

REGIONAL COMMENTARIES – A SUMMARY



❖ What are Regional Commentaries?

Creating a partnership for improving cultural and leisure services

DCMS and regional agencies are committed to strengthening the alignment of national, regional, and local objectives and priorities in the sector, and to encouraging and supporting service improvement in local authority cultural services. Commentaries are intended to be a means to achieve this with single tier and county councils, and will be undertaken in partnership with local authorities.

Commentaries have four inter-related purposes:

- A means to develop and improve working relationships between local authorities and regional agencies.
- A contribution to a better understanding of the work of local authorities and regional agencies.
- A focus for discussing 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.
- A basis to discuss service planning, delivery and improvement in local authorities, and explore the capacity and potential of regional agencies to support improvement.

❖ How do they sit alongside other emerging agendas?

Commentaries form an important part of the emerging improvement strategy for cultural services, involving the main regional agencies in supporting service improvement and cultural planning in the locality and in the region, for example through LAA's.

They align with the emerging thinking around self improvement and allow the regional agencies for the sector to support and be a critical friend on planning, delivery, and performance, and provide an insight into how cultural opportunities are regarded by stakeholder organisations.

They are an example of sector led improvement, and reinforce the role of local authorities as organisations that can “place shape” and influence quality of life and the economic, social and environmental well being of the local community through cultural opportunities and experiences.

They will bring regional agencies closer together and encourage closer cohesion and joining up of cultural provision on the ground. Cultural opportunities and experiences have a practical part to play in creating attractive and vibrant places to live, which in turn contributes to economic, social, and environmental well being.

❖ What are they intended to achieve?

- A structured dialogue between the regional agencies and the local authority resulting in a shared improvement process and a means to clarify relationships and expectations.
- An opportunity for local authorities to gauge their own position against the expectations of regional agencies, and an incentive to adopt self-assessment and self-improvement.
- An opportunity for cultural providers to raise the profile and importance of local government and its partners across and within stakeholder groups
- Opportunities for regional agencies to better understand local authorities and local government's overall position in the region, and for local authorities to inform and shape national and regional policy making in culture.
- A more rounded, locally driven, view of the cultural offering in a locality as an alternative to, or to complement, data based assessments.
- Improved cultural planning and delivery so that local people's cultural expectations are met, and in the best cases, exceeded.
- Strengthening of the links to wider local and regional agendas through culture's contribution to health, regeneration, and safer and stronger communities.

❖ **Who's involved?**

DCMS, the regional agencies for Sport England, Arts Council England, the Museums Libraries and Archives Council, and Regional Cultural Consortia. Other regional bodies such as English Heritage and Regional Development Agencies will be invited to participate where appropriate. The IDeA has been involved in helping to develop the process and will continue to provide advice to the key stakeholders during the process.

❖ **What Commentaries are not**

Commentaries are not inspection by the back door, nor are they a scored judgement in any way. They will not be used in CPA and - if used by regulators - they will be used to inform and guide.

❖ **Has there been consultation with the local government sector?**

In December 2005 a number of regional consultation events took place to which local authorities were invited along with regional agencies and DCMS Government Offices. There was a broad agreement that Commentaries were a step in the right direction as long as they did not impose a burden on local authorities.

The Chief Leisure Officers' Association (CLOA) has said

"Despite concerns about the potential of regional commentaries being a scored judgement within the CPA, Chief Officers welcome the intended strengthening of the relationship between regional NDPBs and individual local authorities, which they see as having weakened over recent years, to the detriment of cultural development by local government. A better shared understanding of the environment in which each is working would be very much welcomed, as would the opportunity for local authorities to clarify for NDPBs the issues they are facing in delivering better services.

A partnership based on the concept of 'critical friendship' would be broadly welcomed by the sector therefore, particularly if it was considered to be a two-way process, whereby NDPBs and local authorities would work together towards mutual improvements in performance."