



ACCREDITED
ARCHIVE SERVICE

Getting Started with Archive Service Accreditation

June 2018

Archive Service Accreditation is the UK management standard for archive services, supported by a partnership of the Archives and Records Association (UK), Archives and Records Council Wales, National Records of Scotland, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Scottish Council on Archives, The National Archives, and the Welsh Government through its Museums Archives and Libraries Division.

The programme provides a Standard and supporting documentation, which can be freely used by archive services to identify their strengths and weakness, and to develop and improve over time.

This guide introduces the programme and how archive services can start working towards an application. It points to a range of other supporting documentation and to where further support is available.

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1. An overview of Archive Service Accreditation

1.1 The purpose of Archive Service Accreditation

Archive Service Accreditation was developed through a process of consultation and co-creation with the archive sector across the UK and launched in July 2013. It was developed in response to a need to develop a single operational standard for all types of archive service and is nationally recognised as the hallmark of a good quality archive service. Its purpose is to ensure the quality of archive services by encouraging a holistic, forward-looking approach to planning and implementing service delivery. In particular Archive Service Accreditation requires:

- A clear mission which informs all areas of the service's activity
- Clear identification of risk and planning for risk management
- Clear identification and analysis of stakeholders and their needs to inform appropriate service delivery
- Explicit planning processes to guide activity and provide a benchmark for progress
- Documented policies, plans and procedures to articulate and capture service standards and knowledge

Archive Service Accreditation is about developing services that are fit for purpose and are capable of accommodating future change. Whilst there is a requirement to provide certain documentation as part of the application process, it is not the documentation that the assessment values, but the processes and learning required to develop that documentation and the positive service outcomes that result.

1.2 The benefits of undertaking Archive Service Accreditation

Services that have applied for Archive Service Accreditation, whether successful or not, have found the process of making an application beneficial. Developing their application provided archive services with the following benefits:

- Undertaking a total review of the service and developing or improving service planning and processes in a focused and coordinated manner
- Developing of a comprehensive suite of policies which provide clarity and can be used to drive improvement
- Establishing new and improved working practices
- Developing a better understanding of the service
- Opportunities for staff to develop their skills
- New data on which to base operational decisions
- New working relationships with organisations and individuals external to the service

A successful application can provide further benefits, including:

- Increased internal and/or external profile

- Stakeholder awareness of the quality of the service through this external validation
- Establishment of a clear mission statement and sense of direction backed up by realistic plans
- A lever for improvement arising from external identification of key needs
- Creating an agenda and driver for change within the service and by the parent organisation
- Material change within the service
- Additional funding to address identified issues
- Skills development of staff
- Professional pride and increased staff and volunteer morale

Services that have applied for Archive Service Accreditation have found it a rigorous but ultimately rewarding process, which has a practical impact on developing the service.

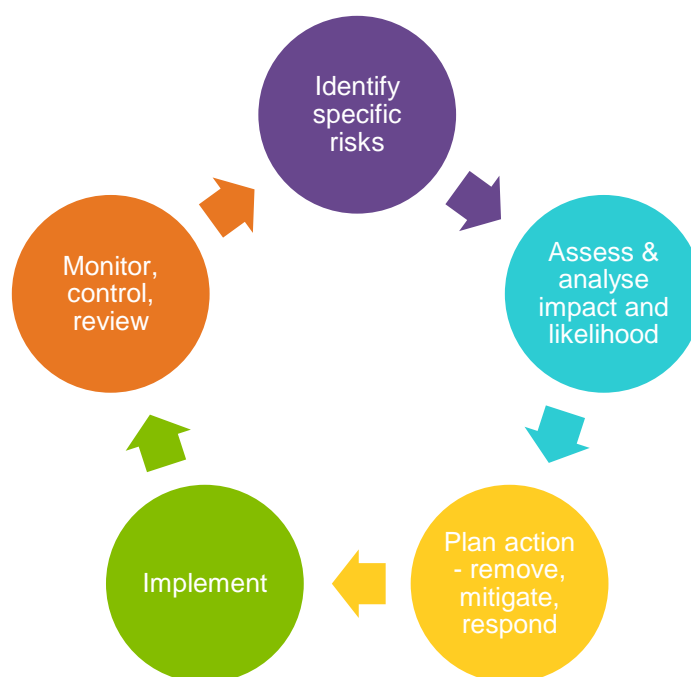
1.3 Perfection or professional competence? The role of risk management

As archive services consider how to engage with Archive Service Accreditation, they should bear in mind that the programme is not looking for perfection. Accreditation is designed to offer a realistic development framework rather than be a gold standard. It can be achieved by the majority of eligible archive services.

However, Accreditation supports professional service delivery by looking for:

- Good practice informed by current standards
- A proactive, not reactive, service
- A service that looks forward – anticipating and accommodating change from external factors and seeking to drive change within the service in response to developments such as new types of collections, emergence of new communities, new opportunities, new professional approaches
- Practice that is commensurate with the nature and scale of the service

An important element in demonstrating professional competence is the archive service's approach to risk management. An archive service is not expected to be free of risks but rather to have properly identified and assessed risk and developed a strategy for removing or mitigating the risk. Effective management of risk is a core means of delivering a sustainable archive service that works well for its collections and users. This is an on-going process that is summarised in the next diagram.



Approaching risk management clearly from the outset will support a successful application, and will have immediate benefits for archive service management.

There are several useful toolkits for risk management for heritage including:

- The ABC Method: a risk management approach to the preservation of cultural heritage (published by The Government of Canada) – provides very detailed guidance which if followed will support much of the analysis required for an Accreditation application <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/risk-management-heritage-collections/abc-method-risk-management-approach.html>
- A Guide to Risk Management of Cultural Heritage (published by ICCROM, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property also in Canada) – a well-structured and illustrated toolkit focused on the ‘10 Agents of Decay’ but with ideas that are useful for wider risk management

1.4 How the programme works

Accredited Archive Service status is awarded by the UK Archive Service Accreditation Committee, based upon an assessment of the achievement of the archive service by the responsible assessor body. The Committee forms regular Panels to consider applications and make awards.

An archive service makes an application through its home nation assessor body.¹ An assessor reviews the application. A percentage of applications are validated by an assessor visit, in some cases accompanied by a peer reviewer (an archive professional with relevant experience). On the basis of the application form, supporting document (and findings of the validation visit where appropriate) the assessor writes an assessment report and makes a recommendation on whether to award Archive Service Accreditation.

This assessment is then considered, along with the application itself, by a regular Archive Service Accreditation Panel, which makes the final award decision. The applicant is informed of the outcome in writing and provided with the full assessment report, which provides guidance on the reason for the decision and an short citation of the Panel's view of the service. The assessment report includes a number of future actions to guide further service development. These are 'Required' actions (which need to be addressed to meet Archive Service Accreditation in future) and 'Improvement' actions (areas of future service development for the service to implement, but not mandatory for retaining Archive Service Accreditation).

The Panel may decide to award provisional Accredited status to those services that are close to meeting all the requirements of the standard. This is awarded for a period specified by the Panel, which can be up to 2 years. During this provisional status the service must address a small number of 'Required actions' identified in the assessment. Evidence of progress on these actions is submitted to the relevant assessor body, which takes them to the next available Panel for approval. The service can then move to the full award.

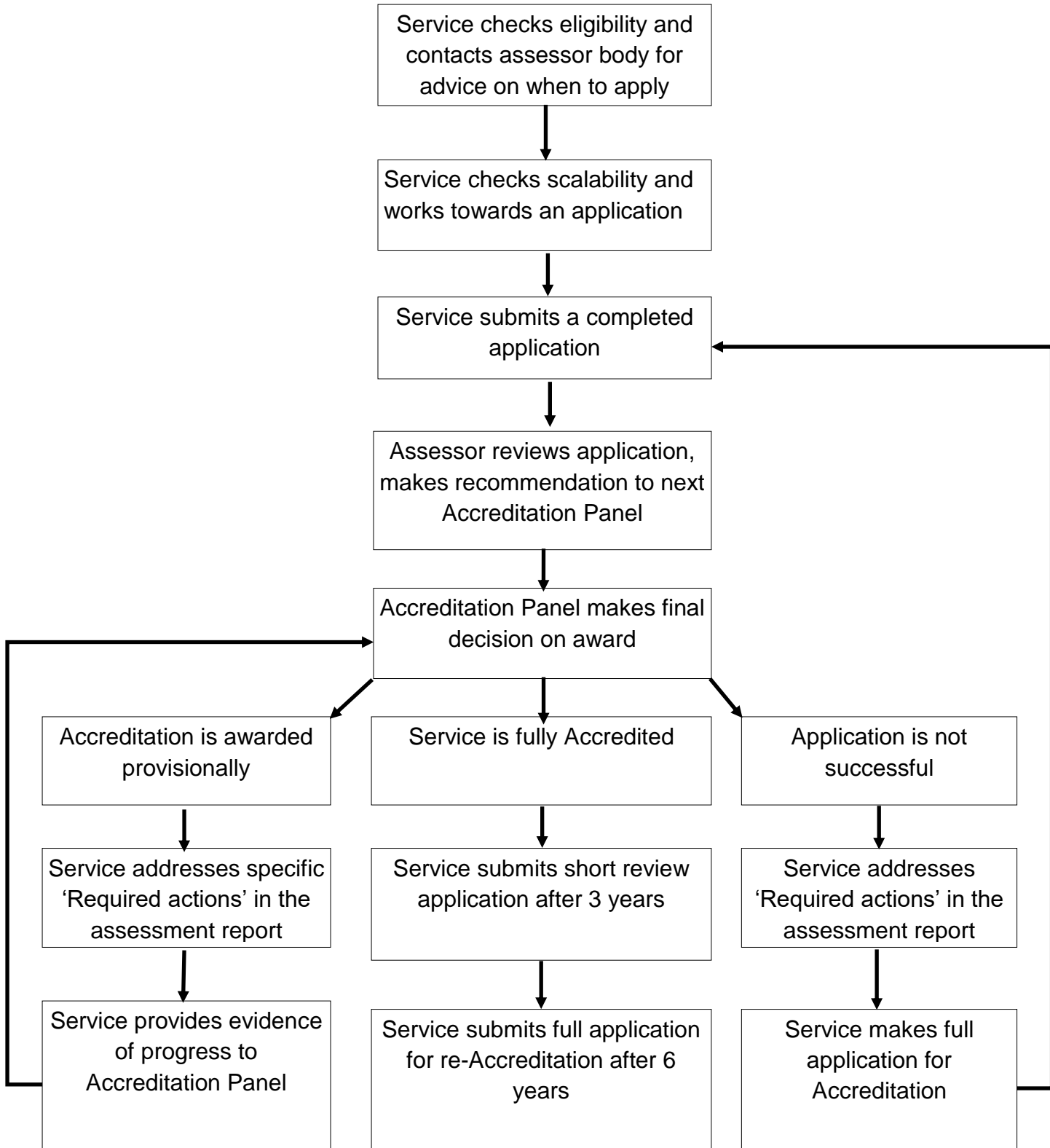
An Accredited Archive Service will normally be reviewed after three years. At review stage the service completes a shorter review form, which checks the service's development and is a moment for reporting significant change. It must then reapply in full after another three years. At both these stages, progress against actions set at the original Accreditation is updated.

Services that do not achieve Archive Service Accreditation can reapply when they are ready. To be successful, the service will need to show progress on critical 'Required actions' identified in the first assessment, as part of completing a full application.

Note: if a service makes an application and is given either full or provisional Accreditation with 'Required actions', these actions will have a timescale for their completion included as part of the assessment report.

¹ England – The National Archives, Northern Ireland – Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Scotland – National Records of Scotland and Scottish Council on Archives, Wales – Museums Archives and Libraries Division, Welsh Government. Arrangements are made for national bodies to be assessed by representatives from other home nations.

The core process is set out in the following diagram:



1.4 Relationship to Museum Accreditation

Archive Service Accreditation is designed to align with Museum Accreditation. Both share the same focus on organisational health, collections and the experiences of people who engage with the service. Both programmes have the same ethos of helping to raise standards and reward achievement. Archive Service Accreditation focuses specifically on the needs of archive collections and their users. Museums with significant archive holdings are therefore encouraged to apply for Archive Service Accreditation, even if they already hold Museum Accreditation, to ensure that their archive collections are managed in line with current archival practice.

2. Working towards an application

2.1 What are the costs of applying for Archive Service Accreditation?

There is no charge for either making an application or receiving Archive Service Accreditation. For most services the major 'cost' is the staff time required to gather data, undertake analysis, develop plans, policies and procedures. This might seem daunting to smaller services. However, the application process is designed to be achievable by all services. Numerous small services have now achieved Accreditation. Taking a planned approach over a period of time will be the most effective way of using Accreditation to develop your service, and is usually the most realistic way of securing the necessary resource.

2.2 How long does it take to complete an application?

This is entirely dependent on the preparedness of your archive service. There is no specific timescale required by the programme. Some services already have many of the plans, policies and procedures in place and it is just a question of reviewing and tightening up existing activity. In such a situation it might take six months to pull everything together whilst also running the service as normal. For other services, Archive Service Accreditation provides an improvement framework for a complete review and overhaul of the service, which will take longer to implement.

The service's personnel capacity will affect the timescale. Some services may make it a priority for one staff member to lead on with support from other staff. For other services, particularly smaller ones, it might fall to one person amidst many demands on their time. In the latter case, breaking down the application into small sections and dealing with each section as time allows may be the best solution.

Even when there is a lone professional whose task is clearly to lead the application, it is always helpful to ensure that other people connected with the archive service are aware of the application, can contribute in their areas of expertise, and perhaps provide a sounding board for any knotty issues. This helps to embed Archive Service Accreditation within the service, as well as providing practical support to the individual.

2.3 Eligibility

Before preparing an application, archive services should ensure they are eligible to apply for an award. Archive Service Accreditation is open to eligible archive services which are located within the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. To be eligible for the Archive Service Accreditation scheme a service must meet six criteria. The requirements are laid out in the *Eligibility Criteria*. If after consulting this document a service is still unsure whether it is eligible, please contact the relevant home nations assessor body. These criteria are based upon:

1. Holding an archive collection

2. Size of the archive collection
3. Provision of access
4. Custody of original records
5. Staffing
6. Storage

The requirements are laid out in full in the *Eligibility Criteria*. If after consulting this document a service is still unsure whether it is eligible, please contact the relevant home nations assessor body.

Archive Service Accreditation is open to all types of archive service, from national institutions or other public sector bodies such as local authority record offices or university special collections, to smaller and private sector services (e.g. historic houses or charities). This includes services which focus on providing access to particular user constituencies rather than the general public (e.g. business archives), or which specialise in a particular medium (e.g. film, sound, or digital collections).

Some services may manage their collections in premises that are not well placed to meet accepted standards for collection storage. This does not preclude the service applying for Archive Service Accreditation, which can be an important mechanism for evidencing the need for improvement, and supporting necessary development.

Archive services which do not meet the eligibility criteria for a formal application are welcome to use the Archive Service Accreditation standard as a reference point in developing their services.

2.4 Scalability

Archive Service Accreditation is designed to work across archive services in the UK. It is supported by a scalability indicator, so that Archive Service Accreditation can fairly and credibly assess archive services of very different aims, capacities and sizes. The role of scalability is to help the applicant and the assessors understand what is expected of an archive service of its type and size. Scalability is not a set assessment framework, but an aid to developing an application. Archive services applying for accreditation are asked to identify their type (based on the legal basis for their services) and scale (from 1 to 3, depending on the size of operations and anticipated audiences).

It is important to note that scalability is not a judgement about a service's quality of delivery. An archive service which identifies itself as 'scale 1' (small) service is indicating a smaller scale of operations, with a simpler and more restricted range of services and activities than a scale 2 or 3 service. This will inform the assessors' expectations of what is reasonable for that service to aim to deliver.

The type 'Private and Third Sector' encompasses a broader variety of different archive services than 'Other public sector' and 'Local authority' types. Consequently

there are three scaled categories rather than the two provided for 'Other public sector' and 'Local authority' services.

2.5 When to apply

A number of factors may influence your decision on when to apply, in addition to preparing effectively for the application. You may wish to apply to receive your assessment feedback as part of a wider review. If your organisation also undertakes Museum Accreditation, you may opt to co-ordinate or dovetail the application timescales. As the application asks for statistics for the previous financial year, the timing of your financial year may have an impact.

The application process gives opportunities to discuss future changes to your archive service. However, it is not advisable to apply while still in the process of material change. For example, if you know a change of governance is coming but you do not yet know the nature and structure of the new governance it is advisable not to make an application until you can be sure. Likewise, if you are working on a new building it would be advisable to make your application once you are in the new accommodation and you know how it performs for your archive service. However, if you have longer term plans for major change, you are welcome to apply, to establish a current baseline for your service. If the material change is delivered within the 6-year term of an award, you may be asked to complete reaccreditation at an earlier date.

If you are unsure about if the change will have an impact on when you should make your application, contact your assessor body for advice.

3. Making an application

3.1 Getting started on your application

You should begin by checking your eligibility for the scheme as outlined above. The next step is to assess the scale of your service using the document called *Scalability*. This will allow you to use the scaled guidance effectively.

If you are interested in making in an application, please contact your home nations assessor body. Some assessor bodies limit the number of applications they will accept in a year so you may need to reserve an application time in advance. Even if you are not planning to apply in the near future, you can begin the process of assessing how far the service needs to progress to become accredited, and your assessor body can offer support.

Undertake an initial assessment of your service against the Standard's requirements taking into account the scalability of your service. It is unlikely that you will meet all the requirements immediately and you should produce a development plan, which will enable you to meet the requirements of the Standard. Delivering this plan may take a number of months or longer, but this preparation is vital to enable you to make a successful application and to get the most out of working towards Archive Service Accreditation.

It is important to keep this proportionate and not to over-engineer a response. Where an archive service begins without the majority of policy and planning required by Accreditation, this can be an opportunity to establish a baseline, which can often be achieved through two or three primary documents. For example, an overarching archives management policy, a forward plan and a set of procedures for archives work can collectively address the majority of requirements.

3.2 Maximising the quality of your application

Not all applications for Accreditation are successful at their first attempt. Here are some key points for ensuring a good quality application:

- Ensure major risks are quantified and managed at the time of application e.g. if you are facing imminent loss of storage capacity, describe your solution. If you cannot explain how you are going to manage a major risk you may wish to delay your application.
- Time your application to avoid applying during material change
- Ensure that the service is meeting or demonstrably working towards professional standards in all areas. There may be certain aspects of the service for which it is not currently possible to meet standards, e.g. accommodation for storing collections, documentation of collections. This does not automatically imply that an application will be unsuccessful. However, in such situations you need to evidence the risk management you

are undertaking to deal with the issue and how you are seeking to implement professional standards. In certain situations this approach may be a partial solution (e.g. good preservation actions to mitigate the problems caused by a poor building) or a long-term solution (e.g. dealing with cataloguing backlogs or upgrading existing cataloguing).

- The activity of the archive service should be on a scale or diversity commensurate with its nature, size and mission. Accreditation assesses each application on its own merits. Scalability is intended as a broad guide to help you understand what is 'commensurate'.

An application may be unsuccessful simply because it has been made too early. Taking extra time can allow activities and procedures to bed in or for situations to settle down and become clearer. However, in some cases the service fundamentally does not meet some requirements of the standard and so will not be successful.

All services are strongly encouraged to contact their assessor body before they start an application to discuss whether there are significant issues that would definitely preclude a successful application and generally discuss their readiness for Archive Service Accreditation. Please note that assessor bodies are unable to review individual draft applications.

3.3 Applying as part of a larger or joint service

Archive Service Accreditation is suitable for archive services that are part of larger services such as a library, a museum, a special or unique and distinctive collection at a university. In such scenarios it should be clear how policy, planning and procedures are used to manage the archive collection even if this forms part of a bigger management unit.

Where archive collections are jointly managed with collections which have directly analogous needs, for example in a Special Collections operation which also holds rare books, it is recognised that there is little benefit in separating out archive elements from a holistic approach which meets the relevant professional standards for archives. In this case, simply submit the unit-wide documentation except where there is a specific archive component. Even where this is not the case, it is recognised that it may be difficult to separate some aspects of the archive service from the wider institution (e.g. budgets, certain policy documents). If this is the case, please provide the details for the wider service and note in your application that it is not possible to separate out the archive element.

3.4 The question of digital preservation

Following a consultative development process 2016-18, Archive Service Accreditation has updated and increased its expectations around the management of digital preservation, including additional questions in the application form.

All archive services that hold digital material or whose collecting remit includes modern records likely to be in digital format should be planning for digital preservation. Accreditation recognises that individual services will be in very different positions for this work – some will have fully integrated processes, whilst others are just starting to work out what is feasible in their particular circumstances.

At present, Accreditation is looking for a clear strategic recognition that digital preservation is vital and part of the service's remit, and that there is work towards implementing digital preservation. Examples might include engagement with a national/regional solution or pilot, undertaking basic steps such as identifying, logging and backing-up digital material, talking to vendors about possible solutions, undertaking staff training, or working on developing a policy and work plan for starting to develop digital preservation. Accreditation appreciates that digital preservation requires time, new skills and additional resources that will take time to assemble. Many services do not yet have a full solution in place. However, all services should be developing the policy, planning and procedures either to start this process or develop it further, and to manage the risks to digital material they have already acquired.

3.5 Accommodating future change

Your application should not only describe the current service but also look forward to its future development. Future change can be incorporated in a number of ways. Forward planning should articulate both changes that are expected to happen to the service and to drive change within the service. Secondly, the application form provides opportunities to identify future changes across all aspects of the service. The service needs to identify material future changes, how these might affect the service and how the service is going to deal with the impact of any change. In describing future changes you should demonstrate that you have undertaken a thorough risk assessment and that your organisation is handling change with a controlled and managed approach.

'Material future change' is any change that will fundamentally affect how the service operates. For example, taking on a new person into an existing position will not be material but the loss of one or more paid posts would be for all but the largest services. Material changes can include areas such as loss of accommodation or planning for a new building, moving into a new type of governance, cuts in staffing numbers, changes in the service budget of more than 5%, or new partnerships for delivering services.

If you are unsure about whether a change is material and should be included in your application, contact your assessor body for advice.

3.6 Making an application: the online system

Applications are made through an online system. Information on the system, how to set up an account and statements on use of data are provided at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/accreditation.

The application form is provided for reference in PDF at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/archive-service-accreditation/supporting-guidance/

3.7 Word limits on the application form

Questions requiring a free text answer have individual word limits. These should be used as a guide to the maximum amount that can be written. Note that the online application system will not allow word limits to be exceeded. They are not a ‘target’ and services will not be ‘penalised’ for an answer that is considerably shorter than the word limit. Just provide the answer that adequately describes your service.

3.8 Getting help with your application

The main point of advice and support for applicants is The National Archives website at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/accreditation>. Here applicants will find up to date information and documentation. For particular advice about any aspect of the programme, you should contact your home nations assessor body.

3.9 Other documentation on Archive Service Accreditation

There is a range of documentation to help applicants which is available at The National Archives website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/accreditation.

It includes:

- The Archive Service Accreditation Standard
- Full guidance on developing an application and completing the form
- Eligibility criteria
- Scalability guidance
- A PDF version of the application form for reference
- Advice on retaining Archive Service Accreditation
- Glossary of terms
- Frequently Asked Questions

3.10 After your application

Whatever the outcome of your application, it is an opportunity to advocate for your service, celebrate what you do well, and plan for improvement in areas that could be stronger. All applications receive a full assessment report and a citation from the Panel which decided on their award, which can be used in internal advocacy and external promotion.

If your application was unsuccessful, this can form part of an ongoing development process and be an opportunity to advocate for your service's needs. Your assessor body will support you to identify next steps in the case of an unsuccessful application.

Successful applications are opportunities to celebrate your achievement, and are often a moment for promoting your service and achieving high-level visibility within your organisation. Many organisations receiving the award choose to have an event to mark the success, often around the presentation of the official certificate by a representative of the Archive Service Accreditation partnership.

If you achieved a provisional award, you can plan how to meet the 'Required actions' which will allow you to move on to the full award. You will also have longer-term actions to consider, to develop your service further.

If you achieved full Archive Service Accreditation, you will also have actions to consider for the future. Your award will be retained as long as you continue to participate in the Accreditation process. Note that in the case of significant change to your service, you should inform your assessor body, who may ask for you to complete the review or re-Accreditation state at an earlier date. In extreme cases, such as if a service ceases to meet the eligibility criteria, the award may be removed.