



# ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Collecting and sharing  
memories

This guide has been created by Scotland's Urban Past (SUP), a five-year community-engagement project from Historic Environment Scotland.

We support communities to record, research and celebrate the history on their doorsteps.

Through our free training and resources, people of all ages can discover and share the fascinating stories of Scotland's towns and cities.

# Collecting and sharing memories

Sharing memories can be therapeutic and give an insight into unique, first-hand experiences of historical events and lifestyles.

## Reminiscence and oral histories

The social history of buildings, streets, open spaces or urban areas is fascinating and significant. Factual histories and personal stories are likely to be an important part of your Scotland's Urban Past (SUP) project and will undoubtedly inform, enrich and enliven it.

The opportunity of talking to people who wish to share their memories will bring together unique stories and first-hand experiences, feelings and attitudes of the past.

These can be contradictory, selective and influenced by numerous factors including age, gender, family background, location and so can be open to interpretation. Memories and opinions can be challenging but are as valuable as factual information.

Sharing memories usually takes place in one of two ways: reminiscence sessions, which usually involve (small) groups and are not recorded. Or conversations often described as oral history interviews, which can involve groups or individuals, and are recorded.

Reminiscing is often considered therapeutic for participants and can benefit people who have short-term memory loss by making use of long-term memory.

Oral histories are collected via audio or video recordings, photographs or in written form. Audio or video is most usual, and a written transcript of the conversation is usually made and sent to participants. Permission must be asked to make a recording of any kind.

Oral history recordings can reveal unknown or forgotten stories and new perspectives, can help many people learn about places, customs, attitudes, and ways of life in the past, and can contribute to a permanent archive of information

# Planning

This guide will help you plan your project in collecting and sharing memories, covering the preparations and practicalities of conducting oral history interviews.

## Why and what?

To start, make a few notes below about the purpose of collecting and recording memories for your Scotland's Urban Past (SUP) project.

What are your goals?	What do you want to find out?
Who could you talk to?	How will you use the recordings?

Once you have one or more specific themes, ensure you have carried out sufficient research, on the geographical area(s) and the time period(s) in question, on local, national and international events and history which might be relevant.

## Making contact

The building(s), street, open spaces or urban area etc at the heart of your project might easily suggest people to approach as candidates for oral history recording. They might be members of your group, your own family, circle of friends or your neighbours.

If you are less sure, contact groups and organisations such as:

- your local library, museum or history group
- voluntary organisations
- trade unions or work-related social clubs
- former-pupils groups
- community councils
- places of worship
- sports clubs
- professional associations
- Scottish Women's Institutes
- Rotary Clubs

Consider placing adverts in local post offices, newsagents or supermarkets, in local newspapers or on websites catering to your local area.

When making contact with groups or individuals it is best to do so in person or by telephone, in the first instance, rather than by email or letter. Further contact may take place by phone or by email or letter.

During initial contact with groups or individuals, give clear information about your project and why you want to talk to them. You may have to convince potential participants, so invite them to chat about the past or to tell you the stories about their life, rather describing the activity as an interview.

Discuss the type of recording you will make, such as audio only or video and sound, and ensure you make potential participants aware of the consent process and how their words will be used shared and stored. See page 8 for more information on permissions.



## Where and when?

Sharing memories is intended to be an enjoyable and informal but structured chat in a relaxed setting.

A semi-private, comfortable space with little background noise and a low risk of interruption is important. However, always remember your own and participants' personal safety when arranging the location.

Any adult considered vulnerable who you would visit in their own home should always be accompanied by a carer.

Once you know where your conversations will take place, think about how you would create a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. Privacy can encourage an atmosphere of trust which in turn can lead to more open and honest conversation.

Discuss potential dates and times that would suit the participant. Avoid times that could cause either of you stress or discomfort, such as rushing through school traffic or at dinner time. A supply of tea, coffee and biscuits is always a good idea, but ensure these are out of the way of the recording equipment and that kettles, urns, crockery and cutlery, and biscuit wrappers will not create disturbing background noise.

## Preparation

When you have your participants, locations and times confirmed, prepare an information sheet for those involved. The content should include:

- details of your project
- what you memories you hope to record
- why you are asking this individual or group of people to take part
- what will happen on the day of the conversation
- how the conversation will be structured
- how recording will be organised (see pages 7-8 for more information)
- how the recording will be used
- how the recording will be preserved (see page 8 for more information)

## Preparing questions

Your research on the subject and talking with potential participants will help you to prepare questions which will guide the conversation during your interviews.

### Do:

Aim for open questions by asking what, where, when, why, how and who?

Ask questions which will encourage precise answers, such as 'where did you move to next?'

Ask questions which invite description, opinions and feelings: 'How did you feel about that?'; 'What sort of person was she?'; 'What can you tell me about the house you lived in?'; 'Why did you decide to change jobs?'

Follow chronological order. Most people remember events and associated feelings or opinions in the order they happened. The conversation may prompt participants to recall an event or person or to explore a theme outside of the chronology. Gently bring the conversation back to your set themes when the participant has finished talking.

Ask participants about aspects of their life to help them relax, even if it is not entirely relevant to the purpose of your conversation. Useful topics could include: where they lived and life in the home; school; chores and leisure activities; holidays; early work; or any other topics or events of importance to the individual or group of participants.

### Don't:

Ask questions which will produce only 'yes' or 'no' answers, such as 'do you remember...?'

Suggest answers in your questions. For example, ask 'Can you tell me about your work at the factory?' rather than 'I imagine you worked in tough conditions at the factory?'

Ask leading questions, ambiguous questions or making statements which do not encourage answers. 'How were women treated differently to men at the factory?' is a leading question – instead, ask about specific aspects of factory life, such as women's and men's roles in the workplace or wages.



## Visual prompts

Alongside and in association with your questions, prepare visual prompts to help guide the conversations, especially for groups. These could include:

- relevant historical or current images
- film clips on a laptop
- copies of postcards and/or photographs
- historical or current pamphlets or other documents
- small objects

Visual prompts work well as ice breakers for the beginning of a session to get a group chatting informally before recording begins.

Practise your questions, using the visual prompts and the recording equipment in advance with family, friends or colleagues to build your confidence.

---

**Visual prompts work well as ice breakers for the beginning of a session to get a group chatting informally before recording begins.**

---

## Conversations

Conversations organised as oral history recordings are usually one of three types:

- Structured: all questions are agreed by all participants in advance
- Focused: themes and some general questions are agreed by all participants in advance
- Unstructured: nothing is decided in advance (least likely for your SUP project, because you will have a focus for your project)

At the start of any of these sessions, start by explaining clearly what is going to happen and why. Begin the recording by stating the names of the participants, your name, the date, the location and the number of the session (you might visit a group/individual more than once)

Making a recorded conversation can be daunting. Practising your conversations with family, friends or colleagues and following the tips on page 7 will help you prepare and feel confident.

## Tips for oral history interviews

### Do:

Check mobile phones are switched off, laptop sound is off, and any radios or TVs are switched off.

Clear away newspapers, papers or pens which may create background noise.

Follow theme(s) in chronological order.

Take brief notes as the conversation proceeds. These will help if you later produce a written transcription.

Be attentive and listen carefully – you may think of new questions to ask during the conversation.

Allow conversation to flow naturally and let people be themselves.

Be supportive. Laugh at jokes and offer empathy or sympathy as appropriate.

Remain as quiet as possible beyond asking questions. If you are asked a question, keep your answers brief; you are not the subject of the conversation.

Stay to talk about the present after the recording has been completed.

Make sure all consent forms are signed before you leave. (See page 8)

### Don't:

Prepare a script – your questions are only guidelines and should not restrict the conversation.

Interrupt when participants are talking.

Add your own comments or opinions. try to use body language to show that you are listening.

Argue with participants; history is subjective.

Rush participants to get to the conclusion of a story, even if conversation has veered away from the the question.

Take too many notes, doodle on your notepad or appear otherwise distracted.

Rush away at the end of the recording.



## Permission

When preparing it is vital to consider the following so that your oral-history recordings will comply with General Data Protection Regulations (2018).

Before getting involved, would-be interviewees MUST

- understand why you are recording memories
- understand how recorded memories will be used in the future
- understand how and where recorded memories will be stored and accessed in the future
- agree in writing to participate in an interview

Before recording, ALL participants MUST consider together

- what might be discussed for themselves and especially living third parties who have not given consent
- what 'personal, identifying data' might be revealed
- if any 'special-category data' might be revealed and could 'substantial damage and distress' be caused?

For more information about GDPR and oral-history recording, please see [information compiled by the Oral History Society and the British Library](#).

## Recording, editing and transcribing

Familiarise yourself with your chosen equipment and practise making recordings in advance of recording conversations. This will make the process of recording less daunting.

### Recording

Audio recordings can be made using digital voice recorders, such as Zoom H2n, Edirol or Marantz models, or phones with or without a microphone attached. Audio recordings should be created in MP3 format.

Video recordings can be made using digital cameras and camcorders, phones (in landscape format) or using the camera on a laptop. Microphones will also be required. Video recordings should be created in MP4 format.

Top tip: use a thin sock over the microphone to block out background noise or echo when you are recording.



## Editing

It is not considered good practice to edit an oral history recording. However, there are occasions where you may wish to make a copy of the original recording and from it make clips to include in an exhibition or as part of a film or use audio clips as soundtrack for a film, animation or presentation slides.

Popular editing software for manipulating oral history recordings include:

- [Audacity](#)  
A free, open-source digital audio editor. Available for Windows, OS X and Linux operating systems.
- [GarageBand](#)  
A sound-recording and editing application designed for Apple systems.
- [iMovie for MAC](#)  
A video-editing application designed for Apple operating systems.
- [Adobe Premiere Pro](#)  
A timeline-based video editing software application that can be downloaded for a [free trial](#). It is part of the Adobe Creative Cloud, which includes video editing, graphic design, and web development programs.
- [Camtasia](#)  
Video editing software that is more user-friendly than Premier Pro, and is available as a [free trial](#). It allows users to easily edit audio, combine or split clips, trim, and speed up or slow down footage.
- [Adobe Audition](#)  
Audio editing software that allows users to create, mix, edit and restore audio content. It is available as a [free trial](#).

The words spoken in any oral history interview belong to the interviewee. The recording created belongs to the interviewer. Legally, informed consent of interviewee is required at the time of the interview to create, to store and for the future use of the recordings.

If you make edits to recordings or their transcriptions, you must acquire separate permission from the interviewee to use them. The interviewee must be able to read the transcriptions or listen to the edited versions before agreeing to the new versions being used, as they may feel their words are being taken out of context.

## Transcribing

It is good practice to create a written record, or transcription, of the conversations your recordings. This will ensure that your material is more accessible and useful.

Transcribing a conversation in full can be time consuming. Unless you are an experienced audio typist, you will probably need to listen to the conversation many times to ensure your transcription is accurate. It is estimated that it will take between four and ten hours to transcribe one hour of conversation or interview.

Creating a summary of a recording can be a helpful way of understanding both the topics and structure of the conversation or interview, of preparing yourself to create the full transcription and for future users of navigating the full transcription. A useful summary format is shown below: a short description of one topic per row and alongside it the time the conversation or interview begins or moves to that topic.

Time	Topic
00:25	Recalls school. Slates and pencils that squeaked. Grandmother worked in the canteen. Before school holidays, Miss Smith, the teacher, bought box of sweets to share around infants' class.
02:40	Describes family involvement in the school. No central heating at first. Later big boiler built at side of school. Father stoked boiler. Mother cleaned school Thursday night. Recalls assisting father with boiler who would give her 6d for helping.

A full transcription should be a faithful record of what participants said. Do not correct grammar or insert explanations of dialect words or delete swear words.

Ensure that each transcription begins with the following details:

- name of project
- name(s) of interviewer(s)
- name(s) of interviewee(s)
- date of the conversation
- location of the conversation
- file name(s) of the audio or digital files corresponding to the transcript

Ensure that the format and style of your summaries and full transcriptions are consistent. Style guides can be found via the resources on the following page.

Ensure summaries and full transcripts are saved and backed up alongside their corresponding recordings.

## Making recordings accessible

### Subtitles

Transcriptions or extracts from them can be used to create subtitles for video recordings or audio recordings accompanied by a slideshow of still and/or silent moving images.

You can add subtitles manually using iMovie for Mac, Camtasia or YouTube online. Camtasia has a speech-to-text feature that transcribes imported audio files. Likewise, YouTube also transcribes the spoken word automatically. However, the software may not recognise strong accents, local dialect words or words from other languages. It also may not recognise capitalization or punctuation, so you will definitely want to check the accuracy of the transcription before you share your video.

### Sharing your recordings

If you wish your project audio or video recordings can be archived with Historic Environment Scotland. They will be made available in future via the [Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network \(SCRAN\)](#) website.

You could also explore depositing your recordings with a local-authority or university archive close to you. Please note that not all archives have the capacity to accept audio or video recordings. To find out more about the developing network of sound archives in Scotland, please visit the [NLS Scotland's Sound's](#) website.

Archiving your recordings with a partner organisation means that the long-term accessibility and preservation of your recordings will be secured.

### Oral-history resources

You can find out more about oral-history recording, the value of the activity and good practice to benefit your own project work at the [Oral History Society](#) and at the [East Midlands Oral History Archive](#) at the University of Leicester.



Scotland's Urban Past  
Historic Environment Scotland  
John Sinclair House  
16 Bernard Terrace  
Edinburgh EH8 9NX

[www.scotlandsurbanpast.org.uk](http://www.scotlandsurbanpast.org.uk)

Historic Environment Scotland  
Scottish Charity No. SC045925



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD  
EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA