UK Digital Strategy 2017 – Why it matters

- **What it is**

In March of this year the Secretary of State for (then) Culture, Media and Sport, Karen Bradley, launched the Government's UK Digital Strategy.

The Strategy builds on the Culture White Paper but also the Industrial Strategy green paper, applying its framework to the digital economy with particular regards to growth, technology and innovation. The strategy sets out the Government's goals for digital infrastructure, creating an advanced skills base, encouraging the use of digital tools and improving access to digital services. It addresses opportunities for businesses, research and development.

- **Why it matters**

The release of the Digital Strategy marks the first in a series of changes shining a spotlight on digital as a major branch of culture and the heritage industry. It is accompanied by a change of name, in July 2017, for the DCMS – now the Department for *Digital,* Culture, Media and Sport – and the launch of the DCMS-led #CultureisDigital project, a conversation between Government, the cultural sector and tech companies addressing how culture and digital technology companies can work together to drive audience engagement and boost the capability of cultural organisations.

The strategy also aligns with the goals set out in the Culture White Paper to:

- Improve accessibility and bring culture to as wide a range of people as possible
- Enhance and rationalise national and local heritage records
- Maximise the benefits of the cultural economy

The Culture White Paper highlighted that "technology and improved digital infrastructure has a crucial role to play in connecting communities and ensuring they are good places to live and work", and made content digitisation a priority: "We want to … make the UK one of the world's leading countries for digitised public collections content. We want users to enjoy a seamless experience online, and have the chance to access particular collections in depth as well as search across all collections" (2.4).

Multiple funding streams open to heritage scientists are prioritising digital projects and encouraging collaboration between the digital, creative and heritage industries, such as the AHRC branch of the EPSRC-UKRI Innovation Fellowships, and the recent call AHRC Research and Partnership Development call for the Next Generation of Immersive Experiences.

- **Key points**

The UK Digital Strategy's main strands are:

1. Connectivity – building world-class digital infrastructure for the UK
2. Digital Skills and Inclusion – giving everyone access to the digital skills they need
3. The Digital Sectors – making the UK the best place to start and grow a digital business
4. The wider economy – helping every British business become a digital business
5. A safe and secure cyberspace – making the UK the safest place in the world to live and work online
6. Digital government – maintaining the UK government as a world leader in serving its citizens online

7. [Data](#) – unlocking the power of data in the UK economy and improving public confidence in its use

Strands 2, 3, 4 and 7 are of particular importance for the heritage sector, as is the [Annex](#) to the document that sets out how the Strategy will be embedded into public service delivery. Under the specific heading of 'Culture', the annex cross-references to the Culture White Paper and the expectation that culture be accessible to all, with digital technology playing a key role in how this is achieved. In addition to playing a part in improving access, the contribution that digitisation and technology can make to heritage conservation and protection is referenced, with technologies such as 3D imaging and video recording specifically mentioned.

- **Opportunities for heritage**

Skills development for a digital economy

According to the Strategy, "one in 10 adults has never used the internet … We must continue to address this digital divide between those who have been able to embrace the digital world and those who have not." Heritage institutions can make a major contribution towards lifelong learning, bridging this gap and the development of digital skills for the future. The British Museum's [Samsung Digital Discovery Centre](#) already hosts free workshops linking their collections to advanced technology and creative activities, while the Wellcome Collection's weekend events often includes free youth workshops on digital themes (see for example this [Saturday Studio Game-making workshop](#)). Cultural institutions are in a prime position to put digital skills in context; there is scope for this type of training to be extended to staff and volunteers.

Libraries are referred to as providers of free Wi-Fi ("Broadband and mobile must be treated as the fourth utility"), equipment and digital resources; this can be expanded to include all cultural institutions, with plans to become 'go-to' hubs of "digital access, training and support for local communities." The policy paper discusses the introduction of "new innovative digital degree apprenticeships." There may be opportunities for cultural heritage institutions to host such apprenticeships.

Enhancing digital engagement

The Digital Strategy Summary insists that "Technology has the potential to bring arts and culture to new audiences; to inspire children and young people; and to support teaching and learning through interactive and online experiences. Many of our national and local cultural institutions are digitising their collections and screening content online, opening up access, especially for those who find it difficult or are unable to visit."

The Digitisation of Culture is a priority area that covers digitisation and increased access to collections (content and infrastructure), but also innovative ways of engaging with audiences and stakeholders (format). DCMS has announced it will be commissioning a review of how museums in England can improve audience engagement with collections through digital technology. Already public platforms such as [Sketchfab](#) and the [Google Cultural Institute](#) are allowing the presentation of heritage records to be linked to other publicly available data sets to ensure they function as educational and community assets.

To make full use of these opportunities, we must ensure that intellectual property rules are dynamic and flexible enough to keep up with technological change.

Using data and digital technology as the basis for research

Data being produced through the rising use of social media and the rapid adoption of new technologies is "creating new opportunities for business growth across all industry sectors, changing how we innovate, market, sell and consume services." There is an opportunity, still somewhat underexplored, for heritage organisations to use this data to investigate how their audience relates and responds to their content. Organisations should ensure they are "using data in innovative and effective ways." Such initiatives can also open the door to crowdsourcing and crowdfunding activities and change the way communities interact

with organisations, collections and research. (See, for instance, the Micropasts and Digventures platforms, which both deliver crowdfunding, crowdsourcing and public engagement for archaeological research).

Transferring digital to practice – uses within the heritage industry

The Strategy recommends "strong collaboration between the public, private and third sector." The heritage sector certainly has a role to play in supporting and sustaining new digital businesses, as research and development contributors but also as major users of new technologies. Heritage institutions can provide test beds for new digital products – such as Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality. This would support the objective of "creating new markets for the UK's Creative Industries using emerging digital technologies; making the UK the best place in the world to create content for immersive systems." Immersive systems and environments are currently receiving considerable attention from funders and stakeholders – AHRC has recently issued a call for the Next Generation of Immersive Experiences and a number of EU-funded Horizon 2020 projects such as i-MareCulture are researching the potential for immersive technology to raise the profile of cultural heritage.

3D imaging, video recording and other digital techniques have further value in supporting the protection and recovery of cultural heritage from acts of damage or destruction, and could be used in conservation and sustainable management of sites. There is potential for major savings in heritage work if digital models of both historic buildings are maintained – they would reduce the need for investigative research on buildings as they age, and enable faster, cheaper and more effective interventions to take place to maintain and preserve structures as they age. A number of researchers have also studied the application of artificial intelligence (AI) to historic building restoration. As data models of historic buildings become more widespread, AI technology will be able to learn from a wider aggregated data pool, and work much more effectively. The UK could take a lead in this area.

Finally, the Strategy discusses the digitisation of the planning system. The Government is considering how the planning system can be made more efficient *and* involve the public to a greater extent, through better use of data and digital tools. There is a Culture White Paper commitment for Historic England to work with local authorities to enhance and rationalise national and local heritage records over the next ten years, so that communities and developers have easy access to historic environment records, see Historic England's work on the Heritage Information Access Strategy. Heritage science research could benefit from involvement in this initiative and should be aware of work in progress.

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