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#DigiRDG: Town and Country Project Evaluation Report

THE MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

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READING MUSEUM

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Contents

1.0   Executive Summary

1.1 The project

#DigiRDG: Town and Country was an Arts Council England-funded Resilience Project which aimed to transform how The Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL) and Reading Museum operate in a fast-moving digital environment. It was the two museums' third project together and ran between November 2016 and April 2018.

The project aimed to help secure the future of the museums by exploiting digital platforms for building relationships with audiences, through skills development, encouraging behaviour changes among staff and audiences in using digital platforms, digitally-inspired community programmes to help achieve greater diversity and enhancing the museums' workforce diversity through appointing two Diversity Trainee Project Officers.

The project's funding from Arts Council England was £237,500, with funding from Reading Borough Council and the University of Reading bringing the total to £274,132. The core project team comprised:

- Adam Koszary, #DigiRDG Project Manager – full-time
- Alison Hilton, MERL Marketing Manager – 1 day per week
- Project diversity trainees: Charlene Marriott and Nitisha Ramrekha-Heeramun – full-time
- Kate Arnold-Forster, Head of University Museums and Special Collections/Director, Museum of English Rural Life – supervisory role and strategic contributor
- Matthew Williams, Manager of Reading Museum – supervisory role and strategic contributor

The project was steered by a Digital Audit and an Action Plan co-written with digital consultant Fiona Romeo. This was informed by: a review of existing documentation, web and social media analytics, an all-staff survey, a discovery workshop and in-depth interviews with staff.

The team worked with consultant Laura Crossley to create a problem statement that the project should solve, and design a project logic model, which was used as a project management, monitoring and evaluation tool.

The problem statement was:
> *"Our audiences are not as diverse as we'd like and our digital behaviour is not as effective as we'd like, which could lead to irrelevance, being left behind and, ultimately, not being sustainable."*

1.2 Evaluation

This evaluation report brings together findings and insights from:

- Digital Audit surveys
- The project's review and reflection meetings
- Data and research collected by the project team at events
- Website analytics
- Social media analytics
- Interviews with the project team and museum directors
- A staff evaluation workshop
- A staff survey
- Surveys to the trainees and their line managers

1.3 Project activities and deliverables

The project's events and initiatives included:

- An audio project stand at The Berkshire Show, with activities including a short film, VR headsets, interactive games and making recorded interviews with visitors and stallholders.
- A Family Forum – research on how families respond to the digital devices and activities within the galleries.
- The MERL Digital Takeover Lates – evening events with activities and talks on a digital theme, including: an augmented reality trail, virtual reality of the Reading Abbey ruins, talks based on virtual models (virtual Rome), silent disco, 3D scanning and 3D craft making and more.
- Involvement in Culture24's Let's Get Real project which seeks to understand the social purpose of digital technology for arts and heritage organisations.
- Hardware was purchased and created as a library for museum staff and volunteers to use, accompanied by training in how to use the equipment (on photography, filming and DSLR).
- Trialling three different uses of 3D technology in a schools session with year 8 students.
- A presence at East Reading Festival gaining feedback on a VR tour of The MERL.
- Setting up and running Code Club sessions at The MERL for children aged 9-13.
- Showing 360-degree photos of Reading Abbey ruins and The MERL galleries at community events and showing them on The MERL website.
- Working with teams of second year students on the MA Public History course at the University of Reading to create social media campaigns for Reading Abbey.
- Gaining user feedback on augmented reality trails of The MERL.
- Installing public Wi-Fi at Reading Museum.
- Attendance at some meetings and networking events with local cultural organisations such as Geek Night and ROAM (Creative Networking for Reading).

Social and digital media initiatives included:

- Reading Museum created a series of Pinterest boards for teach relating to the collections and Reading Abbey on themes such as the Victorian schoolroom, Reading Abbey paintings and Huntley & Palmers biscuit tins.
- Reading Museum publishing four 3D models on online platform Sketchfab.
- Accessible Museum Sprint: creating digital resources for visitors and potential visitors on the Autism Spectrum.
- A Facebook Live piloted for MERL's Annual Lecture.
- The extraordinary viral Twitter success of The Absolute Unit.
- Supporting the #RDG30 social media campaign.
- Creating the Reading Museum blog.
- Both museums' websites have been developed and included the integration and sustained use of blogs.
- Reading Museum has also benefitted from improved photography and The MERL's website has incorporated responsive exhibition trails.

Skills development

A subscription to Skillshare was bought and used by some staff members. The Archives team at The MERL have now incorporated Skillshare into their monthly training.

Several 'Digital Den' training sessions with a mixture of external and internal trainers on topics such as blogs, audiences and outcomes; Agile training; 3D scanning workshop; film training; content; Wikipedia; Instagram; Trello.

Staff also undertook a range of study visits and trips including to the Arts Marketing Association's Digital Marketing Day, an Erasmus trip to the Netherlands and the Museums + Tech conference.

Partnership-working

The museum teams adopted the Agile way of working following training on this, and followed this up with the introduction and use of Trello, a web-based project management application, to plan their work.

Sharing the project and its lessons

Staff and trainees have used social media and blogged throughout the project about their digital adventures, for example blog posts about:

- Using Agile Methods
- Using Trello and Slack
- Project reflection
- Highdown School research on 3D

The project team has also identified nine case studies that highlight the project's variety of achievements and have commissioned a film about the project which will be uploaded to Youtube, disseminated through both museums' social media channels and embedded on the project page on The MERL website.

The viral Twitter success of the 'Absolute Unit' is being showcased widely, for example in the Trendswatch section of the Museums Journal, at the Museums Association's South East Members' Meeting, in academic presentations such as the Natural Sciences Collections Association Conference, in the National Archives' Action Plan for the Archives sector, and at the 2018 Museums Association conference.

1.4 Project outcomes and impacts

As the summary below shows, the vast majority of outcomes have either been met or partially met, and the only two that have not yet been met will be tackled by the museums at the start of the NPO programme.

Outcomes met	Outcomes partially met	Outcomes not yet met
1. Increased understanding of how to be relevant to our audiences 2. Increased digital reach 3. Better understanding of how to evaluate what digital activities and products work for our audiences 4. Increased confidence to take risks 5. Better understanding of what's relevant to our audiences 6. Able to demonstrate that working with communities helps keep us relevant 7. Equipment in place to have a quality digital offer 8. Disseminate and share digital practice 9. Increased understanding of our priorities / core aims and the confidence to say, 'No' 10. Upskilled and empowered workforce who understand and can use digital technologies that are excellent and quality 11. We will have shared our transformation with people/the sector 12. Embedded a sharing and evaluative culture 13. Increased understanding of how to run a sustainable project 14. Be more effective with our resources 15. Better understanding of developing and delivering traineeships 16. Trainees are equipped with the skills to progress 17. We have disseminated and shared learnings from the traineeships 18. The two museums have created a mutually beneficial and strong working partnership 19. The two museums sharing data 20. Able to demonstrate the value of having wider cultural networks 21. Improved feedback across social media 22. Positive Trip Advisor reviews	1. Workflows in place to prevent poor quality work being released 2. Demonstrate the value of having paid digital staff 3. Delivered 6 excellent community projects 4. Remove the barriers to undertaking digital work 5. Be more environmentally conscious 6. Able to demonstrate the value of joint working 7. Developed a better understanding of Reading audiences 8. Increased our network within Reading's cultural scene 9. Increased use of positive feedback from social media in marketing	1. Systems to measure diversity of audiences in place 2. Shared evaluation questions/both collecting similar data

In terms of the project's impacts, the project has already made excellent progress in meeting these already (impacts dealing with longer term change):

Project Impact	Impact met?
1. More Diverse and Greater Audiences are Engaged with our Museums	In part
2. The Quality of our Digital Offer is Consistently Excellent and Relevant to our Diverse Audiences	Yes
3. Our Museums are Leading in Cultural Digital Engagement and Practice	Yes
4. Our Museums Have Built a Reputation for Digital Workforce Transformation	In part
5. Our Museums will have More Sustainable Operating Models	Yes
6. Our Museums are Contributing to Sector Workforce Development	Yes
7. MERL and Reading Museum are Working in a Strategic Partnership	Yes
8. MERL and Reading Museum are at the Heart of the Delivery of Reading's Cultural Offer	In part

Where the impacts have not yet been met the explanations are below:

1. More diverse and greater audiences have attended individual events, but as the museums are not collecting visitor data across the board, it is not possible to know the impact on the museums general visitors.
4. A lot of staff have benefitted from training and started using new tools, equipment and approaches, but pockets of individuals remain who have not yet benefitted from the training and/or embraced digital, and building a reputation for digital workforce transformation will take time.
8. The museums are cultivating a role in the delivery of Reading's cultural offer, but are not yet at the heart of this.

1.5 Lessons Learned

Project scope

A clear lesson that the project team and museum directors agree on is that the project was too ambitious in its aims and that going forward with the NPO, the team will ensure they have regular meetings and quickly be able to spot what is going well and not, and whether they need to revisit anything.

Project management

The project team found the logic model essential, especially using it as a review tool to check back and check on progress.

Communication

The staff workshop raised the issue of needing better communication about when to do things and the project team agreed that it was hard to capture the attention of everyone in both organisations and that internal communication could have been improved.

Training

Many of the lessons learned that were shared during the staff evaluation workshop related to digital training, as some staff felt they had not had the time or opportunity to take part in the training. Some of the ideas for improving this in the future include: recording, reusing and repeat training; featuring digital in the inductions of new staff; and having dedicated time for training e.g. a staff development hour.

Traineeships

There was agreement from staff and the trainees that the traineeships could have had more structure at the outset, although to some extent the traineeships were intentionally flexible in order for them to be shaped by the trainees' own interests.

1.6 Project legacies

The project's main legacies have been identified as:

- **Digital engagement** e.g. digital activities that have been tested and could be repeated, blogging and social media, acquiring digital tools and skills to use them to transform public engagement
- **Internal cultural change** e.g. a positive attitude towards change, fewer barriers to trying new things and take risks, confidence to embrace projects
- **External perceptions and relationships** e.g. building new relationships, changing perceptions of the museums, influencing cultural change and improvement in Reading
- **Partnerships** e.g. The MERL and Reading Museum collaboration: knowing people / personal relationships, widens skills' pool, Trello
- **Digital tools** e.g. Trello which means reduced meetings and emails, improved project planning and efficiency
- **Digital skills** e.g. a more shared level of understanding of digital, digital at the start of things – not an afterthought

The museums are in a good position to further embed a digital culture, method of working and skills and expertise thanks to the NPO programme that is now starting. This work will benefit from the consistency in having Adam Koszary continuing as a digital lead and champion working across both organisations.

Where the #DigiRDG project has not met all of its objectives or outcomes, there are plans to tackle these in coming months. For example, the teams are planning to set up a new audience survey for the NPO that aligns with the data that Arts Council England needs; and marketing manager Alison will be funded by the NPO to write a digital marketing strategy for both museums.

1.7 Conclusion

The project

The #DigiRDG project was an ambitious and multi-faceted project which was refined and developed as it progressed.

The vast majority of the project's outcomes were delivered, with some underway or delivered to some extent, and those that were not delivered being rolled over into the NPO programme – for example standardising visitor data collection.

The project team

The enthusiasm and determination of the project team has shone through, as has their willingness to share their experiences and lessons learned with the wider museums sector in numerous in-depth and honest blog posts and now as the project has concluded, at events and conferences, helping to spread their lessons learned throughout the sector.

The project team showed a pragmatic and flexible approach as the project developed, honing in on the museums' and staff's key strengths, prioritising activities and focusing on completing these. For example, the project undertook or boosted several smaller community projects rather than create new, large and standalone initiatives due to time available and staff skillsets. The team acknowledges that the project was over-ambitious at the outset, that they were at times too thinly spread and that time constraints thwarted the delivery of all the intended activities and outcomes. The issue of a lack of time also affected the wider group of staff, many of whom reflected that a lack of time had hampered their ability to take part in digital training run as part of the project.

The team concedes it would have been beneficial to drop some activities (for example developing Future Learn courses) earlier than they eventually did (December 2017 review meeting). As the project developed, they identified the most successful and relevant ways to make an impact and work smarter, for example by contributing and improving existing events and activities rather than creating new ones from scratch.

Staff

Staff members have developed their digital skills and confidence and now have a library of equipment to draw on. Most staff members have shown an appetite for digital, embracing the new possibilities and opportunities digital brings. However, some pockets of individuals remain who have not taken part in training for various reasons or been as closely involved in the project, so are at risk of being left behind unless they receive more support and encouragement (something which will be tackled in the coming months).

As a result of the project's experimentation and willingness to try new things and evaluating their endeavours, staff now have a better idea of what works and what does not work, which can translate into a running start in delivering the NPO programme.

The staff workshop demonstrated unanimity in the identification of the project's main impacts, lessons learned and legacies, despite staff representing different departments and having different experiences of the project. A major impact identified in the staff workshop and in interviews with the project team and museum directors was that of a culture change in the museum, for example a more open mindset towards technology, a confidence to embrace projects, a culture of training and learning, and fewer barriers to trying new things and taking risks.

Culture change

Certainly many of the key project outcomes relate to the museums internally – this culture change, skills development, the equipment library, the experimentation and lessons from this. Staff have hailed the adoption and roll-out of Trello as a project management tool a success, as it has helped to structure and streamline work and facilitate easier sharing, collaboration and communication within and between the museums.

At the presentation of the project's evaluation to staff, staff reflected they were more likely to say "yes" now, to trust colleagues and have more confidence is taking risks.

Audiences

The project has run or contributed to a wide variety of events and community activities for a range of different audiences, with good successes and useful feedback. However, it did not develop a system to measure the diversity of the museums' audiences (which will now be done during the NPO programme, using The Audience Agency's Visitor Finder programme), and there is therefore no evidence yet that there has been a step change in the diversity of the museum's audiences across the board. The exception being The MERL's online audiences, which have hugely expanded and diversified thanks to the viral social media hit The Absolute Unit.

Going forward

The project is well on the way to tackling all of the elements in the problem statement it identified at the outset:

"Our audiences are not as diverse as we'd like and our digital behaviour is not as effective as we'd like, which could lead to irrelevance, being left behind and, ultimately, not being sustainable."

However, achieving this does not end with the project's completion, it is an ongoing journey which will need to be built on and sustained.

The real test will come in the coming years when time passes, staff change and new technologies and applications emerge – is the culture change embedded with The MERL and Reading Museum, and can it be sustained? Unlike many short-term projects which come and go with project staff who then move on, The MERL and Reading Museum have a great opportunity to continue to build on the success of the #DigiRDG project thanks to the NPO programme which involves the two museums continuing to work together, and a digital lead role for the project manager. As staff members said, the project has been "an important testbed for the NPO" and "we've spent 18 months testing things out and experimenting. We now know what works".

Some final quotes from staff members which provide a good conclusion to the project and report are:

- "digital should support everything rather than being an end in itself"
- "digital at the start of things, not as an afterthought".