

DCMS: Culture Is Digital:

Icon Statement

29 March 2018

Icon, The Institute of Conservation, welcomes the government's [Culture Is Digital](#) report, which explores how "culture and technology can work together to drive audience engagement, boost the capability of cultural organisations and unleash the creative potential of technology."

Icon is a membership organisation and charity which brings together those with a passion for the care of cultural heritage. Icon raises awareness of the cultural, social and economic value of caring for heritage and champions high standards of conservation. We represent nearly 3,000 individuals and organizations comprising professional conservators, heritage scientists and many others committed to improving understanding of and access to our cultural heritage.

Icon is a strong believer of the symbiotic relationship between culture and technology as conservation inherently blurs lines between disciplines. Conservators are trained professionals who combine scientific skills with knowledge of art history, architecture, changing attitudes and lifestyles to understand the context of the objects they work with, and to conserve them sensitively and fittingly.

The government's plans to align the technology and cultural sector's interests more closely is an important development in our sector. We particularly support the Culture Is Digital report's following priorities and commitments:

- **Audiences – Using Digital Technology To Engage Audiences**

The report demonstrates how digital communication and content can facilitate the delivery of greater levels of cultural engagement.

Icon strongly vouches for this benefit, having hosted its first Twitter Conference in October 2017 to a resounding success. The Icon Twitter Conference encouraged conservators and the public to share conservation projects on the social networking service Twitter. The project transposed a traditional networking and knowledge-sharing event onto an online platform, increasing the event's accessibility and outreach. The event comprised of over 1,000 tweets and attracted over 2 million impressions – reaching an audience far greater than Icon's traditional events.

The conference removed economic barriers of participation by allowing people from around the world to partake for free, and with no travel required. The conference made local stories into global issues, celebrating the diversity of our shared cultural heritage and those who protect and care for

it. It supported a democratic discussion and challenged perceptions of conservation as an elite or exclusive practice by allowing anyone in attendance to debate papers.

However, we agree with DCMS in that making digital content available does not necessarily guarantee audience engagement. We commend the report's **commitment to help organisations to "get better at collecting, using and sharing audience data" through Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund**. The heritage sector's lack of diversity is frequently highlighted as a longstanding problem and any support in targeting and tailoring digital communications to improve this is warmly welcomed.

- **Skills and the Capability of Cultural Organisations**

The report sets out a number of commitments to improve the digital skills and capability of cultural organisations. For example, **Arts Council England and the HLF will establish a Digital Maturity Index and Culture Code through which the sector can assess and commit to developing their digital capability and maturity**.

We believe that agreeing standards and setting benchmarks will provide a solid foundation for improving the sector's digital competencies. Many of those employed by cultural organisations will already use standards in their professional lives. For example, Icon members abide by the Professional Standards, which underlie our Code of Practice, Accreditation and professional development.

While a framework of guidelines and principles that distil and communicate the latest best practice will be an important backbone of support, funding to encourage the development of digital skills will be crucial to enabling the standards to be implemented and embedded. We consequently welcome HLF's two-year campaign to build digital capacity across the sector by attracting "high quality digital skills projects."

However, the conservation sector is characterised by SMEs and micro-businesses, many of which in today's economic climate may not have the resources or capacity to put forward and manage grant applications. We consequently urge HLF to ensure that the campaign addresses the digital capacity of large, small and micro businesses equally to avoid a further imbalance in skills and opportunity.

- **Future Strategy – Unleashing the Creative Potential of Technology**

Icon shares the report's praise for collections digitisation projects. Digitisation can increase access to collections, reveal detailed information not normally visible, decrease the risk of damage caused by handling and enable objects to be virtually curated with distant collections. Conservators play a vital role in this important work, for example by assessing the suitability of objects for digitisation and undertaking treatment and managing appropriate conditions to enable digitisation.

The report highlights how differences in standards can threaten the value of digital assets. It consequently promises **a more strategic approach to the digitisation and presentation of cultural objects through a taskforce led by the National Archives, which will focus on developing common standards**. We have already expressed our confidence in standards and believe their application to digitisation will encourage high quality results.

It is equally important for these standards to consider the digitisation of information that contextualises collections. An important part of an object's metadata is its conservation record, which details the object's condition and conservation history. This information is important to understanding an object's current state but also reveals to future generations how the asset was understood and valued.

Icon is actively working in this field through its Documentation Network, which was established with the belief that the advent of technology requires a more focused approach to the development of tools and methodologies for documentation. The group, which fosters collaboration across cultural heritage conservation specialisms, aims to develop guidelines on best practice in conservation documentation, taking full advantage of new technologies in the field.

In addition to our comments on the report's strengths, we would like to raise the following points, which we hope will be more explicitly recognised in future policies:

- **Specialist Skills Needs**

The document acknowledges the need for improving cultural organisations' "specialist digital skills" with Secretary of State Matt Hancock describing virtual reality curatorship as a "crucial new skill" at the report's launch. These skills needs extend to the field of conservation.

The products and successes of the technology and digital cultural sectors have already become an important part of our heritage, the conservation of which challenges traditional and established methods of practice. Icon's *Labour Market Intelligence 2012-2013* identified serious skills needs and an absence of available training for time-based and digital media conservation.¹ The speed in which technology and digital media develop means that new skills needs in this specialist area of conservation will continue to emerge.

Icon supports skills development through our internship programme and professional development opportunities. We urge sector funders, education providers and policy makers to address the serious specialist skills needs to ensure our digital heritage is preserved for the education and enjoyment of future generations.

- **New Cultural Experiences**

The Culture Is Digital report thoroughly highlights the potential of technology to create "unprecedented opportunities for the UK cultural sector," demonstrating how technological advances offer new ways of producing experiences with heritage that may be "inaccessible for conservation reasons."

We would like to stress the active role that conservation plays in this relationship. Conservation is not a passive problem needing to be 'fixed' by technology. Rather, conservation has the potential to inspire development and progress in science through the challenges and opportunities it reveals in relation to an object's condition, preservation, interpretation and management. The cross-disciplinary field of heritage science directly demonstrates this link.

Icon hopes recognition of conservation's active role in inspiring technology and science will alleviate perceptions of conservation as a practice that hinders or prevents development and encourage understanding of how it can drive innovative solutions through the questions it raises.

- **Parity of Support**

In order for the UK technology and cultural sectors to retain their "ultimate power couple" status, a greater balance of funding and support must be achieved.

¹ Aitchison, K., 2013. *Conservation Labour Market Intelligence 2012-13*. London: Icon

The support structures for the sectors' talent pipelines are currently not equal. We are concerned that the side-lining of creative disciplines in the national curriculum, for example through the EBacc, will create disparity in the sectors' strengths. Exposure to creative subjects such as arts, craft and design is key to inspiring the next generation of cultural professionals. There has already been a decline in the study of arts subjects, while investment in STEM subjects continue.²

Icon urges the government to place creative subjects at the centre of education policy to ensure the cultural organisations can continue to make its substantial contribution to society and the economy. This will be crucial to avoiding an imbalance of control in the relationship between the cultural and technology sectors.

Icon looks forward to embracing the opportunities presented through the Culture Is Digital report and will continue to promote the importance and relevance of conservation to the digital agenda.

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² Joint Council for Qualifications, 2017. *Summer GCSE Results*; Ofqual, 2017. *Summer 2017 exam entries: GCSEs, level 1 / 2 certificates, AS and A levels in England*.