europeana
network
association

A seated man sharpening a quill pen, Wellcome Collection, United Kingdom, CC BY

ENA STRATEGIC PRIORITIES IN 2026

Updated October 2025

This document updates the Strategic Priorities for the Europeana Network Association (ENA) for 2026. Building on the achievements and learnings of 2025, it reflects the network's evolving role in the common European data space for cultural heritage and the wider digital cultural heritage ecosystem. The intention is to seek approval by the Members Council and the ENA General Assembly and, if approved, this document will help to guide our activities in 2026 and beyond.

Context: a network coming of age

As we enter the final year of the current data space contract, the Europeana Network Association stands at a pivotal moment. With over 5,700 members (a record growth of 18% over the past year!), we have matured into one of the sector's most influential professional networks. Yet our trajectory points decisively forward: toward deeper engagement, demonstrable impact and organisational models that will sustain us well beyond 2026.

The foundations we have laid position us not merely to complete a contractual obligation but to establish ENA as an enduring force in cultural heritage. The enhanced Community Management Model, improved membership benefits model (noting here that an impressive 76% of members indicated 'complete satisfaction'!), refined governance structures, clarified workflows and new engagement mechanisms developed in 2025 are not merely administrative achievements. They are the actual infrastructure that will enable us to scale our impact, respond to emerging challenges and serve our members more effectively in the years ahead.

Looking toward 2026, we face both opportunity and responsibility. The Data Space for Cultural Heritage Strategy 2030 is to set new directions for the entire ecosystem. The decommissioning of Europeana Pro and launch of our new digital presence offers a chance to reimagine how we connect with members and stakeholders. The maturation of Country Groups and the Ambassadors' Network pilot point toward scalable models for Member States engagement. And the growing emphasis on reuse demands that we translate our members' expertise into value for diverse audiences.

The European Commission's review of Year 3 identified clear imperatives: demonstrate the value of decentralisation, strengthen stakeholder processes, clarify our offerings and show reuse outcomes. These are catalysts that sharpen our focus on what matters most: enabling our members to thrive professionally, amplifying their expertise, facilitating meaningful collaboration and collectively advancing digital cultural heritage practices.

Most fundamentally, 2026 represents an opportunity to prove that the network model works - that distributed expertise, voluntary engagement and collaborative structures can deliver results that centralised approaches can't match. Our success in this final year of the contract will shape not only ENA's future but the broader understanding of how professional networks contribute to European digital cultural infrastructures.

ENA in the data space... and beyond

ENA's role within the Europeana Initiative's three-pillar structure continues to deepen and mature. Our crucial involvement in capacity building (WP3) positions us at the intersection of skills development, community engagement and knowledge exchange: precisely where lasting change happens and network-wide impact occurs. The data space provides unprecedented infrastructure and opportunities, but our value extends far beyond any single contract or project.

In 2026, we will take on expanded responsibilities within the data space Implementation Plan. ENA members will contribute substantively to developing learning pathways, supporting the Europeana Academy's instructor-led training, and helping validate use cases for datasets and services. Our Communities will provide essential expertise for developing and delivering capacity building resources that serve the entire sector.

Simultaneously, we must look beyond the current contractual period. The three strategic pivots identified through the Visioning and Business Strategy 2030 - future development of the data space, leveraging participation in large EU-funded initiatives, and adapting Member States engagement - provide important orientation. Yet our strategic priorities must encompass the full breadth of our members' needs: emerging challenges like AI and heritage in crisis, underserved areas like mentoring and peer support, and opportunities to position ENA as thought leaders on issues that transcend any single project. The Task Force on Long-term Sustainability and Governance will continue to help shape our future organisational model. Its work offers crucial opportunities to resolve governance questions, secure sustainable funding, and strengthen ENA's capacity to deliver value. These discussions will directly influence how we participate in projects like ECHOES and 3D4CH, where ENA serves as an affiliated entity contributing unique network expertise.

Strategic priorities 1-6

In the section below, we present the 6 strategic priorities for ENA in 2026, reflecting contractual commitments, stakeholder needs and aspirations for sustained impact beyond 2026. Separately, we have created an Activity Plan, that explores how the strategic priorities are operationalised as well as the areas of activity and expected outcomes through which we envision to complete all necessary and desired actions.

Strategic priority 1: Deepening Member States engagement

The Country Groups pilot in Bulgaria, Italy and Slovenia has validated a novel engagement model. Findings resulting from the pilot's evaluation, earlier in 2025, encourage expansion: increased awareness and skill development, enhanced peer learning and sustainable national networks that connect local practitioners to European opportunities.

Building on this foundation, 2026 will see systematic expansion and deepening of Member States engagement. The governance structure developed in 2025 needs to be finalised and implemented to enable us to support both existing Country Groups and facilitate new ones. This is not about imposing uniform structures but enabling

locally-appropriate approaches that connect practitioners to each other and to the wider network. The Ambassadors' Network pilot in Finland represents a complementary strategy for high-level engagement. By nurturing relationships with policymakers, ministry officials, and influential initiatives, we can better advocate for digital cultural heritage, the data space, and Europeana's role. The ambition is to develop a network of high-profile ambassadors across Europe who can open doors, identify opportunities, and translate practitioner needs into policy realities. Conducting and evaluating this pilot in 2026 will determine whether and how to scale this approach. Crucially, we will also support the work carried out by the EF to map and coordinate Member State-specific work across the Initiative in order to gain a holistic understanding of activities in each country, optimize resource allocation, and strengthen cross-organisational collaboration, making our collective impact far greater than the sum of individual efforts.

Together, these approaches create multi-level engagement that works vertically within countries (connecting practitioners to decision-makers) and horizontally across Europe (enabling peer learning and collaboration). This granular approach reflects our growing refinement in understanding how networks actually function and create value.

Strategic priority 2: Governance, sustainability, organisational maturity

The establishment of the Long-term Sustainability and Governance Task Force marks a decisive step in envisioning ENA's future. This Initiative-wide effort addresses fundamental questions about governance models, funding structures, and the relationships that will enable us to realize our 2030 vision.

For ENA specifically, this work provides essential opportunities to resolve challenges around representativity, resource allocation, management structures and administrative capacity. The Enhanced Community Management Model introduced in 2025 must now demonstrate tangible impact: better support for members, more effective collaboration, enhanced outcomes. Similarly, our frameworks for Working Groups and Task Forces need to be finalised to ensure transparency and effectiveness. In 2026, we will sign off on clear processes for initiating, managing and concluding these collaborative mechanisms. This includes defining how strategic themes are assigned, how outputs and recommendations inform decision-making and how outcomes integrate sustainably into the Initiative and data space.

The question of ENA's participation in projects exemplifies these governance complexities. Our involvement in ECHOES and 3D4CH as an affiliated entity of the Europeana Foundation demonstrates one model. But questions remain about claiming person-months, managing secondment agreements, clarifying the use of indirect costs etc. Resolving these issues in 2026 will create pathways for ENA to contribute unique value while making the most of additional funding streams, setting precedents for how we engage with future opportunities.

This organisational work may seem removed from members' daily experience, yet it enables everything else we do. Without clear governance, we cannot make strategic choices. Without sustainable funding, we cannot maintain offerings. Without robust administrative structures, we cannot participate in partnerships. The work of 2026 must

include both visible member-facing activities and this essential infrastructural development.

Strategic priority 3: Navigating a changing world

Cultural heritage does not exist in isolation from the forces reshaping society and neither does our network. Our strategic priorities for 2026 must address the realities our members face daily, including several pressing challenges.

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) presents both extraordinary opportunities and legitimate concerns for heritage professionals. How do we harness AI's potential for research, access, analysis and valorisation while ensuring responsible use, protecting rights and safeguarding human expertise? In 2026, we need to continue the conversation and build upon the results of 2025's AI Alignment Assembly and the cross-Community workshop in Copenhagen.

Similarly, cultural heritage increasingly finds itself in crisis contexts, whether through natural disasters intensified by climate change, armed conflicts threatening irreplaceable materials, or political instabilities endangering institutions and individuals. The Climate Action Community's work on environmental sustainability addresses one dimension, but in 2026 we will also consider how our network can support colleagues facing acute challenges, preserve endangered heritage and contribute to resilience and recovery.

These themes - AI and heritage in crisis - represent focal areas where ENA can demonstrate thought leadership, facilitate knowledge exchange, and connect practitioners grappling with similar challenges across different contexts. They also connect directly to our capacity building mission: our members need knowledge, skills and support to navigate these complex realities.

Strategic priority 4: Promoting and facilitating reuse

We continue to place emphasis on reuse scenarios, to reflect on a fundamental question: what (and who?) is the data space for? While substantial progress has been made in aggregating, standardising and making cultural heritage data available, we must now demonstrate and facilitate its actual use by researchers, educators, creative practitioners and other - perhaps uncharted? - stakeholder groups.

The ENA Communities bring together precisely those practitioners who understand how to make cultural heritage meaningful and useful in different contexts. In 2026, ENA members will actively contribute to collecting and documenting use cases, validating scenarios and providing social proofs that demonstrate the data space's value. The Digital Creativity Lab, Built with Bits events, Storytelling mentorships and other activities exemplify the sort of initiatives that not only create value but demonstrate possibilities.

Equally important is to ensure that our Communities are communities of interest as well as practice. By enabling practitioners to share approaches, tools, and experiences, we can accelerate adoption and innovation. This requires creating the right forums for exchange, documenting and disseminating success stories, and providing the support needed for others to adapt and implement proven approaches.

The challenge of reuse also connects directly to capacity building. Many potential users lack either awareness of what's available or skills to make effective use of it. Training programs and events enabled through the data space, help diverse audiences to understand and leverage the wealth of the data space. The Europeana Academy's instructor-led training will be crucial for building these capabilities across different audience groups.

Strategic priority 5: Strengthening the core: community and connection

The analysis of member motivations and the enhanced membership model work of 2025 provide clear direction: members value ENA primarily for networking, collaboration, professional development, and staying current with the field. These findings must ground everything we do in 2026.

Our 7 Communities remain the beating heart of the network, spaces where shared interests drive voluntary collaboration and knowledge creation. In 2026, we will continue strengthening inter-Community collaboration, measuring impact more systematically, and ensuring Communities feel empowered to initiate activities that serve their members' needs. The work to develop transversal community interests mapping and facilitate joint activities will help us better leverage the natural connections across Communities, as exemplified by the 2025 AI workshop in Copenhagen.

Beyond Communities, we must create more opportunities for meaningful collaboration. The 8% increase in members interested in mentoring and peer support suggests significant unmet demand. In 2026 we need to dive deeper into investigating how to match experienced practitioners with those seeking guidance. These initiatives require careful design - we cannot simply create empty structures and hope they self-organize - but the potential value justifies the investment.

Events and networking remain highly valued, yet we must continue evolving our approaches. The potential role of ENA members - in particular but not confined to the Members Council - in either following train-the-trainer programmes, suggesting course topics, delivering content and test-driving or validating new courses, is something we need to gain a better understanding of in 2026. Furthermore, we will continue to organise (online) events including webinars, workshops and cross-Community or cross-pillar sessions in which topics of interest are actively explored rather than passively consumed. And critically, we will explore how Country Groups and other local initiatives can complement pan-European activities, bringing the network closer to members' daily professional contexts.

Strategic priority 6: The Europeana Pro transition: reimagining our digital presence

The decommissioning of Europeana Pro and development of its successor represents far more than a technical migration. It offers a unique opportunity to reimagine how ENA presents itself online, how we communicate with members and prospective

members, and how we facilitate the connections and knowledge sharing that members value.

In 2026, EF and ENA will jointly formulate the requirements and needs for ENA's online presence. This process will be collaborative, drawing on diverse sources to ensure the new platform serves actual member needs. What do members want to find easily? How can we better showcase the expertise within our network? What tools would facilitate collaboration? How can we make the network's activities and achievements more visible?

We will also trial and test automated workflows to gather new and update existing member information, as well as renew our efforts towards an ENA membership renewal process. The approach will allow for iterative membership renewal based on objective criteria rather than disruptive mass renewal campaigns.

The new online presence must reflect our organisational maturity and strategic priorities. It should support Community activities effectively, easily link to or integrate with training programs, facilitate Country Group activities and make it easy for members to discover and connect with each other. Equally, it should communicate clearly to cultural heritage professionals considering membership why ENA matters and what value it offers. Successfully navigating this transition while maintaining continuity of service will be a significant achievement and a foundation for strengthened engagement in the years ahead.

Looking ahead: Transversal sustainability considerations

Finally, we must secure ENA's long-term sustainability. This means clarifying our role in projects and partnerships, resolving governance questions, diversifying funding streams, and building organisational capacity. It also means preparing for transition beyond the current data space contract, ensuring we emerge stronger and better positioned to serve our members and the sector.

Conclusion

The Strategic Priorities for 2026 reflect an organisation that has matured in sophistication, ambition and impact. We have moved beyond simply connecting people to actively shaping how the network functions, what value it creates and how it positions itself. The challenges are substantial: demonstrating impact, expanding engagement models, resolving governance questions and managing organisational transitions while maintaining momentum. Yet the foundations we have built should make us confident that these challenges are surmountable.

Most fundamentally, 2026 offers an opportunity to prove what professional networks can achieve. By focusing on creating genuine value for practitioners, amplifying their expertise, facilitating meaningful connections and collectively advancing digital cultural heritage practices, we will position ENA even more strongly as an enduring force for professional excellence and positive change.

The work ahead requires sustained commitment from our members, Communities, Task Forces and Working Groups, Country Groups and Ambassadors, Members Council and Management Board, working in close collaboration with colleagues across the Europeana Initiative. Together, we have the opportunity to demonstrate that the network model works: that distributed expertise, voluntary engagement and collaborative structures deliver results that centralised, hierarchic approaches can't match. That is the promise of 2026 and the foundation for everything that follows.

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