

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is based on a one-day roundtable discussion on a single digital presence on 2 December 2016. We would like to thank all roundtable participants for their views and contributions. Many thanks to Darren Henley, Chief Executive, Arts Council England who convened the roundtable and to Martyn Evans, CEO, Carnegie UK Trust, who Chaired the event.



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Foreword



Darren Henley,
Chief Executive,
Arts Council England
(Roundtable Host)

In the 21st century there is a clear, compelling and continuing need for a public library service. Public libraries develop literacy and skills through the provision of books, digital resources, activities and courses; support business and economic growth through providing access to information and skills development; encourage exploration and connection be that in regard to culture or our communities; and improve our health and wellbeing. As a civic space, free for all to enter, public libraries also play a key role in helping to build a healthy democracy through providing reliable information to enable people to formulate informed opinions and make informed decisions.

The future public library will be both a physical and a virtual place – somewhere people visit, and somewhere to be part of wherever they are. Across the world, the best libraries are shifting their model

from safeguarding and providing knowledge and information to actively helping people pursue their interests, aspirations and potential – not least through inspiring engagement and developing people’s skills. A digital dimension is critical to achieving this shift successfully and to tap effectively into the huge audience of this beloved public service. With people networking, engaging with others and consuming knowledge and information through handheld devices, it is essential that we embrace this new norm and meet this audience where they are.

A single digital presence for public libraries would provide a mobile, digital space that complements and energises the existing library offer. It will allow the public library service to develop with confidence and it will provide the opportunity to connect libraries’ digital offer to other cultural and knowledge organisations as well as other local services. In this way a single digital presence will also take forward the agenda of local government and facilitate a strategic, long-term approach to

transforming the library service and help councils meet their wider objectives in new ways.

To succeed, a single digital presence must be user-centred, providing people what they want, when they want it and where they want it. It must also be one step ahead – able to anticipate needs and wants. As the development body for public libraries in England, Arts Council England has been advocating how important it is to explore and develop a renewed and revitalised digital library offer, and I look forward to making progress on this agenda.



Martyn Evans,
Chief Executive,
Carnegie UK Trust
(Roundtable Chair)

Andrew Carnegie's vision for public libraries was that they provided opportunities for both education and advancement through providing access to information and knowledge not otherwise available. They enabled people to fulfil their potential. This service was for everyone in the community, no matter what their circumstances, no matter who they were.

Today, the public library has to position itself in a world where a tremendous amount of information, knowledge and culture can be accessed on demand, at any time of day and almost instantaneously through smartphones, tablets and computers. In this context it is critical that we explore the potential of public libraries' digital offer, which has yet to be fully realised.

The creation of a single digital presence – an interactive, personalised platform – is a critical digital issue. It provides the opportunity to refresh the library offer – update their social contract with the public – and revitalise the library brand. The goal? A high quality, user-centred, efficient and responsive service, enabling access to a broad range of services and information wherever and whenever people want them.

There are those who will want clarity – to know, precisely, what this platform will look like and what it will do. Yet, in order to succeed, the outcome of this endeavour must not be pinned down tightly from the outset but come from a process of innovation, iteration and engagement. After all, public libraries across the UK are a trusted

and valued resource at the very heart of local communities – and these communities must play a role in the design of a digital presence through user-testing and feedback.

Developing a single digital presence will be a challenge. Many countries have developed an online interface for a range of library services. Whilst there are some excellent examples, no one has yet cracked the creation of an interactive and engaging platform. Furthermore, it is clear that success is most likely if the needs of the user and public value are placed at the centre of any initiative. Another challenge lies in the time and cost involved in developing a platform.

Yet nestled in heart of these challenges lies the opportunity: the opportunity to create an internationally leading platform based on user need and with a clear and realistic plan for long-term maintenance and ongoing development and support, and the opportunity to invest rather than subsidise.

Public libraries have been a resounding success over the last 150 years. We need to secure and accelerate this success, to promote effectively what the library does and what it stands for. A single digital presence will enable this and ensure that libraries will continue to be relevant and useful, even sought after, as we move into the future.

Introduction

In the wake of the digital revolution, public, private and voluntary organisations across the UK are going through a period of rapid and significant transformation in how they deliver services to citizens. Personalised, responsive digital platforms available through multiple channels are fast becoming the norm¹. These online platforms bring efficiency gains and digital value, and in so doing have altered and shaped the digital economy.

Public libraries are trusted spaces, free to enter, open to all as gateways to knowledge and information. They play a crucial role in ensuring the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of individuals and communities, and have a unique and vital role in a modern and progressive democratic society. They help jobseekers find opportunities, offer courses and digital skills training, provide essential support to people applying for welfare benefits,

and provide spaces in which people can be creative. They can act as venues for concerts, exhibitions or performances – and enable groups with shared interests to meet in a safe space. Public libraries can also provide information about health and health services, as well as books on prescription, and safe spaces for voluntary sector organisations to provide health information and advice. Of course, public libraries can help people understand and act on information which can make a real difference to their lives and wellbeing. They tackle illiteracy through encouraging reading for pleasure, introducing young families to books and reading, running English language classes for new citizens and being a supportive environment for children after school. Public libraries can only deliver this role in the 21st century by embracing both physical and digital channels.

In a digital era where people are increasingly using digital channels to carry out day-to-day tasks it is essential that libraries anticipate the rapidly expanding digital demands

¹ Skyscanner, gov.uk, eBay, Amazon Marketplace, Google search, Facebook, You Tube, PayPal and Uber are platforms that provide an array of functions – from social media to search engines, from platforms for the collaborative economy to payment systems, and from market places to application distribution platforms.

of today's current and future users. This will ensure that people are both attracted to what the library has to offer and benefit from doing so.

Public libraries have often been at the forefront in bringing digital developments to people and communities. From the instigation of the People's Network² onwards, they have played a vital role in helping thousands of people develop digital skills and get online, whilst a range of public library services are now available digitally. But the libraries' digital offer often struggles to meet user expectations and public awareness of libraries' online offer is poor. Meanwhile, the IT expenditure in the majority of libraries has remained steady or declined in recent years³ and public libraries' unique connection between the physical and the digital has yet to be fully realised.

Policymakers around the world have been grappling with how digital

technology can be used effectively to support the development and delivery of public library services. Whilst there are some excellent examples of existing online interfaces for a range of library services across the world, these largely fall into being a discovery tool for text, images and metadata or a point through which to access content in-platform and access to online service.

In the UK the *Independent Library Report for England* by William Sieghart in 2014 recommended that the establishment of a single digital presence (SDP) for English public libraries should be explored. In 2016 BiblioCommons⁴ produced a detailed report looking at: the library sector and user needs, what a unified digital offer for libraries across England might look like and mean in practice, and possible next steps. *Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021* commits the Libraries Taskforce to exploring the feasibility of such a platform and identifying ways to develop, operate and fund it. This commitment to exploring a single digital presence is made in a context where local government resources are coming under increasing pressure

2 The People's Network was a £100m programme that supported the development of ICT learning in public libraries through the provision of equipment and internet connection. Launched in 2000, it aimed to link all public libraries in the UK to the internet by the end of 2002.

3 BiblioCommons (2015) *Essential Digital Infrastructure for Public Libraries in England* <http://goscl.com/wp-content/uploads/151130-DigitalPlatformFinalReport.pdf> [accessed January 2017]

4 A Canadian company that works to transform how libraries serve communities online.

to find streamlined mechanisms to deliver all services. In *Libraries Deliver* the Taskforce advocates the idea of 'Libraries First' where they act as a 'front door' for the delivery of information and services offered by government and its partners.

The digital presence provided by libraries in Wales and Northern Ireland has shone a light on what is achievable, giving us a starting point for beginning to imagine what a platform across England – or the UK – would look like. Together, these factors provide the library sector with both the opportunity and the impetus to work together with partners to create a step change in the digital offer from public libraries.

A single digital presence for libraries could be transformative for existing

and potential library users as well as for the library service. Such a presence could provide public libraries with the opportunity to vastly improve access to library information and resources, attract new users (both virtual and physical) and provide an enriched library experience for all. The opportunity that a single digital presence provides – be that for England or the whole of the UK – is therefore about much more than technology. It is about revisiting the core library mission and thinking about how it can be better delivered, opening up new opportunities and possibilities for service and user alike. It is not simply re-configuring existing services, or making them more efficient: it is about new and as yet unimagined ways to access and explore the library offer.

Benefits of a Single Digital Presence

Advantages of securing a single digital presence could include, but not be limited, to the following:

USERS

- Engaging and high-quality content and services that are easy to access wherever users are, 24 hours a day
- Enhanced understanding and ability to use the information and resources that libraries provide
- Enabled to explore and produce content individually and with others
- New channels for engagement with the library service, publishing sector and other partners

LIBRARY SERVICE

- Increased visibility, use and impact through a national approach to coordinating conversations, offers, and enhanced materials based on the content of the collections of library authorities
- Collaboration among libraries, national and local partners, and with vendors to develop, procure and deliver
- Platform for staff to communicate best practice
- Deliver positive change in the most cost-effective way, delivering a national approach that allows local branding, while avoiding multiple duplication of investment in developing local solutions

DECISION MAKERS

- Significantly improved value for money
- Opportunities to connect SDP with wider digital platforms that integrate local and national offers (eg around culture, learning and skills)
- By embracing 'Libraries First' decision makers in England can integrate local service delivery, with a SDP acting as the digital platform for this integration

“Public library services can be enhanced when libraries work as a network with national support. The sector can achieve more impact by combining expertise and sharing improvement ideas and insight. Joint working can also reduce costs and make it easier for national partners to work with libraries.”

A unique user-centred platform

Navigating the possibilities

When it comes to determining what a single digital presence (SDP) could provide, there is an almost overwhelming number of options. A SDP could offer anything from fairly basic information and transaction based content, to opportunities for co-creation between users. It could be a personalised service and platform that gives users agency and the opportunity to control their own experience.

There is a need for a SDP to provide both a unique online offer and a link to the physical offer and premises of libraries. The platform must seek to blend the physical and virtual offerings of libraries in innovative ways, such as virtual and augmented reality, to break down the notion of a dichotomy between the digital world and 'real' world.

Despite the vast range of potential content opportunities and ways of linking the physical and the virtual, it is clear to us that two things must underpin how possibilities are navigated and decisions made:

1. User needs and wants: the user interest must drive the design of a SDP. User testing is essential to the development of a successful SDP. Moreover, a process of interaction and iteration will enable users themselves to develop a clearer and more nuanced sense of what they would like from both a single digital platform and their library service.
2. Public library values and unique selling point: public libraries enable people to reach their potential and are trusted, free and open to all. It is important that characteristics, services and assets unique to the public library service permeate what a SDP offers to ensure a matchless digital offer and experience.

How 'single' is a 'single digital presence'?

There are some thorny issues when it comes to considering just how 'single' a SDP could – or should – be.

In terms of the local and national, it is vital to determine the extent to which a SDP would provide one consistent visual brand for libraries across all local areas (and jurisdictions) or a single national structure that enables a local look and feel to the interface. We understand that accountability for delivering library services is inherently local. In this context we see the importance of coherence of a single outward facing public library brand *and* the need for clear recognition of libraries as a local service offer.

There is also the question of whether a SDP would become the only platform for accessing all public library services (eg the only online portal for e-lending) or instead

provide a single access point for accessing a range of services on a multitude of platforms (eg access to a range of external online portals for e-lending). We recognise the challenges of shutting down all other portals to e-lending and other resources (for example) and the issue of gaining cross-sector, cross-ministerial and (potentially) UK-wide support to facilitate this process was touched upon. Whilst the challenges are acknowledged as profound, so too are the benefits of successfully managing the process. This will require more work and discussion.

The goal should be to 'push' the library digital presence to where the users are. The SDP is the platform from which this can be achieved.

Resourcing a SDP

In terms of finance, capabilities, capacity and scope, the resource requirement for fully developing a successful digital platform is significant. Regardless of whether any one organisation or group could achieve this for public libraries, we believe that a partnership between different bodies and between national and local organisations would be required.

In terms of ongoing cost, continual iteration and improvement will be required to keep a single digital presence (SDP) fresh, up to date and delivering for user needs. The fact there

is no end point to a successful SDP has resource implications.

Following from this, there are potential benefits of an SDP in generating resources, including by securing value from the aggregation of data, enhanced purchasing power, commercialisation through content and assets, and the potential for third party developers to be involved in aspects of these processes. There are risks involved, for example in damaging libraries' reputation in relation to utilising user data or sale of content or assets, or by selling these assets too cheaply.

Governance

Developing and maintaining a SDP would be a considerable undertaking and ensuring its continued success and viability requires accountability, transparency, monitoring, responsiveness and broad-based participation.

We have explored two potential models for governance. The first is SDP as government owned and led – as a large state intervention. The second is governance by an independent or

arms-length body. (The British Library and BBC being examples of national services one step removed from Government.)

There is a third possible option: a SDP could provide an opportunity to develop a different governance model from either government or arms-length body. In this scenario a SDP provides the opportunity to redefine the relationship between state and service.

Developing a SDP: A phased approach

Iteration and Refinement

To be successful, a single digital presence (SDP) would need to offer the same quality of user experience, and utility, that people have become used to expecting from commercial digital platforms in different fields. Delivering such a complex, successful platform can take a number of years, requiring both user input and commitment from key stakeholders over an extended period of time.

As such, we would encourage a phased and iterative approach to developing a SDP and a period of analytical and strategic development would be essential. This could involve market analysis, stakeholder interviews, workshops and desk research leading to a draft set of options and emerging recommendations. This phase could inform an 'alpha' build⁵ that could

be tested with users, for a relatively low cost. A process of iteration and refinement would then lead to the development of a prototype would then allow others (partners, funders, politicians) to engage with a SDP experience and what a SDP could deliver.

Whilst testing can narrow risk, we are mindful that no amount of testing could eradicate risk. Similarly, it is only through initiating the exploration and testing of a SDP that the full potential of what a SDP could do and be can be realised. Taking a SDP to the next step will therefore require a willingness to test, fail, learn, iterate and improve.

Partnerships and Relationships

Working with others would be essential to developing a successful SDP. A SDP provides opportunities for new partnerships and learning – for example with others in the cultural sector who are currently developing or have previously developed sophisticated digital platforms.

5 During the alpha phase of developing a service, prototypes are built and tested with the aim of demonstrating that building the service you want is technically possible. This phase is used to both identify problems with the design and solutions to these problems, estimate the cost of the service and identify the risks for the beta stage of service development. The beta phase where a working version of the service is developed from the alpha prototypes. At this stage, the service must be able to operate at scale and handle real transactions, and integrate or replace existing services.

However, delivering a transformative digital offer has the potential to disrupt existing relationships with key stakeholders. That is, there are interest groups and organisations that may perceive the development of a SDP as a threat. It is therefore crucial to align interests with key stakeholders and engaging with partners and stakeholders ahead of any testing and throughout the phased approach.

Where next?

Following the roundtable discussion, Arts Council England committed to taking forward the following actions with support from Carnegie UK Trust:

- Identify a suitable organisation or leadership group to take forward analytical and strategic development and the development of a prototype SDP
- Identify resources for project delivery and sustainability

Arts Council England and Carnegie UK Trust have identified the British Library as ideally placed to take forward the next phase of developing the SDP and have provided the investment to make this possible.

Appendix

This paper represents the views of ACE and CUKT on the need and next steps for developing a SDP for public libraries. It is informed and shaped by a one-day roundtable discussion⁶ on a single digital presence on 2 December 2016. The roundtable was convened by Darren Henley, Chief Executive, Arts Council England and Chaired by Martyn Evans, CEO, Carnegie UK Trust.

While the impetus for the discussion came from the policy context in England, a single digital presence is of national (UK) level relevance. As such, the roundtable brought together key senior stakeholders from across the UK to discuss how a single digital presence should be advanced. Discussion was conducted under the Chatham House Rule.

Attendees

Martyn Evans,
Chief Executive,
Carnegie UK Trust (Chair)

Brian Ashley,
Director, Libraries,
Arts Council England

Kate Earl, Senior Manager,
Libraries, Arts Council
England

Jane Ellison, Head of
Creative Partnerships, BBC

Darren Henley,
Chief Executive,
Arts Council England

Roly Keating, Chief
Executive, British Library

Ian Leete, Senior Adviser
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Brian Leonard,
Chief Executive, Sporta

Stuart Lewis,
Head of Digital, National
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Neil MacInnes, President,
Society of Chief Librarians

Helen Osborn,
Director of Libraries
Services, Libraries NI

Jenny Peachey,
Senior Policy Officer,
Carnegie UK Trust

Nick Poole,
Chief Executive, CILIP

Richard Pope,
Advisor, Libraries Taskforce

Chris Pugh, Government
Digital Services

Kathy Settle,
Chief Executive, Leadership
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Linda Tomos, Librarian,
National Library of Wales

Pamela Tulloch,
Chief Executive, Scottish
Libraries and Information
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Alyson Tyler, Senior
Libraries Development
Adviser, Welsh Government

Douglas White, Head of
Advocacy, Carnegie UK Trust

Liz White, Head of
Strategy Development,
British Library

Helen Williams, Head
of Digital Culture, DCMS

⁶ Discussion was conducted under the Chatham House Rule.

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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