September 2021

Evaluation of Arts Council England's Digital Culture Network

Final Evaluation Report – Executive Summary

SQW

Executive Summary

1. The Digital Culture Network (DCN) has been in operation since March 2019 and was officially launched in June 2019 by Arts Council England (ACE). It was originally funded to run for two years until March 2021 and has since been extended; initially by 12 months to 2022, and subsequently to 2024. Its aim is to increase digital skills and capability amongst arts and culture organisations. It also aims to facilitate networking and the formation of partnerships, to encourage the sharing of expertise and practice within the sector, and to draw on the expertise of technology companies.

2. The DCN was established in response to the *Culture is Digital* (2018) report produced by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which set out how arts and culture could benefit from increased uptake of digital technology.

3. The DCN provides free and practical support to the sector, currently consisting of:

   - **Nine Tech Champions** who deliver one-to-one support and training: each has expertise in a particular specialism which they support nationally, with each also based in a specific region. The Tech Champions also design and deliver training events and resources.
   - **Events,** including in-person and virtual training sessions, plus tailored group support sessions such as surgeries and workshops. Since the COVID-19 pandemic all events have taken place online.
   - **Partnerships with tech organisations**, at national and regional levels, to collaborate in supporting the sector. To date the DCN's key national partner has been Google Arts & Culture, with whom the DCN has delivered collaborative training events. Specific events have been delivered in partnership with other tech organisations such as TikTok and Instagram.
   - **The DCN website**, which hosts online resources, webinar recordings and case studies produced and collated by the DCN, and signposts other digital support available to the sector.

4. This support offer was designed to complement existing digital skills support available to the sector through Sector Support Organisations (SSOs) and other support organisations.

5. This evaluation report is the final of three reports produced as part of the independent evaluation of the DCN commissioned by ACE from SQW. The findings are based on discussions with the DCN team, consultations with DCN users, non-users and other organisations providing digital support to the sector, focus groups with wider ACE staff, and analysis of the DCN's customer relationship management (CRM) data and survey responses.

Profile and engagement

6. The DCN has achieved a **high level of uptake within the sector;** by early March 2021 68% of ACE's National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) had voluntarily engaged with an aspect of

the offer. Tech Champions provided support to 1,248 unique organisations or individuals across nearly 2,300 cases, including to nearly 800 non-NPOs. In addition, the DCN has delivered over 60 events, both in-person and virtually, attracting nearly 5,000 attendees. The DCN has also designed and collated resources and information for the sector on its website.

Uptake of the DCN offer…

… by NPOs

- 68% of NPOs engaged with an aspect of the offer:
  - Over half of all NPOs have had a Tech Champion case
  - A third have signed up for an in-person event
  - Nearly a third have signed up for a webinar
- 69% of Band 3 organisations have had a Tech Champion case, compared to 58% of Band 2 and 55% of Band 1 organisations[1]
- NPOs engaging have had an average of 2.3 cases each, rising to 3.0 for Band 3 organisations.

… by specialism

- The most popular specialisms for Tech Champion cases have been web design (20% of cases), digital content (19%), digital strategy development (11%) and social media (10%).

… by art form

- The art forms with the highest uptake amongst NPOs are museums (66% have had a Tech Champion case), visual arts (61%), literature (58%), dance (58%) and music (57%).

… by region

- The DCN has engaged NPOs across all regions of England, with at least 48% of all NPOs engaged in each region. The proportion of NPOs engaged is highest in East of England (80%), North East (73%) and South East (70%).

… by job role

- The roles of those engaging with the DCN most commonly involve marketing or communication (28%), chief executive or similar (24%) and artistic or programming functions (18%)
- The DCN is reaching a wide range of job roles including senior leaders.

[1] NPO banding reflect the size of annual funding to NPOs, with Band 1 the smallest and Band 3 the largest. Each Band has different expectations attached.

7. The highest digital priorities for users who responded to a baseline impact survey were digital strategy, policy and planning development (66%) and digital marketing (59%).

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

8. The DCN's lifetime has coincided with an unprecedented and enormously challenging time for arts and culture. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions have heightened the **importance of the sector and organisations having a strong digital profile and being able to monetise their digital presence**. The DCN has played a key role in supporting the sector through the pandemic, offering access to free expertise and bespoke advice to improve the use and uptake of digital technology to respond to these challenging times. The need for the DCN is evident in the **high demand for support experienced during the initial lockdown,** with the DCN experiencing a large spike in requests, including from previously non-engaged organisations. The DCN adapted to this context well, shifting all support to remote delivery and delivering events in webinar format, which some participants found more accessible than in-person events.

User satisfaction and impact

9. **User feedback on the DCN is overwhelmingly and consistently positive.** Users particularly praised Tech Champions for their expertise, professionalism and approachability, their initial diagnostics, and the personalised, practical and impartial nature of the support provided. Events have also been well received, and regularly lead to uptake of further support.

10. The DCN is having an impact on digital skills and the uptake of digital within the sector. Impacts reported by users include **identifying digital priorities, improved confidence, skills, knowledge, and reassurance from having a critical friend to sense-check plans and activities.** The support has led to users **implementing new digital activities or refining their existing ones**, such as developing digital strategies, establishing online shops, redesigning a website, delivering new digital content and implementing a CRM solution. These have ranged from 'quick wins' through to organisations having the confidence and know-how to move forwards with significant investment in their digital activities. As a result, users reported a range of impacts such as being able to better reach, engage and understand audiences, disseminating and monetising their work in new ways, working more efficiently and effectively as an organisation, and achieving cost savings and financial returns.

11. There is also **evidence that some users are disseminating their knowledge and skills within their organisations**, further supporting the sector to become more digitally literate and mature. The co-occurrence of the DCN and the pandemic has been somewhat opportune for this, with an observable shift in attitudes towards the importance of digital which the DCN and advocative staff have been able to capitalise on.

12. The impacts observed show how **the DCN is instrumental in the realisation of ACE's *Let's Create* (2020) strategy** for 2020-2030. The DCN is contributing to this by: improving the sector's digital presence, content and reach; fostering innovation through the uptake of digital

technology and exploring opportunities for collaboration with the technology sector; developing workforce skills and exposing the sector to industry best practice; fostering a 'data culture' in the sector; and improving the resilience by supporting through access to new revenue streams.

13. As a result, the DCN is viewed as particularly important to (and well aligned to help realise) the strategy's 'Creative and Cultural Country' Outcome, which includes the following commitment:

> *"We will encourage the organisations we invest in to embrace innovation. We will support them to adopt new technologies, focusing both on developing new work and reimagining our cultural heritage for the audiences of today, and on experimenting with new ways of reaching the public."*[2]

14. It is also viewed as key to the 'Dynamism' Investment Principle – by investing in the uptake of digital technology to realise the ambition of a more dynamic, efficient and resilient sector, and ultimately delivering greater returns on ACE's wider investments in the sector such as National Portfolio investments.

A distinctive approach

15. **The DCN is a distinctive sector support programme for ACE and has generated internal learning around ways of delivering sector support**. Lessons emerging include the value of commissioning sector support in-house, the strengths of a 'Champion model' for addressing specific needs in the sector, the value of hiring for expertise outside the sector, and internal learning and enthusiasm around digital ways of working and how the use of a CRM system enables a reflective, customer-focused and data-driven approach.

Performance against Key Performance Indicators

16. **The DCN achieved most of its KPIs for 2020/21**. Notably, it overachieved significantly on the delivery of one-to-one support and events, and on user satisfaction scores. It did however narrowly miss ambitious KPIs on 75% uptake from NPOs (despite active encouragement), reflecting high uptake from non-NPOs and the fact participation is voluntary.

Areas for consideration going forwards

17. The DCN's headline story is extremely positive on the whole, having been set up and delivering an effective and well-received programme in the space of less than two years. This has entailed recruitment of skilled and knowledgeable Tech Champions from outside of the sector, establishing the DCN's core offer, systems, processes, branding and marketing,

[2] Arts Council England *Let's Create* Outcomes, available here: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/outcomes-0

internal and external awareness raising (which has established strong levels of ongoing demand), and establishing partnerships with tech organisations and SSOs.

18. In order to sustain the positive early activity and outcomes, the evaluation has identified areas for ACE to consider relating to the refinement and expansion of the DCN's offer, with a view to further expanding uptake, satisfaction and impact:

- **A key reason for non-engagement was lack of capacity**, particularly amongst smaller organisations. While the DCN's support is designed to be accessible and Tech Champions cater to the level of resources and capacity within supported organisations, there appears to be scope for better communicating this. Organisations in this situation also cited being unsure of what their digital priorities should be.
- Another key reason for non-engagement was more digitally advanced organisations doubting the value the DCN could add. Suggestions to increase uptake amongst these organisations include expanding the role of the DCN in **facilitating networks, peer-learning and partnerships with tech organisations.**
- Taking a targeted approach to increasing uptake by **identifying and contacting organisations that have not engaged with the DCN** may prove effective.
- **Understanding what senior leaders want from the DCN** may also prove key. This could build on successes to date in engaging senior leaders, including in the launch events and *Connected to Culture* webinars.
- Exploring **opportunities for further embedding the DCN within activities of ACE** and identifying potential synergies to improve its reach and impact, may also prove effective. However, the DCN runs as a programme of funded activity, and its success has in part been credited to its impartial and independent open-access support, separate from funding decisions.
- Continuing to **develop new and existing partnerships with tech organisations**. Progress towards this aspect has been relatively limited, as it has taken time to fully understand their purpose and how to achieve and instrumentalise partnerships.

19. The last point to consider is resource. The DCN has set up and delivered an effective and well-received programme over the last two years, while operating with relatively limited management and staffing capacity. This has meant it has had to prioritise resources for delivery of its core offer – which now has a good level of ongoing demand – limiting scope for pursuing other opportunities. This has slowed progress with delivery of certain aspects of the DCN model and has also necessitated discussions around how to 'ration out' support to the sector during peaks in demand. Two further, final considerations are pertinent here. Firstly, a two-year funding cycle followed by short-term extensions have created some issues around retention and forward planning. Second, any expansion of support would need to consider, coordinate with and complement the support already available to the sector.

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