

N-RICH Briefing Note

1. What it is

The National Research Infrastructure for Cultural Heritage (N-RICH) Prototype is a two-year investment in the UK's world-renowned cultural heritage collections, funded through a UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Infrastructure Fund Preliminary Activity grant awarded to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and delivered by the Towards a National Collection (TaNC) programme in collaboration with AHRC.

2. Purpose

Its core aim is to reduce investment risk and build the evidence base for a full National Research Infrastructure by testing whether UK cultural heritage data can be created, connected, accessed, analysed and reused at scale.

3. What it does

The N-RICH project prototypes digital infrastructure components, digitisation methods and shared research environments. It tests scalable approaches to digitisation, metadata creation, AI-enabled data augmentation, interoperability, governance and service design. It examines the costs, risks, ethical frameworks, impacts and benefits of a future infrastructure, while exploring technical development and institutional practice across the cultural heritage sector.

4. Why it matters

N-RICH matters because the UK's cultural heritage collections hold major untapped research, social and economic value, but much of this potential remains difficult to access or use computationally. The prototype responds urgently to the need for sustainable, ethical and secure digital infrastructure that can support research, innovation, AI readiness and long-term sector resilience.

5. Who it connects

N-RICH connects cultural heritage organisations, researchers, technical specialists, policy and funding bodies, digital innovation communities, commercial and R&D sectors, and wider public and community users. It is designed to support collaboration across institutions, disciplines and regions.

6. Key focus areas

Key focus areas include the two core technical work packages: the Digitisation Capability Pilot, which addresses supply-side constraints in creating computation-ready collections data, and the Infrastructure Prototype Reference Stack, which addresses demand-side challenges around access, combination, analysis and reuse at scale. These are supported by evidence-based frameworks and linked projects on environmental sustainability, cyber resilience, ethics, economic impact of collection loss, international benchmarking, digitisation prioritisation, social and cultural value of collections, and open knowledge practice. Together, these areas support N-RICH's core aim of building a sustainable, ethical, secure and effective national infrastructure for cultural heritage research and innovation.

International Benchmarking

Delivery: January – October 2026

Purpose: To provide a comparative understanding of the diverse pathways through which digital cultural heritage infrastructures develop globally

Environmental & Sustainability Project

Supplier: InformU & Preserve Together

Delivery: February 2026 – April 2027

Purpose: To ensure that the digital-collections infrastructure developed through N-RICH can scale responsibly within environmental and financial limits

Cyber Resilience Project

Delivery: March 2026 – April 2027

Purpose: To define how cultural heritage data and systems participating in the N-RICH Prototype can be protected, monitored, and recovered in the event of a breach

Digitisation Prioritisation Project

Delivery: May - December 2026

Purpose: To determine whether implementing a unified approach and clear criteria for selecting digitisation priorities within the GLAM sector could significantly increase the effectiveness and value of N-RICH as a research infrastructure

Digitisation Capability Pilot

Supplier: Oxford University Innovation

Delivery: May – December 2026

Purpose: To address the supply-side constraints that currently limit the use of cultural heritage collections in computational and data-driven research

Infrastructure Prototype Reference Stack

Supplier: Answer Digital

Delivery: August 2026 - March 2027

Purpose: To address the demand-side challenge: whether researchers can realistically access, combine, analyse and re-use cultural heritage data at scale through shared computational services, interoperable interfaces and governed research environments

Ethics Project

Delivery: September 2026 – January 2027

Purpose: To ensure that the digital collections infrastructure developed through N-RICH has an ethical framework to recognise, assess, operationalise, and act upon values-led approaches to data, people, processes, and technology

Economic Impact of Collection Loss

Delivery: September 2026 - April 2027

Purpose: To develop an initial evidence base and practical framework for understanding the economic consequences of collections loss, degradation and inaccessibility across the UK cultural heritage sector

Wikimedia Project

Delivery: September 2026 – March 2027

Purpose: To explore the strategic role of Wikidata and Linked Open Data within the N-RICH ecosystem and wider cultural heritage infrastructure landscape.

Social & Cultural Value Case Studies

Delivery: November 2026 - March 2027

Purpose: To develop case studies that communicate the benefits of investment in cultural heritage digitisation, drawn from across a range of GLAM institutions, reflecting diversity in location, governance, scale and collection type.

7. Key contact & N-RICH team

For N-RICH enquiries, please contact Sophie Dietrich, Programme Coordinator, Historic Environment Scotland, at sophie.dietrich@hes.scot. The core team also includes:

- Rebecca Bailey, Programme Director, Historic Environment Scotland
- Sophie Cummings, Delivery Lead, Arts & Humanities Research Council
- Javier Pereda, International Co-Lead, Monterrey Institute, Mexico
- Anna-Maria Sichani, Senior Researcher, Historic Environment Scotland
- Michelle Forster-Davies, Programme Support Officer, Historic Environment Scotland

8. How to stay up to date with N-RICH

Towards a National Collection mailing list: <https://www.nationalcollection.org.uk/contact-us>

Towards a National Collection LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/86925105/>

Version control

Date	Version	Person	Action/Status
June 26	1.0	S Dietrich	First draft prepared
16/06/26	1.1	R Bailey	RB comments incorporated, signed off
13/07/26	1.2.	S Dietrich	Supplier update
16/07/26	1.3	S Dietrich	RB comments incorporated