



# 1. Introduction

The digital challenge facing archives is hugely significant. This document, based on the full Plugged in, Powered up strategy document, sets out The National Archives' approach to helping the sector meet this challenge over the next three years. Every archive and archive professional should in turn be considering what actions they will carry out in that time.

21<sup>st</sup>-century archive professionals should be trusted experts in terms of the record, both analogue and digital. They should be confident with digital terminology – able to 'speak the language' of digital formats, methods and work. They should also be confident users of digital tools and intelligent customers of digital suppliers, able to determine their own requirements and make informed judgements between competing providers. They must work collaboratively both within their own organisations with IT, records management and marketing colleagues and externally with emerging and established digital groups. They must become deeply embedded in their civic digital communities. Like librarians, those working in archives have a role to play in tackling digital exclusion and improving digital and information literacy within their communities – however defined.

The evidence from our large scale survey of over 300 archive professionals, carried out with Jisc at the beginning of 2019, is that many of today's archive professionals are not in a position to meet the demands of contemporary collections management and advocacy. Only 1 in 3 UK respondents to our survey reported that they felt they have the digital skills they need to carry out their roles. This is far from a firm enough basis to meet the digital needs of UK archives and this document outlines a programme of support in order to improve on this figure and allow archives professionals to take their place as trusted custodians of the nation's data. Archive professionals must continue to develop their skills to ensure that they can carry out their most critical functions in a digital age. There is no more urgent challenge facing the sector today.

This strategy focuses on three main areas of digital archival work: engagement, access and preservation.



Digital skills underpin the delivery all three of these areas of work and include a mix of both practical, technical skills (such as generating a checksum of a digital file) and skills that are more about understanding norms, requirements and vocabulary such as writing a high quality request

for tenders or putting together a successful social media campaign. Plugged in, Powered Up proposes additional actions to support digital skills more generally within the archives sector and sets out a plan for three business years of work to be delivered from 2019 to 2022.

## 2. Building engagement capacity

The National Archives can play a very significant role in developing capacity across the full spectrum of digital activity within archives, but it cannot do everything. Therefore this document includes a series of actions that The National Archives will undertake and a series of recommendations to the sector in each area of activity. Digital engagement is an under-appreciated area of heritage work which can be transformative for archives and audiences.

The National Archives will:

- Fund **grants for digital engagement**, allowing archives to run digital events to public audiences. (From 2019)
- Produce an **engagement toolkit**, gathering together useful existing resources to improve social media impact and support digital storytelling. (From 2020)
- Pilot approaches to the cataloguing of digitised records through **crowdsourcing**, looking at existing platforms and commissioning new guidance. (From 2019)

The sector should:

- **Work with civic tech.** Archives should look to form relationships with data mills, code clubs, citizen science projects and charities such as Wikimedia UK and the Raspberry Pi foundation.
- **Diversify volunteers** by offering new, defined, digitally focused opportunities to students and young adults, which benefit both the archive and the volunteer.
- **Consider enacting community decision making.** Archives should allow their audiences more input into decisions around digitisation, cataloguing and other aspects of access via online voting, [crowdfunding](#) and discussion.
- **Be clear online about how to collaborate.** Academic collaboration in particular doesn't have to be occasional and opportunistic, but instead strategic. Setting expectations for potential collaborators can help to start discussions on a positive footing.

### 3. Building access capacity

Archives can boast considerable success in records digitisation and publication but, at the same time, considerable challenges remain in this area. Many archives are locked into catalogue systems with poor public interfaces which inhibit discoverability. Access to born-digital records is underdeveloped and, while many archives' websites meet an impressive standard of web accessibility, the sector could do much more to support digital inclusion more widely.

The National Archives will:

- **Produce on-site digital access guidance.** All UK archives that are open regularly to the general public should offer wired and wireless internet access and active user support. (From 2020/1)
- **Support digital research** by producing guidance to support the use of born-digital records by the research community. (From 2020/1)
- **Work with vendors**, particularly of library systems, to improve archive modules offered as part of integrated cataloguing solutions. (From 2019)
- **Develop training in user-centred design** for the sector, including requirements gathering and user research. (From 2019)
- **Explore sector metadata presentation** through further development of the Manage Your Collections tool to host and present sector metadata at scale via Discovery. (From 2019)

The sector should:

- **Expand and deepen collaborations and consortia** to share digital costs and expertise.
- **Make digital work visible** through sustained and effective promotion and ensure that the outcomes of funded digital projects are modular, reusable and open.

### 4. Building preservation capacity

This is a particularly urgent area of need. Huge progress has been made in the last decade in meeting the significant challenges posed by the quantity and complexity of born-digital and digitised material. Unfortunately, a gap has developed (and appears to be widening) between institutions leading on digital preservation and the remainder of the sector. To narrow it, both organisations and individual archive professionals will need enhanced support.

To this end, from 2019 The National Archives will:

- **Develop and deliver an intensive practical short course** in digital preservation.
- **Commission new entry-level guidance** aimed at installation and use of open-source preservation tools.
- **Publish details of preservation workflows and infrastructures** that are in use within the sector.
- **Actively pursue grant funding** to support digital preservation work in local and specialist archives.
- **Raise the profile of digital preservation in local government** through engagement with the Society of IT Managers and the Local Government Association.

The sector should:

- **Make both digital preservation work and training a strategic priority.** Other work may have to be temporarily scaled back to allow critical new capacity to be developed.
- **Begin or intensify discussions with senior IT managers** within their organisation to form the partnerships necessary for sustainable preservation.

## 5. Developing digital skills

Digital archival work requires specialist knowledge specific to archives and is not simply a collation of digital skills. Nevertheless, effective 21<sup>st</sup>-century archival work is impossible without an appropriate level of digital knowledge and training. Some of these skills are technical or tool-based (such as generating a checksum), while some are strategic or organisational (for example, writing a tender for a digital product or service).

To support this breadth of needed digital skills, The National Archives will:

- **Launch a network** for archive professionals undertaking digital work. The Digital Archives Learning Exchange (DALE) will meet regularly off and online to share skills and best practice. (From 2019)
- Develop a **peer mentoring programme** to encourage the transfer of skills from those experienced in digital work to those less experienced. (From 2020)
- Develop a **digital leadership programme** to ensure senior managers can formulate and execute the digital strategy and advocacy needed now and in the future. (From 2020/1)

- **Publish metrics** showing the relative digital performance of UK archives to facilitate comparison and promote transparency and excellence. (From 2020/1)
- Support the British Library and Birkbeck, University of London, to **create and deliver a new postgraduate qualification** in Computing for Cultural Heritage. (Open for applications 2020)
- Work with the Archives and Records Association to **ensure postgraduate archive courses provide a greater focus on digital archival skills** and practice.
- Continue to **develop and support novel routes into the sector**, including apprenticeships and the Bridging the Digital Gap traineeships.

The sector should:

- **Support staff** to develop their digital skills and share knowledge with colleagues and the wider sector.
- **Share experiences** of digital work while it is being undertaken – through blogs, social networks and by working in the open using code repositories such as Github.