



# Museums, Galleries and Digitisation

Current best practice  
and recommendations  
on measuring impact

**Summary Report**

# Introduction

*Museums, Galleries and Digitisation* is aimed at museums that want to extend access to their collections by publishing digitised material on the internet.

This report focuses on the impact that digitisation projects have on target audiences, and explores practical ways in which this can be measured to help demonstrate the success of a project.

The process of digitisation is becoming well understood. The expertise, training and technical standards that can help support museums to digitise their collections are maturing and becoming more accessible.

However, evaluating the impact that online digitisation projects have on their target audiences is an area that is often still overlooked. Monitoring the number of digitised images created, or the amount of hits that a web site receives only presents a partial measurement of the success of digitisation.

User impact evaluation should be standard practice for all projects that aim to convey a benefit to the public. By monitoring the impact of digitisation, museums can create a more accurate picture of how their target audiences view the output. This will ensure that the existing product can be modified and adapted to meet user requirements. It can also help to identify new directions or concepts for future projects, and will provide funders and stakeholders with a meaningful indicator to the value of the resource.

*A national ICT strategy for Scotland's museums* was published by SMC in June 2004. Understanding the needs and expectations of the people who use electronic material produced by museums was identified as a key priority. The strategy also highlighted the need to "celebrate and share best practice".

*Museums, Galleries and Digitisation* sets out to help fulfil these goals by achieving two main aims: to recognise digitisation projects in Scottish museums that represent current best practice in user impact, and to identify the common success factors that characterise them.

Digitisation is a term with many potential applications and definitions. The brief for this research defined digitisation as "the process of converting objects and documents into digital form, for example through digital photography or scanning."

### Identifying current best practice

A long list of digitisation projects was drawn up to identify case studies that represent current best practice. This was compiled through extensive consultation with representatives from the national ICT strategy steering group, the Heritage Lottery Fund, and the wider museums community.

The purposes and objectives of this research were then translated into a set of evaluation criteria, which provided a clear framework for assessing the individual projects on the long list. This process produced four case studies that, in the opinion of the research team, represent current best practice in Scotland.

### Measuring impact

Impact on target audiences was assessed for each of the case studies. A number of techniques and data sources were used to achieve this:

- **Analysis of email enquiries and feedback**

All of the web sites studied provide a means for people to email enquiries and feedback. These were logged and analysed.

- **Revenue generation**

Some of the projects that were studied provide a means for people to buy prints of images of the collection.

- **Web site usage statistics**

Although these are not necessarily a good measure of impact in isolation, if they are recorded consistently they can provide a means of charting the use of a web site over time.

- **Logging and analysis of search queries**

Analysing the queries that people submit when searching through the collection can provide an insight into how people use the online database.

- **Use of computers in the museum**

Where the digitised collection is also available on terminals in the museum itself, use of this was taken into account.

- **Original end user research**

Although the methods described above enable some degree of evaluation, to fully understand the impact that the projects have had on their intended audiences direct end user research was also necessary. This was achieved through the use of online questionnaires.

# Case Studies

The following represent a summary of the case studies developed for *Museums, Galleries and Digitisation*. More detailed case studies can be found in the full version, available on the SMC web site.

## **Am Baile** **[www.ambaile.org.uk](http://www.ambaile.org.uk)**

Am Baile is The Highland Council's online showcase for collections in the Highlands and Islands, and can be viewed in both Gaelic and English. It is managed as part of Highland Libraries.

The project arose out of a recognition that the Highlands and Islands has a very dispersed population, which presents access issues for people who want to view the various collections in the region. Simultaneously the Scottish Executive and other public agencies were responding to calls for greater emphasis on the development of the Gaelic language.

The target user groups for Am Baile were defined as Gaelic speakers and learners; children (particularly those who are Gaelic speakers and learners); and general browsers and researchers interested in the history of the Highlands and Islands.

**85% of respondents to end user research believed that Am Baile would improve their understanding of Highland culture, and nearly two thirds said it would help them improve their Gaelic language skills.**

## **Aberdeen Art Gallery: Explorer** **[www.aagm.co.uk](http://www.aagm.co.uk)**

Explorer set out to "encourage the exploration, understanding and participation about Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum's collections." The project arose out of a recognition that a large proportion of the collection was never on display and that it would be of public benefit to make aspects of it more accessible. There was also an awareness that the geographical location of Aberdeen represented a barrier to many visitors, and it was felt that a web site to showcase the digital collection would help to overcome this.

The project audience was defined very broadly as "the general public", particularly those who could not get to the galleries themselves. The project aimed to make the content suitable for someone with a reading age of 14 years and above.

**The total number of visits, both to Aberdeen Art Gallery and to the web site, has increased since Explorer was launched.**

### **Hunterian Art Gallery: Whistler Online Catalogue** **[www.huntsearch.gla.ac.uk/whistler\\_blue/](http://www.huntsearch.gla.ac.uk/whistler_blue/)**

Originally part of a major year long exhibition programme, Whistler 2003, the digitisation project aimed to showcase the Hunterian's Whistler Collection, while at the same time pilot new technology for further applications in the future.

The stated aims of the project were to use the Gallery's Whistler object records as a basis for developing a way for people to search the collection catalogues and find information and images of the art.

The Hunterian identified a number of target user groups for the web site. These include the general public, students and scholars of 19th century art, the wider museums community, and different departments in the Hunterian itself.

**Almost half of respondents to the end user research were not aware of the Hunterian before they visited the web site, and 75% agreed that visiting the web site made them more likely to visit the Hunterian for themselves.**

### **Shetland Museum: Photographic Archive** **<http://photos.shetland-museum.org.uk/shetlands/app>**

The Shetland Photographic Archive set out "to digitise the photographic collections of the Shetland Museum and to make them available using a variety of sources."

Until the start of the project, very little of the photographic collection had been made available to the public. Many of the images were stored on glass plates, making them difficult to handle, and the remainder were slides or negatives that had never been catalogued.

The people of Shetland were the primary target audience for this project, both as an audience with a high degree of interest and as a resource to improve the quality of information about the collection. The Shetland diaspora, including the various overseas Shetland societies, were anticipated to be an important secondary market, followed by researchers and others with an interest in Shetland life and culture.

**The Shetland Museum photographic archive receives high ratings from users, with an average score of 4.6 out of 5.**

**72% said that viewing the collection online would encourage them to visit Shetland Museum in the future.**

# What the Case Studies Show

## About online and physical collections

The end user research carried out during this study provided an opportunity to explore in more detail the relationship between the online and physical presentations of a collection.

Although our research only represented a relatively small sample size, the results do suggest that the main benefit of digitisation projects presented on the web is that they remove some of the barriers to accessing the physical collection. However, there is also a recognition among users of the limitations of a digital collection compared with an actual visit to a museum.

There is some suggestion that online digitised collections can act as a showcase for the museum, generating demand for increased physical visits. In essence the two appear to complement, rather than compete with each other.

## Common success factors

The case studies presented here are all very different in terms of their scope, scale and aims, and this will necessarily influence the way in which their impacts are measured. In broad terms, however, there are some common features that define them as current best practice:

- The subject of the digitised material is suitable for the target audiences and the project objectives.
- In all cases there has been some monitoring of the impact on end users.
- The organisations were able to respond to user comments at the testing stage and after the project went live.
- The organisations have addressed issues of skill retention and project sustainability.
- All of the organisations report positive impacts on internal users.

# Checklist for Museums and Galleries

These recommendations are based on the findings of *Museums, Galleries and Digitisation*. By using this checklist, museums can be confident that their digitisation projects will have the best chance of making a positive impact on end users, and this impact can be properly measured, evaluated and communicated.

## **Clearly define user groups and objectives**

Do this at the start of the project and be specific about the desired outcomes for each. Objectives should be related to the overall aims of the project and should be "SMART" (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-based).

## **Involve all museum staff**

Don't just involve curators or technology specialists in the project. Make sure that a range of museum staff from different backgrounds contribute to the process.

## **Test with end users**

Allocate time and financial resources in the project plan for testing with end users, and make sure that the results are acted upon.

## **Promote the project to drive interest**

If no-one knows about it there will be no impact. Discuss the most suitable promotional strategy at the planning stage and allocate a budget accordingly.

## **Monitor and evaluate properly**

Design a suitable monitoring and evaluation tool for each target market. Allocate sufficient resources in the budget to do this, because it is the only way that project success can be determined.

## **Don't just rely on web site hits to measure impact**

Ensure that the direct end user monitoring actually takes place. Web statistics are easy to obtain but only ever tell a small part of the story.

## **Be flexible**

Make sure that the technology is as flexible as possible. This will broaden the application, making future planning more cost effective and straightforward.

## **Keep the content relevant**

A digitisation project can age very quickly unless the content is refreshed and updated. An iterative development programme should be expected, aspired to and delivered.

## **Plan for the future**

Ensure that there is a suitable exit strategy in place to retain or, at worst, transfer the skills and expertise developed as part of the project and maintain momentum.

## Digitisation in Scottish Museums

*Museums, Galleries and Digitisation* was researched, written and prepared for SMC by Helen Thomas and Sue Crossman at Richard Gerald Associates Ltd (RGA): [www.rgaconsulting.co.uk](http://www.rgaconsulting.co.uk)

RGA is a management consultancy specialising in the cultural, tourism and hospitality sectors. They have extensive experience of evaluating the impacts of tourism initiatives and working with user groups to perform these evaluations.

*Museums, Galleries and Digitisation* was commissioned and managed by Dylan Edgar, ICT Adviser at SMC.

This is a summary of the complete findings. The full version of *Museums, Galleries and Digitisation* can be downloaded at: [www.scottishmuseums.org.uk](http://www.scottishmuseums.org.uk). This includes more details of the methodology, in-depth case studies, examples of the online questionnaires used for end user research, and an extensive analysis of the findings.

The Scottish Museums Council (SMC) is the main channel for Scottish Executive support to, and the member organisation for, non-national museums and galleries in Scotland. SMC provides strategic leadership and a range of services including grant aid, strategic and operational advice, information and training. SMC has 205 members, which manage 341 museums all over Scotland, including 162 independent, 142 local authorities, seven regimental and 30 university museums.

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A large print version of the text is available on request.