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SCL digital study points to unique role for public libraries as physical spaces for accessing digital knowledge and opportunities

SCL's latest research report on 'digital leadership skills' is the result of a four-month study that has engaged more than 200 existing heads of libraries and future library leaders. It will now guide SCL's work to enable public libraries to cement their role as the only universally accessible public space where anyone can access digital knowledge and opportunities.

The research suggests this unique role is becoming ever more vital, not least to conquer the digital divide. SCL will also provide support to strengthen digital leadership skills within the sector.

In March 2014 Shared Intelligence was commissioned by SCL, with funding from Arts Council England, to identify significant digital developments on the horizon and also to determine what skills existing and future library leaders need to respond to these. Shared Intelligence also completed an audit of digital leadership skills amongst existing and future library leaders. The report includes a series of recommendations which SCL are now taking forward.

The **Digital Leadership Skills** report highlights strong skills on key leadership challenges of managing change and complex projects, but gaps for some leaders on emerging challenges around self-publishing or potential opportunities such as offering new online learning resources via libraries (e.g. Massive Open Online Courses or 'MOOCs'). It also showed that while some library leaders are well-equipped to maximise the benefit digital technology can bring, there are gaps in knowledge for some about who in their community lacks internet access, and the overlap between the digital divide and individuals whom libraries do not yet reach.

Key in the findings was the need to share learning from those furthest ahead on digital leadership. The report recommends doing this through channels including SCL's website, physical meetings and potential new online learning platforms so existing successes can be made more visible within and beyond the sector.

The study also confirmed the growth of e-reading and use of handheld devices and the findings recommended SCL moves quickly to build on the learning from the current e-lending pilots (taking place in 4 library authorities).

SCL have now agreed the report and are working on taking forward the recommendations and building them into their overall digital strategy. Priority actions will be around skills development

and sharing learning, alignment with SCL's existing Universal Offers, and using Wi-Fi as a catalyst for building the digital role of public libraries.

Ciara Eastell, SCL President, said: "Digital technology brings a new set of challenges for library leaders and aspiring leaders. We need to ensure that they have the skills to work in a fast paced digital environment, today and in the future. SCL will now work with partners on a plan to address these gaps."

Ben Lee, Programme Director, Shared Intelligence, said: "Some of the digital work we uncovered in libraries across the country is very inspiring--the challenge is how we share this information in a way that more libraries can emulate or do something even better."

Brian Ashley, Director of Libraries, Arts Council England, said: "Making the most of digital technology and creative media is one of the Arts Council's four development priorities for libraries. Successful libraries are offering people the chance to explore the opportunities of the digital world, and successful library leaders are grasping their role at the heart of strong partnerships. They are ensuring support for those who know what they need or those are uncertain where to go next."

The report highlighted the potential for a coordinated approach to purchasing library management systems, thereby saving time and resources, and a renewed drive to bring all library management up to date on wifi regulation.

During the course of the study, which included surveying library authorities in England, Wales and NI, conducting three webinar workshops and an online skills audit, many libraries stood out as leaders in the cultivation and use of digital leadership skills.

Gateshead Libraries run a packed programme of [digital careers days](#), 'e-days', and [other digital activities](#) at their main library to enable young people to learn about careers in technology, meet some of Tyneside's leading digital firms, and gain first-hand experience of coding and computer games design.

Birmingham Libraries are using new funding recently secured from the Wolfson Foundation to invest in [digital technology to support children's literacy](#), including tablets, e-readers, smartphones, and projectors across five local libraries beyond the city centre.

Devon Libraries' new flagship Exeter Library is now home to a brand new [FabLab](#) which encourages and enables invention (for personal learning, enterprise, or pleasure) by providing access to tools for digital fabrication from programmable sewing machines to laser cutters and 3D printers.

Neath Port Talbot libraries staff have developed after-school activities based on Swansea University's [TechnoCamps programme](#), which they deliver in partnership with local primary schools. The activities enable children aged 7 to 11 to develop their enthusiasm for STEM skills by learning computer coding and creating projects using LEGO's Mindstorm robots.

Manchester Libraries have built a '[digital demonstrator suite](#)' aimed at local businesses in their newly re-opened Central Library; it aims to provide 'hands-on' experience of new technologies and high-speed connectivity to local businesses through workshops and events to demonstrate the opportunities these can bring.

Lewisham libraries have [packed up their digital offer](#) and taken it out to local community events to showcase what they offer as a gateway to digital knowledge, and as places where anyone, regardless of income, can experience new technology and learn how to use it.

The full report and supporting documents are available on SCL's website, www.goscl.com

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Notes for Editors

1. **The Society of Chief Librarians (SCL)** is a local government association made up of the chief librarian of each library authority in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. SCL takes a leading role in the development of public libraries, through sharing best practices, advocating for continuous improvement on behalf of local people, and leading the debate on the future of the public library service. www.goscl.com
2. **Shared Intelligence** provides research and consultancy advice on a wide range of public policy issues including public libraries. They have worked with many of the UK's public library authorities and have also supported several national research projects relating to libraries including Arts Council England's *Envisioning the library of the future*. www.sharedintelligence.net
3. Arts Council England champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. We support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2011 and 2015, we will invest £1.4 billion of public money from government and an estimated £1 billion from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. www.artscouncil.org.uk
4. SCL's latest research into digital leadership skills was funded by Arts Council England and undertaken by Shared Intelligence between April and July 2014. The aim was to identify significant digital developments relevant to library leadership and then identify digital leadership skills and competencies library leaders need, to

operate in this changing landscape. Digital developments were identified through desk research, and a survey of all SCL members in England, Wales and NI, to which 110 SCL members responded with detailed comments. A skills audit was carried out receiving responses from 75 SCL members and 128 individuals whom SCL members' had identified as potential future leaders. The findings were tested in webinars and face-to-face discussions throughout the course of the study. The main reports of the research are available on the SCL website, www.goscl.com