



Evaluation of the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative

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Tom Keyte, Margarida Pimenta, Iulia Costache,
inFocus Consulting

Contents



Evaluation of the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative	1
Contents	2
Foreword.....	3
Executive Summary: Evaluation of the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative	5
Introduction	6
Digital Skills for Heritage Overview	7
Reach highlights.....	8
Impact highlights	8
Recommendations for the Heritage Fund around Strategic Initiative design.....	10
Recommendations for the wider heritage sector	11
Full Report: Evaluation of the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative.....	12
Background	13
The Evaluation	15
Reach and engagement.....	18
Findings.....	19
Conclusions.....	53
Recommendations: The Heritage Fund.....	57
Recommendations: The Heritage sector	60

Appendix A: Calculating reach figures.....	62
Appendix B: Reach across heritage areas.....	65
Acknowledgements	66

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Foreword



**Eilish McGuinness, Chief Executive
The National Lottery Heritage Fund**

“As a National Lottery distributor and the UK’s largest funder of heritage, our vision is for heritage to be valued, cared for, and sustained for everyone, now and in the future. The Digital Skills for Heritage initiative has done a brilliant job of furthering that vision through its focus on raising digital skills and confidence, and, along with experts, organisations, technologies, and services, helping the UK’s diverse heritage sector to benefit from digital adoption.

The initiative has benefitted from a partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), who contributed £1M in Grant In Aid to extend the initiative's work on digital leadership and business models. I have been privileged to see first-hand the positive difference that our Digital Skills for Heritage initiative has made to the sector over the past four years – increasing access, reaching new audiences, and providing the public with many more opportunities to actively contribute to our shared, diverse, UK heritage. We have upskilled thousands of organisations, and invested for the longer term in the organisations that comprise the UK’s digital heritage ecosystem. I am glad that this evaluation reflects the continued impact of this initiative on the heritage sector.

Since the initiative’s start in February 2020, the heritage sector has been through an unprecedented acceleration in technology adoption in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are proud that the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative has been able to support heritage organisations through this and to keep the public connected to heritage during this challenging time. In particular, I want to extend my thanks to the 51 partner organisations that enabled us to deliver consistently highly



regarded support; to the initiative's architect, Tom Steinberg; and to Josie Fraser who has overseen the development and delivery over the last four years.

Our long-standing funding requirements – that digital resources created with public funding be available, accessible, and open – ensure the greatest possible value from our investment. The initiative has created an important bank of English and Welsh language resources that demonstrate the benefits of these requirements, including tools to [understand the sector's digital skills needs](#), to [ensure UK heritage is accessible](#), to [safeguard heritage collections and records](#), and to [provide opportunities for new types of volunteering and participation](#).

Last year we launched our new strategy, Heritage 2033. Digital transformation, and the skills development it requires, remain crucial for delivering the vision for heritage set out in this strategy. We will continue building on the significant gains for the UK sector evidenced in this evaluation, and to welcome and fund digital projects.”



**Executive Summary:
Evaluation of the Digital
Skills for Heritage initiative**



Introduction



The National Lottery Heritage Fund (the Heritage Fund) launched the £4.2 million Digital Skills for Heritage initiative in February 2020 to raise digital skills and confidence across the UK's diverse heritage sector. It addressed three priority support areas identified through consultation with the sector:

- ▶ Building digital capacity for small and volunteer-led organisations with low digital confidence
- ▶ Providing sector-wide training and online learning opportunities for small and medium-sized organisations
- ▶ Supporting digital strategy and leadership development including within large organisations

These areas of work were built on further through research benchmarking of digital attitudes and skills across the heritage sector, alongside strands of work exploring new ways of collaborative working and digital volunteering approaches.

The initiative delivers the Heritage Fund's commitment to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport ([DCMS](#)) [Culture is Digital report \(2018/19\)](#). It also supports the responsibility

outlined in the [Heritage Lottery Fund Policy Directions \(2018\)](#) to:

“Increase digital skills, capability, and use of digital tools, both within [the Heritage Fund] and the heritage sector, encourage better collecting, using and sharing of digital heritage material and encourage digital innovation.”

In 2023, inFocus Consulting Ltd (inFocus) was engaged to conduct an evaluation of the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, reflecting back over the four years of the initiative. This evaluation concludes that the Heritage Fund has significantly advanced each of the outcomes set out in the policy direction above, as broken down across the following pages.



Digital Skills for Heritage Overview



The Digital Skills for Heritage initiative was organised across five areas of work described in detail across the findings section of this report:

1. Digital capacity for low confidence organisations

involved two strands of work:

- ▶ **Raising Digital Confidence**, with two projects taking place between February 2020 and October 2021
- ▶ **Digital Confidence Fund**, with 20 projects funded between June 2020 and September 2023

2. Sector-wide training and online learning

opportunities involved two strands of work:

- ▶ **Taking Digital Forward**, with three projects taking place between February 2020 and December 2022
- ▶ **Digital Heritage Hub** ongoing, launching in April 2022

3. **Digital strategy and leadership development** involved one strand of work:

- ▶ **Leading the sector**, with two projects taking place between December 2019 to December 2022

4. **Research and consultation: Benchmarking the sector** involved one strand of work:

- ▶ **The Digital Attitudes and Skills for Heritage (DASH) survey and report** with two versions in April to October 2020 and July 2021 to March 2022

5. **Exemplar cohort projects, to establish new ways of working with digital** involved two strands of work:

- ▶ **Connected Heritage** with eight projects taking place between April 2021 and November 2023
- ▶ **Digital Volunteering**: with 17 projects taking place between November 2021 to November 2023.

Reach highlights

- ▶ The initiative has supported **53,000 unique individuals** working, volunteering, or leading the heritage sector, from **6,400 unique organisations**.
- ▶ Organisations sharing learning was a common finding, meaning the number of individuals that engaged with the initiative is underreported. The figure above does not include the wider reach of many of the projects that improved digital approaches as a result of the initiative.
- ▶ Participants accessed at least **242,000 hours** of highly rated training and development opportunities led by **64 heritage sector support organisations** and experts. Asynchronous, self-led learning hours were in addition to this total.
- ▶ Over **880 high-quality**, highly rated, openly licenced, accessible English and Welsh online learning resources, guides and toolkits were produced, many of which are available on the initiative's online learning site, the [Digital Heritage Hub](#).

Impact highlights

Individuals

Across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, **85%** of projects evidenced **increases in digital skills and confidence** in their participants. This included developing specific new skills (e.g. digitising images or developing websites), creating digital strategies and increased comfort with digital experimentation.

Organisations

- ▶ Of those organisations receiving a small grant, **90% delivered a digital product, project or service that led to positive outcomes** for individuals, organisations, or the sector, in addition to developing skills.
- ▶ **In the first Leading the Sector project, 100% of participants increased confidence** in both their organisation's approach to digital and their digital leadership/skills.



- ▶ **In the Raising Digital Confidence strand, 90% of participants reported planning to take action**, or were already taking action as a result of digital training and support. This included actions like updating a website or creating a digital collection.

Wider heritage sector

- ▶ In the Digital Volunteering and Connected Heritage cohorts, **86% of organisations reported increasing their reach** to new audiences.
- ▶ Of the small grants administered, **43% led to increased access to heritage material** through upgrading websites, developing communications and marketing materials, and digitising collections.
- ▶ The Digital Skills for Heritage initiative has developed the UK's digital heritage ecosystem by **investing in 64 support organisations and experts** to develop new skills training, support services and resources to help drive up the digital confidence and maturity of the sector.

Mapping against Heritage 2033 Investment Principles

- I. **Saving Heritage:** Providing training for organisations across the sector to create new, high-quality digital collections and resources. Connecting the public to heritage by helping deliver available, accessible, and open assets. Increasing knowledge of managing digital assets for future generations. Helping organisations use digital to better communicate the value of heritage.
- II. **Protecting the environment:** Delivering data collection projects that support nature recovery, including citizen science projects that enable mass public engagement. Upskilling land, sea, and nature heritage organisation to use digital effectively. Providing training to deliver high quality at-distance and collaborative work to reduce the carbon footprint of all projects.
- III. **Inclusion, access, and participation:** Training heritage organisations to make use of digital to reach new audiences, cultivate online communities, and provide flexible opportunities to contribute to and engage with heritage. Providing online safety and security guidance. Investing in accessibility training and support, including a accessibility and inclusion benchmarking tool kit. Increasing heritage participation through increasing the number of free, safe online heritage events and activities.
- IV. **Organisational sustainability:** Supporting the creation of over 880 highly rated, openly licensed digital skills resources that can be reused and repurposed for free. Supporting organisations to make more effective and impactful use of digital to deliver their aims, values, and practice. Equipping heritage sector leaders and board members to digitally transform their organisations. Supporting the development of new digital business models and processes. Increasing organisational capacity and sustainability – including through creating new digital volunteering opportunities.



Recommendations for the Heritage Fund around Strategic Initiative design

The Digital Skills for Heritage initiative was designed to make strategic use of Heritage Grants to help the sector benefit from the effective and impactful use of digital. The outcomes and learning from the initiative suggest a range of ways the new 10-year strategy, [Heritage 2033](#) may benefit from lessons learnt:

- ▶ Develop a **theory of change** at the outset of the initiative to help stakeholders get on the same page with terminology and understand how strands of work fit together.
- ▶ Provide **more opportunities for interaction** across strands of work within an initiative (e.g. more regular meetings between initiative leads) to support shared learning and collaboration.
- ▶ Bring an **evaluation partner onboard at the start of initiatives** to establish common data measures that can be

collected across different types and sizes of project, in order to track and demonstrate impact more efficiently.

- ▶ Design activities that meet the needs of different audiences as part of a **cross-sector approach** that recognises that the different types and sizes of heritage organisations across the UK requires a diverse and flexible approach.
- ▶ Ensuring expertise that relates to the initiative is available through the organisations' **Register of Support Services (RoSS)**. Having a pool of consultants with relevant technical expertise enabled projects facing challenges to quickly get relevant support and advice. For example, with complex copyright issues arising from digital collections.
- ▶ Specialist digital RoSS experts were also deployed to provide **first line troubleshooting and support collaboration** across groups of projects. This support was highly valued by those who otherwise would have missed opportunities to benefit from the knowledge of other projects.



Recommendations for the wider heritage sector

- ▶ Recruiting and supporting digitally confident leaders and board members is likely to be an effective way of helping the sector prioritise digital transformation. There is evidence of continued **demand and need for digital skills training**. Organisations cite time, capacity, resources, and access to expertise as barriers to implementing digital ways of working.
- ▶ Establishing a new '**digital funders' forum**' could help to share practice and maximise resource value across the UK, for example through increasing awareness of the resources created by the Digital Skills for Heritage Initiative and by other funders. This could be focused on digital or on ensuring digital is represented in a funders' forum focused on wider topics.
- ▶ Given that the majority of heritage organisations are volunteer-led, micro or small sized, training indicatives that support low-cost uses of technology and support digital

maturity are critical. However, **investment and development of the wider heritage sector ecosystem** of experts, organisations, services, and platforms will be essential to embedding, sustaining, and growing digital skills and confidence over time.



Full Report: Evaluation of
the Digital Skills for Heritage
initiative



Background

The National Lottery Heritage Fund launched the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative in February 2020 to raise digital skills and confidence across the UK's diverse heritage sector.

The Heritage Fund originally committed to support the sector to build digital capacity through a £1 million two-year campaign after working with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to develop the [‘Culture Is Digital’ paper in March 2018](#). Due to sector demand, particularly during Covid-19 lockdowns, and positive results from the first strands of work, investment made via the initiative increased to £4.2 million over a four-year period (which closed in January 2024). This included an additional £1 million from the DCMS, part of the wider [£92 million Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage](#).

This became The Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, a result of a UK-wide co-design process with organisations across the heritage sector. The initiative originally identified three priority areas of digital:

- ▶ **Raising confidence** – supporting organisations, especially small and volunteer-led groups, with lower levels of digital experience and confidence
- ▶ **Taking digital forward** – training and support for small and medium-sized organisations wanting to enhance areas of their digital practice, including establishing an online learning hub
- ▶ **Leading the sector** – supporting senior leaders, especially from large organisations, to understand and plan for digital transformation

Soon after the initiative launched, the first **Digital Attitudes and Skills for Heritage (DASH) survey** was commissioned to provide benchmark digital skills data for the sector, to test the effectiveness of activities, and to provide evidence-based data to inform digital policy making and investment. The timing of the survey meant that the Heritage Fund team could use it as a consultation tool to identify the sector's key digital skills needs resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

The DASH survey was carried out again in 2021. The survey identified a need and opportunity for the Heritage Fund to support new **ways of digital working**, specifically, the use of



technology for collaborative practice and digital volunteering. Online training and the online learning hub were also extended to include support for digital leadership, enterprise, and strategy.

For the purposes of this evaluation, the expanded, four-year Digital Skills for Heritage initiative is broken down across five strands of work:

1. Building digital capacity in low-confidence organisations
2. Sector-wide training and online learning opportunities
3. Digital strategy and leadership development
4. Research and consultation: benchmarking the sector
5. Exemplar cohort projects, embedding new ways of working with digital

The 71 projects that make up these strands ([as can be seen in the roadmap on page 6](#)) ranged from short online courses and support sessions to year-long training projects. The projects were led by **64 support organisations** and experts across the heritage sector.



A stained-glass window from The Richard Jefferies Museum. The museum took part in the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative through the Digital Heritage Lab (Source: [Digital Heritage Hub](#))

The Evaluation



Purpose

In May 2023, inFocus Consulting Ltd (inFocus) was appointed to evaluate the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, resulting in this final report in February 2024.

The evaluation set out to explore the extent to which the initiative fulfilled the policy direction in the [Heritage Lottery Fund Policy Directions \(2018\)](#), through exploring the reach, impact and learning from the initiative:

“Increase digital skills, capability, and use of digital tools, both within [the Heritage Fund] and the heritage sector, encourage better collecting, using and sharing of digital heritage material and encourage digital innovation.” Priority no. 17, Heritage Lottery Fund Policy Directions (2018)

Objectives of the evaluation

- ▶ Understanding the effect of the digital campaigns and funding and the value added by the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative in building digital skills and confidence across the heritage/culture sector.
- ▶ This included exploring the specific outcomes of the initiative, and key lessons learnt, across the five areas of support for heritage organisations shown on page 14.

Methodology

The evaluation methodology included the following approaches:

- ▶ An [outcomes harvesting](#) approach reviewing existing evidence of outcomes and learning across monitoring and evaluation reports since the start of the initiative and determining the extent to which the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative contributed to this. The outcomes



harvesting combined with a [Realist Evaluation approach](#) that explored the wider context and mechanisms in which the different Digital Skills for Heritage projects contribute to the identified outcomes.

“Pawson and Tilley (1997) developed the first realist evaluation approach, although other interpretations have been developed since. Pawson and Tilley argued that in order to be useful for decision makers, evaluations need to identify ‘what works in which circumstances and for whom?’, rather than merely ‘does it work?’ “ Realist evaluation, [Betterevaluation.org](#)

- ▶ The analysis was enhanced by primary data collection from inFocus following a [Mixed Method Evaluation approach](#) combining both quantitative and qualitative data from online surveys, interviews, and learning workshops. The use of mainly qualitative data collection methods helped to explore learning from the existing evaluation documentation in more depth.

This evaluation builds on an internal review report conducted at the end of the second year of the initiative in 2022 by Frankly, Green + Webb, and results from the DASH surveys

carried out in 2020 and 2021, designed and managed by Timmus Ltd and the Heritage Alliance. The DASH research indicated that the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative was having a bigger impact on the digital skills, confidence, and motivation of respondents that had accessed the initiative (compared to those that had not), but direct causation was harder to ascertain:

“We cannot assume causation here, especially because individuals using Digital Skills for Heritage training were more motivated to use digital than the general sample. That said, this targeted support – provided in response to needs identified by DASH in 2020 – has been used by those in the sector and appears to have played some part in improving confidence and ability.” DASH Survey Results 2021

Limitations

While there was sufficient evidence across strands of work to draw conclusions in this report, limitations affecting the evaluation included:



- ▶ As projects were evaluated on an individual basis, in some cases by organisations with limited capacity and expertise, the quality of the data available across streams of work varied considerably. This ranged from evaluations using mixed methods approaches and pre-post surveys with representative sample sizes, through to reports with minimal detail on outcomes or the evaluation approach followed.
- ▶ Data on similar concepts, such as digital skills and confidence, was collected in different ways using different measures across different strands of work. This made consolidation of data at an initiative level more challenging, which was in part a factor of the diversity of digital skills supported by initiatives. However, in many cases there were a variety of descriptions for similar concepts that could have been addressed through a shared theory of change (and standardised terminology) at the outset of the project.
- ▶ Sample sizes for the follow up survey in 2023 were low in most cases, in part due to the length of time that had passed since project completion and the capacity of smaller organisations to participate. The Leading the Sector cohort,

which focused on larger organisations, was an exception, with 56% of participants responding.



3D model: pottery shard from a Farewell mug from Earl of Abergavenny shipwreck. Image courtesy of Portland Museum©. (Source: [Digital Heritage Hub](#)).



Reach and engagement



53,218

Unique individuals across the heritage sector were directly engaged through Digital Skills for Heritage.

6,431

Unique heritage organisations were directly engaged through Digital Skills for Heritage projects. Organisations were well spread across the [6 heritage areas supported](#) by the Heritage Fund, as show in [Appendix B](#).

Neither of the estimates above for individuals and organisations include the increased reach and engagement reported by many heritage organisations as a result of sharing learning from the initiative, and/or improving digital products and creating services that reach more individuals. For example, through cascading training internally, developing a new website that increases the reach of the organisation, or increasing social media engagement.

74,977

Attendances across the Digital Skills for Heritage

initiative: this includes activities directly delivered through Digital Skills for Heritage funding. It includes participants attending activities multiple times.

242,922

Synchronous (real-time) hours of highly rated training and development opportunities accessed by individuals across the heritage sector. Organisational sharing and asynchronous, self-led learning hours are not included in this figure.

Over 880

Highly rated, openly licenced, accessible English & and Welsh learning resources and guides were produced, including the [Digital Heritage Hub](#). More detail on how the reach figures above were calculated follows in Appendix A.



Findings

This section includes detailed findings on reach, impact, and learning across the five areas of work for the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative:

1. Digital capacity for low-confidence organisations
2. Sector-wide training and online learning opportunities
3. Digital strategy and leadership development
4. Research and consultation: benchmarking the sector
5. Exemplar cohort projects, to establish new ways of working with digital



The opening panel at the British Museum for the Digital Skills for Heritage 'Reflect, Share, Inspire' Event (Source: [Digital Heritage Hub](#)).



1. Digital capacity for low confidence organisations

Raising Digital Confidence

Phase 1 – February to April 2020

Phase 2 – April to October 2021

Run by four digital RoSS consultants

The strand of work broke down into two phases. The first involved desk research into the resources and support currently available for heritage organisations with low digital confidence. The second phase involved a three month 'first steps in tech' helpdesk in the summer of 2021 supporting 28 small and voluntary-led organisations with low levels of digital skill and confidence from across the heritage sector. Primarily organisations focused on community heritage (40%), followed by cultures/memories (19%), and areas/buildings/monuments (19%). The project included advice, signposting to resources, and one-to-one and small group training sessions from the Heritage Fund's Digital Register of Support Services (RoSS) consultants that provide support for grantees.

Digital Confidence Fund

June 2020 to September 2023

The Heritage Fund supported 22 organisations to deliver a digital project (or project with a digital element) through £10,000 and £2,500 grants of mentoring from RoSS consultants. The purpose of this strand of work was to support organisations with low digital confidence in building their knowledge and use of digital technologies through delivering practical projects, for example, by creating a website or developing digital marketing materials.

As described later in this section, the Digital Confidence Fund was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Many projects that were intended to be delivered within communities had to be delivered online, adding a steep learning curve for participating organisations.



Impact

The findings in this section are derived from three sources: evaluation reports completed by Digital RoSS consultants, reports submitted from organisations participating in the Digital Confidence Fund, and a follow-up evaluation survey completed by five organisations in 2023.

Impact on individuals

Both organisations and RoSS consultants reported that individuals participating in the Digital Confidence Fund increased their **knowledge and confidence in digital skills**, including copyright and open licensing, learning how to use digital tools and processes, understanding digital options, and becoming more confident in recognising gaps in digital skills in themselves and their organisations.

The impact of support from the Raising Digital Confidence strand was harder to gauge as less data was available, although user response to the service was particularly positive, with **90% 'very satisfied' with the advice received:**

“A really useful service. Having done a lot of reading around this particular area and attended various workshops, it was very useful to have some one-to-one time with an expert.”

Participant in the Raising Digital Confidence strand

Impact on organisations

There was also evidence of a range of long-term outcomes from both strands of work, including digital becoming part of strategic planning, the development of digital and social media policies, new funding opportunities, and opportunities for future digital projects.

Responding to the 2023 survey, all five organisations from the Digital Confidence Fund were still running their digital product or service, and all reported that they remained sustainable. All shared learning from their projects with their organisation and reported increased digital skills:

“The project allowed us to start the process of offering digital engagement on our website, we have since taken this forward to include more content and are more confident



in our ability to do so.” Participant in the Digital Confidence Fund

Most organisations involved in the Digital Confidence Fund also reported increased collaboration with other organisations as a result of their projects:

“The increased digital confidence of the curatorial team will allow for stronger, innovative external partnerships to be developed. The organisation will then deliver a broader range of projects moving forward, accessing external funding and developing new revenue streams.” RoSS consultants’ report on the Digital Confidence Fund.

In the Raising Digital Confidence Strand, 90% of organisations responding to the feedback survey were ‘very likely’ to implement advice received (which covered topics such as organising collections and archives, fundraising and developing a basic website).

Impact on the wider heritage sector

Despite the challenges of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of lockdowns on the overall capacity of staff and volunteers, most organisations participating in the Digital Confidence Fund reported successfully delivering digital projects that led to multiple benefits. This included increased reach to new audiences in the heritage sector (particularly younger audiences), improved accessibility (for example, through the development of websites), and creating digital collections/archives to preserve and share digital heritage resources.

“The help from a consultant has been completed. It enabled us, along with funding from the National Archives, to test out a digital platform (using the specifications and metadata advice from the digital fund consultant), with two collections.” Participant in the Digital Confidence Fund in 2023



Key learning

Support and mentoring from third party digital consultants

Overall, participating organisations valued the support provided across both strands of work, noting this as a contributing factor to the outcomes in the previous section. However, some noted a lack of clarity around the role of the mentor, and the limits of what could be achieved with their support. For the Heritage Fund team, the rotation of different staff members attending these sessions may have had an impact on the understanding of the process.

Factors impacting delivery

- ▶ Covid-19 presented challenges throughout the Digital Confidence Fund (for both heritage organisations and consultants), including a reduction of capacity. There were, however, some benefits for organisations who felt that the necessity to move online to support participants drove the need for digital solutions.

- ▶ RoSS Consultants found that the turnover of staff at the Heritage Fund during both strands of work impacted onboarding and ongoing support for consultants. This led to the Heritage Fund recognising the importance of consistency and support and appointing two central consultants to coordinate both the Connected Heritage and Digital Volunteering strands of work.
- ▶ In general, for organisations often led by one person or volunteers, finding the time to engage with projects in this strand of work was a significant challenge, particularly during Covid-19 lockdowns. The support targeted groups and individuals who were not confident in using digital tools and platforms, however lockdown restrictions meant that this support could only be delivered online. The timing of the Raising Digital Confidence Fund (over the holiday period) also stretched availability/capacity.

Evaluation structure

Evaluation across the two strands was inconsistent with varying levels of both detail and quality in reports. In part, this was due to the capacity of small and volunteer-led



organisations. The Heritage Fund provides evaluation guidance but recognises that the diversity of the projects and organisations it funds means that the method and outputs of evaluations should be tailored to the project. In the internal overview report of the Digital Confidence Fund in March 2023, the evaluator recommended the use of case-studies at the application stage, with examples of outputs and outcomes, and an onboarding briefing for both mentors and grantees to set out potential outputs and metrics.

Additional evaluation guidance was incorporated into subsequent strands of work, with guidance and examples of data reporting tables provided in start-up briefings, and the requirement for grantees to submit quarterly data engagement reports through project delivery.



A spotlight on...Great Grimsby Ice Factory Trust

Through the **Digital Confidence Fund**, Great Grimsby Ice Factory Trust worked with a digital mentor, a professional writer, and web developers to create a website in 2021 that brings together information about the heritage, current business activity, and opportunities that exist within the Kasbah area of Grimsby Docks.

The process supported the Trust to think in a very practical way about who their audience is, how to attract and retain that audience, how to select and communicate information, what digital media to avoid for their specific purpose, and how their website will have an impact on their ambition to reach a critical mass of occupancy in the Kasbah.

Reflecting back on the project in late 2023, the Trust found the website to still be sustainable, with edits and updates carried out by volunteers. Staff have also found that the website has brought people together: “Our aim was to establish and advertise a community, and we have brought people together through the website”



Image: The Kasbah looking north in 1937. © Historic England Archive (Source: [The Kasbah Grimsby website](#))

2. Sector-wide training and online learning opportunities

Taking Digital Forward

Three projects supported small and medium-sized heritage organisations seeking to develop their digital capabilities:

▶ **Project 1: Digital Heritage Lab**

February 2020 to September 2021

Run by the Arts Marketing Association in partnership with Arts Fundraising & Philanthropy, One Further, and the Collections Trust

Sixty organisations were supported to develop their digital potential through a bespoke online academy, structured workshops, and mentor support. Online workshops enabled participants to select relevant topics including fundraising, digital marketing, audience engagement, collections management, and digitisation. Overall, the project reached 1,353 people and 1,061 organisations from across the heritage sector.

▶ **Project 2: Heritage Digital**

March 2021 to November 2022

Run by the Heritage Alliance, in partnership with Media Trust, Charity Digital, Naomi Korn Associates, and DOT PROJECT

Free digital support through virtual days, webinars, masterclasses, and digital guides. The events and resources covered four work streams (digital strategy, digital communication, digital rights, and digital technology) attended live by 2,796 unique participants from 1,090 unique organisations, with 117,678 page views, and 3,993 digital guide downloads.

▶ **Project 3: Heritage Digital Academy**

March 2021 to December 2022

Run by The Heritage Alliance, Media Trust, Charity Digital, and Naomi Korn Associates

With support of £250,000 from DCMS (part of the additional £1 million funding for the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative from the wider £92 million Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage) the project provided free digital skills training and support with a focus on digital



innovation and entrepreneurship that reached 655 individuals from 535 heritage organisations, with training focused on two primary themes of “Making a Plan for Digital” and “Designing Digital Services”.

Digital Heritage Hub

The [Digital Heritage Hub, funded in part by DCMS](#), was launched in April 2022 to answer 100 digital questions across four themes: digital engagement, digital content, digital leadership, and digital planning. In January 2023 the Arts Marketing Association received a project extension to expand the hub to incorporate resources produced from across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative. The funding also included the ‘Reflect, Share, Inspire’ event described later in this section.

By December 2023, the site had been **viewed over 54,000 times** by over **16,000 unique users**. A total of 94 delegates were asked about the hub in a survey at the ‘Reflect, Share, Inspire’ event. Responses showed that 47% had used the hub, before highlighting (in open responses) that the resources were **useful, practical**, and **well structured**, with resources

on inclusion, access, and environmental sustainability among the most popular. The volume of information available was also mentioned:

“It’s a really useful resource to have but is a lot of information thrown at you at once, so can be hard to navigate.” User of the Digital Heritage Hub



A spotlight on... the Reflect, Share, Inspire – Digital Skills for Heritage event

On 18th October 2023, The Arts Marketing Association (AMA) hosted the *Reflect Share Inspire – Digital Skills for Heritage* free hybrid event at the British Museum in London. The event aimed to celebrate and share achievements and learning from past few years within the heritage sector and to expand the Digital Heritage Hub to include resources from across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative.

A post-event survey was sent to all delegates and was completed by 117 of them. Responses revealed that the event succeeded in raising awareness of the Digital Heritage Hub as well as increasing traffic to the site. For example, the number of people who signed up to the Digital Heritage Hub newsletter doubled with the promotion of the event.

The feedback survey also revealed that online delegates reported gaining as much as in-person delegates at the event, but it also revealed that delegates appreciated the opportunity to attend an in-person event and to meet sector colleagues in person.



Image: One of the panels at the Reflect, Share, Inspire – Digital Skills for heritage event (source: [Digital Heritage Hub](#))

Impact

Findings from this section are taken from three comprehensive internal and external evaluation reports for Taking Digital Forward (including baseline and endline surveys), the final project report for the 'Answering the Sector's Questions' project, renamed the Digital Heritage Hub, and a small sample of 16 survey respondents from Taking Digital Forward in 2023.

Impact on individuals

There was strong evidence from across Taking Digital Forward that individuals developed a variety of different digital skills as a result of taking part in the initiative:

- ▶ Designing, developing and evaluating digital products or services (e.g. websites and digital collections)
- ▶ Engaging new audiences and digitally excluded groups (for example, by making websites more accessible and providing information for people with a wide range of needs)
- ▶ Developing or amending organisational digital strategies

- ▶ Embedding 'digital' into business planning
- ▶ Improving social media performance and outputs (e.g. films and visualisations)
- ▶ Online fundraising
- ▶ Increased understanding of the different digital options available, and intellectual property and digital rights

“We needed to radically change our whole approach to digital at senior level. We have implemented changes which encourage our community to learn and prioritise digital within their work. The entire process of The Lab has created a radical change in our team.” Participant in the Digital Heritage Lab



There was also evidence from all three projects in the Taking Digital Forward strand that **increased digital skills extended into confidence and motivation**. For example, in the post-project survey for the Heritage Digital project, the majority of respondents recorded an increase in confidence and motivation in using digital skills and products at work.

Projects in Taking Digital Forward recorded **changes in attitude towards digital**. This involved 'taking the fear out of digital', trying new ways of working, and realising that their skills were more advanced than they first realised.

Impact on organisations

A key outcome across the Taking Digital Forward strand was the sharing of learning within and outside participating organisations, suggesting that the **reach of the strand of work is likely to be greater than those directly engaged**. For example, 95% of Digital Heritage Lab participants who attended an online workshop reported sharing what they had learned, while 76% of Digital Heritage respondents shared learning internally (25% on the topic of copyright, 22% on social media, and 18% on engaging audiences). Although a

small sample size, 14 of the 16 organisations from Taking Digital Forward that completed an evaluation survey in 2023 also shared learning internally or externally.

In the Heritage Digital Academy report, this included participants **gaining the confidence and skills to overcome digital barriers within their organisation** and to advocate to trustees and volunteers on the need for digital skills and associated value:

“I have gained confidence and the required information or 'road map' to take forward digital planning for the organisation. I feel able to develop and then cascade the plan within the organisation.” Participant in the Heritage Digital Academy

Impact on the wider heritage sector

Participants from across the Taking Digital Forward strand also reported either planning to take action, or that they were already taking action, to:



- ▶ **Increase and diversify audiences in the heritage sector,** including through improved skills and confidence around marketing and communication, the use of analytic software to understand audiences, rethinking their digital offer or brand, and using digital for more inclusive and diverse storytelling.

“The museum has been closed for much of the year, but our Facebook posts are reaching 400-500 people with engagement at around 10-20% and positive comments. Our Facebook audience has a younger profile than our visitors when open.” Follow-up survey respondent from Heritage Digital

- ▶ **Develop or review organisational digital strategies,** including through clarifying digital goals and purpose, structuring digital engagement and prioritising digital tasks.
- ▶ **Develop or adopt new software, digital tools, or systems to improve delivery in the heritage sector,** including through refreshing websites, digitising collections, increasing confidence in working with developers, and implementing CRM systems.

“Knowledge learnt is enabling our core team of two to better present the high-quality work our archive is known for and efficiently care for our collections. In the last 12 months our visitor numbers grew from 2.8 million to 5 million.”

Participant in the Digital Heritage Lab

Organisations and experts running activities across this area of work also applied learning to other projects outside the Digital Skills for Heritage. These included an improved understanding of the practical problems that heritage organisations face when trying to engage with audiences online, access to heritage organisations they wouldn't ordinarily have access to, and the development of new online resources to share more widely (e.g. recordings of lab events on the AMA CultureHive website).

All the projects in Taking Digital Forward produced **freely available outputs under open licences**. These included:

- ▶ **Digital Heritage Lab** – recordings of online workshops and new Digital Heritage Lab resources on AMA CultureHive website



- ▶ [Heritage Digital Academy](#) – recordings of past webinars and workshops on the Heritage Digital website
- ▶ [Heritage Digital](#) – 12 digital guides and 19 recorded webinars

As described earlier in this section, these resources came together into the updated Heritage Digital Hub.

Key learning

Format

In general, activities were very highly rated across the three projects – for example, 91% of respondents in the Digital Skills Lab survey rated the usefulness of content as ‘good’ or ‘very good’, while 98% of respondents to the Heritage Digital Academy survey positively rated the quality of the training provider or speaker. Other strengths included:

- ▶ The flexibility of accessing online events and content, both with timing and accessing recordings

- ▶ In the Digital Heritage Lab, participants found the networking opportunities as valuable as the talks
- ▶ Several participants found that cohort sessions provided space to deepen learning and opened up the opportunity to gather deeper insight (compared to standalone modules that improved engagement and reach)

Mentoring

The Digital Heritage Lab evaluation and follow up evaluation surveys in 2023 again highlighted the strengths of the mentorship model. Of the Digital Heritage Lab participants, 74% found the mentoring process very useful:

“[\[My\] mentor brought excellent experience and skills, structured our way forward, encouraged us to use analytics and survey our digital audience, helped us content plan, made us think outside the box, \[and\] challenged our perceptions and assumptions.](#)” Participant in the Digital Heritage Lab



Barriers to improving digital skills and confidence

A range of barriers were highlighted in evaluation reports and 2023 surveys. These included capacity challenges due to Covid-19, low prioritisation of digital skills within organisations, and resistance from staff, volunteers, and trustees in embracing digital. For the Heritage Digital project, participants also felt that they would have benefited from one-to-one, personal support for digital skills.



3. Digital strategy and leadership development

Led by [Culture24](#), with partners [Golant Innovation/The Audience Agency](#)

► Project 1: Leading the Sector cohort

December 2019 to September 2021

Sixteen leaders from medium to large heritage organisations followed a collaborative learning process as a cohort that balanced strategic and practical guidance around digital. This included a series of online workshops (in-person activities took place remotely due to Covid-19) alongside mentorship to help leaders apply learning in their organisational settings.

► Project 2: Leading the Sector: webinars and workshops

July 2021 to December 2022

The second project included six online webinars covering different digital leadership topics and six in-person 'Digitally

Literate Leadership in Heritage' workshops across the UK. From a total of 337 heritage organisations, 377 unique individuals engaged with Leading the Sector, and as of November 2022, 1,826 people have watched the webinar recordings.

Impact

The findings in this section come principally from two detailed end of project reports produced by Culture24. The reports include results from a pre and post survey with 11 leaders (based on existing good practice tools), post-event surveys from webinars, and an interview with the project lead at Culture24. This is enhanced by survey responses from nine out of 16 leaders in 2023, reflecting back on their experiences of Leading the Sector.

Impact on individuals

For the Leading the Sector cohort, all leaders completing pre and post surveys showed increases across **personal**



confidence levels in digital leadership and skills (24% average increase):

“This process has been brilliant and thought provoking... engaging me in new areas of thought and practice, challenging some of my own fears and concerns, and creating clarity around how I can make the biggest difference to my organisation and the sector as a digital leader (in the way that I define that for me).” Participant in Leading the Sector cohort

With differences in the focus of digital leaders across the cohort, the areas in which leaders reported increased knowledge also varied considerably, this including learning:

- ▶ that undertaking digital doesn't have to be complicated or require becoming an expert
- ▶ the fluidity and adaptability of digital solutions and applications to a variety of settings
- ▶ how to normalise conversations around digital skills in their own organisations
- ▶ that digital can be implemented cross-organisationally

- ▶ the benefits of self-directed learning and experimentation, and not being afraid to fail



Image: At the Hunterian Museum Credit: The Hunterian 364 (source: www.heritagefund.org.uk)



Impact on organisations

In the benchmarking survey, leaders increased **confidence in their organisations' approach to digital** (22% average increase), and in their **organisational digital maturity** (22% average increase) in pre and post scores.

Many digital leaders also referred to finding the opportunity to **pause and reflect on their organisations' use of digital** through Leading the Sector:

“It's good to take the time to reflect from a different angle and really look at what kind of footprint your organisation has, its assets and its digital literacy.” Participant in the Leading the Sector cohort

From Culture24 surveys for both online and in-person on the second project – the Leading the Sector workshops in 2022 – attendees felt that they ‘mostly’ benefited from the knowledge, experiences and resources shared, and would ‘mostly’ (online workshops) or ‘completely’ (in-person workshops) agree that resources and learning would support their organisation in the long-term. In both cases the majority of attendees felt

‘completely’ inspired to find out more on the topic of digital leadership in heritage. The most popular workshops are shown in the table below:

Online seminars – Digital Leadership and...	Individual event sign ups	Recording views (as of 29 th Nov 2023)
Hybrid heritage	99	561
Digital skills, literacy and capacity	112	369
Inclusion, equity and digital	57	377
Digital infrastructure and process	110	215
Digital enterprise in heritage	53	175
Heritage digital and the climate crisis	54	129

Overall, across all evaluation sources, leaders felt positive about **collaborating with other leaders and the Leading the Sector faculty**. Five of the nine leaders who responded to the 2023 survey identified benefits from making connections through the project, although none developed into long-term collaborations as of yet:



“...being in a room with other people and understanding that ways of thinking and talking about digital applies whatever the organisation, that’s a really valuable piece of learning.”

Participant in the Leading the Sector cohort

Leaders in the cohort worked on a range of subprojects throughout the project, and from feedback from an online survey administered by the faculty, the majority of the cohort embraced self-directed learning and experimentation.

From data collected across the evaluation, participants in the Leading the Sector cohort described taking action that impacted on their organisations work within the heritage sector. These actions included:

- ▶ Understanding how digital could be incorporated into/drive organisational strategies
- ▶ Building the digital skills and confidence of staff
- ▶ Developing better digital products, services, and infrastructure (e.g. a livestream learning programme for schools)

- ▶ Driving a change of perspective on digital within their organisation
- ▶ Addressing digital inclusivity in their organisation
- ▶ Collecting, analysing and using data
- ▶ Understanding and reaching wider audiences in the heritage sector

“The learning I gained around how digital transformation can be implemented cross-organisationally, and the necessity for greater agility, was fundamental. The LTS initiative gave me greater clarity about telling our venue’s story, what we stand for, and our contemporary relevance, and this was used to inform how we then approached our audiences in order to gain a better understanding of their needs and their perceptions of us.” Participant in the Leading the Sector cohort

Impact on the wider heritage sector

For the Leading the Sector faculty there were also a range of benefits from running the projects. This included **forging or further developing partnerships**. For example, Culture24



deepened its relationship with The Audience Agency, who applied the cohort model to their own work (using templates from the initiative). For one faculty member, the initiative helped them to 'redefine digital', and all faculty members described how they had applied learning to other initiatives.

Leading the Sector also brought about the creation of **various openly licenced resources**, including a pathway resource, '[Developing digitally literate leadership in heritage organisations](#)'. This covered digitally literate leadership and included 24 resources and recordings from online and in-person workshops and supporting toolkits and reports.

Key learning

Course design

The Leading the Sector faculty highlighted the benefit of basing the first Leading the Sector project on current research and good practice (including Culture24's 'Let's Get Real' methodology and Golant Innovation/The Audience Agency's cohort learning projects and research). The faculty also found

the co-design process between facilitators, contributors, and mentors to be particularly effective.

The impact of Covid-19

Leading the Sector took place in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and government lockdowns at a time when leaders in the charity sector faced significant workloads and stresses, which naturally led to some of the cohort being less engaged. The lack of in-person connection was raised several times by leaders in evaluation feedback. However, the faculty found that the pandemic did help to prioritise 'digitally literate leadership' given the pressing need for digital solutions.

Meeting a variety of needs

The overall experience of participants in Leading the Sector was positive, as evidenced by feedback to facilitators and the 2023 survey, although not all leaders in the Leading the Sector cohort experienced the same degree of benefits (as expected given their diverse backgrounds and needs). For example, one leader who responded in 2023 felt the content was too outdated to benefit them.



Mentoring

Although one participant noted that more session preparation and structure would have been helpful, as with other strands of work across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, mentoring was well received by many of the leaders:

“I have found the mentoring sessions one of the best parts of the course, particularly in lockdown. Swapping the pairings meant that the discussions were always fresh and that new insights kept coming.” Participant in the Leading the Sector cohort

Who to invite

One consideration from Culture24 was whether, in future strands of work focused on leadership, senior leaders would benefit from other managers from their organisations attending activities. This was particularly because getting wider teams on board and team capacity were two of the main challenges identified by leaders (and 15% of leaders who attended Leading the Sector webinars and in-person events in the second project were heads of organisations). Such broader

attendance could be achieved by including parallel sessions for senior leadership and other members of staff, without losing the benefits for senior leaders (all nine of the respondents in the 2023 survey each felt they were the right person to attend the course). A reduced time commitment might also help to boost attendance from senior leaders in bigger heritage organisations. This was identified as a potential area for improvement.

The role of in-person events

Culture24 emphasised the importance of in-person meetings in the design of future leadership strands of work, should time and capacity allow for it. For a future cohort, in-person sessions would ideally take place a quarter or half of the way through, giving participants time to get to know each other online, and to increase understanding of the needs of participants. In-person sessions could operate as ‘digitally literate leadership by stealth’ events, where non-digital topics relevant to leaders are the headlines, and a digital leadership lens is the secondary focus.



4. Research and consultation: Benchmarking the sector's digital confidence and skills

Digital Attitudes and Skills in Heritage (DASH) survey

Part 1 – April to October 2020

Part 2 – July 2021 to March 2022

Run by Timmus Research Limited and the Heritage Alliance

The DASH survey aimed to better understand the attitudes and skills of people working in the heritage sector, and to learn more about the organisational support they received in relation to using digital technologies. The survey was launched twice, in 2020 and 2021, completed by 4,120 and 4,514 respondents respectively. The survey was re-answered by 9.3% of the 2020 respondents in 2021 (approximately 389 people).

Both surveys resulted in detailed reports, and both the [2020 report](#) and the [2021 report](#) can be found on the Heritage fund website.



Image: A Lapwing in Suffolk, Credit: Mathew Clarke
(source: www.heritagefund.org.uk)



A spotlight on... The DASH Survey 2021

The 2021 DASH report launched just as the UK went into its first lockdown, providing a snapshot of the UK heritage sector's use of digital and how this evolved during the pandemic. Findings included:

The sector's skills had increased from the previous year. These centred around 'business critical' digital practices, including working online and keeping the public connected to heritage during the pandemic.

In 2020, 75% of staff, 67% of trustees, and 49% of volunteers felt able and confident in using video conferencing. In 2021 this had increased to 80% of staff, 76% of trustees, and 57% of volunteers.

Digital is now more embedded in day-to-day working practices. One respondent said: "the pandemic has placed digital (video meetings) at the heart of working life".

(Source: ["A growing confidence in digital: from pandemic survival to future planning"](#) heritagefund.co.uk)



Image source: [Digital Heritage Hub](#)

Impact

The findings in this section are taken from a range of sources including an evaluation survey completed by 32 participants who interacted with the DASH survey and/or report in 2020 and 2021, an interview with Timmus Research, and a workshop with Heritage Fund staff in November 2023.

Impact on individuals and organisations

The 2023 survey asked respondents to reflect on their experience and any impact of the 2020 and/or 2021 DASH survey and report. The most common answers on how the survey/report has been helpful were **“establishing the current level of digital skills and confidence”**, **“increasing understanding of digital confidence and skills”**, and to **“highlight a need to invest in a digital product(s) and or service(s)”**.

“The digital practice of our local authority museum service has transformed, and the slow uptake of using digital tools to improve communication and efficiency prior to Covid-19 was

replaced by rapid change across the whole local authority. The DASH survey was an opportunity to test where our museum service was some way into this change, and it identified that significant barriers remained and an inertia to adopt a proactive approach to seeking solutions or benefits through digital practice.” User of the DASH survey/report

“We intended to use it (the DASH survey) to develop a digital strategy for our service, but it revealed we needed to take a step back and make structural changes to our organisation first.” User of the DASH survey/report

“It (the DASH survey) helps us build strong networks in Northern Ireland, provided us with critical insights to fuel our advocacy work, public speaking, and sector engagement. (Since Covid-19) Our relationship with digital has transformed and DASH has really highlighted the importance to have a strategy embedded to support our whole strategy.” User of the DASH survey/report

Respondents described how DASH helped to support the identification of individual skills and weaknesses, different roles and relationships to digital, and how people perceive



them. Another common response was that DASH “acted as a reminder or incentive to review activities, processes, methods, and/or approaches.”

Of the respondents to the survey, 20% did not consider DASH to be helpful or could not recall any aspect that was useful:

“No, sadly it consumed a lot of time and didn't deliver the one thing we wanted – comparison with similar sized volunteer-based charities.” User of the DASH survey/report

Respondents in the interview and workshops also highlighted (similar to the surveys) that the DASH survey and report served as an effective staff development tool for heritage organisations, supporting enhanced digital confidence, and informing organisational strategies.

Impact on the wider heritage sector

For the Heritage Fund, DASH was described as being an invaluable tool for policy, executive, and board teams at the Heritage Fund, providing structure for talking about and

understanding digital. DASH also helped the Heritage Fund and wider heritage sector in the following ways:

- ▶ Building a more general understanding of the UK heritage sector outside a specific digital context. For example, the size and areas of focus of heritage organisations.

“Supporting the mapping of the sector was one of the biggest achievements of DASH. Prior to the survey there was a verbal understanding of the heritage sector in the UK, but this was more of a reflection of what we fund rather than what the sector actually looked like. DASH helps to form a more accurate picture of the heritage sector in the UK (size of organisations, and where in different sub-sectors)” Staff member at the Heritage Fund

- ▶ Highlighting the significant role of volunteers in the heritage sector.
- ▶ Learning from the survey directly contributed to the development of different Digital Skills for Heritage streams of work, including Digital Volunteering and Connected Heritage.



- ▶ Influencing audience segmentation work for communications and engagement in relation to the new Heritage Fund strategy. For example, by helping with the “how to engage” sections of pen-portraits of different audiences across the sector.
- ▶ Highlighting foundational digital needs and helping with engagement with smaller heritage organisations.
- ▶ Supporting the [UK Heritage Pulse](#) research panel through the use of screening questions from the DASH survey at the start of the UK Heritage Pulse survey (that can then be compared to the DASH data).

“Having a survey like DASH has set the benchmark for the organisation around consistency around what to ask in the Heritage sector, and ideally should be mirrored across all areas of work.” Staff member at the Heritage Fund

The DASH survey helped to drive collaboration among participating organisations, by fostering networking and resource sharing. Although there was more limited engagement with DASH from larger organisations and entities, the survey indirectly influenced their internal assessments of digital skills and capacity. For example, participating

organisations utilised survey insights internally and adopted questions for internal use.

Key learning

Engaging with larger organisations

Engaging with larger organisations posed challenges. Some may have perceived themselves as self-sufficient and were hesitant to seek external assistance, although a subset did internally explore the questions provided by DASH. The project lead at Timmus Research recommended considering a more strategic approach to engaging larger organisations, emphasising the value of diverse perspectives.

Transactional and transformational

“Digital transition is a gradual process that involves the adoption of digital technology in order to improve upon previously established procedures. Digital transformation is a comprehensive process that involves a significant change in how businesses operate.” ‘Key Differences Between Digital Transition vs Digital Transformation’, <https://www.epiloguesystems.com>



The project lead for DASH highlighted a dichotomy between well-funded organisations prioritising transformative digital changes (for example, incorporating new systems or technologies across an organisation) and those requiring dedicated focus on one-off digital projects that address a specific need (for example, updating a new website or setting up a Facebook group). Supporting these types of digital projects is essential for the functioning of heritage organisations, especially smaller organisations facing investment constraints for infrastructure and specialised digital skills.

“There is the focus in terms of digital on the comparatively small number of large organisations that have a budget for digital innovation, like museums or infrastructure bodies. They are really banging the drum for what I call ‘transformational digital’, like VR headsets or multi-dimensional interactive art pieces. And that's great. But the reality is that no one's talking about the ‘transactional digital’ that needs to be done by the vast majority of heritage organisations, like making sure that you've got a web presence, or a digital archive of everything you own.”

Project Lead – DASH



5. Exemplar Cohort Projects, to establish new ways of working with Digital

Connected Heritage

April 2021 to November 2023

With over £600,000 of funding from DCMS (part of the additional £1 million funding for the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative from the wider £92 million Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage) Connected Heritage funded eight organisations and partnerships to act as ‘network connectors’ and develop communities of practice that use technologies in a range of ways to facilitate collaborative work. Based on learning from earlier in the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, a RoSS consultant was commissioned to offer critical friend support, facilitate collaboration between projects, and provide project management support. All projects were also required to produce a “How-to Guide” as part of their projects. Overall, the projects reached 41,516 unique individuals, 657 unique organisations, and recorded 51,699 attendances at events.

Digital Volunteering

November 2021 to November 2023

This initiative provided funding for 17 UK heritage organisations and partnerships to design and establish new digital volunteering roles and opportunities. The strand of work supported organisations to build digital capacity and enrich organisational practice through developing new digital opportunities for public participation. A RoSS consultant was available for guidance, troubleshooting, and facilitation of collective learning across all projects. Overall, the project reached approximately 2,185 unique individuals, 938 organisations, and 4,968 attendances at events. ‘**Digital volunteering**’, as defined by the Heritage Fund, involves one or both of the following aspects:

- ▶ **Digital activities** means tasks that require technical skill or expertise. For example, these could include building a website, creating a database, adding metadata to digital assets, creating an online service offering ensuring online content is accessible.



- ▶ **Activities that can be carried out at distance** means any task that is carried out via mobile or computer, where technology is used as the medium of delivery. For example, these could include recording a promotional video, logging data, delivering an educational talk online, uploading images.

Impact

The findings in this section are derived from RoSS consultant evaluation reports, reports submitted by participating organisations, one-to-one interviews with both RoSS consultants and a sample of project leads (five for Connected Heritage and one for Digital volunteering), and a learning workshop with 11 project leads from Digital Volunteering. Outcomes from both strands of work included:

Impact on individuals

Digital Volunteering empowered volunteers with new digital skills and expertise, and several projects reported increases in wellbeing of volunteers between the start and end of the project. Findings from both strands of work highlighted the

sharing of resources and knowledge, and emphasised the benefits brought by the integration of new team members and volunteers into their organisation, which facilitated breaking down information and access barriers:

“A volunteer-run museum transformed their relationship with priority communities through digitising 3D scan objects. Volunteers became decision-makers, participating in board-level discussions.” RoSS consultant from the Digital Volunteering project

Impact on organisations

Projects across both strands reported **strengthened collaboration between organisations** inside and outside projects, establishing partnerships through collaborative events and regular check-ins, and removing barriers between volunteers and organisations. One organisation in Connected Heritage reported using new connections to host joint events with another organisation in the heritage sector, whilst another organisation in Digital Volunteering reported being able to strengthen existing partnerships and gaining 20 new volunteers as a result of this collaboration.



In addition to increases in knowledge and insight amongst volunteers, project leads in Digital Volunteering also reported unanticipated outcomes. These included **relationship building between volunteers** (despite working remotely) and volunteers adding valuable contributions in enhancing and expanding resources, as highlighted by a volunteer-developed tool that was later used by other departments in their organisation.

“The addition of individuals new to this area has been instrumental in capturing and sharing valuable knowledge, turning previously unstructured information into a valuable resource.” Participant from the Connected Heritage project

Connected Heritage projects helped organisations to overcome important digital gaps such as missing analytics on live websites and established forums for streamlining information gathering, while Digital Volunteering resulted in volunteers gaining new digital skills and enhancing digital records and collections. For instance, one organisation described how the initiative provided learning experiences in navigating challenges, particularly on its live website.

Impact on the wider heritage sector

Across both strands, 86% of heritage organisations reported **increasing their reach to new audiences**, including LGBTQ+ communities, people of Afro-Caribbean diaspora, individuals that were geographically remote, and younger volunteers. Promoting connections with larger organisations for ongoing collaboration was also recognised. For example, one organisation reported reaching more than 38,000 people via digital radio after connecting with larger organisations.

“Due to the online delivery of the events, including live in-person events which were livestreamed, the project was able to engage not only people from the local community, but it also engaged people of Afro-Caribbean diaspora from across the UK and around the world. In total, 48,451 people from 23 countries (38,830 people from 18 countries as unique individuals) attended workshops, events or activities, either online or off. For a project that initially intended to target the local Pan-African community in Greater Manchester, having eventually engaged tens and thousands of people from around the world has been a phenomenal success, something the project management



is extremely proud of.” Participating organisation in
Connected Heritage

Connected Heritage **increased diversity within membership of participating organisations, and improved accessibility** through opening up digital content to a wider audience.

Digitising collections with the support of digital volunteers was a particularly strong result from across Digital Volunteering:

“As a result of the project, 590 new archaeological sites of local and regional significance have been recorded for the first time. These ranged from prehistoric burial mounds to prehistoric and Roman settlements, and deserted medieval farms and villages... In addition, over 100km of previously unrecorded Roman roads were mapped across both countries, representing a coherent communication network that had eluded academic research for generations.”

Participating organisation in Connected Heritage

One organisation shared how the project’s focus on digital skills and availability of free resources diversified its membership through people engaging from across the UK without the need to travel. Several organisations within Digital

Volunteering established a more representative and diverse workforce, engaging with multilingual communities in remote volunteering.

Key learning

Mentorship and facilitation

Findings from both strands of work emphasised the importance of mentorship and communication, and the diverse benefits of collaborative initiatives as invaluable components for achieving broader organisational goals.

Both consultants leading the projects recommended conducting regular cohort sessions to build trust among projects and facilitate individual support, and to evaluate the long-term impact of projects, in order to understand how they contribute to organisational growth after funded activities end.

Dedicated support

Organisations from Connected Heritage highlighted that the RoSS consultant's support significantly contributed to effective communication, well-functioning reporting processes, and the



recognition of funding challenges in digital projects for heritage organisations. The RoSS consultant suggested bringing in a digital mentor early during project design, particularly on complex topics such as copyright matters.

Harnessing volunteer talent

Digital Volunteering showcased the success of harnessing volunteers to bring specialised skills, a wider geographic engagement, and subject specialism to enrich digital content. Over 14,000 volunteer hours were reported by projects, and the motivation and collective contribution of volunteers was evidenced across projects.

Both the RoSS consultant and project participants related that for any similar strands of work in future, support mechanisms for remote volunteers should be in place, including one-to-one check-ins and regular volunteer meetings, to prevent attrition.

Collaboration with limited digital literacy

Challenges emerged in both projects around collaboration and digital literacy. For example, in some projects, selecting the right platform for online collaboration hindered effective

solutions as some organisations found it difficult to assess which tools would be most valuable and what it would take to implement them effectively.

Learning digital collaboration skills amid fast-paced projects also led to tensions, delays, and difficulties in managing external participants' expectations for Connected Heritage organisations.

Both RoSS consultants recommended that in any similar strands of work in the future, basic training is provided on tasks like live streaming and organising hybrid events, and that there is a recognition of the value of expertise sharing amongst a cohort. For example, connecting organisations facing challenges with those finding solutions.

Communication and clarity on project goals

For some organisations engaging in Connected Heritage, engaging new partners proved time-consuming, causing delays to projects. Barriers to developing 'How-to Guides' included insufficient team involvement and conflicting deadlines.



In some cases, communication and clarity issues contributed to prolonged project silences and difficulties in assessing progress. Internal changes and a lack of understanding regarding project goals further added to delays. Both consultants and participating organisations highlighted the need to emphasise project focus and clear communication to avoid mission drift, ensure alignment with core objectives, and maintain focus on broader network goals.

Volunteer engagement and retention

The majority of Digital Volunteering projects engaged with volunteers who had no previous volunteering experience within their organisation and faced challenges around volunteer recruitment, engagement and retention. For example, around how volunteering opportunities were promoted:

“Organisations who simply advertised the volunteering opportunity through their usual mailing lists and organisational digital channels (website and social media) experienced mixed to limited engagement. Where online recruitment often worked best was when the opportunity

was tailored to a digital service that connected them to a target demographic.” RoSS Consultant – Digital Volunteering

Fluctuating attrition in remote volunteering projects, particularly in sustained and open-ended participatory activities, posed a challenge, with sudden departures occurring without notice. One RoSS consultant advised acknowledging remote volunteers’ preferences for irregular working hours and tailoring opportunities to digital services, as well as implementing bitesize tasks to enhance volunteer engagement, catering to time constraints and providing flexibility.



A spotlight on... The Royal Horticultural Society

The **Royal Horticultural Society** (RHS) has a rare and unique collection of more than 28,000 plant nursery catalogues representing over 2,000 individual nurseries, dating back to 1612. This collection is a fascinating environmental and social history archive, tracking the changing face of gardening infrastructure over time. ‘Digital Dig’ project helped uncover and document hidden gardening heritage through micro-volunteering opportunities.

“The project has helped uncover and document hidden horticultural history through three distinct volunteering programmes: Transcribers, Geotaggers and Digital Ambassadors and has created digital resources that will make this previously inaccessible collection widely available to online users.” Digital stories, Digital Skills for Heritage

By March 2023, RHS significantly expanded and diversified its volunteer base. Over 200 remote volunteers geotagged 2,669 locations, 33 volunteers transcribed 1,250 pages, *and* 12 local young people produced digital films. (source: Digital Heritage hub)



Image by Sigmund on Unsplash (source: Digital Heritage Hub)

Conclusions



Overview

As described at the start of this report, one of the key drivers for the development of the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative was the HM Government digital policy direction in the [Heritage Lottery Fund Policy Directions \(2018\)](#):

“Increase digital skills, capability, and use of digital tools, both within HLF and the heritage sector, encourage better collecting, using and sharing of digital heritage material and encourage digital innovation.”

Looking at evidence from across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, it is clear that the Heritage Fund has significantly advanced each of the outcomes set out in the policy direction above. In this section we summarise the evidence from across this report in relation to outcomes for **individuals working or engaging with the heritage sector**, **heritage organisations** and the **wider heritage sector**.

As described in the methodology section, projects across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative took different approaches to monitoring and evaluation. While it was helpful to tailor evaluations to each project, similar concepts (like collaboration and digital skills) were measured in different ways and with different levels of rigour, which led to challenges consolidating the data. There is, however, still sufficient evidence from across the strands of work to reach the conclusions below.

Impact on individuals

- ▶ More than **53,000** unique individuals from more than **6,400 organisations** engaged in projects **directly funded** through the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative.
- ▶ In total, individuals engaged in projects for more than **242,000** hours.
- ▶ Individuals attended activities **74,977** times. These activities were consistently highly rated across the initiative (regularly achieving 90% satisfaction ratings and a combined Net Promoter score of 50, indicating a ‘good’ score on this [global single-question measure of satisfaction and customer loyalty](#)). This is from a small sample size of 26 responses



but is broadly representative of qualitative feedback from across the initiative.

▶ However, the **actual reach of the initiative into the heritage sector is likely to be far wider** than reported by the heritage organisations engaging in the initiative, as:

1. Participating organisations reported regularly sharing learning internally (and in some cases externally). To illustrate this potential wider reach, when looking just at the Heritage Digital project in the Taking Digital Forward strand, sharing with just 25% of colleagues could potentially expand the project's reach from 2,796 to an estimated 28,000 individuals (as estimated from data available for both the percentage of individuals sharing data (76%), and the size of organisations engaging with the project).
2. There are also no reach figures relating to the digital products and services (such as websites and marketing materials) developed as a result of funding, training or other support from the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative. As an example, 13 out of 19 organisations taking part in the Digital Confidence Fund developed either a new website or online

resources intended to engage a wider audience, but any increases in reach from these are not included in the figures mentioned above.

3. Given that there were more than **240,000 online content views** across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, it is likely that the online content views include individuals not accounted for in the 53,000 figure above.

▶ From a review of data across all projects in the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, individuals increasing digital skills and/or confidence was evidenced by 85% of projects across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative. The definition of 'digital skills' and 'confidence' varied considerably, encompassing, for example:

- Specific digital skills around topics such as open licensing, social media, collections, or websites
- Understanding the digital options available
- Increasing digital confidence and motivations
- Designing, developing, and evaluating digital products and services



- Developing or amending digital strategies/embedding digital into organisational strategy
- The benefits of a 'test and learn' approach/not being afraid to fail

Impact on organisations

- ▶ Across the Digital Confidence Fund, Digital Volunteering, and Connected Heritage strands of work, small grants supported projects to focus on a specific digital project. **Of those organisations that received a small grant, 90% succeeded in delivering a digital product, project or service** (for example, websites and online content, digitised collections, and digital strategies).
- ▶ Across Raising Digital Confidence and Taking Digital Forward strands, a similar percentage of organisations reported that they **would take action, or were already taking action**, as a result of engaging (for example, 90% of participants in the Raising Digital Confidence strand).
- ▶ As shown in [Appendix B](#), evidenced from data across training and support initiatives, **engagement from**

organisations was well spread across the heritage sector. In this context the heritage sector is broken down across the [six types of heritage](#) that the Heritage Fund support.

- ▶ The initiative also had a positive impact on leaders in the heritage sector. All leaders engaging in the Leading the Sector cohort reported an average of 23% increase in confidence in their **organisational approach to digital**, and an average of 24% increase in **personal confidence** in digital leadership and skills between the start, middle, and end of the project.
- ▶ There were also reports across several strands of activity relating to organisations **adopting new digital ways of working**. This was particularly prevalent in the Leading the Sector projects, where leaders reported benefiting from the self-directed learning and experimentation in digital encouraged throughout the project. Other examples include organisations in Digital Volunteering putting in place infrastructure to support volunteers on an ongoing basis. This also extended to the organisations that gave examples of applying learning to other activities they were running across the sector.



Impact on the heritage sector

- ▶ Both Connected Heritage and Digital Volunteering reported strong results around engaging new audiences for their organisations and the heritage sector more generally, which was a focus of several training courses. Across both strands, 86% of heritage organisations reported increasing their reach to new audiences, including (as described by the organisations themselves) LGBTQ+ communities, audiences with Pan-African heritage, individuals that were geographically remote, and younger volunteers.
- ▶ Focus was placed upon increasing accessibility to heritage material through upgrading websites, developing comms/marketing, and digitising collections. Of the projects that received small grants, 43% focused on digitising collections to some degree, with some strong results across Digital Volunteering in particular. For example, plant Heritage received remote volunteering support to digitise nearly 30,000 records from 169 collections.
- ▶ Across Digital Skills for Heritage, more than 880 digital resources were created and shared under an open licence, leaving a significant legacy for the sector.
- ▶ Collaboration between organisations was also one of the main outcomes reported across different strands of work, from the Digital Confidence Fund through to Leading the Sector and Connected Heritage.
- ▶ There is also key learning emerging from the initiative that could benefit the wider sector, which is covered in the following section on recommendations.



Recommendations: The Heritage Fund

This section includes a set of recommendations that could be applied to the design of Strategic Initiatives across the Heritage Fund, particularly those that involve multiple strands of work.

- ▶ Developing a **theory of change** (or similar model) would be a cost-effective way of helping to get stakeholders onto the same page with terminology and where their activities fit in the overall initiative. Ideally the theory of change would be developed at the outset through a co-design process involving a range of stakeholders and then updated regularly with new learning.
- ▶ Organisations running Digital Skills for Heritage projects made recommendations to add **more opportunities for interaction across the strands of work**. For example, adding an annual conference or more regular meetings and learning events between project leads to support shared learning and collaboration.

- ▶ **Bringing an evaluation partner onboard at the start of an initiative**, involving multiple areas or strands of work would help in a number of ways. Firstly, it would help the evaluator or evaluation team to build a deeper understanding of the initiative and changes that occur along the way.

The evaluator could also provide support with the development of a shared measurement framework at the outset of the initiative (based on the theory of change) to explore whether there is a core set of measures that could be collected across multiple projects. For Digital Skills for Heritage, for example, this could have included common measures in areas such as digital maturity, digital skills and confidence, collaboration, and sharing learning – without the need to collect any personal data.

Other evaluations of initiatives that involve multiple projects have used a small set of common measures that all organisations are asked to collect in the same way. For example, in the inFocus evaluation of The National Lottery Community Fund, delivered by CAST/Catalyst, common measures were used around the areas such as digital



maturity, collaboration, and sharing learning, and selected/developed over a two-week period at the start of the evaluation. Organisations receiving grants still had the flexibility to collect data specific to their projects in addition to these measures.

The evaluation partner could also then coordinate with external evaluators to ask to use the same measures, or at least to use the same concepts and terminology as the theory of change, and incorporate the measures into their own primary data collection.

While accepting that coming to an arrangement with participating organisations across a wide range of projects to share personal data would be unlikely, steps could be put in place to collect more data around the overlap between participants attending different projects. For example, a simple way to do this is to build in a common question across reporting forms (and any primary data collection from evaluators) about other projects they have accessed from across an initiative. This could help to get a better understanding about the degree to which attendances are overlapping.

- ▶ The Digital Skills for Heritage initiative showed the importance of **designing activities that meet the specific needs of different audiences as part of a cross-sector approach**. For example, the Leading the Sector strand of work was specifically tailored to meet the needs of leaders across the sector, based on existing learning and good practice. Across the initiative there were examples of a wide variety of different approaches adopted to meet the needs of a range of different audiences.

“This initiative is unique due to its layered approach and the effort to cohesively upskill the sector. Unlike other projects, it had a clear strategy to address the diverse needs of heritage organisations in one program.” Project Lead in the Digital capacity for low confidence organisations strand of work

Engaging with many organisations of different types and sizes in different locations across the UK requires developing a diverse and flexible approach. Prioritising areas, audiences, or types of heritage will help simplify the offer and how impact can be measured.



- ▶ **Expert Mentoring** was highlighted as a success factor across three of the five strands, ranging from support from a RoSS consultant through to peer-to-peer support in a cohort setting. This could be explored further for any initiatives looking to build skills and confidence in a particular area.
- ▶ Heritage organisations and project leads also highlighted the benefits of collaboration and working within **a cohort structure**, finding that it could deepen learning and insight. Learning from Connected Heritage also highlighted the importance of building skills in digital collaboration in the early stages of a project.
- ▶ Another benefit involved increasing expert capacity and ensuring consistency of support through engaging with a **RoSS consultant to support and coordinate** strands of work. For example with Connected Heritage and Digital Volunteering, specialist digital RoSS experts were also deployed to provide **first line troubleshooting and support collaboration**. This improved communication, reporting processes, and support for participating organisations.
- ▶ Across training and support strands of work, **recordings of online sessions** played a key role in disseminating learning:

“This data shows that the event recordings achieved more views (2,872) than those that attended live (2,796). Combined, these two points offer important insight for future digital skills programmes of this kind. That is, the important role that recorded content plays in facilitating the sharing of information from events, post-event.” Project Lead, Heritage Digital
- ▶ Using a sector-wide survey like the **DASH survey** could help with the design of new initiatives by ensuring that the needs of the sector are accounted for. The DASH survey provides a template that could be used in other areas outside of digital. Running the DASH survey itself more regularly (annually) would also help to understand the needs of the sector on an ongoing basis. The comparison between the 2020 and 2021 surveys provided a lot of rich data for initiatives and for this evaluation.



Recommendations: The Heritage sector

Finally, this section turns to recommendations for the wider sector from the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative.

The need for digital support

Overall, there is still a clear demand and need for support with digital across the heritage sector from organisations engaging with the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative. For example, in the DASH survey, while there was an increase in digital confidence between 2021 and 2022, participants identified **significant barriers (e.g. around time and funds)** to staff and volunteers in small to medium-sized heritage organisations in accessing support and upskilling. Across Digital Skills for Heritage projects there was also evidence of the need for support. The Heritage Digital project leads found that there was an **increase in organisations facing barriers to implementing digital** ways of working, which they felt

indicated the ongoing need for digital skills provision within the sector.

There may also be a **lack of digital support in the heritage sector**. Although from a small sample size (30 organisations), 86% of respondents to the 2023 evaluation survey were not aware of support similar to the support accessed through the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative.

Increasing engagement in building digital skills and confidence

Given the need for further support in building digital skills and confidence across the heritage sector, it could be worthwhile to bring together key stakeholders from across the sector to share the learning from the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative and look to coordinate support further across a wider range of funders and stakeholders. The Heritage Fund worked closely with heritage and digital stakeholders across the course of the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative, so this would effectively involve establishing a more regular 'digital funders forum' to share practice and maximise resources around digital.



A cost-effective starting point for increased collaboration for the digital funders forum could be the **co-design of a theory of change** (through workshops and webinars) that would set out how activities across the sector lead to social outcomes and draw on the learning from the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative. Essentially, it would provide an impact map of the roles different stakeholders play/could play to build digital skills and confidence, while inspiring new stakeholders to engage in this area of work. The process could also promote the many high-quality resources that have come out of the Digital Skills for Heritage initiatives, many of which can be found at the [CultureHive Digital Heritage Hub](#).



Appendix A: Calculating reach figures

The inFocus team has sought to use conservative estimates to avoid overclaiming the calculations and assumptions for the reach figures that are presented here.

Unique Individuals and organisations across the heritage sector directly engaged through Digital Skills for Heritage

The figure is generated from the data for unique engagement provided directly by organisations running activities under the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative and is dependent on the accuracy of these figures. The inFocus team checked the figures against narrative descriptions in evaluation reports. As collating personal data across projects is not feasible, the degree of overlap (participants attending more than one of the projects) needed to be addressed. The overall reach figure for unique organisations and initiatives (compiled from the data

provided by organisations) were reduced by 10% on the following basis:

- ▶ Where data is available on organisations accessing more than one project, overlap tended to be low. For example, 10% of one strand of work (the DASH survey) had accessed at least one of the five Digital Skills for Heritage resources listed in the survey. Significant overlap between projects also didn't emerge from qualitative data across the evaluation.
- ▶ This lack of an overlap between attendance in projects is likely in part because of the different target audiences. For example, an overlap between the engagement figures for the Digital Volunteering project and leaders in Leading the Sector is very unlikely.
- ▶ Where there is more possibility of overlap, such as participants in the Digital Confidence Fund strand of work accessing Taking Digital Forward webinars, this would only impact on small numbers of participants relative to the overall reach figure.
- ▶ Access to resources (e.g. downloads of resources or page views), where there is likely to be more overlap, are not



included in the unique counts. As an example of this overlap, 55% of respondents from Taking Digital Forward and the Digital Confidence Fund accessed the Digital Skills for Heritage guides to getting started in digital.

- ▶ As described in the main body of the report, organisations sharing learning was a common finding, **meaning that the number of individuals that engaged with the initiative is very likely underreported**. The figures for unique individuals and organisations do not include the wider reach of many of the projects that improved digital approaches (data was only available on this from the Connected Heritage strand of work and not for other projects like the Digital Confidence Fund).

Attendances across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative

The figure for attendance across the Digital Skills for Heritage initiative is calculated from cumulative attendance figures submitted by participating organisations.

The accuracy of the reported attendance could be influenced by a number of factors. As above, since figures are reported by organisations, there can be potential errors, human error and even faulty technology or incomplete data in the counting process which can lead to inaccuracies (and also underreporting – the inFocus team did not include figures that were unclear).

Another important factor to consider is that the figure does not distinguish the quality of engagement. For example, online free events tend to attract more attendees, but the quality of engagement could differ from in-person and paid events.

Hours of highly rated, training and development opportunities accessed by individuals across the heritage sector

To arrive at a figure for hours of engagement by individuals in training and development opportunities, the inFocus team estimated the number of hours per opportunity reported and multiplied it by the reported number of people engaged.



Where the length of an initiative was unclear (in some cases this was reported or possible to determine using desk research), events, webinars, and one-to-one sessions were estimated at one hour, and full-day events such as workshops and/or seminars estimated to be six hours. For DASH figures, an estimate of 20 minutes per completion of the survey was multiplied against the number of respondents.

The inFocus team was again cautious in calculating the estimate. For example, Connected Heritage was not added to the estimates as there was not sufficient or consistent detail on activities to break down the likely length of activities across projects. For Digital Volunteering, volunteering hours were used where reported (this was not available for every project in this strand of work).



Appendix B: Reach across heritage areas

From a sample of 4,069 organisations across 5 projects, engagement from organisations was well spread across the heritage sector, as defined by the [6 heritage areas supported](#) by the Heritage Fund. This is compared below to the data collected through the latest DASH survey in 2021.

	A sample of 4069 organisations from 5 projects	DASH
Industrial, Maritime and Transport	4%	8%
Cultures and memories	11%	8%
Community heritage	19%	18%
Landscapes, nature and parks	6%	11%
Historic Areas, Buildings and Monuments	14%	17%
Museums, Libraries, Archives	40%	28%
Other	7%	10%



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- ▶ Josie Fraser, Head of Digital Policy

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