

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council was created in 2000 by executive decision to develop and improve England's museums, libraries and archives. The body has its origins in the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries which was created in 1931. This body was renamed the Museums and Galleries Commission in 1981, and its remit and activities were widened in 2000, under the new name of *Re:Source*. This body was subsequently re-incarnated as the MLA. Its specific functions included providing the sector with strategic leadership, acting as an authoritative advocate and champion, advising stakeholders on best practice and assisting DCMS with the delivery of specific initiatives.

The decision to abolish the MLA by April 2012 was announced on the 26th July 2010 by Jeremy Hunt and formally conveyed to the body's chair on the 20th October 2010. In his letter the Secretary of State, Jeremy Hunt argued that the decision was 'the only way to ensure that frontline services are preserved. This is no reflection on the professionalism and ability of your staff and management who have been outstanding' (Hunt, 20 October 2010). Along with abolition, Jeremy Hunt also announced that functions would be transferred to other appropriate bodies, and the MLA worked with Ministers to successfully transfer museums and libraries functions to Arts Council England (ACE) and archives responsibilities to the National Archives.

The transfer of functions from the body to ACE was agreed in consultation with staff and resulted in ACE taking on the museums and libraries role from 1st October 2011. However, a skeleton staff remained at the MLA until May 2012 to complete work, and the website remained live for the public to access until 31st March. Under these plans ACE was intended to take on responsibility for:

- the Renaissance in the Regions programme, central Government's major programme of investment into regional museums
- museums and libraries development work, drawing on their experience of working with the arts sector and local authorities to help deliver an innovative service in challenging times
- a range of statutory cultural property functions, from export licensing for cultural objects to the Acceptance in Lieu scheme.

Further funding of around £46m each year from 2012/13 was also announced to enable the Arts Council to deliver this work.

On 20th April 2011 it was announced that The National Archives would take over responsibility for the 'support and leadership of the archives sector' from October 2011 (DCMS, 20 April 2011). It was agreed that The National Archives would take over the following duties:

- Leadership role for the archive sector
- A policy, information and advice role for government
- A strategic engagement role, helping archive services and their parent bodies to respond to Government policy and to develop in ways that strengthen and reinforce the national network of archive provision.

In response to the news that the MLA would be wound up by April 2012, Chair Sir Andrew Motion and Chief Executive Roy Clare called for calm. In a joint statement they said: 'Stormy seas call for cool heads and steady hands. The team in the MLA have worked tirelessly and with commendable commitment to develop the capacity of the organisation since 2007. Now, faced with an unforeseen degree of economic pressure, government has chosen to balance the books and to prioritise the rationalisation of its existing cultural agencies as a contribution.... As a result we will work methodically and calmly to continue to deliver a vibrant and effective expert service for the public who rightly expect excellent, sustainable museums, libraries and record offices in their local neighbourhoods' (Museums and Heritage Magazine).

This statement was reflected in the subsequent actions taken by the Chair, Chief Executive and Board. Rather than opposing abolition, the MLA rather worked with Ministers and DCMS from an early stage in order to agree and implement a transfer of functions to the most appropriate bodies, and to ensure minimal negative impact on the sector. The transfer of functions to ACE was seen from the outset as the most desirable outcome and the Chief Executive (as well as the Chair) worked with the leadership of ACE to facilitate this and a smooth transition in the timely transfer of functions.

There was an acknowledgment from the outset, recorded in interviews, that the most important factor stemming from the abolition announcement was the potential for negative impact on the sector. The MLA's cooperation with both Ministers and DCMS was as a consequence of seeking to minimise this impact and to preserve the functions of the MLA in their new home (Interview Data). However, there is a mix of opinion on whether the abolition itself was a good thing. While some interviewees viewed the abolition as potentially very bad for the cultural sector and libraries in particular, others think that the move was sensible given that ACE are well-placed to take over the functions. The former Chief Executive had himself suggested a similar transition back in 2007, in order to maximise efficiency, but the Labour government had been less responsive to the suggestion and were keen to maintain the MLA as a distinct organisation.

For many within the MLA the decision for abolition came as a surprise because in 2007 the Chief Executive and Chair oversaw a major restructuring of the MLA designed to deliver a more efficient and effective organisation. This work was seen to have reduced cost and streamlined the organisation, anticipating the purposes of the 2010 public bodies review. For this reason some interviewees were surprised at the decision to abolish the MLA because the cost-efficiency of the organisation had been improved, and limited financial savings were likely to be secured through abolition. It was felt that insufficient attention had been devoted by the government to the improvements made within this organisation prior to 2010.

The Chair and Chief Executive of the MLA had met with Jeremy Hunt and Ed Vaizey in the run up to the election in order to share relevant policy issues at an early stage, and were aware of the manifesto commitments to reduce the number of arm's length bodies. However, because of the 2007 improvements they had expected to pass the 'three tests' and did not have indications from Hunt or Vaizey that their future may be in jeopardy.

There was some concern expressed in relation to the proposals from the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee who published a report which urged DCMS to review ACE's museum and library functions in 2012. They expressed concern that 'ACE does not have the expertise or the resources to carry on, adequately, the functions of the MLA. We welcome ACE's commitment

to retain key MLA staff. However, given the reductions ACE is having to make in its own operating costs, it is unrealistic to expect that ACE can carry out the role as effectively as the MLA' (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 22nd March 2011). In the media there was some localised concern expressed, however this related mainly the [loss of local jobs](#). There has been more widespread criticism of the impact of the Government's spending cuts on the arts and culture sector in general, and this has extended to some criticism of the MLA abolition and transfer of functions (e.g. Page, 9 December 2010). In addition former Chair Andrew Motion has been vocal in his opposition of the Government's policies on arts and culture (e.g. University of Oxford, 2 June 2011).

There was no consultation on abolition with stakeholders, and concerns were not expressed in the public realm. There were only a handful of parliamentary questions on the subject, mainly challenging the decision taken and querying this lack of consultation. It therefore appears that there was very little opposition from the organisation itself, stakeholders or politicians. However, the leadership team of the MLA worked hard to ensure the preservation of functions (as well as the redeployment of staff) through transfer to ACE, and themselves view this as the most appropriate action to have taken – with the view that, had they openly opposed abolition or sought to undermine Ministers, they would have been unable to have so much influence over the way in which functions were transferred (Interview Data). In the end, although some concern was expressed to government over the archives function being transferred to the National Archives rather than being kept with the other functions at ACE, the transfer of functions was largely as the MLA had desired.

Stakeholders did not oppose the abolition of the MLA, mainly because the MLA did not have a strong network of supporting stakeholders given the nature of its work. The MLA's role was often to challenge museums, libraries and organisations providing archive functions through peer review and this led to many instances of disagreement between the organisation and those institutions – some of which resulted in negative media reports for those institutions. There is also the perception that the MLA's focus on driving change and improvement in order to make the sector more resilient in the face of spending cuts and increasing digitalisation was received negatively by some who disagreed with the direction of travel (Interview Data). For all of these reasons, the MLA lacked supporters when abolition was announced (it is also worth noting that the MLA never called for support from any stakeholders because it never attempted to launch a defence of the organisation, only the preservation of the functions through transfer).

These issues mainly related to libraries and archives, whereas for museums (while there were still numerous instances of disagreement as a result of review and challenge on the part of the MLA) another factor was a lack of need for an advocate for the museums sector. There are numerous lobbying groups and networks in the museums sector, all of which act on behalf of museums at both local and national level. With such a strong support network, museums were less likely to be concerned by the abolition of the MLA. Additionally, museums and galleries are much more visible and elicit much more public interest than libraries or archives which are predominantly local institutions. As such, one view held is that museums and galleries are far less likely to need additional advocacy during a time of spending cuts, because the public are far more likely to come out in opposition against the closure of a prominent museum or gallery than they would be for a local library.

Concerns have been expressed about the future of the libraries sector given the abolition of the MLA and so a lack of leadership for the sector in a difficult time. There is also a wider concern that the MLA worked predominantly 'on the ground', interacting with institutions to drive forward improvement; while ACE is mainly office-based and works in a very different way. This could have significant implications for the future of functions transferred from the MLA to ACE. The same may also be true of the transfer of the archives function to the National Archives. The MLA was attempting to drive forward an agenda of modernisation of institutions at the time of its abolition, and it remains to be seen whether this leadership function continues with the transfer of functions.

Key Documents:

Hunt, J. (20 October 2010) Letter to Andrew Motion, http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/Motion_MLA.pdf, accessed 21 November 2012.

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http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/university_year/the_romanesh_lecture/jun_2011_andrew_motion/romanesh_june11.html

Museums and Heritage Magazine, 'MLA to be Abolished', http://www.mandh-online.com/news/content/1257/mla_to_be_abolished, accessed 21 November 2012.

Page, B. (9 December 2010), 'Arts Council takes over libraries, with budgets slashed', *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/dec/09/arts-council-takes-over-libraries-budget-slashed?INTCMP=SRCH>, accessed 21 November 2012.

The National Archives and Arts Council England (2012) *Memorandum of Understanding Between The National Archives and Arts Council England*.
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/documents/ace-tna-mou-2012.pdf>

University of Oxford. (2 June 2011), 'Andrew Motion defends humanities in the 2011 Romanes Lecture', http://www.ox.ac.uk/media/news_stories/2011/110206_1.html, accessed 21 November 2012.