

THE	
NATIONAL	
ARCHIVES	



# Our Research Vision 2024-27

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# Our Research Vision

## Foreword

The National Archives is a research institution. Our collection – stretching over 240 kilometres of shelving and petabytes of digital material – is a pillar of the United Kingdom’s intellectual infrastructure, and is consulted by academics and scholars, journalists, writers, lawyers, genealogists and the wider public every day. It contains government files, court records, wills, maps, photographs, emails, websites, data and code; and stories, about love, death, money, power, community and the human experience.

But we are not just a repository: we conduct research ourselves, as well as enabling it for others. The National Archives is an Independent Research Organisation (IRO), accredited by UK Research and Innovation in recognition of the scale, significance, rigour and originality of our research. We have led major funded research projects in the arts and humanities, in computer science, and in heritage science and conservation. We have created dozens of PhD studentships, placements and early-career fellowships. We are a hub for archival innovation nationally and internationally, with state-of-the-art laboratories and digital tools. Our public, educational and academic programmes of talks, workshops, conferences and online resources reach tens of thousands of people each year.

Our research is at the heart of what we do, and creates ripple effects throughout The National Archives and beyond. Whether it be developing the latest technology to preserve and present the digital record, or making forgotten voices from our collection visible

through our engagement programmes, research underpins almost every facet of Archives for Everyone, our strategic plan.

This is our vision for research. It outlines our conception of what a researching archive might be: an institution that preserves the past, sustains the future, provides truly equitable access, and which travels beyond its own front doors to engage with the society of which it is part. The National Archives can be an evidence, memory, identity and a community institution<sup>1</sup>; it can be custodial, sustainable, accessible and impactful. It can be everything an archive might be.

Our Areas of Research Interest outline our priorities for 2024 – 2027. We have also created a Roadmap, through which our research ecosystem – our staff, students, infrastructure, skills, technologies and partnerships – will be equipped to deliver these priorities and realise our potential.

We look forward to building new relationships, and deepening our existing connections, as we set out to fulfil these ambitions.

**The National Archives is not just a repository: we conduct research ourselves, as well as enabling it for others.**

<sup>1</sup> Cook, Terry (2013). “Evidence, memory, identity and community: four shifting archival paradigms.” *Archival Science* 13, pp 95-120. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10502-012-9180-7>.

# Context: four principles for research at The National Archives

## 1. Practice-based

Research – *creating new knowledge* – is fundamental to each facet of the heterogeneity at the heart of The National Archives, and it takes place every day and in every corner of our institution.<sup>2</sup>

Whether it be unboxing a medieval writ to describe it for our catalogue, writing code to safely preserve and provide access to complex digital objects, or conducting a chemical analysis of an unknown pigment, the generation of knowledge is fundamental to our working practice. This knowledge generation takes many different forms, from blue-sky problem-setting to the most immediate and applied problem-solving. Many of our staff are researching, much of the time.

We are the only government department that is accredited as an IRO; but we are also the state's publisher, at the heart of information policy and management; the leadership body for the archives sector in England; the Historical Manuscripts Commission, sustaining private archives across the United Kingdom; and a cultural heritage institution with an extensive programme of education, exhibitions and public programming. We have a unique position to leverage at the crossroads of many fields.

The word 'archive' signifies not only a collection, but also the institution or community which holds it. This Vision is about

that community, and it seeks to empower everyone within and around The National Archives to recognise the potential of their own research, even – or, perhaps particularly – where they do not yet or do not only recognise themselves as researchers.<sup>3</sup>

We must empower our research leaders to answer our biggest questions, and nurture a culture of innovation at every level of our institution, to maintain the foundations on which our thought leadership sits. We will build on our reputation as a collection-holding institution to create research that is **practice-based**: grounded in 'what we do' as much as 'what we have'.



<sup>2</sup> We use the REF definition of research: "a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared".

<sup>3</sup> We endorse and uphold the [Technician Commitment](#) and its vision for librarians and archivists.

## 2. Strategic

We believe that our research benefits society: but our scholarship cannot rest on that assumption alone. The Public Records Act charges The National Archives (through the Keeper of Public Records) with specific duties: to preserve the record, as it has been preserved for us, and to provide access to it for the public. Each of these duties is complex and dynamic, and each changes with the passage of time, the emergence of technology, and the development of the society to which we are responsible as public servants.

We do research to support that public task: we believe that research is an axiomatic good, but here, we undertake it specifically to support our duties. In short, our research must be **strategic** and purposeful: it has to support Archives for Everyone, our strategy, in tangible and measurable ways.

However, this does not diminish or narrow our ambitions as a researching archive: our challenges are still complex, multifaceted and uncertain, and the research that addresses them must therefore be broad in its scope and bold in its intent, while upholding the highest standards of originality, significance and rigour.

**This Vision seeks to empower everyone within and around The National Archives to recognise the potential of their own research, even where they do not yet recognise themselves as researchers.**



## 3. Uncertain

Disruptive and entrepreneurial innovation can test our politics, governance, culture and innate sense of self on an almost daily basis. In the archive, we must address (to name but three):

1. A tidal wave of digital material – the ‘digital heap’<sup>4</sup> – which in its scale, diversity of format, and complexity of structure will overwhelm many existing recordkeeping institutions and practices;
2. A changing climate, which places new pressures on energy-hungry archival institutions, and on our understanding of our own ecological past;
3. A shifting society, which compels us to consider ever more actively what becoming the Inclusive Archive really means, and how we become an Archive for Everyone which is accessible to, representative of and enriching for every person we serve.

<sup>4</sup> Allan, Alex (2015). “Review of government digital records.” Government digital records and archives review by Sir Alex Allan – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

This is why The National Archives has a Research Vision: because our obligation to preserve and provide access to the record is not one that we can simply fulfil now, or three months from now, but rather, is one that must endure 5, 50 or 500 years from the present. As a researching archive, we embrace the unknown, iterate, and improve our practice. We create tolerance towards risk (technological, financial and reputational), and we create spaces where we can fail early, fail gently and – yes – fail often.<sup>5</sup>

The function of research at The National Archives is to scan the future, to codify and disseminate new knowledge to seed innovation, and to create spaces for translational research and experimentation where we can embrace **uncertain** outcomes.

## 4. Connective

We cannot do this alone. We are just one institution, with a short history as a research organisation, in a comparatively small sector. To realise our potential, we have to engage with, learn from and work in partnership with others, including through the transfer of technologies, practices and skills from other sectors as part of a wide research ecosystem. This Vision seeks to build the **connective** tissue between The National Archives and the partners we need, from every sector, to grow our research portfolio, create new opportunities for interdisciplinary innovation, address our biggest challenges, and build upon our potential.

Through our research, we will connect our needs with the vast horizons of the galleries, libraries, museums and archives sectors; with the researching academy, in universities in the UK and abroad; and with private enterprise and the wider public sector. We will collaborate more deeply and more intentionally with new and existing partners,



including entering formal partnerships where appropriate.

Our fundamental strength lies in our fundamental heterogeneity: we can conduct research as an IRO, engage in policymaking as a government department, change practice nationally as a sector leader, and educate and engage our audiences as a cultural heritage institution, within the single space that is The National Archives.

The Areas of Research Interest below map out where we want to travel, as we continue to build a portfolio which is **practice-based, strategic, uncertain and connective**, over the next three years and beyond.

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<sup>5</sup> We have been inspired, among many other initiatives, by the Centre for Cultural Value's [FailSpace](#) project.

# Areas of research interest



At The National Archives, we have a range of research expertise, including:

- **Collections and archives:** archival theory, standards and practice; cataloguing; and historically focused arts and humanities research, from the medieval to the contemporary, with a particular focus on underexplored collections and new ways of engaging with global history through our collections.
- **Digital, data and emerging technologies:** new and emerging technologies; computer science; digital preservation, accessibility and presentation; digital scholarship; data science; and computational approaches to the archive.
- **Conservation and heritage science:** preservation standards; advanced and sustainable environmental management; conservation practice and semantically linked knowledge documentation systems; material understanding of the record and its implications for contemporary audiences and practitioners; and sector leadership in heritage science.

These are supported by our:

- **Impact, culture and engagement:** enabling research and facilitating collaboration; skills and capacity development; learning and student programmes; working towards greater inclusion across all areas of our work; and evaluating and communicating the value of our research, education and outreach.
- **Infrastructure:** legislation, information and data policy; management and development of our laboratories, repositories and physical spaces; our digital estate, facilitating digital research and computational access to our data; open access to research and information; and understanding the archive sector through data and evidence.

We believe in interdisciplinary approaches, and in the necessity of encounters between different subject specialisms, perspectives and backgrounds within the archive. We always work towards connective, collaborative partnership between individuals and institutions.







Within the framework of the above, we have identified four **themes** and twenty **priorities** for our research in 2024 – 2027:

## 1. Trusted and secure custodianship

Our first duty under the Public Records Act is to *“take all practicable steps for the preservation of records”* in our care, to secure them for future generations. This includes the physical care of our ever-growing collection of analogue records, and also includes the selection, transfer and preservation of a digital public record that is growing exponentially year-on-year, and which exists in a world where trust in the veracity of information is more valuable than ever, because it is under threat. We must become a ‘living digital national archive’ by instinct and design.

This research theme captures our challenges in appraisal, selection and sensitivity review, as we expand our archival practice to include new collections and real-time published court judgements, in becoming the ‘archive not just of government but of the state’; the use of technology, including AI, to help make decisions about what should be transferred to the archive; and the need to preserve physical and digital records, including AI models, independently of the software that was used to create them.

This must happen within a clear policy and legal framework, where the imperative to govern openly and the rights of individuals to control their own data sometimes exist in tension.

### Our priorities are:

- What should we collect, preserve and present, as we shape changing standards, practices and cultures in managing information, to fully realise the value of authenticity, trusted evidence and the archive in a democratic society?
- How can we use AI and other emerging technologies, in an ethical, safe and transparent way, to solve our biggest archival practice challenges in preservation, selection and sensitivity review?
- How do we use the latest advances in scientific and conservation practice to preserve the physical record for future generations?
- How do we rethink our own role as a researching archive, creating encounters between different institutions and disciplines, and leading and learning from others in our research practice?
- Policy and legal infrastructure: understanding information legislation, data protection, and our role as custodian of the record of the state.



## 2. A responsible, sustainable future

As well as the record itself, we must also protect the environment and the institutions that sustain it. Archives are organisations with a long-term view: we must look forward to a changing climate in a ‘demonstrably sustainable’ way and inspire positive action by engaging with our planetary history.<sup>6</sup>

This research theme captures our ambition to measure and reduce the environmental impact of our practice and of our physical and digital estate; and to use the untold wealth of geographical, environmental, ecological and geospatial information within our collection to inform the future through understanding the past.

We also must develop our physical infrastructure, in a responsible way – creating laboratories, repositories and public spaces fit for the future – and continue to invest in people, through our staff, students and partnerships.

### **Our priorities are:**

- How do we realise our collection’s potential to shape geographical, environmental and ecological histories, to inform a sustainable future?
- How can we measure and mitigate the environmental impact of our digital estate?
- How can we adapt our estate, practice and standards, to safeguard our collections in the most environmentally responsible way?
- How can we facilitate opportunities for future research, supporting the development of researchers at all career stages and cultivating an inclusive research culture across our organisation and our partnerships?
- Physical infrastructure: the state-of-the-art spaces, laboratories and repositories needed for the development, delivery and dissemination of cutting-edge research and scholarship.

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<sup>6</sup> We partner with [Our Collections Matter](#), the [UK Museums COP](#) organised by [NMDC](#), and other initiatives within the cultural heritage sector to deliver this Vision.



### 3. Global, inclusive access

Our next responsibility is to provide access: to *“arrange that reasonable facilities are available to the public for inspecting and obtaining copies of those public records in the Public Record Office”*. The nature of what this entails has evolved through time, and it now encompasses both physical and digital access to our collection. We believe that access should be global, for the many communities around the world represented within the record of the British state; and computational, to provide meaningful ‘big’ data for emerging technological approaches to the archive. We must become a ‘genuinely inclusive, collaborative and available national archive’.

This research theme captures our ambition to unlock our collections in new ways, for example through AI, optical character recognition (OCR) and handwritten text recognition (HTR); to foreground global majority voices in our collection and centre the communities represented therein, working in partnership with other global institutions; and, closer to home, to overcome the immediate challenges of hazardous materials in our collection and distributed data within our heritage science and conservation practice.

The above must be underpinned by a secure and sustainable digital estate, for our collection and research work, ensuring that every output we create is open, accessible and has a permanent digital legacy.

#### Our priorities are:

- How do we make global majority histories and marginalised voices visible, in an ethical, inclusive and meaningful way, within and through our collections?
- How can we use AI, OCR/HTR and other emerging technology to datafy our digitised collections and provide computational access to our born-digital collections on a national and global scale?
- How do we enable safe and global access to the whole of our material collection, including where it is hazardous; and comprehensive access to our heritage science and conservation data?
- How do we ensure open and equitable access to our research outputs, outcomes and opportunities?
- Digital infrastructure: an open, sustainable and cost-effective digital estate for our digital collection and research outputs.



## 4. The archive within and for society

Finally, we believe that archives are for everyone, and should mean something to everyone. It is not enough to wait for our stakeholders to come to us; we must go beyond our own front doors, to realise the public value of the archive in society through our educational and student programmes, our work in communities, and our partnerships with the wider academic sector.





This research theme captures our vision for the archive as an institution that helps us both understand and shape our own wellbeing and social identity, as a space where the stories of our records and our objects come to life, and as a place where our users are fully empowered, including by the latest technological tools, to conduct their own scholarship into our collection.

The National Archives is one of around 2,500 archives in the United Kingdom. Our vision can only be realised through a national infrastructure of public and private archives, delivering social and economic value in the places where they are found, and working in partnership with the wider galleries, libraries, museums and academic (GLAMA) sectors. As the sector leadership body for archives, we are committed to releasing their potential through an ambitious vision for the archives sector across the UK.

### **Our priorities are:**

- How do we advance interdisciplinary scholarship in medical and health humanities, and realise the archive's contribution to health, wellbeing and place?
- How can we use human-computer interaction (HCI), emerging technologies and other digital scholarship approaches to empower the widest-possible audience of archive users?
- How do the material and visual histories of our collection enhance our collective understanding of our shared history?
- How do we actively engage different audiences and research communities in impactful ways, maintaining a reflexive and inclusive approach to research practice, engagement and development?
- National infrastructure: realising the economic and social value of The National Archives and the wider archives sector.

# Vision in a page

Our expertise and themes	 <b>1. Trusted and secure custodianship</b>	 <b>2. A responsible, sustainable future</b>	 <b>3. Global, inclusive access</b>	 <b>4. The archive within and for society</b>
<b>Collections and Archives</b>	What should we collect, preserve and present, as we shape changing standards, practices and cultures in managing information, to fully realise the value of authenticity, trusted evidence and the archive in a democratic society?	How do we realise our collection's potential to shape geographical, environmental and ecological histories, to inform a sustainable future?	How do we make global majority histories and marginalised voices visible, in an ethical, inclusive and meaningful way, within and through our collections?	How do we advance interdisciplinary scholarship in medical and health humanities, and realise the archive's contribution to health, wellbeing and place?
<b>Digital, Data and Emerging Technologies</b>	How can we use AI and other emerging technologies, in an ethical, safe and transparent way, to solve our biggest archival practice challenges in preservation, selection and sensitivity review?	How can we measure and mitigate the environmental impact of our digital estate?	How can we use AI, OCR/HTR and other emerging technology to datafy our digitised collections and provide computational access to our born-digital collections on a national and global scale?	How can we use HCI, emerging technologies and other digital scholarship approaches to empower the widest-possible audience of archive users?
<b>Conservation and Heritage Science</b>	How do we use the latest advances in scientific and conservation practice to preserve the physical record for future generations?	How can we adapt our estate, practice and standards, to safeguard our collections in the most environmentally responsible way?	How do we enable safe and global access to the whole of our material collection, including where it is hazardous; and comprehensive access to our heritage science and conservation data?	How do the material and visual histories of our collection enhance our collective understanding of our shared history?
<b>Impact, Culture and Engagement</b>	How do we rethink our own role as a researching archive, creating encounters between different institutions and disciplines, and leading and learning from others in our research practice?	How can we facilitate opportunities for future research, supporting the development of researchers at all career stages and cultivating an inclusive research culture across our organisation and our partnerships?	How do we ensure open and equitable access to our research outputs, outcomes and opportunities?	How do we actively engage different audiences and research communities in impactful ways, maintaining a reflexive and inclusive approach to research practice, engagement and development?
<b>Research Infrastructure</b>	Policy and legal infrastructure: understanding information legislation, data protection, and our role as custodian of the record of the state.	Physical infrastructure: the state-of-the-art spaces, laboratories and repositories needed for the development, delivery and dissemination of cutting-edge research and scholarship.	Digital infrastructure: an open, sustainable and cost-effective digital estate for our digital collection and research outputs.	National infrastructure: realising the economic and social value of The National Archives and the wider archives sector.

# Our Research Roadmap

## Introduction

Our **Research Vision** sets out our institutional areas of research interest, and our priorities for the research which we want to undertake. It is a shared and corporate vision, which seeks to encompass and enable research across our organisation, wherever it is needed and wherever our research can be impactful.

This Roadmap, or operational plan, has been developed to connect that organisational

vision to the work of our Research, Grants and Academic Engagement Department, the central hub for research, research funding and research engagement within The National Archives.

It seeks to translate the principles of our Research Vision into a series of tangible steps that will be undertaken by the Department in 2024 – 2027, to support The National Archives as a whole.



We will:

1

Create projects, build skills and develop a clear pathway for researchers across the breadth of our research **practice**;

2

Realise the benefit and societal impact of our research to our **strategy**, working within a strong governance structure;

3

Create the technical, procedural and cultural infrastructure that we need, to accept **uncertainty** and embrace opportunities in an ethical and inclusive way;

4

**Connect** with our research ecosystem, through our publications, training, events, partnerships and wider research engagement.

We look forward to working with our internal and external stakeholders as we progress through this Roadmap over the coming three years.



# Research Roadmap

	<b>Outcomes</b> (what we want to achieve)	<b>Activities</b> (what we intend to do)
<b>1</b>	<b>Projects</b> Grow the value and scope of funded research projects across The National Archives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We will horizon scan for funding, share funding intelligence, and direct planned projects to the most suitable funding opportunities.</li><li>• We will fund pilot and preparatory work through our Strategic Research Fund.</li><li>• We will develop a portfolio of outstanding research projects that respond to the priorities and ambitions of our Research Vision.</li></ul>
<b>2</b>	<b>Publications</b> Greater volume and scope of publications, and other research outputs including code, shared openly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We will openly publish our research more frequently and more impactfully, in peer-reviewed journals and other media.</li><li>• We will make our code and data openly and computationally accessible.</li></ul>
<b>3</b>	<b>Engagement</b> Greater engagement with our research, from our public, archives sector and academic audiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We will refresh our website, social media and newsletters to reflect our new Vision.</li><li>• We will continue to pilot new forms of digital engagement.</li></ul>
<b>4</b>	<b>Programming</b> An impactful portfolio of conferences, seminars and events centred on our research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We will curate an impactful programme of events that showcase and grow our research, including a biannual DCDC conference, History and Archives in Practice events, an Annual Digital Lecture, and events centred on our heritage science and conservation research.</li></ul>



	<b>Outcomes</b> (what we want to achieve)	<b>Activities</b> (what we intend to do)
<b>5</b>	<p><b>Students</b></p> <p>A comprehensive and impactful research training offer which reflects our role.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will continue to support a cohort of PhD students each year, supervising and providing programmes of training for postgraduates, and curating a PhD portfolio which adds value to The National Archives and reflects the priorities of our Research Vision.</li> <li>• We will consider our whole academic training offer at the undergraduate and postgraduate level, including workshops, placements and training, to create a single vision of who we want to be as an institution for lifelong academic learning.</li> </ul>
<b>6</b>	<p><b>Infrastructure</b></p> <p>Developed, accessible and secure research services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will support the construction of digital research services, through the construction or procurement of a repository or platform which provides secure, open and computational access to our publications, outputs and data, for example to support the training and use of AI models, while conforming to established standards.</li> </ul>
<b>7</b>	<p><b>Governance</b></p> <p>A mature research advisory and governance structure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will recruit an expert Research Advisory Group, to provide advice and challenge on our Vision and Roadmap.</li> <li>• We will complete the development of our policy, compliance and process infrastructure.</li> </ul>
<b>8</b>	<p><b>Partnerships</b></p> <p>Deepened existing and new, more diverse partnerships in our research ecosystem.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will deepen our existing partnerships, including entering formal partnerships where appropriate.</li> <li>• We will look to build new partnerships in different communities of practice, with funders, collaborators, businesses and communities, including outside of the cultural heritage sector, and particularly in the information and computer sciences.</li> </ul>
<b>9</b>	<p><b>Impact</b></p> <p>Measurable impact and strategic benefit from our research activity, across the four-year outcomes of our corporate strategy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will develop and implement a structured framework for capturing our societal research impact.</li> <li>• We will capture, track and report on the benefits of our research to our corporate strategy.</li> <li>• We will complete the development of a suite of KPIs against which to measure the delivery of this Roadmap.</li> </ul>

	<b>Outcomes</b> (what we want to achieve)	<b>Activities</b> (what we intend to do)
<b>10</b>	<b>Development</b> A clear pathway for staff to develop as researchers, with comprehensive training, incentives and career development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will use our staff induction, shadowing programme, drop-ins, events and other communications to introduce a wider range of people to research at The National Archives.</li> <li>• We will refresh our structured, formal training programme for researcher development and grant management.</li> <li>• We will provide mentoring, experimentation workshops, secondments, fellowships, sabbatical opportunities, and peer-to-peer skills development for our staff.</li> <li>• We will engage with our Human Resources Department to explore incentivisation, reward and progression for research excellence at The National Archives.</li> </ul>
<b>11</b>	<b>Inclusion</b> Continuing the development of standards for ethical and inclusive research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will continue the development of best-practice standards for inclusive research and engagement.</li> <li>• We will complete the development of our policy and procedures for ethical and trusted research.</li> </ul>
<b>12</b>	<b>Culture</b> Greater confidence, organisationally and individually, in our research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will have greater confidence in our research and researchers, advocating for the value of archives – and for The National Archives – as researching organisations, as well as research infrastructure.</li> <li>• We will break down siloes between research and operational delivery, and value both operational innovation and blue-sky research.</li> </ul>
<b>13</b>	<b>Breadth</b> A wider range of research taking place across The National Archives, in each of the priority areas of the Research Vision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will build cross-organisational research ‘clusters’ to conduct our research activity, across Department boundaries.</li> <li>• We will deliver each of the activities above across the full breath of our Research Vision, realising the research potential of The National Archives in every team and discipline.</li> </ul>

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