

DPC Response to *Call for Evidence: Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors*

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Introduction to the Digital Preservation Coalition

The [Digital Preservation Coalition \(DPC\)](#) is a not-for-profit organisation comprising one hundred and three institutions which represent many different sectors, across thirteen countries and on four continents.

Each with an interest in digital preservation, our members are government agencies, national and local ‘memory institutions’, archives, libraries, museums, higher education and research institutions, broadcasters and film makers, manufacturers, strategic investors and professional bodies.

By digital preservation we refer to the series of managed activities necessary to ensure continued access to digital materials of all kinds now, in the future, and for as long as necessary.

The DPC is managed by a small team of full-time staff, with its head office in the UK, and overseen by a Board of Directors appointed from our full members. Our primary function is to deliver the support required to enable our members to succeed in their own objective of creating a secure digital legacy.

We submit this call for evidence as a summary of our own observations during the pandemic, with a view to making robust digital information management a priority from this point onwards.

The duty to document digital information does not cease in a crisis, it becomes more essential than ever. Collecting, preserving, and maintaining digital data is not an optional or recreational activity – it is a critical function which supports all areas of our national interest. We recommend that digital preservation is prioritised as an essential part of the stimulus packages for industry and innovation as we work to re-energise our economy post-pandemic.

What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

With the closure of many institutions across the sector during the pandemic, our members have reported redundancies, expected cutbacks and budget restrictions - but this comes within the context of a much greater demand for digital materials as individuals around the world expect to be able to access all of the information they want and need from home.

The move to online working and information access has meant that globally our approach to accessing information is now weighted vastly towards *the digital* as opposed to *the physical*. Indeed, one member reported the usage of an online catalogue of materials doubling since the lockdown. But while access to robust digital materials would not be possible without the hard work of our digital information managers, record keepers, digital archivists and others working in the field, this almost immediate shift from physical to digital has left many people without the requisite skills to play a part. Many of our member organisations are looking to manage that deficit quickly, whilst also delivering a service of ‘digitisation on demand.’

The almost overnight switch to digital also means that the infrastructure of many member institutions has been left behind. Library Management Systems for example, were largely set up in favour of physical collections and must now be adapted for digital use. Nevertheless, in spite of these challenges, the sector has rallied energetically to make these adaptations and to maintain continuous access for digital users.

Moreover, important decisions are being made by the government which involve huge interventions in markets, healthcare and the daily lives of billions of people as they seek to secure the social, economic and cultural wellbeing of the population. Archival functions across the sector are working to respond to the critical need to document these strategic decisions during this time of crisis, as the government takes unprecedented steps to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our duty to document is critical. Collecting, preserving, and maintaining digital data is not an optional or recreational activity – it is an essential function which supports our national interest and rests with governments, research, education and commerce.

How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

It has been long acknowledged that there is a digital preservation skills gap in the sector and to address this the DPC has been collaborating with The National Archives as part of their current DCMS funded digital capacity building strategy '[Plugged In, Powered Up,](#)'

Together we have worked through the COVID-19 crisis to develop and deliver practically focused online training, which equips learners with the skills required to implement simple and proactive digital preservation workflows within their organization. It is free to access for learners across the archives sector in England and for DPC members. The National Archives commissioned this project in November 2019 and the training resource, [Novice to Know-How](#), was launched in April 2020 – at the height of the pandemic. The initiative was not in response to the pandemic however, simply a timely coincidence.

Perhaps regarded as an optional activity which supports recreational interests and research – collecting, preserving and maintaining digital data across the sector has otherwise been notably lacking in the support it requires.

What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

Long-term, and without the appropriate recognition and funding which will enable continued access to robust and well-maintained digital data, the growth and enrichment the DCMS seeks to achieve in the UK will be severely impaired. There are likely to be large gaps in the record of our cultural and artistic heritage, and businesses and communities will be unable to grow if they do not have access to the product, service, research and cultural data which enables innovation and development. There can be no economic success, only economic failure.

And, as the economic impact of COVID-19 is felt across the country, it will be critical to secure, capture and preserve the records of defunct companies and/or private entities. Without immediate action, the social, cultural and economic significance of former undertakings will be lost.

The very ability to study the COVID-19 pandemic requires the existence of records management services and archives. Without appropriate intervention, records and data will not be generated and captured in ways that enable their preservation and access, now or in the future. Long-term, we will be ill-equipped to respond to other such crises.

To ensure we can still access the information we need to prevent and/or manage future crises, a commitment to robust record keeping from government which reaches across the sector is required.

Just as it is essential to have global agreements on reporting standards, specifications and definitions (as in the [Sendai Framework](#)), so it is necessary for archives and archival functions to be recognised

and resourced as the custodians of the raw data that underpins composite data or reported information.

We therefore recommend that digital preservation is prioritised as an essential part of the stimulus packages for industry and innovation as we work to re-energise our economy post-pandemic.

This should provide funding for resources, and training to support those responsible for this task, as well as a commitment that the function of digital information collection and preservation across all industries will be protected.

The duty to document this information does not cease in a crisis, it becomes more essential than ever.

What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

The impacts of the pandemic will be far reaching, and all organisations must recognise the importance of proper data and records management. This must be a priority.

The sector has responded as well as it can and the pandemic is showing the benefits of access to large and small scale data to inform decision-making, but this does not reduce the need to contextualise records (i.e. data, algorithms, code, audio-visual), nor does it exempt governments from documenting their data analysis processes or capturing critical information. In these current circumstances, records are at risk as new ways of working are rapidly adopted without the usual processes and infrastructure.

It is essential that the basis of decision-making in this context, the decisions themselves and the senior decision-makers involved are thoroughly documented in order for the government to remain accountable both during and after the emergency and for future generations to be able to learn from our actions.

Archives are the custodians of the 1918 influenza pandemic records, which are currently being studied by scientists around the world. These institutions will eventually be the stewards for the predominantly digital records related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Research and educational institutions, especially those involved in tracing the disease, mapping and analysing the pathogen's genome to develop vaccines, must ensure that their records and data are accurate and properly maintained.

The work of digital preservationists, information managers and record keepers *will* enable not only business continuity, research and innovation, but also the evidence of how this crisis was managed for future generations.

The economic and societal impact of the current pandemic needs to be evidenced, not only to prevent and/or anticipate similar events but to understand the effect this event will have on current and future generations. We must protect this digital information.

How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

With the correct investment and support for digital preservation, there is a great opportunity for the government to demonstrate long term vision and planning, and for the sector to evolve after COVID-19 as a digitally focused and valuable resource for the UK.

There is also an opportunity for the government to demonstrate a commitment to transparency and accountability by sustaining an accurate digital record and earning the trust of the British public by maintaining clear, permanent audit trails.

By investing in digital preservation, we have the potential to provide greater scope for innovation and reuse of cultural, creative and research data at scale, helping businesses and communities to grow. We can transmit opportunities to future generations by ensuring the right data is available to the right people at the right time in the right format, for as long as necessary.

We would have available a dynamic, powerful information asset which represents an accurate social and cultural record, and we could demonstrate a commitment to this collection protocol, for present and future generations. As funders, the sector would be able to demonstrate to DCMS, their own commitment to the sustainability of this cultural record in return.

With robust access to digital information, we can create a pathway to enable smaller and local organizations to take advantage of enterprise level infrastructure through shared or cloud services, and we could improve future policy formation by supporting the development of strategy, processes and procedures.

In short, an investment in digital preservation would be an investment in the UK's distinctiveness, competence and competitiveness by providing robust access to legacy data and digital information which are essential for our innovation, research, development.