 8. Performance Measurement and Learning
10. Within each theme are a number of descriptors that define performance and against which evidence can be brought forward to measure the quality of the organisation's performance. The position of the organisation can be plotted at one of four levels: Poor, fair, good or excellent.

11. The overall assessment can then be used to:
 - Identify areas of strength and of weakness
 - Identify, and explain, different people's interpretations of the service's position in each element and in the eight themes
 - Provide a basis for discussions with managers, partners, and other stakeholders about the way forward for the service
 - Set a benchmark to be used for subsequent discussions about how or where the service has improved
 - Set a benchmark that can be used for in-depth comparisons with other service providers
12. From the self-assessment an Improvement Plan is produced in order to address normally three or four of the most significant improvement areas identified.
13. For those who wish to seek an independent challenge of their self-assessment external validation can be provided by the IdeA. The process involves:
 - Independent review and challenge of the organisation's understanding of the process, the proposed scoping, and the recording of evidence
 - Independent review of the self-assessment including checking of selected criteria against identified evidence and reality checks in order to seek to validate the judgements made about the organisation
 - Independent review of the improvement plan and critical friend role to ensure the plan adequately addresses the agreed weaknesses

The Process for York

TAES

14. The Lifelong Learning and Culture Team undertook the TAES self-assessment process over the summer in order to prepare for the Regional Commentary process and to produce an Improvement Plan to develop our services. The self-assessment was conducted by service managers and the Chief Executive of the York Museums Trust, supported by colleagues from HR, Finance and Management Information. Colleagues from other organisations assisted by providing challenge to our thinking. Evidence collected included a survey of partner organisations asking for their views of our performance against the 8 themes.
15. External validation was provided by the IdeA. The validation process included extensive interviews with partner organisations and other stakeholders. The full report is available to view on line. Key findings were:

Strengths:

- A management commitment to improvement
- People in the organisation are encouraged to take ownership for the service and service development and to be creative
- There is recognition amongst leaders of the role of the lifelong learning and cultural services in meeting community needs and achieving community and Council goals

- The organisation has developed comprehensive service plans for each service, which include the actions necessary to develop the services. There are theoretical threads linking the service plans to Council and wider strategy. Individual goals are based on these plans
- People in the organisation appear to be very knowledgeable about the services
- In general, staff perceive the Council as a good organisation to work for with a commitment to fairness, equality and looking after its staff (e.g. flexibility, etc.)
- The organisation has developed and implemented training plans, which support the organisation's service plans
- There are pockets of good practice in relation to community engagement
- The organisation develops a good working relationship with community partners

Areas for Consideration:

- There is limited evidence of a structured and integrated review and improvement system for the Lifelong Learning and Culture service arm and it is not currently the driver of service design
- There are currently many pockets of good (and best) practice within the various services. But there is limited evidence that this practice is systematically shared within Lifelong Learning & Cultural services to make the best use of resources and to maximise its impact
- There is limited evidence that the knowledge resources within Lifelong Learning and Cultural services are systematically identified, shared and used to assist in developing and improving the service
- The organisation could develop a more systematic approach to wider personal development, which is communicated more effectively with all staff (e.g. cross-departmental work experience, mentoring, coaching, self learning, etc)
- There is limited evidence that community engagement activity is currently coordinated across the service arm to maximise resources, share learning and benefits and avoid duplication
- There is relatively little evidence that the service arm builds equality planning into strategy, service plans & performance management
- The organisation could develop a more structured approach to identifying, managing, reviewing and improving partnerships
- The current cross-service team working is not applied in a structured and proactive way (therefore opportunities could be missed)
- Greater use could be made of organisational improvement plans for each service and at the service arm level
- There is limited evidence that the organisation currently uses project management techniques to help plan and manage 'breakthrough' improvement projects (i.e. significant changes in the way the organisation works)

The Regional Cultural Commentary

16. The Regional Cultural Commentary process has involved a series of meetings between officers and the DCMS, Sport England, Arts Council, MLA Yorkshire, and English Heritage over the summer. The full commentary can be viewed on line. The key issues identified were:

Strengths

- Support for children & young people and the delivery of Every Child Matters demonstrated through the exceptional take-up of Artsmark in York Primary Schools, the best results in the country, the particularly high number of young people undertaking musical instrument lessons in schools through the Music Manifesto and the delivery of the Bookstart programme which is considered nationally to be good practice.
- A clear commitment to and active involvement in partnership working demonstrated through active involvement in sub-regional matters particularly through North Yorkshire Culture and a strong relationship with rural North Yorkshire resulting in clear prioritised strategies for culture in the sub-region
- The Community Arts Programme, Arts Action York provides an excellent model of how the arts can add value to service delivery and directly contribute to strategic objectives
- The number of adults completing courses through public libraries is sharply increasing, reflecting the strategy of placing learning at the heart of the library service
- A strong community sport structure which has delivered the highest sport participation figures in the region

Areas for Development

- Improved contact between the Authority & regional agencies is needed to plan and prioritise jointly towards creating a common purpose
- The Authority & ACEY to explore with Creative York how the specific needs of arts based creative industries in York can be addressed within the broader work with creative industries
- Improved communication and joint working between English Heritage and the Authority is needed to address issues regarding developments impacting on the historic environment assets of the city to reflect importance of historic environment to the city, such as the appointment of an Historic Environment champion and agreement of the mechanisms to ensure that the historic environment is reflected in the strategic plans of the City such as the LDF
- The Authority to seek to clarify and address the discrepancy between young people's increasing usage of and satisfaction with activities available to them and the falling satisfaction rates amongst adults with the activities available to young people
- The authority to work to secure a sustainable future for archives
- The Authority to articulate clearer plans to show how it will develop its cultural services to match and support the significant ambitions for culture set out in the Community Plan

- The Authority to work with its partnerships to achieve closer alignment of these partnerships with strategic outcomes, together with clearer partnership goals and evaluation

Improvement Planning

17. The team found both initiatives extremely helpful. The opportunity for the team to identify its own strengths and weaknesses with the help of critical challenge and validation was found to be much more powerful and effective than is external inspection. Some of the key themes emerging that the team will now tackle are around the need to be more systematic in approach. This applies particularly to:
 - ensuring service improvement,
 - sharing best practice, and
 - developing effective partnerships
18. Improvement Planning will take place at a number of levels:
 - a) Individual actions that will be driven forward through existing service plans e.g. developing options for the future of the City Archives
 - b) Individual actions that will be taken through our partnerships, notably developing our relationships with the regional cultural agencies
 - c) Transformational change designed to produce a step change in performance
19. The Lifelong Learning and Culture team has drawn up an Improvement plan designed to achieve step change. This aims to address the key issues from all those set out above:
 - a) Strategic Planning: Putting in place a Commissioning Process that ensures that the Lifelong Learning and Culture Plan is central to driving service design and development and drives strategy and performance review
 - b) Systematise improvement in services provided to customers:
 - i. Putting in place a “Yorkised” system to drive continuous improvement of customer processes
 - ii. Building in future self-assessment
 - c) Improve the Service Arm’s performance with respect to Equalities: Understanding our current performance, instituting training, and putting in place steps to embed excellent practice
20. Reports will be made on progress with this Improvement Plan through the regular performance reports.

Consultation

21. The self-assessment process involved consultation with partner organisations as well consideration of evidence of public and staff views already available to the team. This report is for information and there is no further consultation to undertake on it at this stage.

Options

22. There are no options to consider.

Corporate Objectives

23. The service plans funded through the Leisure and Culture budget are derived from the Lifelong Learning and Leisure Plan 2005 – 2008, which includes a link with the corporate priorities under each of the following headings:
- Making York More Eventful
 - Engaging in Learning
 - Being Healthy
 - Safer, Stronger and Greener Communities
 - Vibrant Cultural Infrastructure

Implications

24. The report has no Human Resources, Equalities, Legal, Crime and Disorder, Information Technology, or Property implications.

Risk Management

25. There are no risks directly associated with these initiatives. The improvement process strengthens service planning and will help to ensure that individual project risks are identified and appropriately handled within the service plan.

Recommendations

26. The Executive Member is asked to note and comment on the TAES self-assessment, the Regional Cultural Commentary and the areas for improvement planning set out.

Reason: So that a rigorous programme of service improvement can be taken forward.

Contact Details

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**Report
Approved**



Date 28.9.07.

Wards Affected: List wards or tick box to indicate all

All



For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

The Regional Commentaries Guidance Manual: *Creating a partnership for improving cultural and leisure services*

Towards an Excellent Service: The Framework for Cultural Services