

Unlocking  
Our Sound  
Heritage

BRITISH  
LIBRARY

# Getting Your Sound Collections Digitised: The First Steps

#SaveOurSounds



# Getting your sound collections digitised – the first steps

The degradation of discs and tapes in addition to their technological obsolescence mean that we only have a limited period of time in which to copy their contents to digital files, after which the content may be lost forever. Going about the process of digitising sound collections is a big topic however, so in this brief document we'll focus on how to make a big early decision: whether to digitise your sound collection yourself, or to contract a service provider to do the work for you.

## Weighing up the options

It's worth starting by weighing up the pros and cons of the two options. Perhaps the biggest advantage of digitising a collection yourself is that it gives you control over the process. That could include the quality and formatting of the outputs, as well as the time-scale of the work. There are a great many technical and ethical decisions that need to be made during the digitisation process, and doing the work yourselves can ensure that it is done in an archivally appropriate way, for example without making subjective "improvements" to the sound, or using lossy compression in the archival master files. Depending on your circumstances this might be a key consideration.

However on the down side, it would require that you or your archive invest in the necessary equipment, as well as essential transfer, maintenance and repair skills. Acquiring well maintained, professional-grade replay equipment for obsolescent formats isn't always easy and is rarely cheap. Developing or accessing the necessary skills can be challenging. It can also be hard to confidently estimate the costs of such a project in advance, either in terms of expenditure or staff time.

If contracting a service provider to carry out your digitisation work for you, it should be possible to agree a fixed cost in advance and to hold them to it. Having a clear idea of costs in advance can greatly simplify any subsequent fundraising. The problem of ensuring that digitisation is carried out in a manner appropriate to an archive can be navigated by ensuring that the vendor complies with guidelines developed by the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA – see below). Having the work carried out externally will also remove the need to invest in digitisation infrastructure, though the subsequent long-term preservation of files will have to be factored into any plan, no matter how digitisation takes place (see also the Unlocking Our Sound Heritage leaflet **Long-Term Storage of Digital Sound Files**).

Using a service provider does however require that you be in a position to know and articulate precisely what you want from a vendor, and that this be agreed in writing with them. This may be less simple than it sounds: you may have specific

requirements around digitisation procedures, associated metadata or output formats which the service provider needs to know about. Some knowledge of the characteristics of the medium will be needed, and decisions will need to be made regarding how the work should be carried out, and how much effort you require the vendor to go to.

Potential vendors understand that they must make a competitive offer to succeed, while also covering their costs. To remain sustainably competitive they will understandably seek to streamline and simplify processes as much as possible. For example, when digitising a cassette collection, do you require the vendor to check for and apply Dolby noise reduction, if it was applied when the tape was originally recorded? This will make a significant audible difference to the quality, but will add to the time and effort required, and therefore the cost. Every requirement you have, however obvious to you, must be carefully thought through and specified explicitly, as it may affect the unit cost.

## Making a decision

Factors worth considering include:

- What infrastructure, such as specialist equipment or skills do you already possess or have access to? Transfer engineers can be trained, but equipment maintenance or repair skills can be much harder to obtain.
- What formats do you want to digitise, and in what quantities? Creating digital files from formats such as Minidisc or DAT is usually more straightforward than from analogue tape formats, for example. Larger quantities of a given format may strengthen an argument for carrying out the work yourself. Below a certain quantity, the investment in skills and equipment will not be justifiable.
- What appetite is there within your institution for doing the work yourself? Does it fit well with existing skills, infrastructure or future strategic aspirations?

Whether doing the work yourself or contracting a service provider, you will need to be confident that you know in detail what you want to achieve, and that you will be able to assess whether or not you are receiving the service you expect, both during and after the project. Your local UOSH partner will be happy to discuss your options with you, and offer assistance and advice whichever way you decide to proceed. Bear in mind that the worst of all options is to do nothing.

## Further information

The two documents below are helpful in outlining the key strategic, ethical and technical issues around the digitisation of archival audio collections. Brief, relatively easy to read and essential, TC 03 concentrates on the principles, while TC 04 provides detailed explanations of the practical consequences of TC 03. TC 04 is perhaps the most comprehensive guide to Best Practise in audio archiving.

IASA Technical Committee, **The Safeguarding of the Audiovisual Heritage: Ethics, Principles and Preservation Strategy**, Co-Edited by Will Prentice and Lars Gaustad. Version 4, 2017 (= Standards, Recommended Practices and Strategies, IASA-TC 03). <https://bit.ly/35TC6z5>

IASA Technical Committee, **Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects**, ed. by Kevin Bradley. Second edition 2009. (= Standards, Recommended Practices and Strategies, IASA-TC 04). <https://bit.ly/2Njbz7L>