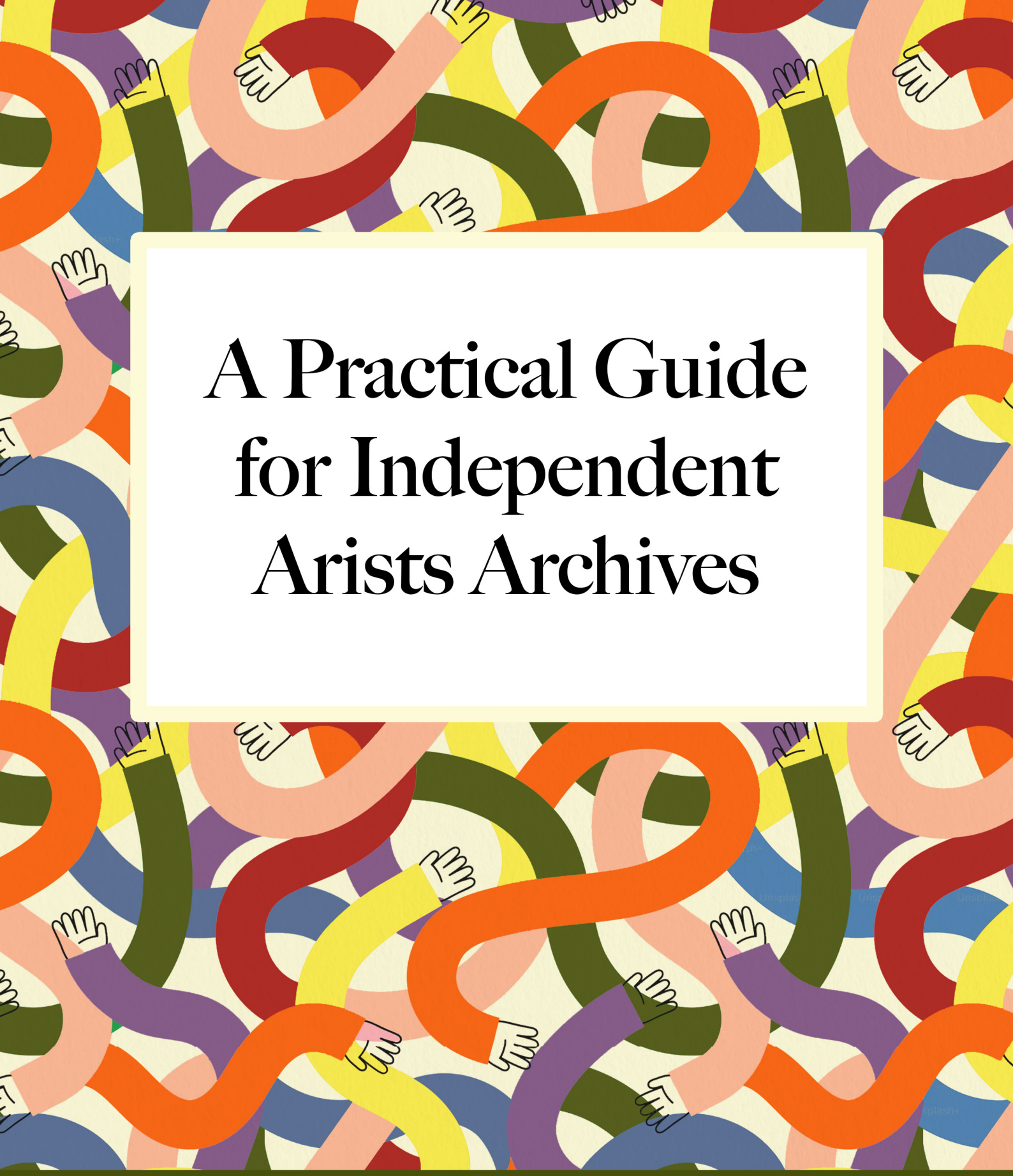


A Practical Guide for Independent Arists Archives

By Sorcha Dallas
Curator/Custodian
The Alasdair Gray Archive

THE ALASDAIR GRAY ARCHIVE
SCOTTISH ARTISTS ARCHIVES NETWORK
CREATIVE SCOTLAND
ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL
GO SEE SHARE

Welcome

Drawing on research developed through the Go See Share Fund from Creative Scotland, including engagement with Flat Time House, Charleston Trust, The Alasdair Gray Archive and The Agnes Owens Archive, this guide explores practical and sustainable approaches to supporting independent artist archives beyond traditional institutional structures. Independent artist archives are increasingly becoming some of the UK's most vital cultural spaces. Often established quickly, precariously and with limited infrastructural support, they preserve far more than artworks or manuscripts alone. They safeguard relationships, communities, creative processes, political histories and forms of social memory that might otherwise disappear. Yet many archives emerge under immense pressure, often following an artist's death, during periods of housing or storage instability, without long-term funding, and through substantial unpaid emotional, intellectual and administrative labour.

Although more than 25,500 artists contribute to Scotland's cultural economy, there remains no national body dedicated specifically to supporting artists' archives. Responsibility frequently falls to individual custodians, families, artists, curators and communities operating with limited resources and specialist expertise. This guide does not propose a singular institutional model, but instead offers adaptable strategies, ethical considerations and practical methodologies for sustaining independent archives in ways that remain publicly alive, financially resilient, ethically grounded and structurally sustainable. Rather than asking how independent archives can replicate museums or formal institutions, it asks how archives can build sustainable cultural ecosystems on their own terms. Its central argument is simple: independent archives survive not because they replicate institutions, but because they build relationships, networks and forms of shared stewardship.

The growing number of independent artist archives emerging across Scotland demonstrates an increasing need for sector-wide infrastructural support and long-term strategic investment. The Scottish Artists Archives Network is helping to lead this development by advocating for greater recognition, connectivity and support across the sector, while creating opportunities for custodians to share knowledge, resources and experience. Custodians are frequently undertaking work of major cultural value without stable funding, strategic guidance, conservation support, training or long-term organisational infrastructure, despite preserving significant aspects of Scotland's cultural memory and creative history.

As more archives continue to operate beyond formal institutional frameworks, there is increasing need for national advocacy, shared resources, advisory support, sector networks, training pathways and sustained civic investment capable of supporting this growing field. Independent archives already contribute substantially to cultural preservation, public education, artistic production, community engagement and civic identity. Their sustainability should not depend solely upon individual sacrifice, goodwill or unpaid labour, but be recognised as an essential part of Scotland's wider cultural infrastructure.

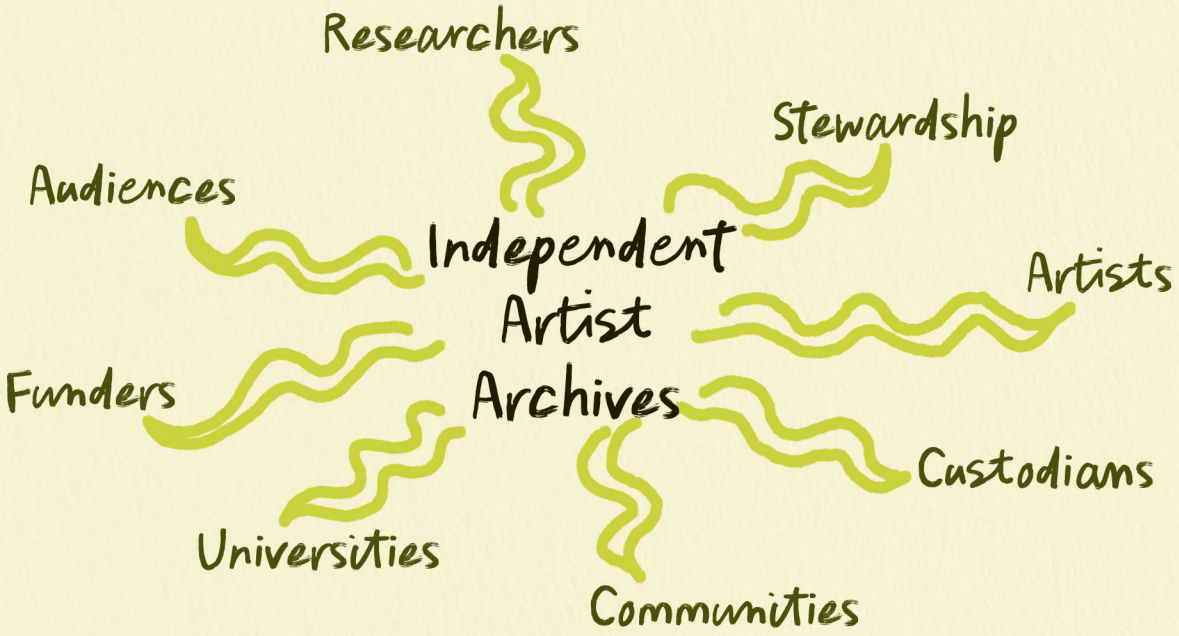
1 Begin with Ethics, not Infrastructure

Many archives begin in crisis:

- a death;
- an eviction
- probate deadlines
- storage emergencies
- or the risk of cultural material being dispersed.

In these moments, logistical concerns can quickly dominate decision making. However, long term sustainability depends first on defining an archive's ethical framework.

Before cataloguing systems, constitutions, or funding applications, establish; **why** the archive exists; **who** it serves; **what** values shape it; and **what** forms of access and care matter most.

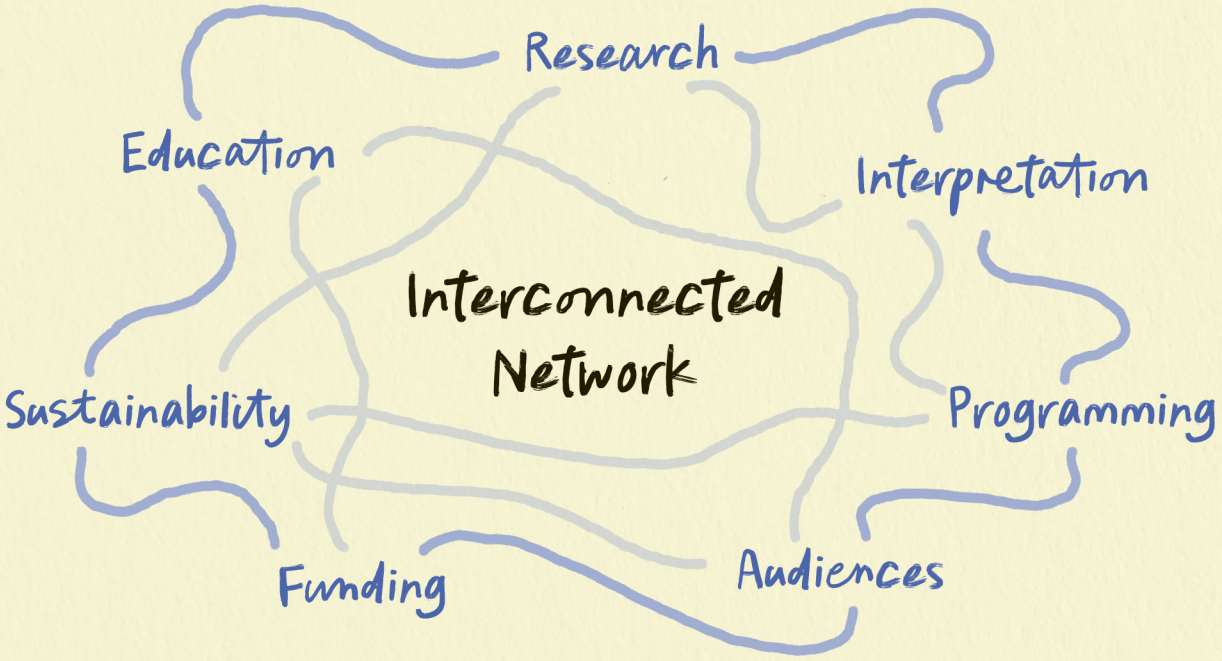


Key considerations:

- What values shaped the artist's life and work?
- How might those values shape governance and public access?
- Who is currently exlcuded from archival culture?
- What forms of knowledge should be preserved alongside objects?
- How can the archive remain accessible rather than gatekept?

An archive without a clear ethical position risks becoming purely custodial rather than culturally active.

2 Treat the Archive as a Network, not a Storage Unit



Preservation alone rarely creates sustainability. The most resilient archives operate as interconnected networks, involving: collections, education, commissioning, public engagement, research, publishing, partnerships, and community participation.

Archives remain alive through continual exchange rather than static preservation alone. Sustainability emerges when activity circulates:

- educational partnerships generate researchers
- researchers produce new interpretation
- interpretation creates programming
- programming builds audiences
- audiences strengthen funding cases
- funding enables future projects.

3 Preserve Process, Not Just Objects

Independent archives often contain cultural knowledge that institutions historically overlook. Creative lives are documented not only through finished artworks, but through working environments: habits, correspondence, annotations, domestic spaces, collaborations, and everyday materials

Practical approaches before moving or cataloguing collections:

photograph spaces extensively, document shelf arrangements, record annotations and working processes, preserve unfinished material where possible, and retain relationships between objects.

Materials such as:

- notebooks
- shopping lists
- tools
- drafts
- reading glasses
- post-it notes
- and personal libraries

often reveal more about artistic process than finished works alone.

4 Build Relational Archives, Not Heroic Narratives

Traditional archives frequently reinforce the myth of the singular genius. Independent archives have the opportunity to work differently by foregrounding networks of collaboration and care. Archives should actively document: collaborators, assistants, editors, publishers, curators, family members, neighbours, technicians, and creative communities.

This shifts archival storytelling away from:



"the story of one exceptional individual"

towards

"a wider ecology of cultural relationships"



This approach creates richer possibilities for: scholarship, public engagement, eduction, and community participation.

5 Cataloguing is Political

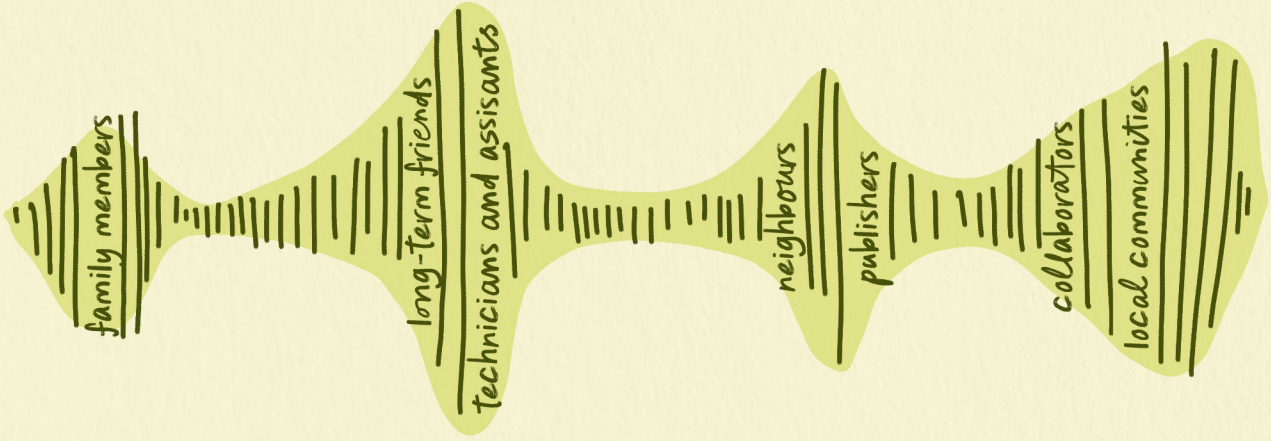
No archive is neutral. How archives are arranged determines: what becomes visible, whose labour is acknowledged, and how cultural histories are interpreted. Independent archives can move beyond rigid institutional heirarchy by developing more relational forms of cataloguing. Read **Jimerson, Randall. *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability and Social Justice*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009** as an inspiration for how you can be proactive in accessioning and shaping your archive.

The aim is meaningful navigation. Consider:



6 Record Oral Histories

One of the greatest risks facing independent archives is the rapid loss of living memory. Communities disperse. Collaborators age. Context disappears quickly. Oral history should begin as early as possible, even informally. Prioritise recording: family members, collaborators, publishers, neighbours, technicians and assistants, local communities, and long-term friends.



Basic recordings are often more valuable than waiting indefinitely for formal funding or perfect conditions. Oral testimony transforms archives from static collections into living systems of memory.

7 Access Creates Relevance



Access does not diminish archival value, it strengthens it.

Pratical strategies:

- Open before everthing feels complete
- Develop public programming early
- Use digital platforms as archival spaces, not simply marketing tools
- Encourage meaningful interaction where conservation allows
- Build educational partnerships from the outset

Visibility creates audiences, advocates, partnerships, and future sustainability.

8 Fundraising is Relationship Building

Fundraising should not exist separately from public engagement. The strongest fundraising models create long-term emotional investment and collective ownership around the archive.



Smaller, repeatable and community oriented events are often more sustainable than attempting to replicate institutional gala culture.

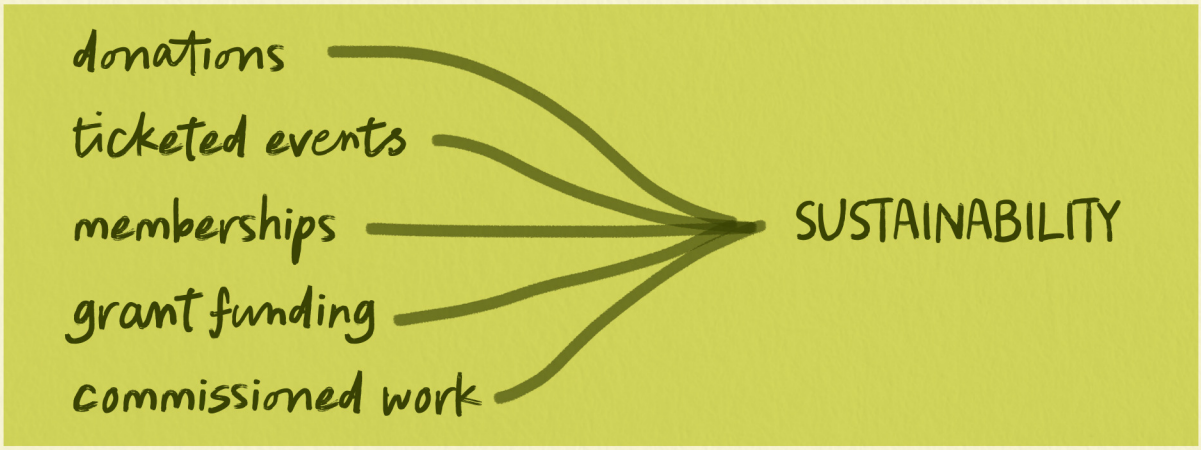
9 Build Income Through Cultural Production

Independent archives rarely survive through grants alone and archives become more sustainable when they generate ongoing cultural activity through publishing, commissions, workshops, partnerships, and public programmes. Commissioning can:

- activate collections
- attract new audiences
- support contemporary practioners
- and stregthen funding applications by demonstrating ongoing public relevance.

Practical considerations:

- Start small and repeatable. A sustainable annual event is often more valuable than an ambitious one-off project.
- Build mixed income streams and avoid dependence on a single source of funding. Combining donations, ticketed events, memberships, grant funding, and commissioned work creates greater resilience.
- Crowdfunding works best when tied to urgency. Crowdfunding campaigns are often most effective when attached to a specific conservation need, a building move, digitisation, an exhibition, or preserving at risk material.
- Audiences respond more strongly to tangible outcomes than abstract operational costs. Ask directly for donations - many archives under ask. Simple mechanisms matter, e.g. donation buttons, supporter schemes, QR codes at events, suggested ticket donations, and public fundraising appeals.
- Small recurring donations can become significant over time.



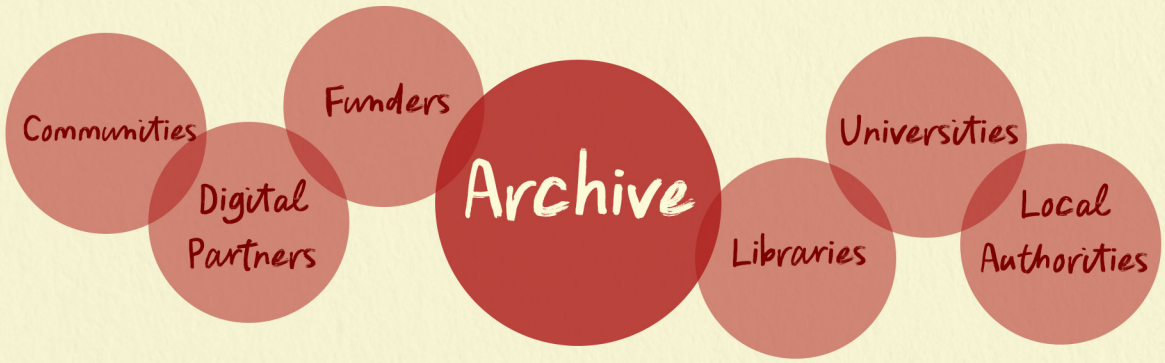
In the UK, original artwork is automatically protected by copyright as soon as it is created, giving artists both economic rights (to control copying, licensing, and commercial use) and moral rights (to be credited and protect the integrity of their work), with protection lasting for the artist's lifetime plus 70 years. Artists can monetize their work by licensing it, which retains ownership while granting limited usage rights, or by assigning copyright entirely to another party. When artwork is published in books, magazines, or zines, publishers may hold separate rights over the publication's layout, but artists should still be credited and consulted on alterations. Additional income may be available through schemes such as Public Lending Right (PLR), DACS Payback, and Artist's Resale Right (ARR), which provide payments when works are borrowed, reproduced, or resold. To safeguard their intellectual property, artists should use copyright notices, watermarks, and lower-resolution images online, and may benefit from registering with the Design and Artists Copyright Society to collect royalties and manage rights.

10 Develop Layered Partnerships

Partnerships with Universities
Universities can provide more than funding. Partnerships may offer interns, placement students, researchers, digitisation support, venue access, and academic credibility.

Partnerships with Local Authorities
Local authorities may support civic heritage work. Archives connected to local history, working-class culture or civic identity may align with regeneration programmes, libraries strategies, local heritage initiatives, or community planning funding.

Partnerships beyond Arts Funding
Independent archives may also fit education funding, literacy programmes, community wellbeing initiatives, social history grants, place-based funding, and digital innovation schemes.

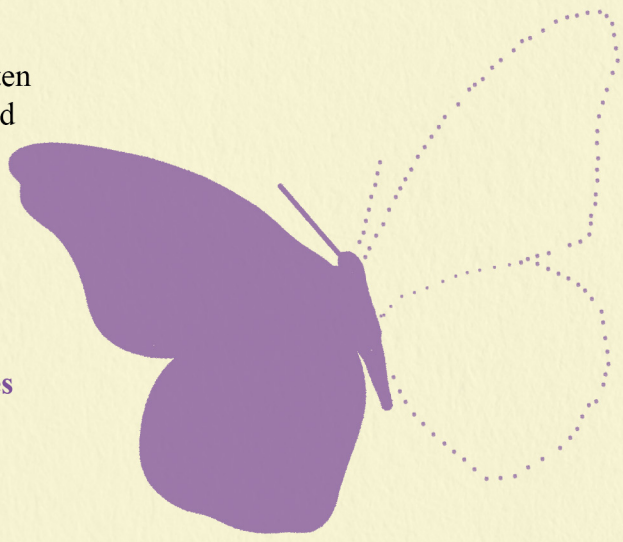


11 Avoid Institutional Mimicry

A common mistake among independent archives is attempting to operate as underfunded museums. This often produces burnout, bureaucracy, inaccessible systems, and unsustainable workloads.

Independent archives should instead recognise their strengths: flexibility, intimacy, responsiveness, experimentation, and strong community connection.

Their value often lies precisely in offering alternatives to institutional structures.



12 Care for the Custodian



Independent archives frequently rely on one individual carrying emotional labour, fundraising, public engagement, adminstration, curatorial work, conservation, and institutional memory simultaneously. This is rarely sustainable.

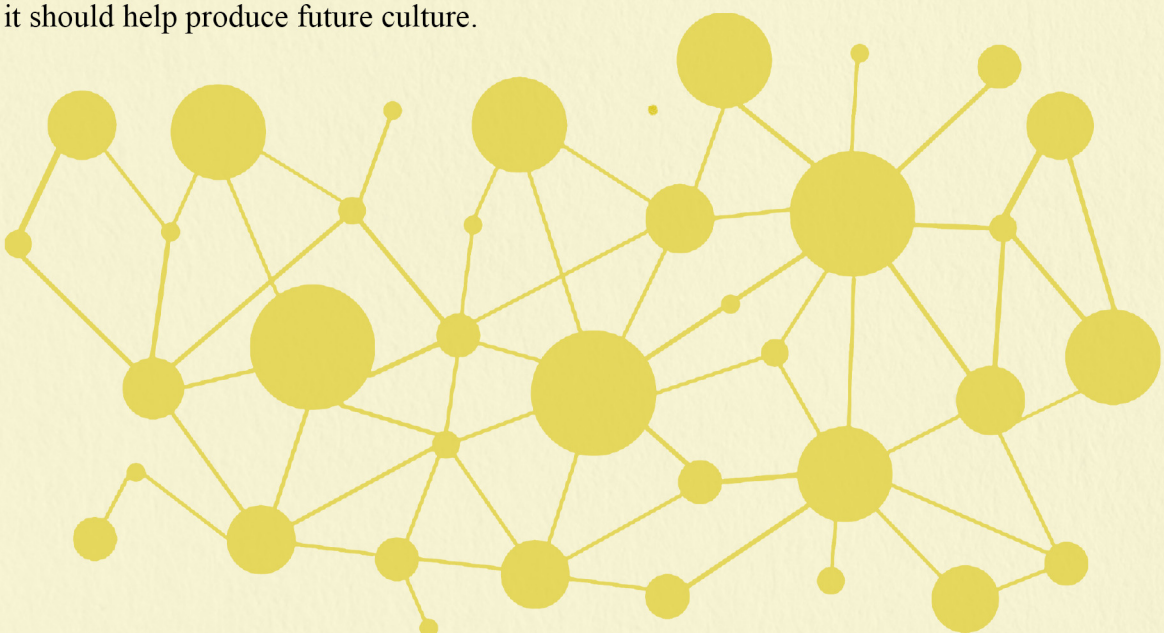
Strategic priorities:

- document systems clearly
- decentralise knowledge
- share responsibility
- build collaborative governance
- acknowledge emotional labour
- and plan succession early.

Archives should be able to survive beyond individual custodians.

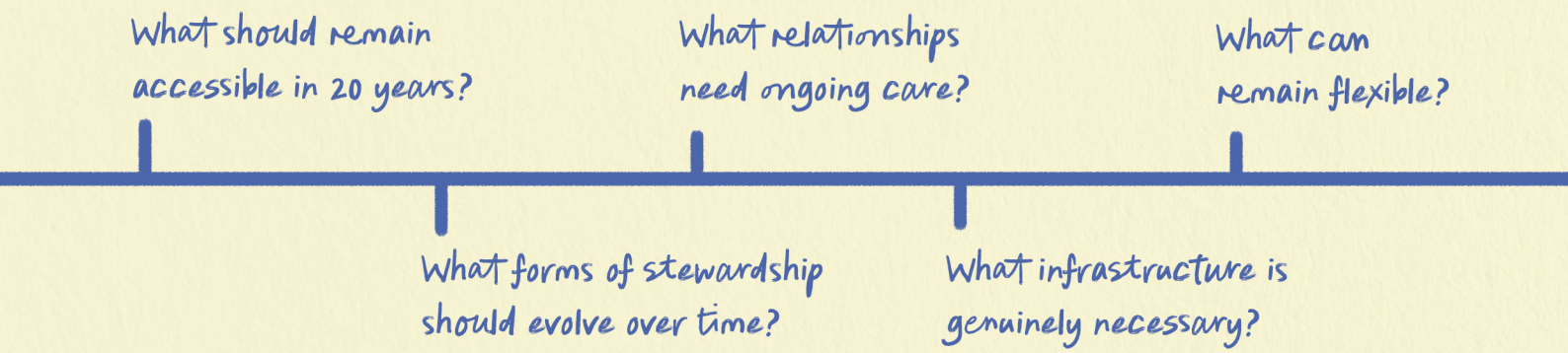
13 Commission New Work Continuously

Archives remain culturally alive when they actively generate new culture. Commissioning artists, writers, filmmakers, researchers, educators, and performers ensures archives remain connected to contemporary public life. Creative responses attract new audiences, expand interpretation, create funding opportunities, and prevent archives becoming static memorial spaces. An archive should not only preserve cultural history, it should help produce future culture.



14 Think in Decades

Independent archives are often forced into short-term survival thinking. Yet sustainability requires long-term imagination. Key questions:



The strongest archives evolve gradually rather than attempting immediate institutional permanence.

15 Declare your Interdependence and Build Mutual Support

Independent archives do not survive through isolation, but through networks of care, shared knowledge, reciprocal advocacy and collective infrastructure. One of the greatest challenges facing independent artist archives is the assumption that each archive must solve governance, fundraising, cataloguing, conservation, succession planning and public engagement alone. In reality, sustainable archives emerge through interdependence rather than self-sufficiency.

Custodians should actively seek support, share expertise and build relationships with others working across the sector, recognising that collaboration is not a weakness but a necessary part of creating resilient cultural ecosystems. Joining networks such as the **Scottish Artists Archives Network** can provide opportunities for peer support, shared learning, strategic advocacy and collaborative programming, while helping make visible the substantial labour independent archives undertake. Archives also benefit from relationships beyond formal archival structures, including artists, writers, educators, librarians, conservators, universities, publishers and local communities.

No archive sustains itself alone. The long-term future of independent archives will depend not only upon preserving collections, but upon building cultures of solidarity, reciprocity and shared stewardship capable of sustaining custodians and archives collectively over time.

Conclusion

Independent artist archives are increasingly becoming some of the most important sites of cultural stewardship in the UK. Often operating beyond formal institutional structures, they preserve not only artworks and manuscripts, but also relationships, creative processes, political histories, communities and forms of social memory that might otherwise be lost. Their significance lies not solely in conservation, but in their ability to remain publicly alive: generating dialogue, supporting new creative work, fostering research and creating meaningful access to culture.

This guide has argued that the long-term sustainability of independent archives depends less on replicating institutional models and more on building flexible, values-led ecosystems rooted in collaboration, accessibility and shared stewardship. Financial resilience, public engagement, ethical governance and creative production are not separate concerns, but interconnected parts of sustaining living archives over time. Independent archives often emerge through urgency, care and substantial unpaid labour, yet they continue to make major contributions to cultural life, education and civic identity despite limited infrastructural support.

As increasing amounts of cultural memory are preserved outside traditional institutions, there is growing need for wider national and civic investment in the sector. Custodians require not only funding, but also access to training, networks, advisory support and sustainable organisational infrastructure. The future of independent archives will depend upon recognising them not as temporary or marginal projects, but as essential cultural spaces capable of shaping how histories are preserved, interpreted and shared collectively.

Ultimately, archives survive through relationships. Not simply through buildings, catalogues or conservation systems, but through communities willing to continually activate, support and remake them together across generations.

Further Reading

- Harris, Gareth, *Towards the Ethical Museum*, Lund Humphries Publisher Ltd, 2025
- Caswell, Michelle and Marika Cifor. ‘Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives’. *Archivaria*, vol. 81, no. 1 (May 2016): 23–43.
- Vakin, Judy and Karyn Stuckey, Victoria Lane, *All This Stuff - Archiving the Artist*, Libri Publishing 2013
- Jimerson, Randall. *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability and Social Justice*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009.

To find out more, The Scottish Artists Archive Network has a free ‘Resources page’ where you can find advice, toolkits, and inspiration.

Glossary

Archive
A collection of historical records, documents, photographs, audio recordings, digital files, or other materials that are preserved because they have long-term value. An archive can also refer to the institution or place that stores and manages these materials.

Cataloguing
The process of describing, organizing, and recording information about items in a collection so they can be identified, searched for, and retrieved easily. Cataloguing often involves creating metadata such as titles, dates, creators, subjects, and locations.

Preserving (Preservation)
The actions taken to protect and maintain materials so they remain accessible and usable over time. Preservation may include proper storage, environmental controls, conservation treatments, digitization, and ongoing management of digital files.

Oral History
A method of recording and preserving people's memories, experiences, and personal accounts through interviews. Oral histories are typically audio- or video-recorded and serve as valuable historical sources that capture perspectives not always found in written records.

Related Terms:

Collection
A group of materials gathered and managed together because they share a common theme, origin, creator, or purpose.

Metadata
Information that describes an item, such as its title, creator, date, format, and subject. Metadata helps users find and understand materials.

Digitisation
The process of converting physical materials (such as photographs, documents, or recordings) into digital formats.

Conservation
The repair and stabilization of physical materials to prevent further deterioration.

Access
The ability of users to discover, view, listen to, or otherwise use archived materials.

Provenance
The history of ownership, custody, or origin of an item or collection, which helps establish its authenticity and context.

Record
Any piece of information created, received, or maintained as evidence of activities, decisions, or events.

Repository
A place or system where archival materials are stored, managed, and made available for use.

Appendix

Funding, Support and Practical Resources for Independent Archives

The following organisations and funding routes may support independent artist archives depending on the archive's scale, governance structure, public engagement activity and heritage focus. Funding landscapes change regularly, so it is important to check eligibility criteria and deadlines directly.

Core Arts and Heritage Funding

Creative Scotland Funding

- Supports artist-led activity, public engagement, commissioning, organisational development, research and development, residencies, publishing, and community cultural projects.
- Particularly useful for pilot activity, public programming, creative commissions, and early-stage archive development.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund

- Supports projects connecting people and communities to heritage, including archives, digitisation, oral history, conservation, organisational resilience, engagement programmes, and capital projects.
- Funding ranges from smaller development grants to major long-term investment.

The National Archives: Archives Revealed Programme

- Supports cataloguing, archival visibility and public access projects for underrepresented collections.
- Useful for scoping projects, cataloguing, collections development, and increasing discoverability.
- Can help build evidence for future larger-scale funding applications.

The National Manuscripts Conservation Trust

- Supports conservation and preservation of manuscripts and archival collections across the UK.
- Useful for conservation treatment, environmental improvements, and specialist preservation support.

Paul Hamlyn Foundation

- Supports socially engaged arts and community-based cultural work.
- Potentially relevant for participation projects, public engagement, collaborative programming, and organisational development.

Esmee Fairbairn Foundation

- Supports organisations working across arts, heritage and social change.
- Particularly relevant for projects focused on access, inclusion, community engagement, and long-term sustainability.

Foundation Scotland

- Provides access to a wide range of local and regional funding opportunities across Scotland.
- Useful for community programming, local heritage activity, small-scale development, and grassroots organisational support.

Crowdfunding and Public Donations

Crowdfunding can be an effective tool for independent archives, particularly when campaigns are framed around clear, urgent and emotionally tangible goals. Public fundraising efforts tend to resonate most strongly when attached to specific needs such as preserving a threatened archive, securing storage, undertaking conservation work, digitisation, relocation, exhibitions or commissioning new creative responses. Audiences are generally more willing to support visible and immediate outcomes than abstract operational costs, meaning campaigns focused on "helping preserve this collection" are often more successful than requests simply framed around sustaining overheads. Clear storytelling, transparency around how funds will be used and demonstrating the wider cultural value of the archive can significantly strengthen public engagement and financial support.

Useful platforms

- Crowdfunder UK
- Kickstarter
- Patreon

Top tips for public donations

Many independent archives under-ask for public support, despite audiences often being willing to contribute when given clear and accessible opportunities to do so. Making donations simple and visible can significantly increase support through small but consistent contributions. Practical mechanisms such as QR codes at events, online donation buttons, recurring supporter schemes, suggested ticket donations and clear fundraising messaging can all help normalise public giving. Audiences also respond more strongly when they understand exactly where their money is going. Framing donations through tangible outcomes - for example, explaining that "£10 preserves one box of material," "£50 supports oral history recording," or "£100 helps digitise fragile material" - can make support feel direct and meaningful. Building recurring support structures is particularly important, as smaller regular donations often become more sustainable over time than occasional large fundraising campaigns. Membership schemes and supporter circles can also help foster a stronger sense of long-term community investment and shared stewardship around the archive.

Strategic Funding Advice

Independent archives benefit significantly from building evidence of their public value from the earliest stages of development. Recording visitor numbers, collecting testimonials, documenting volunteer labour, archiving press coverage and tracking forms of public engagement all become essential when applying for future funding. This evidence helps demonstrate demand, impact and cultural relevance, particularly for archives operating outside formal institutional structures. Small grants can also be used strategically to test ideas, pilot programmes, strengthen partnerships and build credibility for larger funding applications over time. Not every archive project needs to begin at institutional scale; gradual and sustainable growth is often more effective. It is also important for independent archives to think beyond traditional arts funding, as many archives intersect with multiple sectors simultaneously. Depending on their activity, archives may align with education funding, literacy initiatives, local heritage support, place-based regeneration programmes, mental health and wellbeing initiatives, housing and community projects, or digital innovation funding streams. Recognising this cross-sector value can open up wider opportunities for support and long-term sustainability.

Free Resources!

- Oral History Society
- NIVAL Guide to Archiving
- The Scottish Council on Archives,
- DACS website: Preserving an Artist's Legacy



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