

Corporation of London

London Metropolitan Archives

May 2002

Improving public services

The Government has placed a duty of local councils to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available. ¹Best value is a challenging framework designed to improve local services. Councils are required to assess their own performance and put in place measures to ensure continuous improvement in all of their services.

Councils must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value:

- ◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- ◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- ◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and
- ◆ **consulting** with local taxpayers, customers and the wider business community.

The Government has decided that each council should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate. The Audit Commission's Inspection Service performs this role.

The purpose of the inspection and of this report is to:

- ◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ◆ enable the Council to see how well it is doing;
- ◆ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working on the ground;
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

¹ This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

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Summary and recommendations

Summary

- 1 The Corporation of London is the provider of local authority services for the 'square mile' of the City of London. It is an historic organisation going back 800 years. It has unique powers and provides a wide range of services in addition to those it undertakes in its local authority role.
- 2 The Corporation is defined legally as the Mayor and Commonality and Citizens of the City of London. Authority resides in the Court of Common Council consisting of the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Common Councilmen. At present there are 113 Members and 25 Aldermen. The Corporation is non-party political.
- 3 The residential population is small at about 8,000, but the full range of services are provided to meet its needs, as well of those of daytime visitors (approximately 328,000 consisting mainly of City workers and students). The Corporation's responsibilities extend beyond the City, for example in terms of housing provision; public open services such as Epping Forest and Hampstead Heath; Port Health and the animal reception centre at Heathrow.
- 4 The London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) is part of the Town Clerk's Department and reports to the Libraries, Guildhall Art Gallery and Archives Committee of the Corporation of London. The LMA has a regional brief for the management of archives collections of relevance to the Greater London area above borough level, including the records of the London County Council, Greater London Council and Inner London Education Authority.
- 5 The LMA works in partnership with all London borough archives and local studies services to ensure that material of relevance to specific communities is held at the most appropriate level.
- 6 The LMA is made up of two divisions, reader services and collections development. The best value review covered all services in both divisions with the exception of Keats House Museum and Library. Excluding Keats House, the LMA has an establishment of 54 full time equivalent staff with a further 19 externally funded posts.
- 7 The Service is estimated to cost £2,590,000 for 2001/02. It is financed through the City Fund, which operates in accordance with local authority legislation and provides the Corporation's statutory local authority services and its police services. The LMA also has access to a one-off repairs and renewals fund of £2,000,000.
- 8 The best value review of the LMA took place in April 2000 as part of a wider review of the Town Clerk's Department during 2000/01. The Town Clerk's Office Working

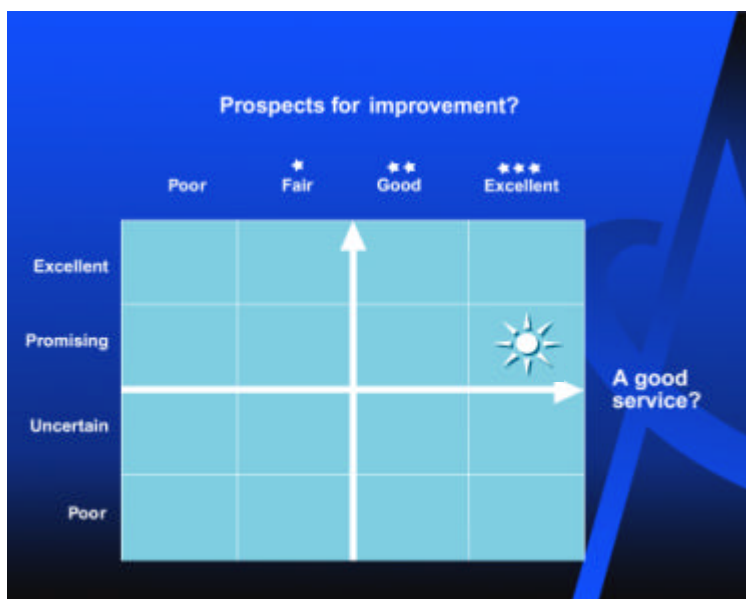
Party was made up of officers from a range of Corporation departments and a representative of the corporate best value group.

- 9 The report was agreed by the working party in May 2001 and approved by the summit group of senior Corporation officers on 25 May and the Libraries, Guildhall Art Gallery and Archives Committee on 2 July 2001.
- 10 Elected Members approved the following key priorities for the LMA's best value improvement plan as a result of the best value review:
 - ◆ User priorities:
 - ◆ extension of visitor facilities;
 - ◆ Saturday opening;
 - ◆ e-government/improvement of finding aids; and
 - ◆ microform viewing area improvements;
 - ◆ Building priorities:
 - ◆ Halon (fire extinguisher system replacement);
 - ◆ roof replacement; and
 - ◆ BS5454: 2000 compliance for storage in Old Block.

Scoring the Service

- 11 We have assessed the Corporation as providing an ‘**excellent**’, three star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Scoring chart²: Corporation of London – London Metropolitan Archives



'an excellent service that has promising prospects for improvement'

How good is the Service?

Are the aims clear and challenging?

- 12 Officers have drawn up the aims of the LMA. They are set out in the best value review and have been updated in the comments and complaints form that is available to users. They can be summarised as to:

- ◆ build an archive collection which tells the story of London and its people;
- ◆ provide the best possible access to the information in our care;
- ◆ ensure that our resources are available to as wide a range of people as possible;

² The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the Service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- ◆ build an environment where learning is fun;
 - ◆ develop our staff so that we can provide expert services; and
 - ◆ make full use of current techniques to provide an effective service.
- 13 We believe that the LMA aims are clearly written and challenging to the Service. They reflect the Corporation's strategic aim and policy priority to 'provide high quality services of regional and national significance by continuing to promote and sponsor centres of excellence in the Arts and Culture'.
- 14 However, they do not yet fully reflect the wider regional role that the LMA could play in co-ordinating the provision of archive services in London. We recognise that the Head Archivist has participated in the development of a regional archive strategy and is one of the archive sector representatives on the interim regional agency. We recommend that the LMA aims and objectives are updated to include a commitment to a regional role in supporting the archives section in the Greater London area.
- 15 We commend the Corporation for making their aims as clear as possible and communicating them to users. We recommend that the LMA consults and involves a wider range of stakeholders, such as other London archive services, in continuing to update their aims.

Does the Service meet these aims?

- 16 The LMA has made significant progress over the last five years in improving and developing services in order to achieve its aims.
- 17 *To build an archive collection which tells the story of London and its people* the LMA has developed a preservation and conservation policy for the Service. It is also in the process of updating its collecting policy to reflect the development of a regional framework and to make clear to depositors and users the basis on which material will be accepted as a gift, purchase or on deposit. However, we found that the policies were not well known to users.

'There are some significant gaps in the collections and I'm not sure if there is a policy to fill them' [user]

- 18 We recommend that the LMA consults and involves users and depositors in developing its collecting policy and determining its priorities for cataloguing unlisted material.
- 19 In response to government policies on social inclusion, the LMA has become more proactive in seeking archive material from under-represented groups in the community. For example, the LMA is now actively seeking the records of non-Anglican religious bodies such as Jewish and Sikh institutions.

- 20 The LMA buildings which contain the collections are maintained to a good standard, but only one of the two buildings fully complies with BS5454: 2000, the standard set for the storage of archival material.
- 21 The LMA has a three-year building development plan that identifies priority improvement schemes. However, the requirement to fully comply with BS5454: 2000 within three years has to be balanced against other building improvements which will directly improve services to users such as improved visitor facilities and recabling the reading room.
- 22 *To provide the best possible access to the information in their care* the LMA have continued to extend opening hours to users. The Service is now available on 2 late evenings and on 22 Saturdays per year. This has been achieved in consultation with users and other stakeholders without increases in revenue budgets.
- 23 The LMA has developed their web site and a distance enquiry service to give more information and support to users who are unable to visit the archives. The net result of these initiatives has been to increase the number of visitors from 18,885 in 1996/97 to 25,946 in 2000/01 and to achieve a 21 per cent growth in distance enquiries to 6,269 in 2000/01.
- 24 The LMA has also improved its performance in retrieving documents requested by users who visit the archive. Documents can be requested three times per hour instead of two and the LMA has a standard of producing 95 per cent of requests within 20 minutes, which is being met. The LMA has recently introduced standards for distance enquiries and copying documents. The standard for distance enquiries (90 per cent of distance enquiries fully completed within 28 days) was achieved for the first time in autumn 2001. We recommend that the LMA publicly display their performance against the standards in the search room and in their annual report.
- 25 *To ensure that their resources are available to as wide a range of people as possible and to build an environment where learning is fun* the LMA have developed an interpretation policy and service. The purpose of the interpretation service is to increase usage of the LMA by young people and other groups of potential users who are under-represented among current visitors.
- 26 The interpretation policy is an important step in changing the focus of the LMA, but its strategic objectives and action plan only cover a 14-month period. We recommend that the interpretation policy should be amended to show how the strategic aims will be achieved in the medium to long term.
- 27 The interpretation officer has already created a number of exhibitions, events and resource packs that have been made available to other organisations. Reader services have been reorganised to create a larger interpretation team. We believe that these actions will ensure that a more diverse range of people will use the LMA in the future.

- 28 *To develop staff so that they can provide expert services* the LMA has a well developed performance management and training system which provides clear performance targets for staff and offers a range of opportunities for personal development. Staff are supported to achieve professional and related qualifications.
- 29 In the survey of visitors to British archives, the percentage of visitors strongly agreeing that staff were knowledgeable increased from 48.9 per cent in 1999 to 55.0 per cent in 2001. The user focus group we spoke to and our reality checks all confirmed that the staff provide a high quality service to the public.
- 30 As part of its Saturday opening initiative the LMA introduced volunteers to the Service. The LMA agreed a volunteer policy and a structured training and induction programme for staff and volunteers. As a result, the staff and volunteers we spoke to were all positive about the way that volunteers had been introduced and were working together as part of the staff team. We commend the LMA for this achievement.
- 31 So far, volunteers have only been recruited from existing LMA users; we recommend that the LMA proactively seeks further volunteers from a wider range of communities.
- 32 *To make full use of current techniques to provide an effective service* and in response to the government policy on archives action plan, the LMA has set itself a target of converting all existing manual catalogues to automated formats by 2005. This will involve converting over 5,000,000 records and could not be achieved within the revenue budgets of the LMA.
- 33 To meet the target, the LMA has been successful in seeking external funding from charitable foundations, the Heritage Lottery Fund, New Opportunities Fund and Public Records Office. The LMA has been awarded £650,000 over the last three years from these sources which will enable them to convert approximately 2,000,000 records by the end of 2002.
- 34 The LMA has invested in its reprographics equipment over the last few years. This has improved the Service in two ways. Firstly, the LMA is now able to offer an improved copying service to users. A wider range of books and documents can now be copied, scanned or microfilmed to a higher quality. A copying policy and service standards have been produced and turnaround times have been improved. Secondly, the LMA is able to compete for microfilming contracts in the public sector. External clients include several London boroughs and the Information Services National Training Organisation. The contracts have produced an average income of £23,000 per annum over 2000/01 and 2001/02 which has been reinvested in the Service.

How does the performance compare?

- 35 As a large regional service, it is not always appropriate for the LMA to compare itself with London borough archives. London averages for the seven boroughs who

reported financial information to Cipfa in 2000/01 were £221,000 net expenditure, 4,445 visitors and 1,412 documents produced. In comparison, the LMA reported net expenditure of £2,326,000, 27,627 visitors and 50,243 documents produced. The LMA provides a much broader scale and range of services over a larger geographic area. In relation to the physical number of visitors, the LMA appears expensive but in relation to the number of documents produced in response to all user enquiries, the LMA is cost effective.

- 36 The LMA is able to directly compare its performance against other London archive offices using the archival mapping project for England (2000) and the survey of visitors to British archives (2001).
- 37 The archival mapping project for England measures the facilities that archive offices provide to their users. In 2000 the LMA was in the regional top quartile in five of the eight categories, above average in two, and scores poorly only in relation to electronic records, which it is currently not required to keep.
- 38 The survey of visitors to British archives measures the satisfaction of users with services and facilities at each archive office. In 2001 the LMA's excellence rating was above the regional average in five of the seven categories. The two categories where the LMA was below average were opening hours and visitor facilities.

How likely is the Service to improve?

Does the best value review drive improvements?

- 39 The best value review was completed on time and involved officers from a range of departments, elected members and staff. Given the regional significance of the LMA, the fact that there was no external involvement in the review process was a missed opportunity but we acknowledge that the Corporation have addressed this issue in subsequent best value reviews.
- 40 The review identified the key challenges that faced the Service. These were the role and service of LMA, cross departmental services, responding to government thinking, the impact of the bidding culture and the specific operational questions of Saturday opening, improved equipment and improved accommodation.
- 41 The operational issues addressed reflected the priorities of users (identified by the complaints system and user surveys). The review challenged the way the service was provided and identified how significant service improvements could be achieved. The review also effectively challenged how the LMA was responding to modernising government, external funding and social inclusion initiatives.
- 42 The review attempted to address the role and service of LMA and cross-departmental issues. However, the scope of the review meant that the relationship between the LMA and a number of other Corporation services such as Keats House, the Museum of London, the Guildhall Library and the City of London Record Office were not considered. This meant that the only cross-departmental service

that the review examined was the archive conservation function. We acknowledge that a number of the broader cross-departmental issues are now being taken up at a Corporation wide level.

- 43 The review did not fundamentally challenge the role of the LMA as a regional body. It recognised that government agencies have strongly emphasised the need to develop regional perspectives but it did not address the potential role of the LMA as a key agency for co-ordinating regional development. The review is also silent on the issue of the responsibility for archiving Greater London Authority records which will be key to the long-term future of the LMA.
- 44 We found evidence that the LMA had effectively compared itself with the Public Record Office and the Scottish Record Office. For example, some of the improvements in performance of retrieving documents requested by users have been achieved by process benchmarking with the Public Record Office.
- 45 The LMA has regular contact with users through its newsletter, complaints system, user surveys, website and London Archive Users Forum sub group and we found that the operational issues addressed by the review accurately reflected the priorities of users.
- 46 However, we did not find evidence that the LMA had directly consulted users about the best value review apart from the consultation exercise on Saturday opening. We note that, following our inspection, the LMA is proposing to reconvene the user focus group that we spoke to.
- 47 The best value review recognised that the LMA contracts out a number of specialist services but it did not consider alternative methods of procuring the core service. However, subsequent to the review the LMA have produced a procurement options appraisal that includes an undertaking to consider a proposal on managing the LMA as a charitable trust by Summer 2002. We also believe that the proposal to introduce volunteers to achieve Saturday opening represented an imaginative approach to alternative ways that services can be provided.

How good is the improvement plan?

- 48 The best value improvement plan was organised around the structure of the LMA, rather than the key challenges identified by the review. It focused on operational and funding issues and was limited to three years. However the plan identified timescales, resources required and responsibilities for delivering improvements.
- 49 The improvement plan does not contain clear performance targets for LMA services over the next five years, even in areas such as user satisfaction where comparable performance information is already collected. We recommend that the LMA update and revise their improvement plan to reflect all the key challenges addressed by the review over the next five years and include performance targets which will clearly demonstrate that service improvements are being achieved.

Will the Corporation deliver the improvements?

- 50 We found support from elected Members, users, staff and other stakeholders for the capability of the LMA to achieve further improvement.
- 51 In interviews and focus groups with external agencies, users and elected Members, we were told that the Service had transformed over the last five years, becoming more outward facing and customer focussed.
- 52 Staff also believe that the Service has improved over the last five years and is moving in the right direction. They feel well informed about the changes that have taken place but believe that they could be more empowered to continue improving services.

'We need more team ownership of team decisions' [staff member]

- 53 The Corporation has given the LMA full control of their £2,000,000 repairs and renewals fund to ensure that a number of the operational and building improvements outlined in the building development plan can be achieved.
- 54 The best value review was completed in May 2001. Since that date the LMA have made significant progress in implementing the key priorities for the best value improvement plan outlined in Paragraph 10 of this report. Saturday opening has been achieved, new microfilming equipment has been installed, the web site has been developed and more catalogue records have been automated. The Halon fire extinguisher system replacement proposal has been approved. Further external funding bids such as the 'Moving Here' project have been successful and the interpretation service has been launched.
- 55 The Historic Manuscripts Commission and the Public Record Office have recently inspected the LMA. Both organisations recognise the quality of the service provided by the LMA.

'The main theme which I took away with me was that there is a great enthusiasm for the continuing development of public services which readers actually want' [Public Record Office]

- 56 Although both organisations point out that environmental conditions in one of the two main buildings do not fully meet the recommendations of BS 5454 the Public Record Office have renewed the appointment of LMA to hold deposited classes of public records. The Historic Manuscripts Commission places a greater emphasis on the preservation function of the LMA and has offered to grant it two years of provisional approval. The LMA has recently completed a self-assessment against the Commission for Racial Equality Level two and has clearly demonstrated how it achieves the required standard.

- 57 The Corporation of London has a good track record in its previous best value inspections. All five services inspected have been rated as 'good'. One has excellent prospects for improvement, one has promising prospects and three have uncertain prospects for improvement.
- 58 The LMA has a clear performance management system for individual staff and detailed targets for each section of the service. However, it does not have an overarching annual service plan that identifies the key priorities for the Service and is communicated to users and other stakeholders. We recommend that the annual report from the Libraries, Guildhall Art Gallery and Archives Committee include the key priorities for the LMA in the forthcoming year and their achievement of the previous year's priorities.

Recommendations

- 59 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement authorities need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team feels that the Corporation should now take action to resolve a number of general, political, managerial and partnership issues.
- 60 We recommend that:
- ◆ The LMA should update its aims and objectives to include a commitment to a regional role in supporting the archives sector in the Greater London area.
 - ◆ The LMA should consult and involve a wider range of stakeholders in continuing to update their aims and objectives.
 - ◆ The LMA interpretation policy should be amended to include an action plan that shows how the strategic aims will be achieved in the medium to long term.
 - ◆ The LMA should consult and involve users and depositors in developing its collecting policy and determining its priorities for cataloguing unlisted material.
 - ◆ The LMA should proactively seek further volunteers from a wider range of communities.
 - ◆ The LMA should update and revise their improvement plan to reflect all the key challenges addressed by the review over the next five years and include performance targets which will clearly demonstrate that service improvements are being achieved.
 - ◆ The Annual Report from the Libraries, Guildhall Art Gallery and Archives Committee should include the key priorities for the LMA in the forthcoming year and their achievement of the previous years priorities.

- ◆ The LMA should publicise their performance against distance enquiry, document copying, document production and further standards in the search room and annual report.

61 We would like to thank the staff of the London Metropolitan Archives particularly Deborah Jenkins who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Neal Hounsell

Inspector

Dates of inspection: 9 February and 11 - 13 February 2002

Email: n-hounsell@audit-commission.gov.uk

**For more information please contact
Audit Commission Inspection Service
London Region
17th Floor Millbank Tower
Millbank
London SW1P 4QP**

**www.audit-commission.gov.uk
020 7872 4900**

Appendices

What the inspectors did

The purpose of best value inspection is to make two judgements. The first is, how good is the Service being inspected? The second is, how likely is it to improve? We carried out a range of different activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Documents reviewed

Before going on site, we reviewed a range of documents which had been provided in advance by the Corporation for us. This included the following:

- ◆ Best value review and improvement plan, May 2001
- ◆ LMA performance management objectives 2001/02
- ◆ LMA training plan 2002/03
- ◆ LMA Interpretation and Education Policy 2001
- ◆ Annual report from the Libraries, Guildhall Art Gallery and Archives Committee 1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001
- ◆ LMA preservation and conservation policy 2001, draft copying policy 2002, collecting policy 1994
- ◆ 'Moving Here' project business plan
- ◆ LMA Commission for Racial Equality Standard for Local Government level 2 action plan.

Reality checks undertaken

When we went on site, we carried out a number of different checks building on the work described above in order to get a full picture of how good the Service is. These on site 'reality checks' were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the Service and see how well it works on the ground. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

- ◆ Personal visit to the LMA, 2 February 2002
- ◆ Distance enquiry service checks, week beginning 4 February 2002
- ◆ Web site check, 5 February 2002

- ◆ Volunteers focus group, 9 February 2002
- ◆ Tour of LMA buildings 11 February 2002
- ◆ Users focus group 12 February 2002
- ◆ Staff focus group 12 February 2002.

List of those interviewed

We also met with a range of different people involved with the Service

David Murray	London Libraries Development Agency
Dr. Norman James	Historic Manuscripts Commission
Stephen Jones	Public Record Office
Charlotte Shaw	Senior Archivist, Acquisitions, Cataloguing and Automation
Rhys Griffith	Senior Archivist, Access, Enquiries and Interpretation
Helen Lindsay	Senior Conservator, Preservation
Tim Harris	Senior Archivist, Administration and Building Services
Geoff Pick	Reader Services Manager
Emma Stewart	Collections Development Manager
Colin Thom	English Heritage (Survey of London)
Mick Scott	Senior Librarian Keats House
Dr. Deborah Jenkins	Head Archivist
Mrs. Ann Pembroke	Chairman of the Libraries, Guildhall Art Gallery and Archives Committee
Mr. Lionel Altman	Deputy Chairman of the Libraries, Guildhall Art Gallery and Archives Committee
John Butcher	Assistant Town Clerk

Tom Simmons	Town Clerk
Sam Seager, David Thomas	Public Records Office (Moving Here Project)
Emma Halsall	Regional Archives Council (telephone interview)