

# Digital Impact in Museums & Galleries

December 2022



↓ by

CULTURAL  
ASSOCIATES  
OXFORD

**One  
Further**

↓ on behalf of

**MA** Museums  
Association

**Art Fund**

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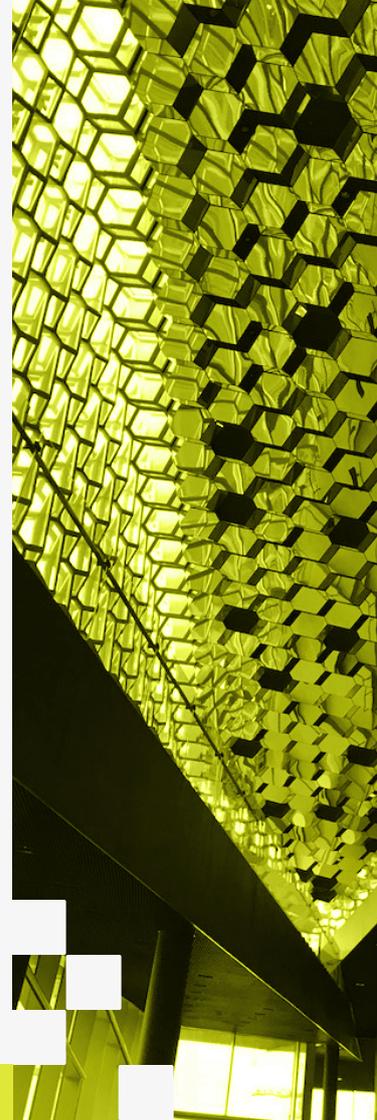
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## Foreword

In 2020, for the first time in living memory, cultural attractions across the world shut their doors. This called into question what a museum or gallery is to people, if it cannot be accessed in the physical space. For institutions predicated on their physical holdings, built up over centuries, this was not a straightforward question to answer. Cultural institutions were compelled to pivot their public engagement almost exclusively to digital.

When museums and galleries reopened, many faced the challenge of combining in-person experiences with new online systems. Thanks to advance ticket sales, many were collecting audience data they hadn't before, increasing their capacity to understand and potentially broaden their audiences.

Now, 18 months on, the sector is beginning to reflect on the legacy of that extraordinary year. Art Fund and the Museums Association commissioned research to help museums better understand and assess the purpose and impact of digital work. We also wanted to build our understanding, and that of other funders, of how best to direct future investment in digital capacity building. This report briefly summarises the findings of the investigation we commissioned from One Further and Cultural Associates Oxford.



**Sarah Philp**  
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**Sharon Heal**  
**Museums Association**  
Director

## Introduction

On behalf of Art Fund and the Museums Association (MA), One Further and Cultural Associates Oxford undertook a six-month study based on research and action learning. This short report summarises our findings and conclusions.

The research began with a literature review focused on other studies looking at the experiences of the culture sector during the pandemic. We undertook an analysis of over

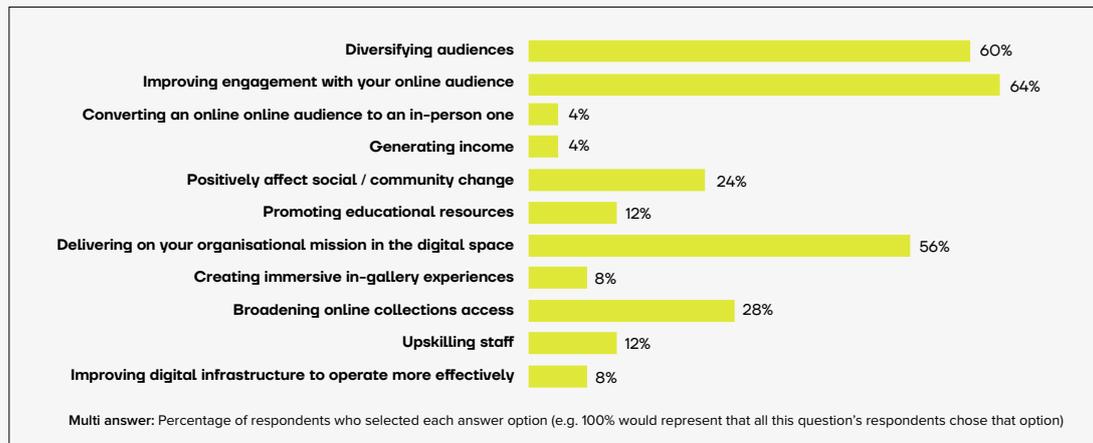
200 projects which had been funded immediately before and during the pandemic by Art Fund and the MA, with an average grant of around £25,000 (*most projects were still underway at the time the research was undertaken which impacted evaluation of their success*). We sought the views of these organisations and others in the sector through a survey and then worked closely with 22 organisations actively engaged in digital projects,

most of which were from this group of funded projects. These organisations attended a series of small group discussions, once a week for six weeks. The sessions responded to an online talk from a sector expert, acting as a provocation for discussion.

Highlights from the survey are included throughout this report. Overall, it was clear that, for these respondents, diversifying audiences and improving audience engagement were priorities.

- Analysis of **200 projects**
- Average grant of **£25,000**
- Funded by **Art Fund and the MA**
- Close research with **22 organisations**
- **Six week** programme of discussion

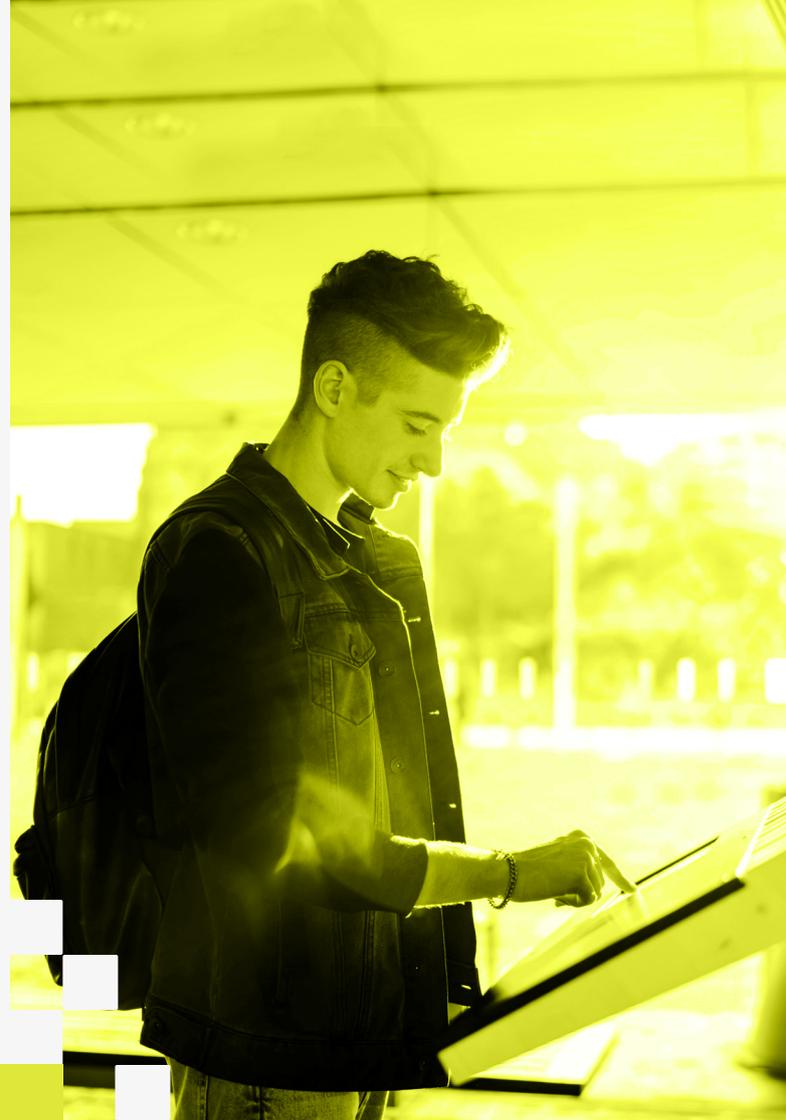
### ↓ Survey responses: What are the most important objectives to your digital activity? Please select up to 3.



**At the outset of the project, the following project research questions were identified:**

- 1 → How can museums measure the impact of their digital work in ways beyond income generation – in particular, the social impact of these activities?**
- 2 → How can museums identify and understand their online audiences, with a view to reaching new and more diverse people in the digital space?**
- 3 → What does it mean for a museum to operate effectively in the digital space after the pandemic – what does good practice and an effective digital strategy look like?**
- 4 → How can museums scale up digital activity, be more ambitious and move towards longer-term planning?**
- 5 → What is the potential for museums to monetise digital work and experiences and how can they grasp these opportunities?**

One Further and Cultural Associates Oxford would like to thank the staff of all the museums that took part, and shared their successes and challenges, and reflected on their changing understandings of the position and purpose of digital activity in their organisations.

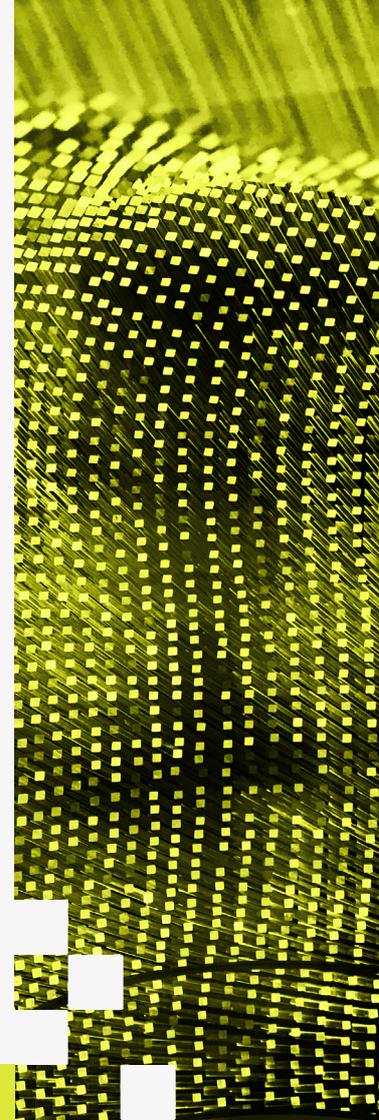


↓ Organisation	↓ Project
<b>Art360 Foundation</b>	<b>Artists' Legacies in the Museum:</b> engaging museum curatorial teams with the archives of three Black British Artists, through Study Days and workshops, led by emerging Black curators.
<b>Artlink Hull</b>	A programme of exhibitions and public engagement activities, reimagined as a digital programme, for the 87 Gallery contemporary visual art gallery and artist space.
<b>Barnsley Museum Service</b>	<b>Draw Hope:</b> a programme promoting wellbeing for young people through the act of drawing and bringing their voices into the interpretation of the Sadler Collection of English Drawings.
<b>Equal Arts</b>	<b>Out and about with Thomas Bewick:</b> a programme for older people prioritising those who had been socially isolated during the pandemic, including those living with dementia.
<b>Foundling Museum</b>	<b>Breakout Room:</b> A Creative Forum for Care-Experienced People <b>Shared Stories, Shared Voices:</b> a programme to enable audiences, including Foundling Hospital pupils and graduates of their care-leaver training programme to use new digital channels to share their stories and voices about collection objects they have chosen.
<b>Green Howard's Museum</b>	<b>Digital Discovery:</b> enabling the museum to pilot the delivery of a new digital learning programme including workshops, an online history club for young people and online public talks.
<b>Horniman</b>	<b>Nigeria 60:</b> a multidisciplinary project to mark the 60th anniversary of Nigeria's independence, moved online in response to the pandemic. <b>African Collections Research Hub:</b> a digital space, providing online access to digitised versions of the museum's African and Caribbean collections and resources, as well as advice for people wanting to carry out their own research projects.
<b>House of Illustration</b>	Adapting their education programme to pilot a new series of digital artist-led masterclasses and short courses, with the aim of developing a new offer which could become financially self-sustaining.
<b>International Curators' Forum</b>	<b>Diaspora Pavilion 2:</b> a professional development programme in collaboration with Block 336, for emerging artists from underrepresented backgrounds, including new commissions and community programming.
<b>London Transport Museum</b>	<b>Progressing Participatory Practice:</b> embedding new approaches to working with community experts across the museum's programming, drawing on the experiences of working with the Advisory Board for an exhibition on post-war Caribbean recruitment.

← **Participants in the research programme**



↓ Organisation	↓ Project
Manchester Museum	<b>Let us show you what we see:</b> enabling neurodiverse children and young adults to create new digital content <b>To Have and to Heal:</b> using digital engagement with Egyptology collections to explore themes of colonialism, multiculturalism and bereavement with third sector organisations, offering support to people at risk of social isolation, schools and home educators and care homes.
Museum of the Home	<b>Stay Home:</b> exploring a collection of lockdown experiences in the context of the wider Documenting Homes collection and developing capacity to collect and manage digital material. <b>Mollspeak:</b> a commission for a new space-specific audio experience for visitors.
Museums and Heritage Highland	<b>Museum of the Highlands:</b> a project to bring objects from the collections of 15 museums across the Highlands together to create a digital learning hub, with resources for children, young people and teachers.
National Museums Liverpool	<b>Transatlantic Slavery and Legacies in Museums Forum:</b> establishing a new network for museums with collections relating to slavery, to share best practice and amplify the work being done across the UK to understand the origins and legacies of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.
Nottingham Contemporary	<b>Caption Conscious Ecologies:</b> a research and commissioning initiative to create a toolkit and other resources, supporting new approaches to captioning moving-image work to improve accessibility.
Open Eye Gallery	<b>Socially Engaged Photography Network, Re-Framing Culture:</b> a training programme for curators and aligned professionals to explore commissioning socially engaged photographers, as well as developing non-cultural organisations as partners.
Towner Art Gallery	A project to commission an artist to co-create a pilot podcast series with Eastbourne's LGBTQ+ community, using collection works as a starting point for exploration and conversation and inviting responses to artworks.
Turner Contemporary	<b>Connecting New and Existing Audiences with Art in the Wake of COVID-19:</b> a new learning programme, devised in collaboration with local communities, and offering new ways to explore and connect with themes of identity and belonging.
Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums	<b>Mini Must-see:</b> a pilot for a new digital programme, developing compelling stories for audiences through film, audio, photography, creative writing and narrative journalism. The pilot focused on the LGBTQ+ community and incorporated staff training.



## ↓ Organisation

## ↓ Project

<b>UP Projects</b>	<b>Assembly 2022:</b> online learning and development programme for diverse practitioners, working with artists, curators and other public art practitioners. The programme aimed to promote an inclusive and diverse public art sector.
<b>Whitechapel Gallery</b>	<b>Contemporary Art and Philosophy Masterclasses Programme:</b> targeting local young people from the Gallery's local context, and supporting schools to encourage the uptake of creative subject options at GCSE and A-level.
<b>Wolverhampton Art Gallery</b>	<b>Making Space:</b> a programme to create a new space in the gallery for collaboration, creativity and community, through a series of workshops and events, supported to move online during the pandemic.

## ↓ Key insights from the literature review

- The sector is emerging from the pandemic under significant financial pressure and with a pressing need for a more strategic approach to digital activity.
- There is a rising interest in collaboration, community and *“the local”*.
- Organisations are showing a general pivot to *“people and purpose”* but there is a challenge in how to measure the effectiveness of non-revenue-generating work.
- Audience behaviour won't *“snap back”* after the pandemic; there is a clear need to consider hybrid, blended or other new models for delivering museum experiences.
- Diversifying both audiences and workforces is a priority; existing inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19.
- Many smaller organisations still need help getting digital *“basics”* in place, either improving infrastructure or getting collections online.
- Internally, there is a critical risk of burnout across the workforce due to the effects of Covid-19.
- Museum staff are emerging from the pandemic with significant interest in developing digital skills, and there is a requirement for upskilling staff in several areas.



# Overarching Findings

↓ 1

## Lack of strategy is the biggest barrier to digital effectiveness

In many organisations, staff have low confidence in their organisation's overall strategy as well as poor levels of confidence in how to develop digital strategies which support the organisation's overall mission. As a result, they lack a clear focus or a clear sense of prioritisation in their digital work, leading to feeling overworked and burnt out. Insubstantial strategy also makes it difficult for museums to articulate why they do what they do digitally.

↓ 2

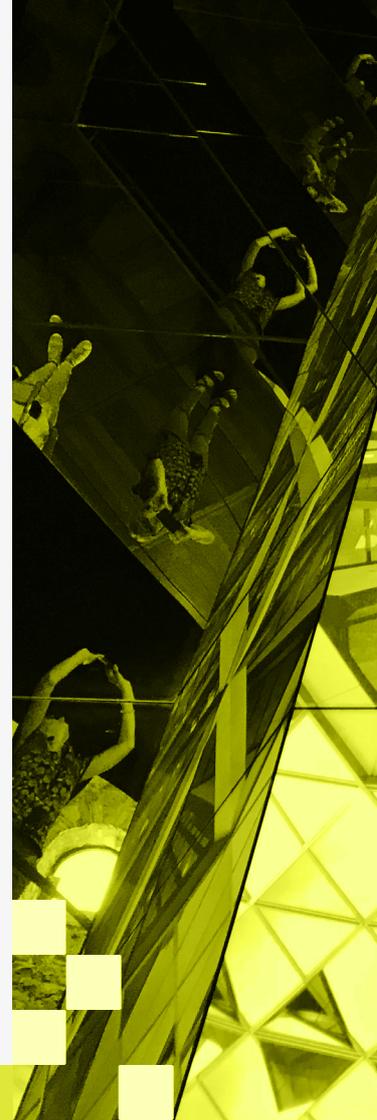
## The sector contains a lot of digital knowledge, but often that knowledge isn't shared – even within organisations

We found that, for most of the activity museums and galleries want to do digitally, the relevant knowledge exists in the sector or in other partner organisations, but that knowledge is often siloed. For example, digital teams in larger museums know how to follow digital best practices in user research; and learning and programming teams know how to deliver and evaluate community-based projects which aim to have an impact in the longer term. But those two areas of expertise often remain separate. Digital activities will have greater impact, and museums and galleries will be able to measure that impact more effectively, when those two skill sets are brought together.

↓ 3

## Museums appreciated the flexible funding approach adopted by Art Fund and the MA in 2020-1

Both Art Fund and the MA adopted a flexible and responsive approach to funding during the pandemic, allowing organisations to test approaches which they felt were best suited to their audiences' needs. Study participants were overwhelmingly positive about this and contrasted it with their perceptions of other approaches to funding digital projects, which seemed to prioritise specific '*in vogue*' outputs, such as VR, which might not be closely linked to audience need.



## ↓ Research question 1

How can museums measure the impact of their digital work in ways beyond income generation – in particular, the social impact of these activities?

## Main Findings

Museums and galleries with in-house digital teams were likely to use digital best practice evaluation methodologies. Smaller museums were less likely to have this knowledge and have more limited capacity.

Museums and galleries sometimes settle for reporting on data that is easy to collect, but is not necessarily the most pertinent to understanding the long-term benefit or social impact of digital activities.

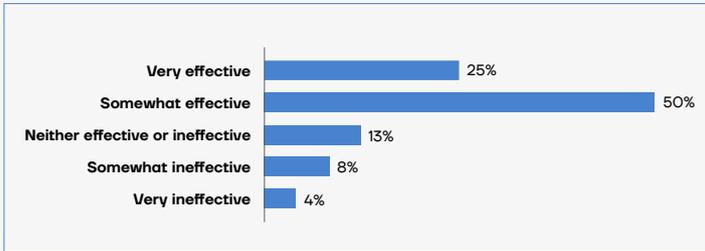
The most robust evaluation of the social impact of digital projects will come from a blend of digital evaluation methodologies and qualitative/longitudinal methodologies. But it's quite rare for a single project to use both in its evaluation. Even when an organisation has both digital evaluation know-how (*in the digital team*), and longitudinal social evaluation know-how (*in the learning and programmes team*), too often these are not combined to provide insight.

## Response

The MA will update its social impact toolkit, to incorporate tools for digital projects and methods for defining and evaluating a digital project for social value.

The MA will, with Art Fund support, create a Museums Essentials free online course that covers digital usability evaluation and how to integrate this within a social impact methodology.

↓ Survey responses: To what extent do you feel that your digital activity has been effective at widening audiences?

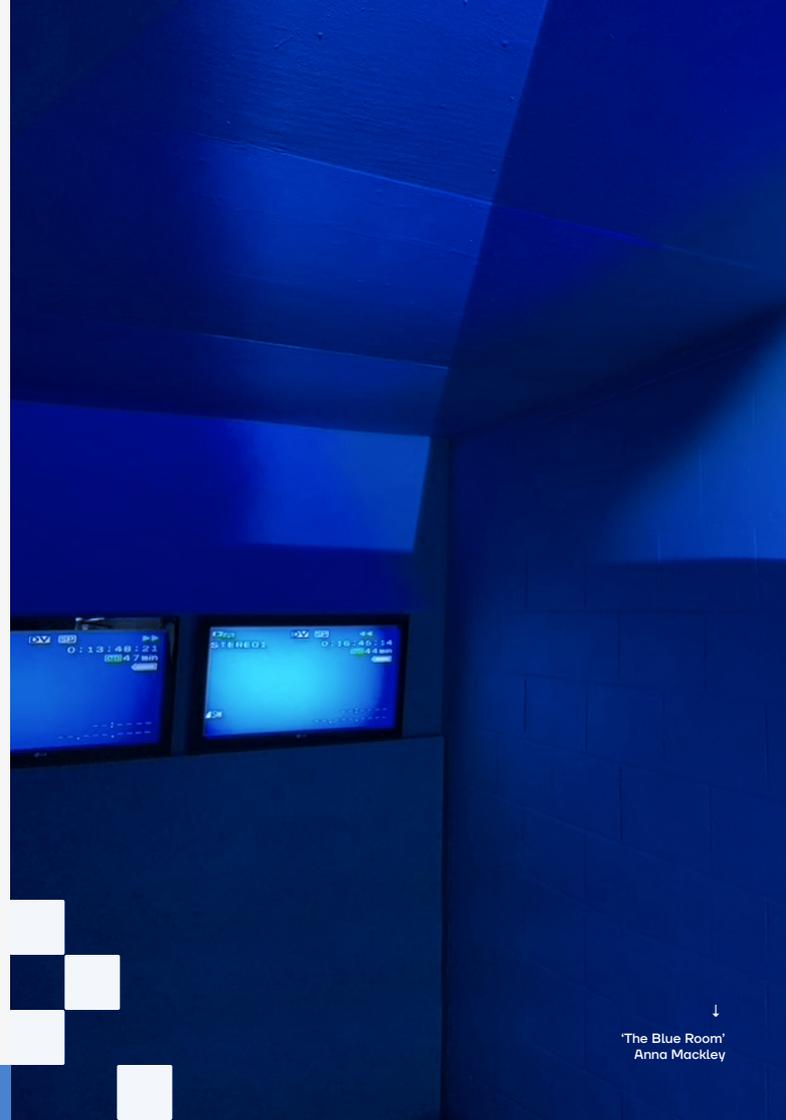


## Good Practice - Case Study

### Foundling Museum: A Creative Forum for Care-Experienced People

**The Foundling Museum** is developing a new digital arts space for care leavers. Going live in 2023, it aims to demystify the creative industries for care leavers, and provide them with a range of creative activities, including creative workshops, interviews and videos, and 1-minute videos of practising artists sharing how they got into the sector and what 'being an artist' really entails. The site will also highlight training and job opportunities.

It is part of the museum's work to increase its reach and impact with care experienced people, a group whose sense of isolation, mental health difficulties and trauma were exacerbated by the pandemic. The museum worked with leading organisations that provide support for care-experienced people, and has a Care-Experienced Advisory Board, who will play a key role in testing and refining the site.



↓  
'The Blue Room'  
Anna Mackley

## ↓ Research question 2

How can museums identify and understand their online audiences, with a view to reaching new and more diverse people in the digital space?

## Main Findings

Few study participants are collecting data which enables them to understand their online audiences, rather than simply recording numbers of people accessing digital content.

Digital audience development initiatives require distinct approaches and should not simply mimic a physical programme. Museums and galleries need to take account of different barriers in the digital space: many potential participants may lack appropriate hardware or sufficient data; others may feel the lack of the social engagement that comes with in-person activities. On the other hand, barriers around physical accessibility and scheduling are reduced.

Reaching new audiences online requires time and ongoing commitment.

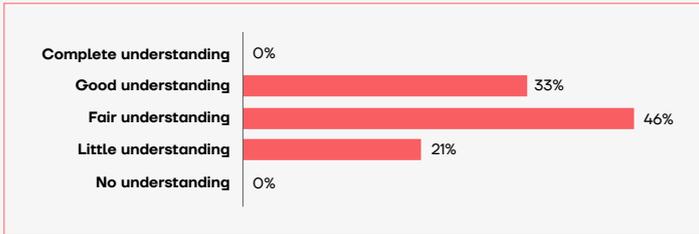
Many of the relevant skills for digital audience development exist across and beyond the sector, sitting with digital specialists and with audience specialists. But these are not always combined to produce projects that both make sense digitally and achieve audience development objectives.

## Response

Art Fund will explore further the feasibility of working with partners to develop a new model for bringing specialist skills and training (*in areas like diversifying audiences, evaluation, monetising digital, digital strategy*) from outside the sector into museums through mentoring or secondments, drawing on learning from existing initiatives (*such as **Bloomberg's digital accelerator programme***).

The MA has provided coaching to grantees for some time. With new grant programmes, including the new iteration of the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund and the Mindsets and Missions programme, this will be extended to enable grantees to access more support for skills development.

↓ **Survey responses: How would you rate your understanding of who your online audiences are?**



## Good Practice - Case Study

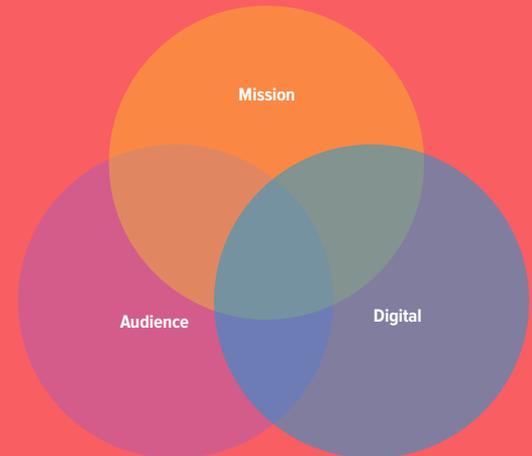
### **Art UK: Audience Broadening Initiative**

**Art UK** used a mixed method approach to audit the makeup of their existing online audience and set that against UK census population records. They discovered that their online audience underrepresented people from ethnic minorities and 16-24 year olds. As a result, they commissioned a three-year **Audience Broadening Initiative** with thirteen discrete digital projects, a sustained

body of work to move the needle in terms of how Art UK's online audience reflects the UK population.

A comprehensive evaluation framework not only looked at the specific project deliverables relative to the project targets but also identified systemic changes required at Art UK to allow them to build on the work.

As the diagram illustrates, a project which reaches more people in the digital space is ideally one which is fully aligned with the organisation's mission, which serves a clearly defined audience need, and - crucially - in which digital is not a '*second best*' solution, but the optimal way of delivering that project.



↓ Research questions 3 and 4

**What does it mean for a museum to operate effectively in the digital space after the pandemic – what does good practice and an effective digital strategy look like?**

**How can museums scale up digital activity, be more ambitious and move towards longer-term planning?**

## Main Findings

As organisations were adapting so rapidly to the new circumstances at the start of the pandemic, few grant applications received by Art Fund and the MA were able to integrate proposed pandemic-response digital projects within a broader mission, vision or long-term plan. While this was understandable in the context of the pandemic, organisations need to be able to align their digital work with broader organisational priorities for the longer term.

However, many participants were unclear about their organisation's central strategies, both for the organisation as a whole, and for digital activity. Many also reported low levels of confidence in developing digital strategy.

As a result of the pandemic, organisations and individuals took on new areas of digital activity, without increasing capacity or stopping doing other things to create space for this. In the absence of a clear strategy, many departments and individuals in digital teams and across organisations are being stretched increasingly thinly and investing their limited time in too many competing aims. This is leading to staff overstretching themselves and burnout. The need for effective digital strategies is clear.

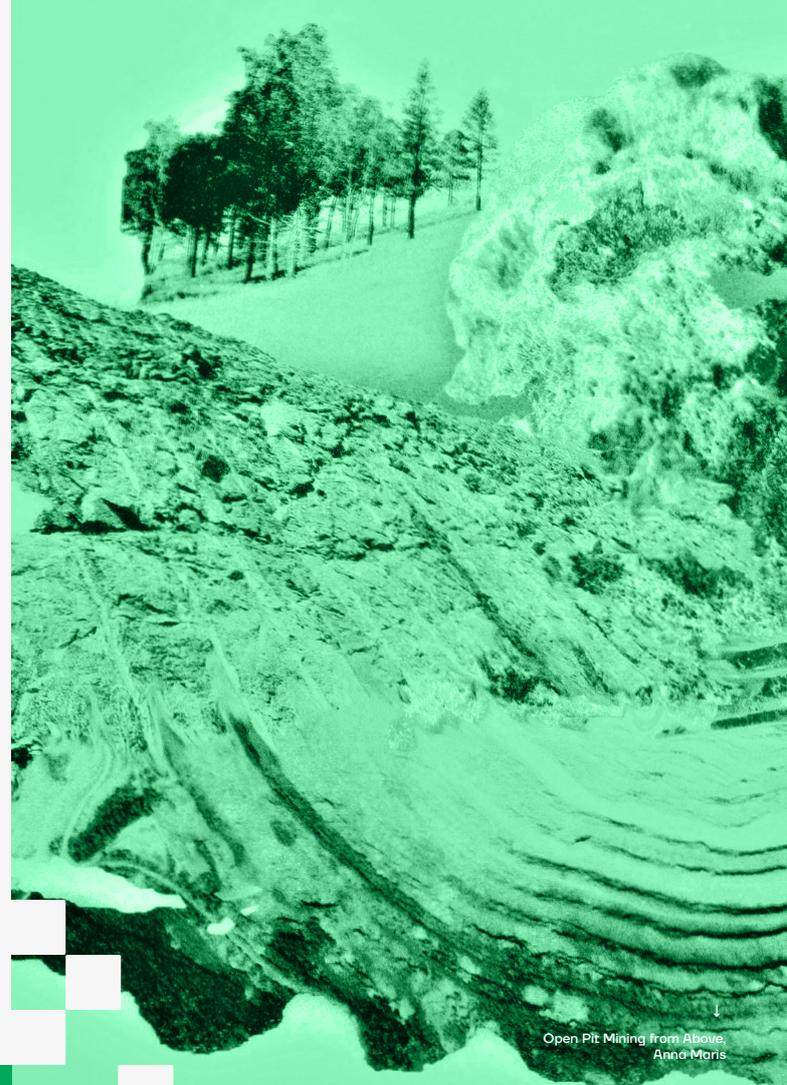
## ↓ Tips for developing a digital strategy

An effective digital strategy will be instigated or strongly supported by the organisation's senior leadership. It always needs to be developed within the context of an effective overall organisational strategy.

For digital strategies to be effective, digital activity needs to be put on a par with other organisational activity, and be integrated with it, not seen as a niche or isolated activity.

Digital strategy should identify and focus on areas where digital makes the most difference to the mission of the organisation. This might be through enabling things to be done better or more cheaply, offering new types of experiences, or reaching audiences who would not otherwise benefit. Digital strategy development should start with an audit, working out what an organisation's strengths and opportunities are. In large organisations, the process of undertaking this audit needs to bring different departments together to ensure perspectives and priorities are shared.

The strategy needs to ensure that digital activity is appropriately resourced in terms of people and tools, including factoring in time and resources to test, evaluate and learn. Digital activity needs to be planned over a sufficiently long period to allow momentum to build over time. The strategy should ensure that one activity provides foundations for the next area of activity, in terms both of staff skills and audience relationships. Too often, organisations hop from one activity to another: one participant told us, *'I had to learn a load of skills to deliver an AR project, but the next thing might involve a completely different set of skills'*.



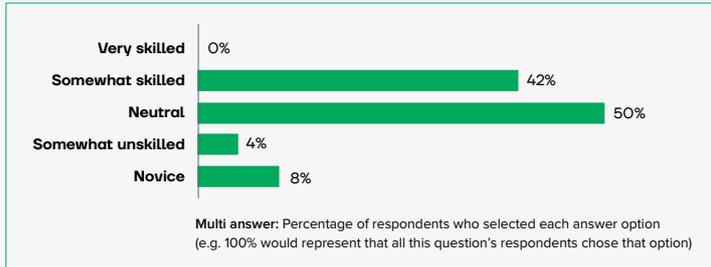
↓  
Open Pit Mining from Above,  
Anna Maria

The research explored how museums could be enabled to scale up their activity and be more ambitious. Many of the smaller organisations that participated would welcome opportunities for joint working and shared resources. Suggestions from the research include developing shared infrastructure, for example a cashless donations system, which could be advanced by a funder or support organisation and made available to organisations at low cost. There is also scope for more sharing of expertise.

Participants stressed the importance of networking and sharing expertise and there is scope for funders to support this, perhaps through peer mentoring. More ambitiously, there is also scope for organisations to share specialist roles, with a digital expert working part-time for a group of museums.



## ↓ Survey responses: How skilled do respondents feel in relation to digital strategy?



## Response

Art Fund will ensure that applicants to their open project grants are aware that they can include the costs associated with creating an effective digital strategy in their applications, as well as building in an understanding of an organisation's digital strategy as part of the assessment process. This will also counter any perception that digital project funding tends to go to short-term vanity projects like apps or VR installations. To ensure its funding has the best possible impact, Art Fund will also encourage applicants to consider when and how they could work in partnership on digital strategies, and what digital

infrastructure could be shared to make limited resources go further.

A Museums Essentials online course from the MA will cover the principles of how to create an effective digital strategy and implementation plan. Sector funders and support organisations should come together to discuss how they can better help organisations through funding and other channels to connect with each other, coordinate to develop networks, mentoring and partnerships to support museums in learning, setting digital strategy and implementing digital systems.



## ↓ Research question 5

What is the potential for museums to monetise digital work and experiences and how can they grasp these opportunities?

## Main Findings

Three quarters of organisations participating in the research had explored generating income online. However, less than a fifth of respondents in the survey reported significant income from their digital work and participants generally had little confidence in their capacity to generate income online, although they recognised the importance of doing so.

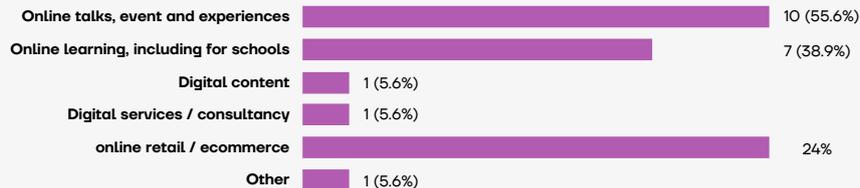
All organisations with a digital presence should look to increase their effectiveness in asking for donations online. The keys to success are making the user experience as frictionless as possible, as well as developing a compelling narrative which conveys why an organisation needs support. But many organisations still have usability barriers on their online donation forms; and many do not have segmented email lists, meaning they are unable to send targeted messages based on people's preferences or prior behaviour.

Some organisations – notably the **Tank Museum** and the **London Transport Museum** – are beginning to have success with paid-for online content, using Patreon to offer premium content to subscribers. However, these kinds of results require long term investment in content and audience development, with considerable up-front resource needed to get to the point of making money. For many smaller organisations, better online fundraising will be a higher priority.

## Response

Art Fund will work with museums to understand whether there is additional digital infrastructure, linked to their existing services such as Art Tickets, that could be developed and shared to improve their ability to solicit donations online and onsite.

### ↓ Survey responses: What are the most important objectives to your digital activity? Please select up to 3.



Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)

## Good Practice - Case Study

**Mystery at the Museum** was an online escape room run by Oxford University Museum of Natural History in 2020, and presented by TV naturalist Steve Backshall.

In the run up to the event the museum was able to augment their own email and social media channels alongside Steve's to promote the event and create a custom email list of those interested in attending the event.

In the lead up to the event weekly teaser videos were put out on social media and those on the email list were sent puzzles and clues, along with donation messaging. The event itself was free.

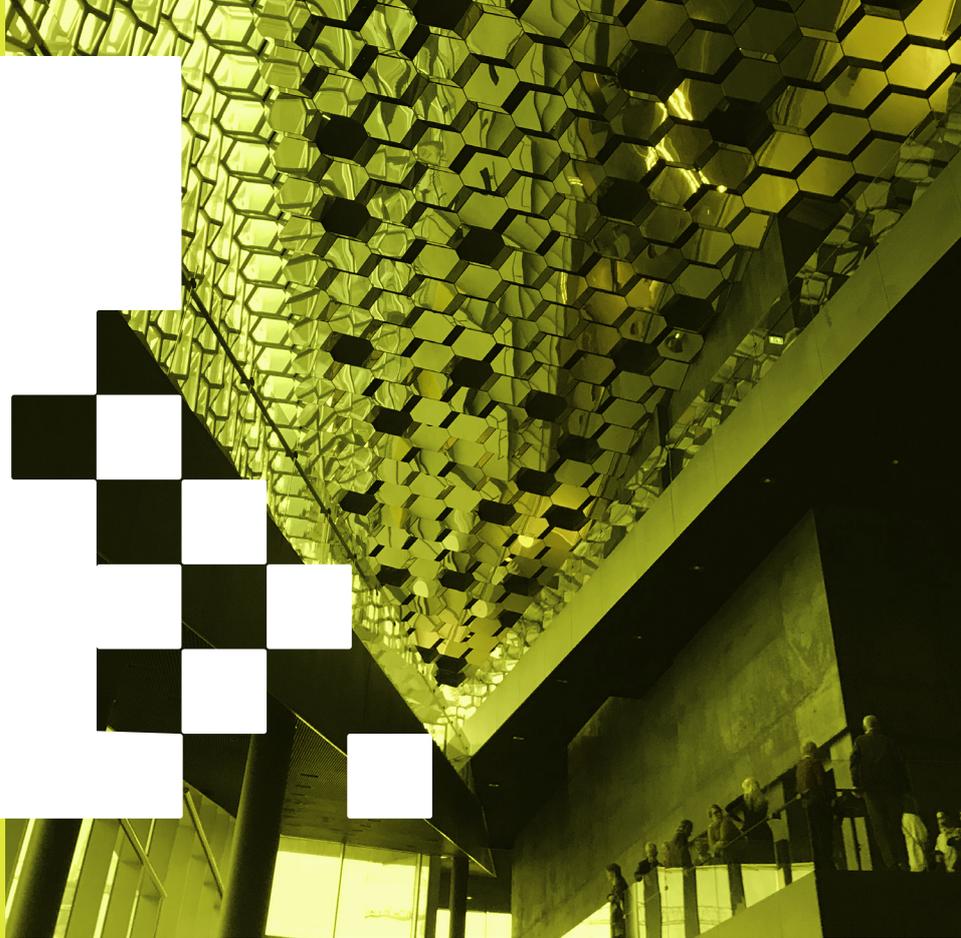
On the night itself, Steve was live streamed into people's homes (*from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*) as audiences typed in answers to clues to help Steve 'solve' the puzzles.

The event recorded 121,000 views and over 16,000 people and 7,689 households taking part. Although the event was completely free, it generated over £33k (*from a cost of £3k*), with 59% of registrants making a donation. Fundraising materials developed for the event, but which can be reused, have given it a longer legacy.



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