SPHERE: STORMONT PARLIAMENTARY 
HANSARDS: EMBEDDING IN RESEARCH

**Use Case: Impact**

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The SPHERE project convened an Irish Studies e-Resource Workshop in order to discuss outreach and embedding of Irish Studies e-Resources, and to capture strategic recommendations for greater impact of such resources. This event was held at the Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI), and co-hosted by the Centre for Data Digitisation and Analysis (CDDA) at Queen’s Belfast and the National Library of Wales (NLW), on 8th April 2011. This report is intended to capture strategic outcomes from this event.

The Workshop was attended by key stakeholders, all responsible for the creation, management and use of significant resources for Irish and Celtic Studies. The workshop built on the findings of the impact report into use and impact of *The Stormont Papers* undertaken by the SPHERE project, and investigated some of the key issues uncovered, including the relatively limited use of this resource. The Workshop addressed ways that outreach could be improved, in order to increase impact of *The Stormont Papers* and related resources. Other issues addressed that related to outreach included linking the material to other content, augmenting it with new material, and developing sustainability models. Work on SPHERE had identified a number of recurrent concerns with other developers of related e-content, and these findings led to this workshop.

The workshop comprised 17 speakers together with a further 8 attendees from key organisations in Ireland and Britain including
Belfast City Council (BCC), King’s College London (KCL), Library and Information Services Council Northern Ireland (LISC), Libraries NI (LNI), the Linen Hall Library, the National Archives of Ireland (NAI), NLW, National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI), the Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency (NISRA), PRONI, Queen’s University (QUB), the Royal Irish Academy (RIA), the Strategic Content Alliance (SCA), the University of Portsmouth (UP), the University of Manchester (UM) and the University of Ulster (UU). Due to the strong response from invited attendees it was not possible to issue a wider call for participation.

A number of common themes were identified both through the formal presentations and discussion amongst delegates:

- There is considerable activity in the development of Irish Studies e-content. A number of large projects have been completed, with other work currently underway or planned. This activity reflected the rich analogue Irish Studies content held in Northern Ireland and the local and international demand for this material in more accessible formats.
- There is a lack of clarity in what e-resources are being created and by whom.
- Organisations are serving specific audiences from academic users, to the general public, to streamlining back-office operations to provide easier access to information for internal use. This has resulted in considerable audience and sector fragmentation. In the academic sector it may have resulted in undue focus on scholarly resources of limited interest to the public, in heritage organisations it may have resulted in bias towards sources containing person names to feed genealogists. Different sectors have different priorities and the potential for tension exists in attempting to meet the needs of diverse groups of users, however it is also clear that across all fields of activity, e-resources are increasingly required to stress and increase their impact, be this in commercial or non-commercial contexts.
- There is no coherent adoption of standards in the development of content whether in terms of the use of metadata, data capture techniques or methods of dissemination.
- Large numbers of data silos are being created which challenge user audiences in several ways including resource discovery, extracting information from bespoke websites, drawing
together fragmented data and more. It became apparent during the presentations that architectures to draw data together were desirable and that it would be wise to explore the under-utilised systems that were already in place both within Northern Ireland and beyond.

- Whilst a number of organisations represented have analogue collections of international value, technical experience at the highest level, or both, there is little cross-fertilisation of skills and content.
- Overreliance on private sector suppliers and expertise presented certain risks in terms of costs compared to not-for-profit organisations, the use of established standards, and the longevity of companies compared to opportunities offered by suitable memory institutions.
- There is a fundamental challenge associated with the current funding environment in Ireland and Britain.

- Discussion around these themes highlighted the potential for a series of initiatives to ensure that Northern Ireland leads in meeting the international interest in Irish Studies with its associated social, economic and cultural benefits. Leadership is required to co-ordinate activities in all aspects of resource development from the selection of strategic content to digitise, to adopting best practice in information collection and management, to sharing expertise, and developing dissemination strategies. It seems unlikely that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is able to provide this leadership and the development of alternate strategies is required. Indeed, this lack of leadership may be island-wide. However, there are opportunities to learn lessons from past resource development activity when shared in a collaborative environment. A joined-up approach to content development, and cross-sector sharing of resources is required, and a digital infrastructure to link e-resources together and break down data silos is necessary. There seems little doubt that if content were interlinked an integrated resources would be of greater value than its component parts. Sharing of resources – content, hardware, expertise – is likely to result in overall cost reductions than stand-alone project development, and building collections with critical mass in terms of breadth of coverage and disciplinary coverage will ease sustainability concerns through the use of shared infrastructure and increased uptake of the resources created.
• There are enhanced opportunities to secure funding available across different sectors and internationally through a collaborative approach. Possible funding sources include the Heritage Lottery, educational charities, the International Fund for Ireland and academic Research Councils. In all instances cross-sector impact is of importance.

An important conclusion of the event was that increased impact of digital resources in Irish and Celtic Studies can be facilitated through sector, and cross-sector, collaboration. It is recommended that a Network of Expert Institutions in Irish e-Resources be established comprising stakeholder bodies who are willing and able to share expertise and content to the general good. Such a network might follow the model adopted by the Humanities ICT Expert Network of Centres (see www.arts-humanities.net/noc) although with wider terms of reference. As the next step towards this goal it is suggested that a second workshop be held to address generic issues relating to Irish Studies e-content. These matters include, but are not limited to, advocacy of the development of Irish Studies content, strategic digitisation, digital preservation, resource dissemination, business models for resource development and sustainability, sharing of assets including digitisation equipment and archival resources, interoperability, the adoption of standards. No one stakeholder possesses all of these skillsets but many are able to contribute in one or more areas.