



SEMLAC response to the Regional Assembly Select Committee Examination of Social Exclusion

Introduction

South East Museum, Library and Archive Council (SEMLAC) is the regional development agency for museum, library and archive activity in the South East. We work to improve the quality of museum, library and archive provision in the South East in order to maximise the sectors' contribution to the region's distinctive cultural, social, educational and economic life and identity.

We cover the 19 county and unitary authority areas within the Government Office for the South East (GOSE) region. This includes 74 local authorities spanning Milton Keynes to the Isle of Wight to Medway.

Since it was first established in 2002, SEMLAC has funded an Access and Learning Team whose remit has included issues relating to tackling social exclusion. The team has responded to this to the challenge of inclusion by advising on and supporting specific programmes, including those aimed at independent older learners as well as those in day and residential care, young men in prison, asylum seekers and their families and members of the traveller communities in the south east. Building on the insights these programmes have afforded, SEMLAC recently published its own social inclusion strategy that seeks to identify barriers and challenges to inclusion, the contribution to that museums, libraries and archives can make to tackling exclusion and how SEMLAC can enable and support that process.

General Comments on the paper examining context and issues prepared for the select committee

SEMLAC found this paper extremely valuable, particularly the south east specific data, definitions of exclusion and the assertion that culture has a role to play in tackling social exclusion. Along with a social inclusion strategy and action plan, SEMLAC has also commissioned research into Libraries and Community Cohesion from John Vincent, a nationally acknowledged expert in this field. There are nearly 500 public library service points in the south east and SEMLAC feels that the public libraries can play a really significant role supporting renewal, regeneration and hosting and nurturing active communities. They are self evidently providers of lifelong learning opportunities, including the support of those with basic skills needs.

Question 1

SEMLAC supports the key points in the social inclusion statement and feels that the museum, library and archive sector can support most of the eight areas of policy, specifically:

Healthy local communities – museums, libraries and archives are part of the community landscape as venues, as representatives of the voluntary and community sector and as providers of help and information for the community.

Reducing Crime – public libraries have worked in partnership with safer community initiatives and all parts of our sector can contribute to opportunities for young people at risk of crime, including via initiatives such as Positive Activities for Young People. Public and prison libraries also have a role to play in the rehabilitation of offenders and ex-offenders and SEMLAC and Hampshire Libraries are currently part of a consortium project that rehabilitates persistent offenders funded through the SEEDA EXODUS programme.

Educational attainment – museums, libraries and archives have a fundamental role to play here, directly supporting school age children through homework clubs, learning activities linked to the National Curriculum and providing pupil enrichment or gifted and talented programmes. Support is also provided for community based learning for FE and HE students, particularly via public libraries' books stock and free access to the internet.

Entrepreneurship and enterprise – libraries provide community based business information and are often the first port of call for small businesses. Museums in the south east have contributed to SEEDA's social enterprise developments.

Health inequalities – public libraries play a significant role in providing literature about healthy living, including diet. Their fiction stock can also support people's mental health, whether through reading for pleasure or joining a book group. This area of work, known as bibliotherapy, is developing fast within the region, including in Portsmouth City Council via innovative partnerships with Primary Care Trusts. SEMLAC also supported the development of a pioneering training manual, Oxfordshire County Council's "Words and Wings." The manual was aimed at reminiscence workers and looked at ways to use artefacts, photographs, documents and oral evidence, including songs to support reminiscence activity that keeps older learners physically and mentally active and contributes to their wellbeing.

Cultural activities – this is where museums, libraries and archives fit within regional structures and SEMLAC supports and plays an active role in the work of Culture South East

Question 2

SEMLAC would cite the development of DCMS PSA Targets for the cultural sector as a major change in structure since the statement was agreed.

DCMS PSA Target 3

By 2008 increase the take up of cultural and sporting opportunities by adults and young people aged 16 and above from priority groups by:

- Increasing the number who participate in active sport at least 12 a year by 3% and increasing the number who engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity level of sport at least 3 times a week by 3%.
- Increasing the number who participate in arts activity at least twice a year by 2%, increasing the number who attend arts events at least twice a year by 3%.
- Increasing the number accessing museums and galleries' collections by 2%.
- Increasing the number visiting designated historic environment sites by 3%.

Priority groups are defined as:

- people with a mental or physical disability
- people from black or ethnic minority groups
- people from socio-economic groups C2, D and E

The new Public Library Impact Measures, which directly linked to the governments "shared priorities," will show hard evidence of the difference this part of the cultural, information and learning sector can make to local communities. They will also feed into each local authority's Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPA).

SEMLAC also sees the new developments around growth areas in the south east as an opportunity to plan proactively for communities, including those at risk of exclusion. We have particular interest in the development of a cultural infrastructure to support these new communities as they grow.

SEMLAC notes that the Local Strategic Partnerships and newer Local Area Agreements are part of the current landscape. Our sector has often found few opportunities to be represented within these partnerships and agreements. Their membership criteria are often less than transparent to our sector and the information flow from these groupings is also patchy for our sector.

Question 3

SEMLAC would like to see the measurement of the PSA targets set by DCMS as one measure for inclusion in the south east.

Question 4

SEMLAC initially found SIPSE a useful focal point for information and idea sharing on social inclusion and we contributed examples of good practice to support the drawing up of the original statement. We were also represented at the conference to introduce the statement. However, as we were represented on SIPSE by Culture South East we have had less contact more recently than we might have liked. We have always maintained a commitment to social inclusion – as witnessed by projects we have managed and grant aided and the development of our social inclusion strategy but have found SIPSE's communication with us to be intermittent. It has been difficult to build on their initiatives, including their special working parties as it has not always been clear to us what these working parties are doing and how we might contribute. Recently SEMMLAC was asked to join a new group addressing BME and Asylum seekers and looks forward to greater involvement with SIPSE. SIPSE has amongst its members many senior managers with large and complex workloads. Clearly, their seniority was to be sign of the importance to be given to tackling exclusion but they are often people with little time to give to SIPSE beyond attending the meetings. Tackling exclusion is a partnership activity and works effectively when based at a level where it can take account of local needs and work through local vehicles. It should perhaps have been more appropriate for the SIPSE members to concentrate on championing inclusion and allow for bodies such as SEMMLAC and its constituents who work at a grass roots level to facilitate the group's activity. For this to happen more two way communication is needed from the all the sectors involved at grass roots up to SIPSE and from the SIPSE champions through to the communities themselves.

Question 5

The RES was originally written very much from the economic standpoint and it was hard to detect how social inclusion might be effected through its actions. The RES is now under revision and it appears as though there is more consideration now being given to social inclusion factors however the document is still fundamentally economically led, rather than community led. This will continue to create challenges for those seeking to tackle social exclusion in the region as our exclusion is so pocketed and can easily be masked when our regional economy defines us.

Question 6

As previously stated our sector is not well represented in local strategic partnerships, despite our potential and actual contribution to the 8 key areas of the social inclusion statement. Therefore, SEMLAC would seek more transparent arrangements for recruitment to the partnerships and more of an onus of members to network with all contributors to social inclusion, including museums, libraries and archives.

Question 7

SEMLAC already feels that both SIPSE and the Local Strategic Partnerships have been difficult for our sector to join or collaborate with. Therefore, much of our sector has been working on social inclusion without their help and support. This has been regrettable for them and also has meant that these regional vehicles for focusing on social inclusion have not been able to draw on the valuable support of our sector. SEMLAC would not want this to continue and would like to seek ways that we and our sector can take a more active part in SIPSE and the Local Strategic Partnerships. Smaller local organisations must be supported by these regional bodies as they are the ones that deliver change on the ground.

SEMLAC would also cite the Area Investment Frameworks structure and the Learning and Skills Councils as regional players with whom it has been hard for our sector to form partnerships. Investment for deprived areas and the provision of learning and skills opportunities are significant forces for tackling social exclusion. Museums, libraries and archives have found the AIF structures difficult to engage with as, despite being locally devolved, understanding how they function has been difficult as they do not appear to have common management structures and are very time consuming to get to know. The same could be said for the six Learning and Skills Councils in the region, operating across 19 county and unitary authorities. Despite the emerging regional focus for the Learning and Skills Councils, each of the six can operate independently and have different priorities. This has provide confusing both for museums, libraries and archives operating at local authority level and for SEMLAC in trying to broker more cost effective regionwide initiatives.

Question 8

Mindful that the South East's growth areas represent both an opportunity to develop vibrant inclusive communities but also a risk that without the right infrastructure new excluded communities could result, SEMLAC has spent considerable time in advocating the value of museums, libraries and archives to creating successful growth areas. Two reports commissioned by SEMLAC from Oxford Brookes University; "Museum, Library and Archive provision and new development in the South East" and "Securing Developer Contributions for

Museum, Library and Archive Facilities in the South East (Guidance Notes)” have sought to account for the current position in terms of our sector as part of new communities’ infrastructure and to advocate a role for the future. These pieces of work have articulated a clear role for our sector and have aimed to explain planning obligations so that those running museums, libraries and archives can see how they might make their case. SEMLAC has spent time promoting this work to the sector and to planners within the region. SEMLAC sees this type of explanatory guidance as a model of good practice in ensuring that those with an interest in developing the local community infrastructure have clear information and guidance to act upon.

Other examples of good practice in our field include the new EXODUS partnership that brings together Winchester City and Test Valley Borough Councils, Winchester Housing Group, JobCentre Plus, CLIC (a housing and health organisation), Winchester prison, Hampshire Libraries and SEMLAC to support the rehabilitation of persistent offenders. This project is in receipt of SEEDA and European funding.

We would also cite the projects outlined in question 1, “Words and Wings” the training manual developed in partnership with Oxfordshire County Council’s Community Education and Museums Service, “Black Box,” a SEMLAC partnership project linking museums, prisoners and vulnerable groups in West Sussex and Brighton & Hove, “Bridging the Gap”, a SEMLAC partnership project between West Sussex Libraries, Ford Open Prison and Sussex Youth Ltd/Sussex Probation looking at resettlement of ex-offenders.

Finally, SEMLAC would cite the “Project Hero” initiative whereby vulnerable young men in Reading Young Offenders Institution took part in creative reading and writing workshops inspired by graphic novels and artefact loans. This was a partnership project between Reading YOI, including its education service and prison and Reading Museums and Libraries Service.

There is no evidence that any of these projects was directly initiated or supported through SIPSE or its working parties.

Question 9

Skills for Life is an area of activity with a national agency and SEMLAC has played a strong role in the region as a broker between those concerned with tackling basic skills deficiencies and those suited to the delivery of learning opportunities, such as public libraries. This is a model of two way communication of advocacy and good practice on behalf of the deliverers and identifying needs to meet their agendas, such as training.

Question 10

Currently SIPSE does not engage regularly with regional agencies such as SEMLAC. These bodies are key communicators with the community and voluntary sector and more local organisations responsible for delivery. A better communications strategy for SIPSE and work supporting the Social Inclusion Statement would take account of this chain including regional cultural agencies when planning and disseminating its work.

Question 11

The planning and funding architecture is not flexible enough as it does not take sufficient account of the value of the community and voluntary sector in communicating its functions, aims and ideas. Partnership is difficult to achieve because of the lack of transparency to local and community organisations and the remoteness of SIPSE and its current membership from activity on the ground.

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