



*Our Heritage, Our Stories*  
Workshop Report

W2: CGDC producers

## Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) & Our Heritage, Our Stories (OHOS) Mission Statement

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This statement is intended as a call to action to heritage professionals and political representatives alike. It outlines the value and importance of digital content created by community archives to Northern Ireland's history and memory, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the fragility of this material and the risk of loss.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2024, a wide range of stakeholders gathered at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) to explore how community-generated digital content (CGDC) can be preserved and made accessible to new and diverse audiences. Participants explored the value and impact of CGDC to complement, contradict, and challenge "official" sources and received historical narratives, which is especially important in Northern Ireland. For example, a presentation from the Prisons Memory Archive represented stories with connections to Armagh Gaol and Maze/Long Kesh during the Conflict, and a talk about PRONI's CollabArchive project explored the representation of LGBTQIA+ community in the Northern Irish context.

While support for the creation, management and use of digital heritage is currently provided by bodies such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Digital Preservation Coalition, and PRONI, this support varies broadly in longevity and depth and lacks overall cohesion. Often, projects are funded on a short-term basis without consideration of sustainability requirements for the long-term preservation of and access to the digital outputs they generate. The collated findings from the day suggest that the main elements lacking are: sustainable, permanent specialist staff contracts; longer-term budget security and funding; clear and consistent advice from experts, including standardised best practice guidelines; and clearer structure and strategy across the organisations.

Participants raised the need for strengthened local and national structure-building. They also noted that advocacy is a key requirement to ensure the required support, time and resourcing are identified and provided. Collated data from the day shows that organisations are preparing for the future of their archives by conducting structural reviews; implementing retention, selection and disposal of historic archives as well as newly generated ones; networking and collaborating with other organisations to pool resources; providing training to volunteers; and engaging in contemporary collecting.

When asked about resources (outside of funding) needed to achieve their goals, participants listed the most important three as staff, time, and collaboration. This finding maps to the UK-wide concerns identified by the OHOS through a series of interviews, workshops and reports conducted

in conjunction with 84 community archives and projects. The ubiquitous nature of this finding cannot be ignored and is the key driving force behind this statement.

Further local and national joined-up planning and partnership-initiatives are needed to ensure the proper futureproofing of critically endangered CGDC in Northern Ireland and the UK more broadly. A joined-up strategy and vision needs to be set out to ensure the correct contacts and connections are made between local groups and established institutions, and it is imperative that the specifics of the Northern Irish context are considered and embedded in this strategy. Additional support is required across the sector to enable a joined-up strategic approach that will encourage stable, long-term funding, with facilitated training courses and pooled organisational resources.

The strategy must ensure a diverse range of voices, communities and stories are represented in the CGDC which is preserved for future generations, and sensitivity around the collecting and representation of material which may be traumatic or contested.

Ongoing commitment to and awareness of CGDC by funders like the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the Northern Ireland Government, supporting groups and individuals to create, and archive partners such as PRONI to advise and preserve, is required to safeguard Northern Ireland's community generated digital content and ensure the digital assets created today will live into and thrive into the future.

## Summary

### What Northern Irish Heritage Needs Now:

- An improved sense of the importance of heritage and archives and their role in the present and future amongst decision makers
- Improved awareness of the value of CGDC and the preservation challenges which make it vulnerable to loss over time;
- Longer term preservation solutions for digital archives, particularly CGDC, including an understanding of the difference between digital storage and digital preservation;
- Adequate long-term funding, including more sustained funding for organisations already providing support for community heritage, such as PRONI;
- Increasingly diverse user base and partners that can advocate for archives across all parts of Northern Ireland;
- Access to information and/or a network of partners and stakeholders providing practical advice and guidance as well as preservation options if required, for groups and individuals creating CGDC.

Groups and organisations represented at the event:

Ulster University  
John and Pat Hume Foundation  
Clifton House  
Springhill Community House  
Mellon Centre for Migration Studies  
Royal College of Nursing  
North of Ireland Family History Society  
Rural Community Network  
NI Screen  
Prisons Memory Archive  
Sailortown Regeneration  
Corrymeela Community  
Queen's University, Belfast  
Ulster Human Rights Watch  
Heritage Council  
Nerve Centre  
Historic Environment Division, DfC  
North Belfast Heritage Cluster  
Libraries NI  
Linenhall Library  
Irish Community Archive Network  
National Museums Northern Ireland  
Digital Preservation Coalition  
National Lottery Heritage Fund  
University of Glasgow (OHOS Project)  
Clifton House, Belfast  
Belfast City Council  
Public Record Office of Northern Ireland