

 the audience agency

Dorset History Centre

Digital Content Research Findings

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Part 1 - Overview & Summary

Introduction

The Dorset History Centre is the county archives service and local studies library for the local authority areas of Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole. In common with many archive services, Dorset History Centre faces a number of issues; on-going pressures on budgets and resources, a general decline in the use of archives, together with the additional challenges of the digital world, which bring expectations from users that archival content will be available online.

Research commissioned by Dorset History Centre in late 2016 supported the view, both from users and non-users, that there is an appetite for an increased amount of online digitised material. However, the remit of that research project didn't include an investigation into exactly what kinds of material people wanted to access online. The aim of this piece of work therefore is to provide clarity on how the Service should prioritise the digitisation of archival material. The research will be used to help inform the future digital strategy.

The Brief

The brief as presented by Dorset History Centre was for consultants to explore the options available to Dorset History Centre as it seeks to understand and respond to the demand for 'online content'. As audience habits change and more archive service users seek material online, it is vital that the service is fully confident of the rationale and purpose for the approach it takes to online content provision and that the approach is firmly based upon evidence rather than on opinion. Where at all possible it is our wish to align audience expectations with our ability to meet them. It is equally important that the digital content strategy pursued is affordable within the parameters of the service's budget and that full costings for its creation and maintenance are clearly understood. The findings of this research will be shared with other archive services as part of the project, and reported in a published document that they can use when scoping their own particular solutions to this question.

Context

According to the most recent statistical release from the Taking Part survey, there has been a general decline in the percentage of adults visiting archives, from 5.9% in 2005/2006 to 3.1% in 2016¹. It also appears that the archive audience is an aging one, with decreases in the proportion of adults who visited an archive centre across all age groups, except for adults aged 75 and above.²

This decline in the use of archives, together with an aging audience, represents a significant challenge to Dorset History Centre and the wider archives sector. As noted in the report produce by CDC Consulting, *“Less than 20% of users are new to archives, this coupled with a decrease in the ages of users except those who are over 75, suggests that the market is not renewing itself very well.”*

However, despite the fact that the Taking Part survey indicates that visits to archive websites have also dropped, from 9.7% in 2005/2006 to 8.3% between October 2015 and September 2016, in the previous report it does note that, *“In contrast to all other cultural sectors, a higher proportion of adults visited an archive or records office online than in person.”*

The latest ‘National Survey of Visitors’ report carried out by The Public Services Quality Group for archives and local studies³ does show the increasing importance of archive websites to the process of planning a visit. And for several related questions, Dorset History Centre scores above the national average.

Which of the following did you do to prepare for your visit today?	Survey of visitors to UK archives 2014 - All	Survey of visitors to UK archives 2016 - All	Survey of visitors to UK archives 2016 - Dorset History Centre
Went online to check opening times/find directions etc	44%	47%	60%

¹ Taking Part 2016/2017 quarter 2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/sat--2>

² Taking Part 2015/2016 quarter 4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201516-quarter-4-statistical-release>

³ PSQG National Survey of Visitors, Headline Report 2016

Conducted online research	42%	44%	52%
Searched archive's online catalogue to find records/reserve documents	30%	33%	45%

Of course this research only addresses the behavior of current users and if the archives sector is to attract new audiences, it needs to also develop strategies to reach non-users.

In conducting desk research to inform the final recommendations for this report, we researched and consulted beyond the immediate archives sector, to include museums and libraries. This is because there are synergies between the activities of these types of organisations and museums in particular have made significant advances in the last few years in terms of engaging audiences with online collections. Indeed the most recent Taking Part data indicates that the proportion of adults who visited a museum website has increased significantly from 15.8% in 2005/06 to 28.7% in the year to September 2016.

It is acknowledged that Dorset History Centre operates under the umbrella of Dorset County Council and currently the website for the archives service is part of the main Council website. It is somewhat limited in functionality and difficult for the archives team to make significant changes to how digital content is presented. However, we are aware that a procurement process is underway to redevelop the website and the aim is for Dorset History Centre to have a separate website (albeit using the same CMS system as the main Council website). This will be hugely beneficial in helping the archives service to move forward with the development and presentation of its digital content.

Research Objectives & Methodology

What we investigated

- The motivations of users to engage (with Dorset History Centre content) online and how this may change depending on the platform, for example, the website as compared with social media engagement.
- The opportunities for engaging with different types of audiences.
- The relationship between the physical archive and online content.
- The impact of the physical location of the archive on the online needs of users.
- What exactly “more” online content means to different types of users.

- The basis on which content should be prioritised for digitisation
- Audience expectations in relation to paying for services/material together with the potential opportunities.

The approach we took

The work was divided into two areas: primary research, which involved running a number of focus groups with users and non-users and desk research, to explore in more detail Dorset History Centre's current approach to digital work including on social media platforms and the different approaches taken by a range of organisations, including museums and libraries.

Primary Research

A total of four discussion group sessions took place. These were conducted at 3pm and 6pm on Monday 8 and Tuesday 9 May 2017. Two were conducted in Bournemouth, at the central library, and two in Dorchester, at Dorset History Centre; one session for current users of the DHC archives, and one for non-users, was conducted at each location.

14 current users and 16 non-users of the Dorset History Centre archive participated in the research.

A screening survey was used in the recruitment process, to ensure that all participants met the necessary criteria. To meet the research objectives it was essential that the participants were either current users of the collections at Dorset History Centre or had the potential to become so (i.e. had used other archive sources, or indicated an interest in subjects reflected by the Dorset History Centre collections).

Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was facilitated by a member of staff from The Audience Agency (a topic guide is given in Appendix 1).

All participants were given £30 to thank them for their participation. Where quotes are used the participant is identified using a pseudonym; these pseudonyms may be matched with the participant profile given in the table in Appendix 1.

Desk Research

This involved a situational analysis of Dorset History Centre's current digital platforms, research into relevant approaches taken by the wider archives, libraries and museums sectors and consultations with several related organisations.

Key Findings

Curating and contextualising digital content will engage more users & ensure long term relevance of archives

From the primary research, responses to the word 'archive' were generally matter-of-fact; 'records', 'information' and 'history' being the most used words - but it was apparent from the discussions that it is the stories held within those historical records that engage people on an emotional level and create enthusiasm and passion. *For non-users in particular, the stories that come from archives are the route to engagement*

Therefore, taking a curatorial approach to the presentation of digital content will be more likely to engage a non-professional audience in particular, and help to ensure the long-term relevance of archives to the general public. This is an approach already being taken by many museums and libraries. Social media also provides an opportunity to present content to audiences in more contextually relevant ways.

In addition, some larger archives are experimenting with providing contextualised content using automatic tools i.e. when a search returns an item it suggests other relevant items alongside it. While this may be too technically challenging for smaller archives to implement now, the feasibility of presenting online content in this way could be explored for the future.

Understanding & expectations of what is meant by 'digitisation' are varied

There were a variety of different thoughts about what the term 'digital content' means (and therefore what the expectation is about online availability). To many participants it appeared to mean adding a catalogue record, transcription, or thumbnail capture, rather than a high-quality reproduction, which can be fully accessed online.

What is evident from research is that in practice it would be incredibly difficult and somewhat meaningless, to try and prioritise digitisation in relation to collection or item types, indeed, there was no clear conclusion that focusing on digitising a particular item type or collection would serve the needs of all audiences.

Rather the key may be to divide audiences into segments based on their propensity and motivation to engage and aim to meet the overarching needs of those segments e.g. regular users/first-time users/non-users (but with potential to engage).

Digital content can help provide much needed support

Although some regular users, who know exactly what they are looking for, indicated they would be interested in accessing more digital archive material online, others, particularly non-users, primarily wanted online material to help them understand more about *using and accessing* the archive (whether online or at the physical archive). Several participants in the focus groups suggested that they would be apprehensive about using an archive because they didn't really understand how it works or why they might want to use it themselves. Therefore good explanatory content that helps to demystify archives would be hugely beneficial.

Research purpose & personal connection determine the importance of physical versus online

In most regional archives some material is informational, for example, business or land ownership records and some has more personal resonance, for example, letters relating to family history.

It appears that those doing research on behalf of others (who also tended to be more experienced users of archives) would be happy to access material online if they had confidence that the information they could access was accurate and thorough, whereas those undertaking personal research were more likely to want to access material physically. However this was a particularly complex issue with many factors impacting on opinions around physical and online access.

Key findings summary

- Careful curation and presentation of digitised content online will help archives to appeal to a broader audience and ensure longer-term relevance of archives to the general population.
- Audiences have varying degrees of understanding about what digitisation is and mixed expectations. For this reason it is not possible to create a formulaic way to decide what should be prioritised for digitisation.
- It is important to also consider the role of the website in supporting a visitor, whether with a visit to the physical archive or helping them understand how to access digital material.

Part 2 - Results in Detail

Focus Group Research

Overall perceptions of archives

Reflecting on what ‘an archive’ means to them, participants were asked to write down the first three words or phrases that came to mind.

The responses are shown below as word clouds, with more frequently used words appearing in a larger font. Selected quotes from the discussions following this exercise are included to offer further context (all quotes are included in Appendix 2).

In each of the groups the words that participants used to describe an archive were largely fact-based, with ‘history’, ‘records’ and ‘information’ being the most commonly used words. This indicates that the participants essentially see archives as repositories of historical documents; awareness of the other types of material held by an archive, such as oral histories and objects, appears to be less prevalent and very few emotional or experiential responses were given at this point.

In the discussions that followed the exercise, the main theme to emerge from the non-user groups was that of being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material held in an archive, and not knowing where to start in accessing it. User responses were more varied, ranging from the difficulties they face in reading hand written documents and those in Latin or other languages to a more philosophical discussion around what is history, and how is the history of the present day being documented and archived.

Current user responses



"I expect them to hold things of historical value, whether that be 24 hours ago, or 2000 years ago" (UD6)

"I've written down that it's an original resource, because it's the only place you can really get that" (UD5)

Non-user responses



"I just feel like I wouldn't know where to start" (NUD1)

"I feel that if I came here, I'd have to spend a few hours before I actually started looking at it and it seems a bit of a daunting task" (NUD4)

Combined responses



Routes to engagement and potential barriers

Ratings exercise

Participants were asked to make a mark on a scale from Very Important to Not at all important to indicate how influential a range of factors are when making their decision to use an archive. The factors were: that it is local*, that it is easy to get to, that online access to information about the collections is available, that pre-visit support is available, and the potential costs of accessing and using the archive.

The responses were largely similar from both the current users and non-users, with online access to collections information being the most significant factor for both groups. That it was easy to get to was also important to both groups; that it is local was of more importance to current users than to non-users.

In the discussions that followed it emerged that many of the elements considered in the rating exercise have interdependencies that impact on the level of importance they have in any given situation; for example, the issue of locality is more complex than a question of whether people are willing to travel to use an archive or not.

The participants in Bournemouth didn't give any strong indication that they would be unwilling or unable to travel further (i.e. to Dorchester) to access material in principle, but they were concerned about the practicalities of being able to do so. This was particularly in terms of parking availability and the potential costs of using the archive. They also indicated that being confident that their time would be well-spent was a vital factor in determining whether they would be willing to make the journey; this would mean knowing in advance that the material they were interested in seeing actually contained information of interest and use to them, which is in turn linked to the issue of the online content, and what they expect and need from that, and also the pre-visit support.

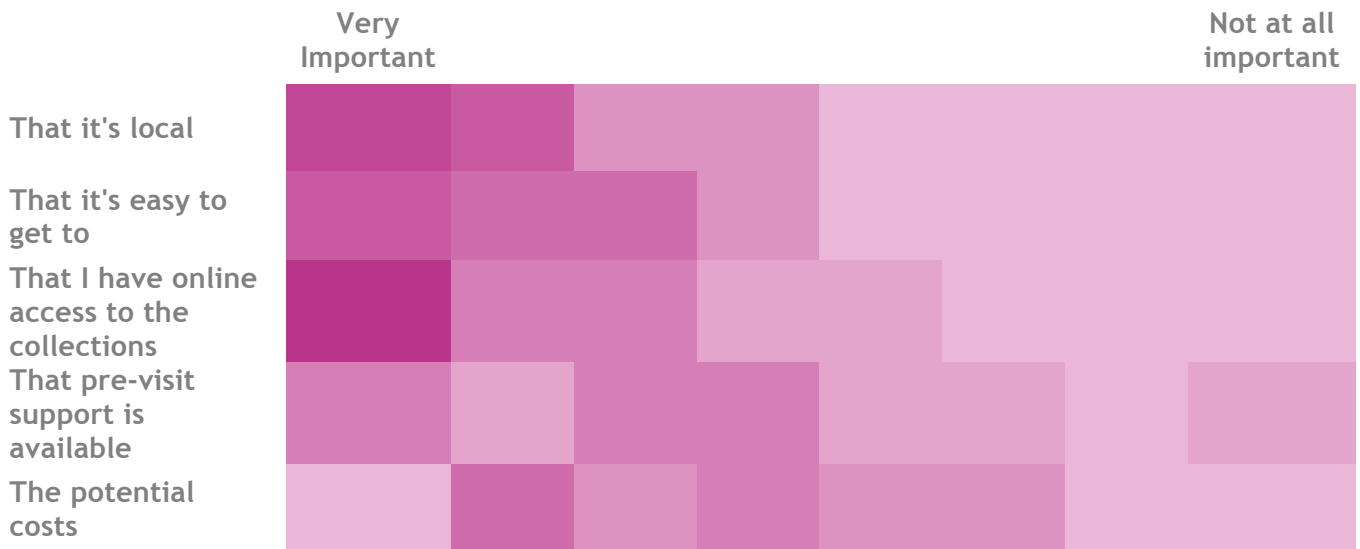
This suggests that having clear information about practicalities such as parking, accurate descriptions of collection content, and costs clearly and easily available to new and potential users is more important than the location of the archive.

The users in the Dorchester group indicated that they highly valued having the archive on their doorstep, and their responses demonstrated a sense of ownership that seemed to be linked to this and their ability to visit frequently.

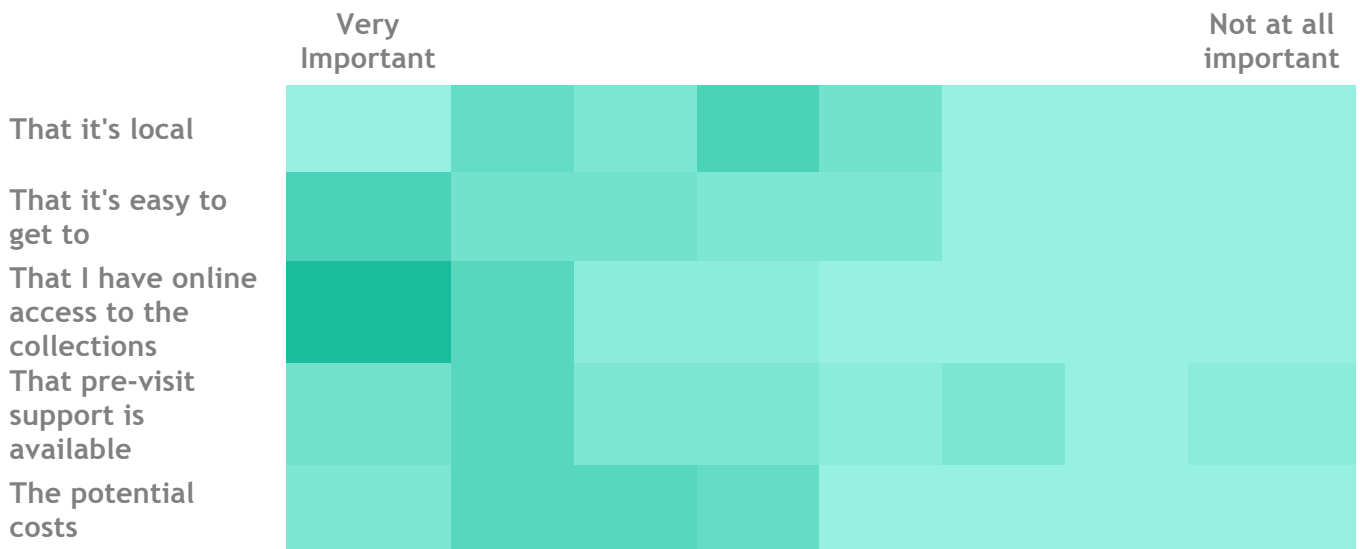
*Locally sited rather than containing locally-specific collection materials

Thinking about when you have used an archive collection, please indicate how important each of these elements was in making your decision to do so:

Current user ratings



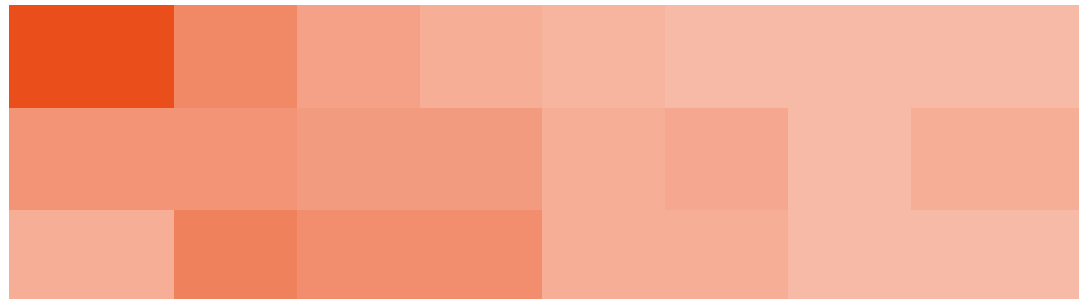
Non-user ratings



Combined ratings



That I have online access to the collections
That pre-visit support is available
The potential costs



Locality & ease of access

A number of participants in the non-user groups noted that they were unaware of Dorset History Centre until taking part in the research, despite having an interest in the subject areas and type of material held by the archive. It was commented that raising the profile of the archive, would help to engage more people with the collection. This supports the research carried out in late 2016 by CDC, which concluded, “*many non users are not aware of the service and what it can offer*”.

“I didn’t even know there was a Dorset History Centre, and I’ve lived here all my life” (NUB6) [general agreement from the Bournemouth non-user group to this statement]

“Just get people’s attention - I didn’t know you were even here” (NUD8)

“If you just put in Dorset History Centre, I’m not going to come down because I’ve got no connection with Dorset. Need to think about what is there to draw them in, if the town is not local to their history” (NUD2)

“Drop Dorset or have local history centre or something and then immediately you broaden your base” (NUD6)

“I don’t think it’s well enough publicised ... when I was doing my degree I wouldn’t have even thought to look in an archive. It’s not only about being accessible, it’s telling people you’re accessible - it makes a difference” (UD3)

Some participants highlighted that the parking difficulties may put them off visiting.

“Dorchester’s not the easiest place to park. So there are practical issues as well” (NUB7)

Pre-visit and visit support

In relation to pre-visit support, and particularly in relation to the non-user groups, it became clear that information about what to expect of a visit to the archive - what the set-up is, what you are expected to bring and not bring, how you will access the material - is as important as information about the collections.

“[would be good to have information about] the archive itself, or where you’d be going, rather than just information about the collections” (NUB8)

“Maybe if you’ve got a Q&A of frequently asked questions - how much does it cost? Where do I park? (NUB2)

“I don’t know if I’m walking into a room and helping myself, or if I then have to ask someone who’s got white gloves on, who goes and gets it and makes me put white gloves on” (NUD3)

“Do I just walk in, or do I need an appointment?” (NUD2)

“How long it might take, is a follow-up visit needed? Is there a cost involved if I needed someone to help me personally, to spend their time going through?” (NUD3)

“I still don’t understand what the difference is between a place like this, and the museum” (NUD3)

“I’m interested in going to museums, but here, is it worth me coming here? What’s my incentive, I don’t understand that still” (NUD7)

Both non-users and users also expressed the importance of getting support with *how* to use the archive. And so although less about the online experience there were key points made about the importance of helping people with their first time visit.

“If I knew I was allowed to [come in and look at materials seen online] and someone could help me, because I’d be terrified to come here with this massive old artefact on my own” (NUD5)

“I’d have to know what you can and can’t do, so if there are records that you’re not allowed to touch or photograph ... because I don’t know what the rules are ... is that something you find out when you get here?” (NUD1)

“Until you get started sometimes you don’t even know what questions to ask ... I think it’s important to have someone to help the novices through the process” (UD3)

“I think there should be an induction ... the other day I was getting a document out and someone came rushing out and said ‘no - don’t do that! You want to use these...’ and gave me glass weights - nobody told me I had to do that, it was a bit embarrassing and I’ve been coming here for quite a while” (UD6)

“There is so much, having some sort of area where there is a general breakdown of we carry this, this and this, would help me know where to start” (UD3)

Costs

There were varying opinions about the perceived and actual costs of using the archive (both onsite and online). The cost of photographing or downloading material prompted quite a heated discussion amongst both users and non-users. It was generally felt that a charge for downloading or having content photographed or copied was expected, but participants were not supportive of paying to take their own images.

“I went to Dorset History centre when I was looking at this house and ... copied [it]with an IPAD - I had to pay £7 for that ... that aggrieved me, I don’t agree with that ... the national archives don’t charge and a lot of record offices don’t charge” (UB4)

“I photograph many things. When I go to the National Archives in London, they always say I can photograph things for free. Last time I photographed over 400 documents ... here you pay £7 a time I think ... that’s high when you’re only photographing” (UD6)

“I would be upset if they started charging for the services [research support, rather than reprographic services]” (UD2)

“Rather than paying a daily rate, could you pay an annual rate or monthly ... something that works out if you were interested in coming regularly” (UD3)

All participants felt it was important that costs (whether for digital material or on-site charges) were transparent.

“It would be good to know the cost attached to finding out the information and perhaps if you wanted to take printed copies, so you could take them away with you” (NUB6)

“It would be nice to know about these costs, beforehand” (NUB5)

When specifically discussing potential costs for online material, there were a number of different opinions and suggested approaches.

“Scotland’s history they do a pay a certain amount and you can look at everything and the amount comes off your account and keeps coming off. That system would work” (UB3)

“Essex ... do the same don’t they? They’ve got a special online system where you can pay so much and look at all their parish registers” (UB4)

“As I say, I’ve never quibbled at paying £3 a day to the National Archives ... I mean because a lot of things like say the service records, they aren’t anywhere else and what’s it going to cost these days to drive up to London and copy them and that. So I’m quite happy to do that ... they don’t charge you per page they charge you per document ... the cost of going to look at the original is far and away over the cost of downloading for £3.50” (UB2)

“I think the public records stuff should be free” (NUB8)

“I would like to have a choice of a one-off payment so I can use something just once, or if I’m tracing my family tree and I need say a three, six or twelve month payment. It would be good to have this difference in price” (NUB4)

“You could have a scale of costs ... so different prices depending on the resolution you have” (NUB5)

“Free to view, but pay to download for you to keep - I wouldn’t be surprised to see that there was a cost involved in that” (NUD7)

Exploring engagement with online content

A range of facsimile collection items were made available to the groups to explore and consider. The participants were asked to look at the example items and think about how they would expect or want to access them.

The example items included personal and documentary photographs, illustrative material from the Poole Pottery archive, newspapers, illustrative and documentary maps, personal

and documentary letters, a diary, and a range of both hand-written and printed documentation including parish registers and committee minutes.

In the discussion that followed the participants were asked to respond to a number of questions relating to how they would expect, or want to, access different types of material, with a focus on the relative benefits of online or physical access.

In contrast to the initial perceptions exercise, participants in all the groups began to talk about the archive materials in a more personal and emotional way. It became clear that the stories that the objects can tell are the key to engaging people with them, and the participants in all groups expressed the view that these stories are a way to encourage more people to access the archive material including non-traditional users.

“I was really surprised by the Poole pottery stuff ... I was thinking of dark dusty official documents and not these fantastic designs ... that was quite inspiring to want to look at more of that” (NUD4)

Throughout both the user and non-user groups no clear indications emerged in terms of what types of material they would prefer or expect to access online. As with the ratings exercise, there are a number of factors involved that impacted on their preferred access route. For example, those conducting research on behalf of others would be quite happy to access what they needed online if it was available, whereas those conducting personal research are more likely to want to visit the archive in person.

“Only if it was related to your particular family. This one was written by your great aunt or Grandpa, then yes, it’s nice to hold it, but other than that” (UB4)

“It is fascinating to see the original document, especially if it is very old. You can’t make a statement, it depends on what the purpose of your research is, to an extent” (UB1)

“If it belonged to a member of the family ...to actually see something which he kept and risked his life for - to actually handle and say this belonged to my uncle, you know. Rather than just having a photocopy of it” (UB2)

“If it’s not personal, then I think online will do. Unless it’s something really historical maybe” (NUB4)

“If I saw a document online, if it was related to my family, I probably would want to see it” (NUB3)

“If you were just looking for a specific article [in a newspaper] then no need to see the original” (NUD2)

“If I need an almost business approach - find what I’m looking for, turn it into a source, stick it in my essay, move on - then fine, stick it all online and that would suit me for time saving and efficiency. If I’m doing something more personal, more nostalgic, then I would like a hands-on experience - seeing someone’s handwriting and the dog-eared corners” (UD3)

“If it’s just a list of names or burials ... then that’s better online, but original documents and newspapers - you’ve got to see the original because it can lead onto other things” (UD2)

“I’m quite happy to see newspapers online” (UD6)

There was consensus however, in wanting to have access to more than a simple catalogue record online. Participants suggested taking a layered approach to presenting the collections online, perhaps starting with headline content and an image which would then link through to more narrative content with further images, and finally the full catalogue record.

“Some sort of combination approach would be good, where for those less interested in finite details but looking for an overall one sentence or a piece of information an online version would be enough” (UD3)

“I think perhaps just to say it is available to be seen in the flesh. You’ve got the digitised photograph, if you want to come and have a look at it you can, you’re welcome to do so” (NUD6)

“Internet resources are an additional rather than locking something away never to be seen again ... making it accessible, having the option to do what suits you - that’s what will work best” (UD3)

“Pick something massive and lead us through the event ... the Bloody Assizes ... the Tolpuddle Martyrs” (NUD3)

“It would be good to have one of those little videos showing you where you can go into the next part of the archive ... from your point of interest ... a video that would piece together the story of how you would bring it all together ... this is such and such’s house, this is the school they went to” (NUD8)

“I think being able to search spatially [collection items linked to a particular geographic area] is really important” (NUD5)

“Could you give categories of types of information? So it’s not bespoke, but it’s enough to send you in the right direction” (NUD8)

“How many people have used it [a particular resource] would be good, because if it’s got loads of likes then you would know that this is maybe one for you” (NUD5)

“Well I’m quite interested in the history of my house, but I don’t know how to find out ... case studies on the website might help” (NUD5)

“I could be really quite interested in getting lost in an archive of history or photographs, but the visual things were the most interesting to me” (NUD5)

There was also general agreement that the current website does not offer a good user experience, and would need to be improved in order to support greater online access. Linked to this, the issue of quality arose in both groups and participants expressed the feeling that any digital content should be of the highest quality if users are expected to access collection material online.

“I think one thing that’s really important is that the Dorset History Centre has a decent website ... the ‘Dorset for you’ links are atrocious ... it doesn’t tell you anything you want to know” (NUD3)

“And make it more interesting, more inviting ... you go through the council website, you come here on sufferance - like ‘we’re tolerating you being here’, you know” (NUD5)

“And it feels very static ... I don’t know whether you’ve got audio or video in your collections, but it would be nice to experience that ... it would make it seem less dark and dusty” (NUD8)

Along with the idea of using the archive material to tell stories, perhaps linked to notable local or national events or figures, the use of social media - particularly Facebook - emerged as a channel the participants in both user and non-user groups felt would engage more people and encourage them to use the archive. There were also suggestions of ways to use content as a means to attract people to using the archive.

It points to an opportunity to use social media and other marketing to widen awareness. In connection with messaging and encouraging new users.

“Social media might be a good idea. Facebook” (UB4)

“You’ve got to be far enough along the research road to say, ‘can you send me you newsletter’. So, you’ve got to find out. But again, social media would help that” (UB2)

“If it came up on your Facebook feed ‘today in history’ from the Dorset History Centre” (NUD3)

“It may also be of interest [to have information available at relevant sites] like you say, Kingston Lacy House. If you could somewhere on the grounds have a terminal where you could look at some of the archive material that’s here and then that would interest you more.” (NUB2)

“Appeal to the recent history of the people who are still alive and want to see their own lives reflected in the history centre, because people are curious about people and themselves” (NUD7)

“You could have a gem of the month or something like that ... it makes a reason to go back to the website because it would change” (NUD8)

“I guess there’s something here with the maps as well, that almost tell the story, so almost the years as they go by, you click through records and see when things change. I think that would draw people in” (NUB8)

Participants in both groups identified audio and video recordings as being ideal content for online provision, along with maps and photographic materials. It was generally felt that the more visual content, such as the Poole Pottery archive, might attract more users if it was presented through social media although a number of participants commented that they expected people who wanted to use it to inform art practice would also like to see it in person.

“I think photographs are a good one that can go online, they tend to be quite good and even things like maps” (UD4)

“I’d support maps - maps are beautiful I think and they work wonderfully online, all the maps!” (UD7)

“Are there recordings? The Dorset dialect is so rich, I’d love to have access to an audio” (NUD7)

“I know that they’ve taken quite a lot of oral history and audio of people singing and stuff - I don’t know how much of that is accessible online... any more of that, if they can get that up, that would be a good thing” (UD5)

Situational Analysis

Google Analytics

The Dorset History Centre website is part of the main Council website and is several years old. As a result the functionality is not currently as good as it could be and there are some difficulties in getting comprehensive statistics on website usage. However, an analysis of the Google Analytics provides the following insights (figures are for 1st June 2016 to 1st June 2017):

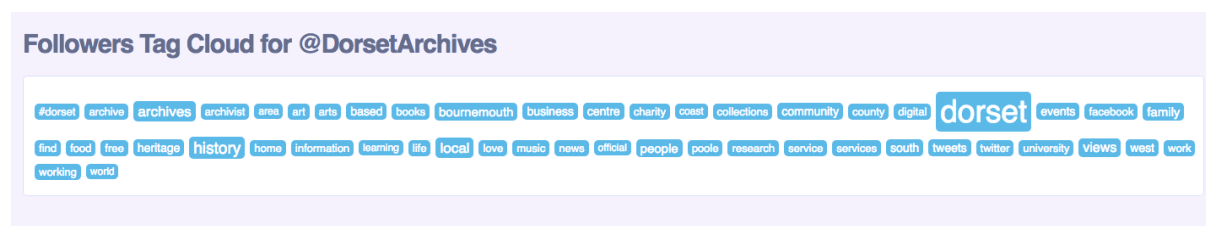
- After the home page of Dorset History Centre, the three most popular pages are Parish Registers, Online and Collections.
- On average users spend 2 mins 23 seconds on the Parish Registers page (compared with 1 min 25 seconds to all Dorset History Centre pages. This indicates that Parish Registers are an important starting point for those conducting research. From that page, most users go back to the home page (/dorsethistorycentre) but the second most popular page (from Parish Registers) is the Research Service page, suggesting that many people are looking for assistance with how to access and search the registers.
- Overall, pageviews to any part of the Dorset History Centre website have gone down 34%, when compared to the previous 12 months. This mirrors the findings from the Taking Part survey (referenced in Section 3) that visits to archive sites have fallen year on year.
- The Collections page has an extremely low dwell time of only 34 seconds, which may indicate that people expect different content to that which is currently on the page (specific user testing would be useful to explore this further).
- 59% of traffic to the Dorset History Centre homepage arrives via Google search, indicating the importance of people using Google to start or assist them with their research. 22% is via a referral e.g. from The National Archives 'discovery' section. 12% of traffic is direct. This may include referrals from email newsletter but is also likely to be people who have bookmarked the website in their browser. Currently there is very little traffic being referred via social media channels and this presents a key opportunity.

Social Media & Other Digital Channels

Dorset History Centre has two Twitter accounts (a main account @DorsetArchives - 1245 followers and @RSM_GBeck - 833 followers, which is live tweeting a WW1 diary). It does not have a dedicated Facebook page but periodically posts content via the main Dorset For You Facebook page. The service also sends out a monthly email newsletter, which at the time of writing has 2,500 subscribers.

Social media channels offer a significant opportunity to reach and grow audiences and are likely to be a particularly effective way of engaging non-users. The previous research conducted by CDC supports this view with ‘advertising, social media & promotional material’ being given as the top answer by users and non-users, to the question of how Dorset History Centre could better support them (as a means to make them more aware of what the service can offer).

The following word cloud shows the most commonly used words in the bios of @DorsetArchives’ followers. It appears that many followers are themselves archivists or other organisation/business accounts in the area (use of words: official, charity, business). However the word ‘history’ also appears prominently.



Anecdotally, many organisations in the archives, heritage and museums sectors find that Twitter is increasingly a channel to connect with peers and professionals, rather than members of the public, whereas Facebook connects organisations with a much wider and more general audience. When considering whether or not to start a dedicated Dorset History Centre, the service will need to weigh up the benefit in terms of audience engagement against the required resource to update and maintain a specific page. Having a page dedicated to the archive and its stories (rather than via the Dorset For You Facebook page) would provide a more focused content set which arguably would have a stronger impact than when combined with other Council news.

The potential can be seen by looking at pages such as <https://www.facebook.com/skyearchives/> and <https://www.facebook.com/northumberlandarchives>

Despite the growth in prominence of social media over the last 10 years, email newsletters remain a hugely important digital communication tool for most organisations. Analysis of reports from five of Dorset History Centre's email newsletters (distributed between Oct 2016 and March 2017) show an average open rate of 44%, this is extremely high when compared to general benchmarks⁴ and indicates that subscribers are loyal readers. In most cases, the most popular link in each newsletter relates to an event or open evening at the archive, illustrating the importance of physical events to audience development.

⁴ <https://mailchimp.com/resources/research/email-marketing-benchmarks/>

Wider Sector Analysis

By reviewing the approaches taken by other archives, libraries and museums we can identify the key issues and themes in relation to digitisation strategy and online collections. For smaller or regional archives, these themes can provide useful insight to help inform future direction.

Context & Curation

As stated by The National Archives in their most recent Digital Strategy⁵ *“Most people using our website do not understand how archives organise their collections and many find searching our catalogue bewildering.”* So while professional and experienced users of archives may be comfortable searching online catalogues, new users can find the experience confusing and disorientating. Many archives have digitised their catalogue and provide a search function but as Tom Scott from The Wellcome Collection says, *“Search only works if you know what you’re looking for”* in addition, for many users, even once they’ve found an item, *“the content has been atomised to such an extent that it become meaningless”*, which is to say that people may carry out a search, find themselves viewing a catalogue entry for an item but not really understand what they’re looking at.

Looking wider than archives, some museums and galleries are exploring new approaches to the presentation of their online collections, specifically to make them more accessible to a wider audience. The Barnes Foundation for example, is following the approach of its founder and working on grouping artworks not by historical connections but by groupings such as light, colour, space or line. As Shelley Bernstein from the Barnes says, in a recent Medium post⁶ *“...often catered to the research audience, with rich semantic search and comprehensive metadata for every object, but almost no connections between works themselves. This works well for a sophisticated, goal-oriented user with a deep understanding of art and art history which, coincidentally, describes most museum staff, but leaves most visitors without a way to explore the collection beyond searching for the names of artists that they’ve heard of or for words they like.”*

These issues are not easy to resolve, there are significant technical and practical challenges to, for example, presenting search results in a contextualised manner but one

⁵ <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/the-national-archives-digital-strategy-2017-19.pdf> (opens pdf)

⁶ <https://medium.com/barnes-foundation/rethinking-the-museum-collection-online-e3b864d8bb39>

increasingly common way to help new users find a way into the archive is to take an ‘editorial’ approach and curate selected content into themed collections. For a regional archive this may relate to a particular area, local estate or significant historical event. The additional benefit of curated collections is that this type of content often works well on social media, helping to engage new audiences.

Partnerships, Collaboration & Open Access

Archives of all sizes often enter partnership arrangements in order to help fund the digitisation of archive material. It is likely that with increased pressures on budgets, collaborative ways of working will become more common. While partnerships can open up new sources of funding, one note of caution is that sometimes these agreements involve significant licensing restrictions in terms of how that material can then be used. This may be an issue for those organisations moving towards a more open access model. A model that is increasingly popular. For example the New York Public Library⁷, Wellcome Images⁸ and Rijksmuseum⁹ have all adopted this approach, believing that making digital content available for unrestricted use will ensure it remains relevant and used.

Other opportunities for collaboration includes the Google Cultural Institute, who are now working more actively to help archives digitise and present digital content. UK examples include the Yorkshire Film Archive¹⁰, Black Cultural Archives¹¹ and Alexandra Palace¹².

Imogen Bakelmun, from Google Cultural Institute explains the process of working with archives as follows, *“The first step is to create a ‘partner page’ complete with assets (images and videos) and exhibits that help to tell the stories of the collection. In this, we really encourage our archive partners to really make the most of the exhibit feature to help to unpack their archives, pulling out the stories that help to tell a broader narrative of how archives work within our society.*

We can also offer digitising services to partners who do not have digital content already. We’re in the process of on boarding more and more archives and the way we work with them will be informed by the needs and requirements of our partners.”

⁷ https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/arts/design/new-online-openness-lets-museums-share-works-with-the-world.html?_r=0

⁸ <https://wellcomeimages.org/indexplus/page/News.html>

⁹ <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio>

¹⁰ <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/yorkshire-film-archive>

¹¹ <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/black-cultural-archives>

¹² <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/alexandra-palace>

Focusing on the needs of users

As already noted, many archives, libraries and museums are experimenting with ways of presenting online content for different types of users. For professional and experienced users, being able to search online for catalogue entries will be important but in order to ensure long-term relevance of archives to a wider audience, archives need to become more aware of the needs of less experienced or engaged users.

To this end, many archives are taking an audience centric approach to developing their digital strategies, in order to ensure they are catering for all types of users.

As explained by the US Archives, *“...we did a lot of work developing digital personas to identify the types of users using our catalog and website. That helps us build exciting, dynamic pages using our digital content.”*

Future-proofing

Digital tools and technologies offer many opportunities but also significant challenges, not least the rapid pace of change. Trying to entirely future-proof your digital strategy is impossible but at each stage of development, careful consideration needs to be given to the likely longevity of a particular approach. As noted by the National Archives, *“Digital archives must ride the rise and fall of successive waves of technological change and make decisions about where best to apply their efforts.”*

One-off project funding can be at the root of stand alone digital assets (like microsites or apps) and while there may be good reasons to develop specific digital projects, the danger is that an organisation creates something that become unsupportable in the longer term and does not integrate with other digital activity.

Best Practice Examples

Serving the needs of multiple audiences

The Wellcome Library at Wellcome Collection provides a clear example of best practice in terms of serving (differing) audience needs. And while the organisation will have significantly higher budgets than small regional archives, the overall principles of how they approach the online user experience can be followed, to a certain extent, by any archive services.

Most notably Wellcome Library provides clear options for both experienced users of archives and for new visitors. This is demonstrated by:

- **Searchable catalogue:** For those users who are familiar with archives and/or who have a clear idea about what they are looking for, an online searchable catalogue is an important feature. The Wellcome Library has a particularly user friendly catalogue search option with useful options that help a user to refine a search and, once they have found a key item, giving researchers the option export to specialist services like EndPoint and RefWorks).
- **Online collections:** In common with many archives and libraries, Wellcome has digitised a portion of its entire holding, “...based on the strengths of our holdings and the interests of current or potential audiences. We also aim to create significant online resources that will stimulate research in the global health themes that underpin our collecting strategy”. The homepage for the online collections presents a range of user journey options that aim to serve both more experienced users plus first time visitors.
- **Online support:** It should be noted that not only do Wellcome aim to serve differing audience needs by the functionality of the website, it also provides clear support to first-time users with, for example, a prominent prompt on the catalogue search homepage linking to a page with additional help and advice.

Using social media effectively

The John F Kennedy Library & Museum uses social media to bring alive the material in its collections and to drive engagement with the material. The library is active on several different social platforms but its biggest audience is on Facebook¹³. The Facebook posts use a number of different methods to encourage engagement, including; focusing on

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/JFKLibrary/>

content that generates an emotional response, linking to key historical or significant calendar dates eg Father’s Day, sharing facts about JFK that are interesting but likely to be less well known (and are therefore surprising) and asking the Facebook audience questions that invite their own reflections on material.

Aside from Facebook, the JFK Library is active across a number of different social media platforms including Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Pinterest¹⁴. However, managing multiple social accounts, to a high standard, can be resource intensive so smaller archives are best advised to focus on maintaining accounts only across one or two platforms.

The JFK Library, along with many other libraries, museums and archives is also using History Pin¹⁵ to contextualise archive material, particularly photographs, within geographical locations. Examples of other relevant History Pin accounts include Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums¹⁶ and Leeds Libraries¹⁷

Curated content & narratives

Carefully curating digitised material can be a particularly effective way of reaching an audience who may not be current archive users.

The Wellcome Library curates online content in the form of “digital stories” showcased from their home page and that are designed to engage both archive users and non-users. The production values are fairly high and the text written by a professional writer but the same impact can be achieved without that resource.

Archives+ in Manchester¹⁸ provides a number of digital stories on its website which are themed by locally relevant topics¹⁹. Using a mixed media approach, including audio interviews, as appropriate, this curated content is presented in such a way to make it highly engaging to anyone interested in the history of the city.

¹⁴ <https://www.jfklibrary.org/About-Us/Social-Media.aspx>

¹⁵ <https://www.historypin.org>

¹⁶ <https://www.historypin.org/en/connections-tyne-wear>

¹⁷ <https://www.historypin.org/en/connections-leeds>

¹⁸ <http://www.archivesplus.org/about-archives>

¹⁹ <http://www.archivesplus.org/stories>

Final Recommendations

- Ensure that the website offers clear, practical support and advice for those who have never visited or used an archive before. Where possible include photographs of the inside of the building so that those who are planning a visit, have a sense of what to expect.
- Identify themes and content collections that are likely to have resonance with an audience wider than experienced archive users. For example, key historical material relating to notable places, buildings and individuals from the county. Use this material as the starting point to create themed online collections. Where possible, include associated narrative to provide context and bring the material to life.
- Continue to develop the online catalogue so that it is as user-friendly as possible.
- Resource allowing, set up a standalone Dorset History Centre Facebook page and post regular updates. Follow the examples within this report for ideas on effective social media content.
- Explore working with Google Cultural Institute in order to benefit from their support and experience in the field of curated online content.
- Continue to develop the audience-centric approach, being clear how different types of online content are serving the needs of both experienced archives users and those that are new to archives.

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Afterword - Dorset History Centre

The process of thinking through the brief, commissioning the work and then collaborating with the Audience Agency as the consultancy took place was a very interesting process. The service considered careful analysis of the question of digital content to be critical to the way it evolves over the next few years, both in terms of core business but also projects. Some of the responses that were received were not at all surprising, others less so. Some of our assumptions have been proven correct, but equally others have been challenged. We certainly feel that the process has been valuable as it has provided us with solid, empirical evidence of audience needs and preferences -rather than our previous reliance upon anecdotal evidence or gut instinct.

The findings of this report will strongly influence the way we seek to develop a digital strategy for Dorset History Centre. We will be focussing upon place-related information and aiming to curate content online rather than simply pointing users at a mass of information. The report will form an evidence base for funding applications and will be used as an advocacy document with senior managers and politicians. It provides a key reference point for all future online activity. We hope it has broader applications within the sector and that other services can take something from it to help inform their approach to the provision of digital content.

Appendix 1 - Focus Group Participants

Topic guide

A topic guide was used to facilitate each group discussion. The table below shows the question areas, materials, and exercises used at each session.

Topic Area	Format /Materials/Exercises
1: Introductions	TAA meet and greet, overview of research and format for the session, participant information sheets
2. Ice-breaker	Participant introductions, areas of interest and experience of using archives
3. Archive perceptions exercise	3-word exercise, individual Facilitated group discussion
4. Routes and barriers to engagement	Ratings exercise, individual Facilitated group discussion
5. Exploring engagement with different types of material	Consideration of facsimile materials, individual Facilitated group discussion
6. Conclusions	Final thoughts and incentive distribution

Participant profiles

The table below gives a profile of each participant alongside a pseudonym.

Pseudonym	Group	Profile
UB1	Current users (U)	Male; White British; aged 55-64; BH24 resident
	Bournemouth group (B)	Interested in: local history, social history, and legal records

UB2	Current users (U) Bournemouth group (B)	Male; White British; aged 65+; BH9 resident Interested in: local history and family history
UB3	Current users (U) Bournemouth group (B)	Female; White British; aged 55-64; BH14 resident Interested in: local history and family history
UB4	Current users (U) Bournemouth group (B)	Female; White British; aged 65+; BH5 resident Interested in: local history, family history, regional topography and mapping, legal records, and social history
UD1	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Female; White British; aged 65+; DT9 resident Interested in: local history and social history
UD2	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Male; White British; aged 65+; DT1 resident Interested in: local history and family history
UD3	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Female; White British; aged 25-34; DT4 resident Interested in: local history, family history, regional topography and mapping, and religious history
UD4	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Male; White British; aged 65+; DT1 resident Interested in: local history, family history, regional topography and mapping, and social history
UD5	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Male; White British; aged 16-24; DT1 resident Interested in: local history and social history
UD6	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Male; White British; aged 55-64; DT1 resident Interested in: local history and family history
UD7	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Male; rather not say; rather not say; DT1 resident Interested in: local history
UD8	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Female; rather not say; aged 55-64; DT1 resident Interested in: local history, family history, and religious history

UD9	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Male; White British; aged 55-64; DT2 resident Interested in: local history, family history, regional topography and mapping, and social history
UD10	Current users (U) Dorchester group (D)	Female; rather not say; rather not say; DT1 resident Interested in: local history and family history
NUB1	Non-users (N) Bournemouth group (B)	Male; White British; aged 16-24; BH3 resident Interested in: family history
NUB2	Non-users (N) Bournemouth group (B)	Female; White British; aged 45-54; BH18 resident Interested in: local history, family history, and social history
NUB3	Non-users (N) Bournemouth group (B)	Male; White British; aged 55-64; BH14 resident Interested in: local history, regional topography and mapping, and social history
NUB4	Non-users (N) Bournemouth group (B)	Female; White other; aged 25-34; BH4 resident Interested in: local history, family history, regional topography and mapping, religious history, and social history
NUB5	Non-users (N) Bournemouth group (B)	Female; White British; aged 45-54; BH10 resident Interested in: family history and social history
NUB6	Non-users (N) Bournemouth group (B)	Female; White British; aged 35-44; BH22 resident Interested in: local history and family history
NUB7	Non-users (N) Bournemouth group (B)	Male; White British; aged 35-44; BH8 resident Interested in: local history and family history
NUB8	Non-users (N) Bournemouth group (B)	Male; White British; aged 16-24; BH8 resident Interested in: local history and regional topography and mapping
NUD1	Non-users (N) Dorchester group (D)	Female; White British; aged 65+; DT1 resident Interested in: local history, family history and religious history

NUD2	Non-users (N)	Male; White British; aged 55-64; DT1 resident
	Dorchester group (D)	Interested in: local history, family history, regional topography and mapping, and religious history
NUD3	Non-users (N)	Female; White British; aged 45-54; DT2 resident
	Dorchester group (D)	Interested in: family history
NUD4	Non-users (N)	Female; White other; aged 55-64; DT2 resident
	Dorchester group (D)	Interested in: local history, family history, regional topography and mapping, and social history
NUD5	Non-users (N)	Female; White British; aged 35-44; DT1 resident
	Dorchester group (D)	Interested in: local history, regional topography and mapping, religious history, and social history
NUD6	Non-users (N)	Male; White British; aged 55-64; DT10 resident
	Dorchester group (D)	Interested in: local history, family history, and regional topography and mapping
NUD7	Non-users (N)	Female; White British; aged 35-44; DT3 resident
	Dorchester group (D)	Interested in: religious history and social history
NUD8	Non-users (N)	Female; White British; aged 45-54; DT6 resident
	Dorchester group (D)	Interested in: local history and social history

Appendix II - Customer Circles

Overview

While we would recommend that in-depth primary research is conducted by trained and experienced researchers, customer circles is a method that cultural and heritage organisations can use to talk to, and gather direct feedback from, their audiences or participants. Typically this is achieved through group discussion sessions attended by 5-10 participants. These would be facilitated by someone from the organisation and last about 1.5 hours.

In research terms they follow the focus group methodology, but not necessarily with the same levels of rigour or analysis that would be applied by a trained research facilitator.

Customer circles can be carried out as 'one offs' to address particular issues or as part of a wider feedback strategy.

What are they good for?

- Gathering opinions and feedback that is attitudinal in nature. This may include for example, user experiences of a space or set of resources, testing ideas and gathering reactions to marketing materials
- By having a group together, discussing a topic, ideas develop and are discussed in a more fluid way than is possible through other types of research such as surveys.
- What you won't get from a customer circle is robust feedback from a large sample of audience members. It is about depth rather than statistical robustness.

How do you set up a group?

Recruitment:

- You will need to recruit people to attend. The most common way of doing this would be to contact your attenders and ask them whether they would be interested.
- Calling by telephone works well because you can control the recruitment process and limit the number of participants that you need to contact. It also allows the potential participants to be put at ease about the nature of the research and what is required of them.
- Calls can be made by briefed members of your team who are confident in talking to customers.
- Depending on the nature of your discussion group, you will need to decide whether there are any particular audiences that you want to talk to; for example, local

history enthusiasts, commercial researchers, personal researchers, lapsed users, frequent users or younger / older users.

- If you are looking to gather information from people who are not currently using your service, you may find it helpful to identify who you want to talk to in the first instance (e.g. special interest groups, particular demographic profiles etc.) and then go through existing networks and channels in order to recruit them. Open calls can be made through services such as Gumtree or local media advertising.
- You may also want to ask some questions when recruiting so that you know more about the profile of your potential group.
- You must not invite under 16's to a group without parent/guardian consent. We would strongly advise that you should use a trained researcher for any groups that consist of under 16's.

Incentives:

You may also want to provide an incentive for people to attend. You will have to gauge to what extent you think this is necessary, but typically a payment of £20-£30 as a thank you for their time and to cover any expenses is sufficient.

Follow up:

- When you have an agreement from someone that they are happy to attend, take any further contact details required and send them a confirmation of the group time and location.
- Two days before the group is held, you should contact them again as a reminder.
- Be very clear about where the sessions will be taking place, what time participants are expected to arrive, and the arrangements upon arrival (i.e. will they be met at the door etc.)
- One of the biggest issues around recruitment is that some people will fail to attend. It is worth recruiting ten for a group of seven or eight.

Group size:

- Do not be tempted to make your group large, with more than ten attending the discussion can become very unwieldy and hard to manage. You will find that in smaller groups people open up more and provide deeper feedback.
- It is better to run two small groups of five than one large group of ten. It's actually a good idea to run more than one group on a topic (if you have time) as this will

give you two discussions to compare. It will also 'even out' the affect you may have of strong characters influencing one of the discussions.

- If you are running a mix of sessions for different user types (i.e. frequent / non-users) it can be helpful to separate them out, as the experiences of the participants are likely to be different. Also, less frequent users may feel less confident about contributing if more experienced users are in the same group.

Setting up the space:

- Think about the area that you are going to use for the group, whether it is adequate for setting out the required number of chairs in a circle. It is also a good idea to have some type of coffee table in the middle of the circle to break up the space. Try to avoid sitting around a full size table, it can feel too much like a meeting.
- Offer refreshments on arrival and take a break half way through the group so that people can top up.

How do I facilitate a group?

Write a topic guide:

- To get the most out of a group you will need to be prepared. The best way to do this is by designing a topic guide in advance. This gives a structure to the session that you can follow.
- You may also want to think about any materials you need for the group, such as marketing literature. It is much better to show people information to respond to than to just tell them about it.
- Don't be too ambitious with what you think you can cover in a session, try to cover a small number of topics in depth. Having said that, definitely have some topics 'up your sleeve' just in case.
- Try to combine discussion with other activities, such as using stickers to indicate strong likes and dislikes on marketing materials or using post-it notes to capture and share responses to specific questions.

Introduce the group:

- At the start of the session introduce yourself to the group and set the scene for the discussion. It is a good idea to also state some 'house rules', about respecting opinions, not talking over one another etc. If you have an info regarding exits in the event of an emergency also tell them.

- If you intend to record the session then ask permission of the participants.

Guide the discussion:

- The facilitator should allow the conversation to flow naturally, and steer it through the topic guide.
- Try not to impose your views and opinions on the group, as a representative from the organisation, you will get in to a position where participants start to seek your views and ask you questions.

Draw out the key themes:

- Once the group has finished you will need to draw out the key themes and make conclusions. To help you do this, you should try to make some notes as soon as possible after the group.
- It can also help to have another member of your team present at the group to take down key points. Don't assume one person can facilitate and take notes at the same time.
- You may also find it helpful to record the sessions, to help with writing up the findings. If you want to do this, you will need to ensure that the participants are happy for you to do so.

Overall, you may want to consider working with a research professional to mentor you through the first group with a view to working independently later.