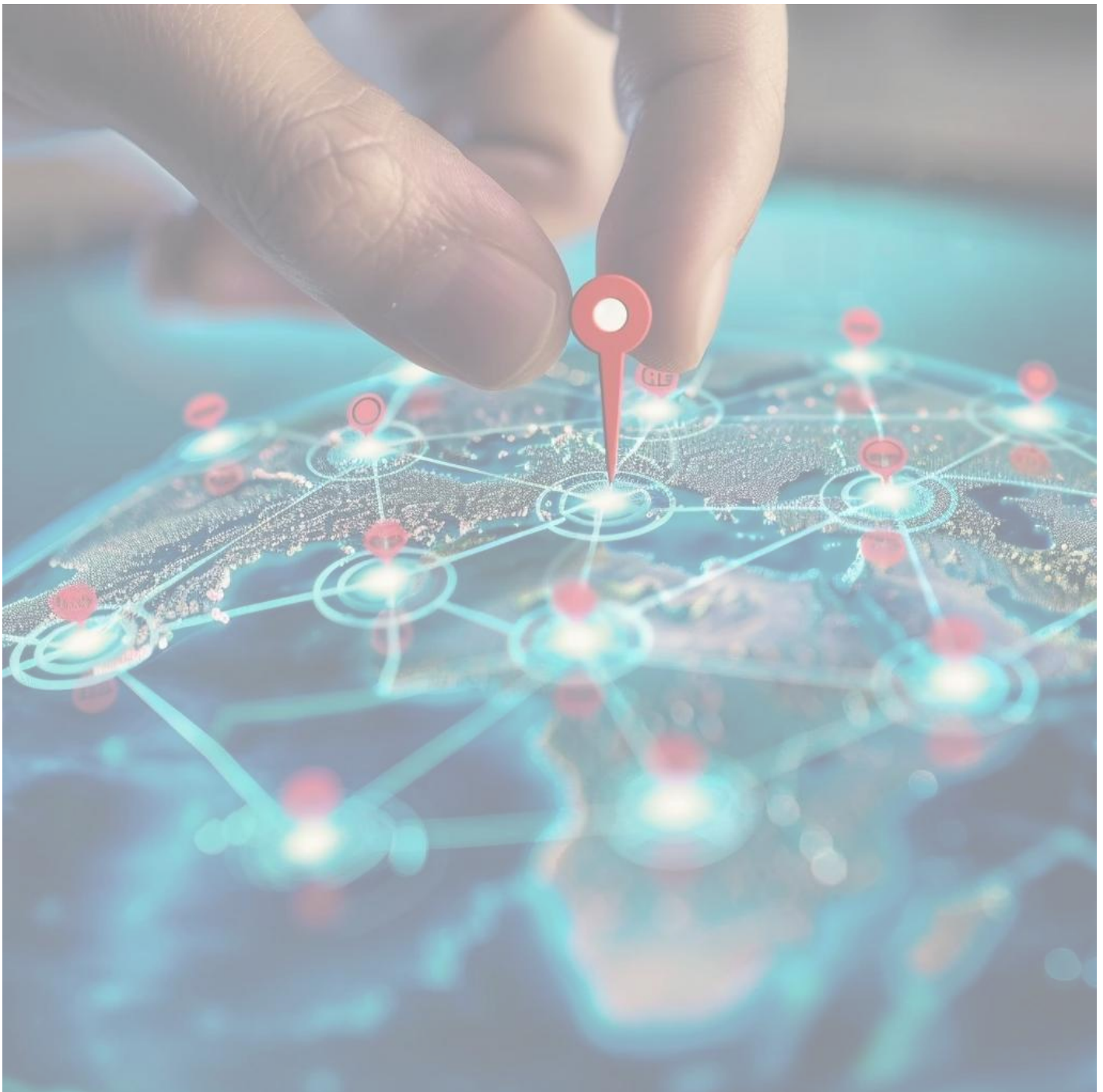


A Guide to Historic Environment Records (HERs) in Scotland

v1.0 March 2025



Summary

“It is essential that every planning authority has access to a Historic Environment Record (HER), curated by a professional archaeologist on behalf of the local authority or a dedicated heritage body” (Section 10, [PAN 2/2011 Planning and Archaeology](#)). Historic Environment Records provide detailed information about the historic environment of a given area. The Historic Environment Records in Scotland have been created as a result of decades of research and investigation, and continue to be dynamic with ever-more information being added. They are maintained and updated for public benefit and used in accordance with national and international standards, and are widely used by a variety of audiences ranging from planners, developers, consultants and contractors through to researchers, local groups, schools and members of the public.

This guidance sets out the specification for Historic Environment Records (HERs) and replaces the Benchmarks for Good Practice (ALGAO UK 2002) and the Association of Regional and Island Archaeologists (ARIA) equivalent. It defines the scope of the content and coverage of an HER, its temporal and geographical limits, and how the public can access records. It also includes information about service delivery, the requirements for staffing, and HER infrastructure. In short, it sets out how an HER host authority needs to ensure that the record is kept up-to-date with accurate information in order to meet the requirements of the [National Planning Framework \(NPF4\)](#), resulting in better support and an improved information base for the planning system, and other land management requirements.

The guidance supports HER host authorities in ensuring that they are managing their records in line with best practice and accepted standards, thereby raising quality and consistency across the network of Scottish HERs.

Whilst this guidance has been prepared specifically for bodies that host, manage, maintain and make accessible the HER, it will be of relevance to a range of other public, voluntary and private sector bodies, and individuals with an interest in the historic environment of Scotland.

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1.0 Introduction

The historic environment, as defined within National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), is “the physical evidence for human activity that connects people with place, linked with the associations we can see, feel and understand.” Furthermore, “an asset is a physical element of the historic environment – a building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having cultural significance.”

Historic Environment Records (HERs) provide detailed information about the historic environment of a given area, and in Scotland they have been created as a result of decades of research and investigation. They are maintained and updated for public benefit and used in accordance with national and international standards and national policies and guidance.

The National Planning Framework 4, Policy 7a (2023) states, “development proposals with a potentially significant impact on historic assets or places will be accompanied by an assessment which is based on an understanding of the cultural significance of the historic asset and/or place. The assessment should identify the likely visual or physical impact of any proposals for change, including cumulative effects and provide a sound basis for managing the impacts of change. Proposals should also be informed by national policy and guidance on managing change in the historic environment, and information held within Historic Environment Records.”

PAN 2/ 2011 (section 10) states, “it is essential that every planning authority has access to a Historic Environment Record (HER) ...curated by a professional archaeologist on behalf of the local authority or a dedicated heritage body.”

And that, “[They] represent an indispensable tool for the formulation of development plans and the determination of planning applications. More generally, the creation and analysis of an HER is an important first stage in the positive management and preservation of the historic environment for the purposes of education and recreation, and as an input to local history, conservation and tourism projects.”

Consistency of data and standards across the network of Scottish HERs is central to the delivery of improved and simplified access to heritage data to support the planning process and for use by local communities.

2.0 Historic Environment Records (HERs)

Effective protection and management of the historic environment relies on access to good quality, authoritative information: Historic Environment Records and their associated resources provide this information.

2.1 What is an Historic Environment Record?

An HER is an information service with systematically organised information about the historic environment of a given area and can be accessed by anyone. HERs have developed from Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs), information sources which were created in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the lack of archaeological information available to owners, developers and planners.

An HER is maintained and updated for public benefit and in line with national planning policy. HERs contain and signpost information about historic landscapes, buildings, archaeological sites and finds.

They also contain information from planning, academic, and community led research such as archaeological intervention reports (e.g. excavations) or historic building surveys. HER content represents decades of collection and collation of information from a wide range of sources, including those from the Ordnance Survey, Historic Environment Scotland (formed from the merger of the Royal Commission on the Archaeological and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) and Historic Scotland), museums, archives and libraries. They are unique sources of information about their areas and the conservation management process, including planning casework and specific details relating to the archaeological resource.

An HER underpins the work of local authority archaeology/historic environment services. In Scotland they are generally hosted by councils or in some cases by Trusts and other organisations on their behalf. Some also host more than one HER by means of Service Level Agreements (SLAs) or Shared Service Agreements (SSAs) with neighbouring local authorities. Similar HERs exist in England and Wales, where they are a statutory requirement in their own right, as well as in other countries. In Scotland thirteen archaeology/historic environment services provide HERs for the local authorities and the National Parks.

An HER comprises a maintained digital database linked to a Geographic Information System (GIS) which is supported by associated reference material. Reference material may be digital or paper and include aerial photographs, copies of early maps, antiquarian reports, characterisation studies, unpublished 'grey' literature and a reference library of secondary sources such as offprints, books and journals.

An HER is a dynamic and constantly evolving resource which requires continuous maintenance and enhancement as new information about the historic environment comes to light, whether as new entries or new information for existing entries, or as new data standards are introduced. It requires space and appropriately qualified and dedicated professionals for its upkeep and to facilitate its use by a diverse audience.

2.2 What is a Historic Environment Record used for?

HER services provide access to information about the archaeological and historic environment of the particular area(s) of Scotland they cover to fulfil a wide variety of functions. These include:

- Advancing knowledge and understanding of the historic environment.
- Informing strategic policies and decision-making relating to Local Development Plans, Local Place Plans, and land management.
- Informing development management recommendations and decisions, and streamlining planning processes.
- Supporting heritage-led regeneration, environmental improvement and cultural tourism initiatives.
- Supporting the conservation, management, enhancement and protection of the historic environment.
- Supporting our understanding of the impact of climate change, both in the past and today.
- Informing countryside management such as forestry and agricultural land management.
- Contributing to research, education and social inclusion.
- Promoting public participation in the exploration, appreciation and enjoyment of local heritage.

2.3 How does a Historic Environment Record relate to other records?

In addition to HERs, there are other sources of information about the historic environment. At a national level Historic Environment Scotland is the primary source for records relating to designated historic assets of national importance including Listed buildings, Scheduled Monuments, Historic Marine Protected Areas, Inventory of Historic Battlefields, and Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes, though together these are less than 10% of the historic environment assets that have been recorded. Public access to mapped and description data for these designated historic assets is through the Historic Environment Scotland Designations portal and the wider [trove.scot](https://trove.scot.nhs.uk/) website.

HERs signpost to other relevant data sources, whether these are local records held in archives or museums, or national records such as the National Record of the Historic Environment (NRHE), and the [Online Access to Site Investigations \(OASIS\)](#) reports which now form part of the Archaeology Data Service Library.

In Scotland, a partnership between HERs via ALGAO Scotland and HES has produced the PastMap website, hosted by HES. This functions as a data portal similar to the Heritage Gateway in England but is entirely map-based. It holds GIS datasets from the national record (which also includes layers for nationally designated sites and buildings) and from participating HERs. Both the national and HER datasets contain embedded links to the relevant online resource so that the user can be directed to individual HER websites where available, to NRHE, and to the HES designations portal. Critically, it should be noted that HERs remain the primary source of information for decision-making within planning and other land-change processes.

3.0 Legislative and Policy Roles and Responsibilities

3.1 Local Planning Authorities

The National Planning Framework (NPF4) establishes the historic environment, whether designated or not, as a core component of sustainable development in the planning process and provides guidance on how to sustain and enhance its significance and setting. It emphasises the need for pre-application consultation, assessment, and expert advice to inform local authority decision making, and for the recording, publication, archiving and public benefit of heritage assets impacted by development.

Supported by technical and professional guidance, it clearly sets out the role of the Local Authority Archaeologists (LAA), those that use and manage the HERs, and the importance of a dynamic Historic Environment Record to aid decision making.

Scotland's local authorities employ a comprehensive network of professional archaeological advisors, offering a range of specialist skills in the built, buried, earthwork, coastal and submerged historic environment. They provide advice that is proportionate, consistent, informed, impartial and timely. This advice informs and enables appropriate development while ensuring compliance with policy(s) and legislation.

PAN 2/2011 (section 10) sets out the requirements for an effective HER:

- professionally competent curatorship and analysis;
- a list and description of all known monuments and archaeological sites and finds within the geographic area, to support accurate assessment of their importance;

- a map record (commonly at a scale of 1:10,000) or digital application which identifies the location and extent (where known) of each monument, site and find-spot; and
- detailed additional supporting information for specific sites, such as photographs, survey and excavation reports and references to relevant published and unpublished sources, plus links or cross-references to other sources of information, such as the lists of statutorily designated historic environment assets created and maintained by [Historic Scotland – now known as Historic Environment Scotland], and [Canmore – now known as the National Record of the Historic Environment held by HES] and originally created by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS).

Note: since the PAN 2/2011 was published, the names of organisations have changed, and these changes have been reflected in the above text while not changing the original context and intended meaning of the four main features listed.

A key part of the role of the Local Authority Archaeologists in Scotland is the professional curation of a Historic Environment Record (HER) which forms the basis of all decision making and is a Local Authority requirement referenced in national and local policy.

An HER requires regular updating, ongoing maintenance, and enhancement to ensure it is in line with current and emerging data standards. This is a dynamic tool as new records and information are regularly added into systems as new discoveries and research are published, including information derived from the planning process.

There is the legal requirement for Local Authorities to provide HER data under the INSPIRE (Scotland) Directive 2009 to the Scottish Improvement Service (HER Data is part of Annex I 'Protected Places').

3.2 Historic Environment Scotland (see also 2.3 above)

Historic Environment Scotland (HES) has a responsibility for setting standards in heritage data and collaborate with partners nationally and internationally to promote common standards, including specialist vocabularies.

Historic Environment Scotland are also responsible for the operational management of PastMap in partnership with ALGAO Scotland.

3.3 Other organisations

Some other organisations also hold records of the historic environment. These are often tools created for management of the historic environment under their responsibility. Examples of these records are those held by the National Trust for Scotland, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Ministry of Defence Infrastructure Organisation, and Forestry and Land Scotland. These complement HERs but often contain more management-specific information.

4.0 Content and Coverage

4.1 Content

An HER contains, or provides links to, information on the following:

- Nationally and internationally designated heritage assets

- Locally designated heritage assets (where assessed)
- Undesignated heritage assets with archaeological interest (including assets that are known to have been demolished or destroyed or known only from antiquarian sources, and assets which do not meet the criteria for national or local designation)
- Other heritage assets with historic, architectural and artistic interest that are of local significance (including undesignated historic buildings, parks and gardens and historic places commemorating events and people)
- Archaeological objects and their findspots
- Investigations of the archaeological, architectural, historic or artistic interest of a place or landscape, including work such as, but not limited to, desk-based assessments, walkover surveys, geophysical surveys, field evaluations, excavation reports, archaeological watching briefs, environmental assessments, conservation management plans and assessments, reports on significance from Design and Access Statements, Historic Building Recording reports on buildings, conference notes and proceedings, etc. These are called 'Events'
- Historic area assessments and characterisation studies such as historic farmstead characterisation and conservation area appraisals and management plans
- Output from relevant national and local research projects
- Scientific data relevant to the understanding of heritage assets such as borehole logs, absolute dating and palaeo-environmental data
- Other miscellaneous sources of information, including published and unpublished reports, oral and local traditions, and independent research

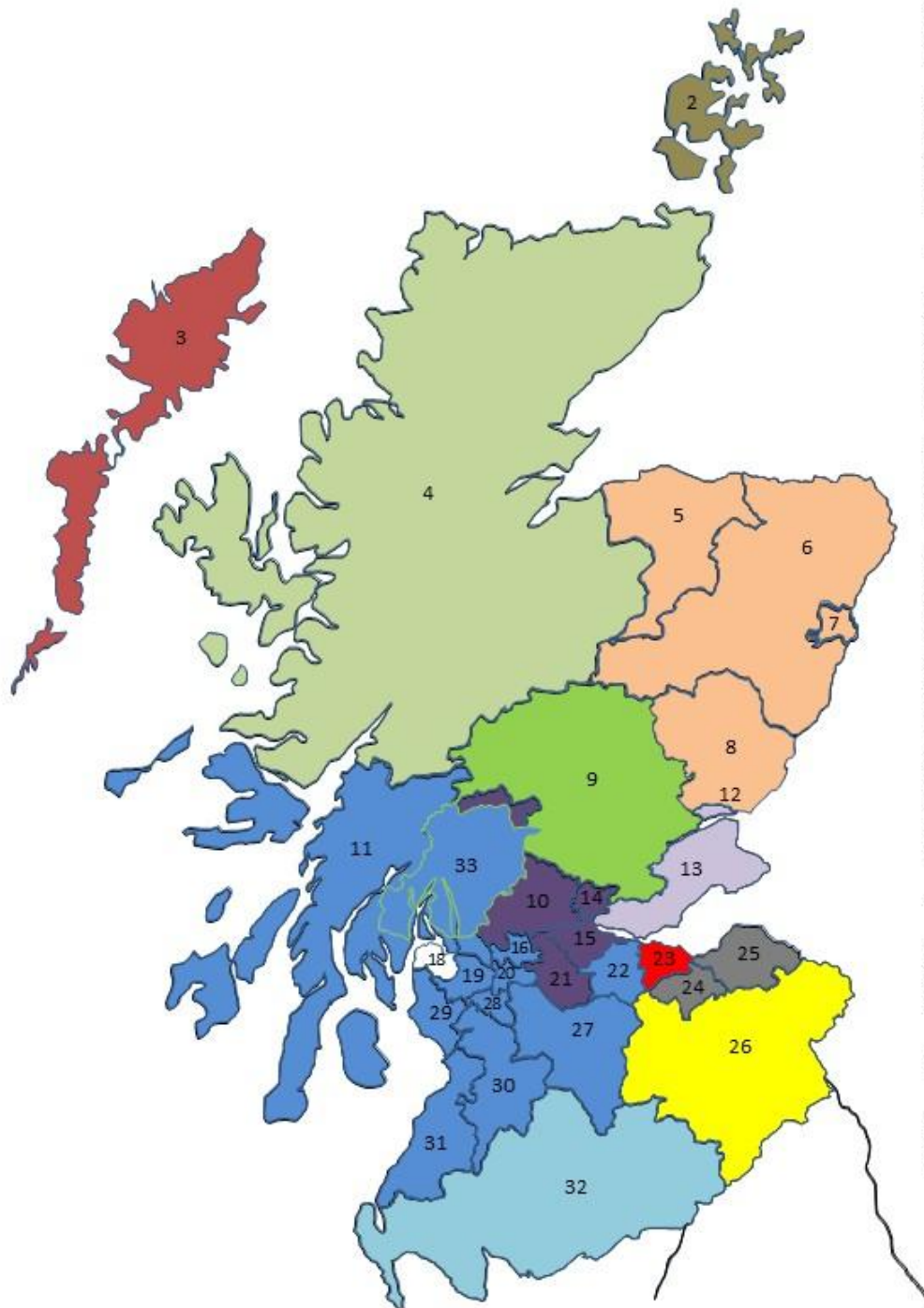
4.2 Temporal Limits

An HER includes significant data relating to all periods, from the earliest human activity to the present day. There are no temporal limits on the information recorded in an HER.

4.3 Geographic Limits

The geographic limits are defined by the administrative boundaries (whether terrestrial, inter-tidal or marine) of the local authority or authorities that an HER covers. In Scotland these consist of 32 Local Authorities, and 2 National Parks which have planning authority, though Cairngorm National Park Authority currently has no agreement in place with any Local Authority for HER provision to the Park.

Current Local Authority Archaeology Service Provision



- 1 Shetland Islands
- 2 Orkney Islands
- 3 Comhairlie nan Eilean Siar
- 4 Highland

Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service (ACAS)

- 5 Moray
- 6 Aberdeenshire
- 7 City of Aberdeen
- 8 Angus

- 9 Perth and Kinross

Stirling Council Archaeology Service

- 10 Stirling (except LL&TNP)
- 14 Clackmannanshire
- 21 North Lanarkshire
- 15 Falkirk

Fife Council Archaeology Service

- 12 City of Dundee
- 13 Fife

West of Scotland Archaeology Service (WOSAS)

- 11 Argyll and Bute
- 16 East Dunbartonshire
- 17 West Dunbartonshire
- 19 Renfrewshire
- 20 City of Glasgow
- 22 West Lothian
- 27 South Lanarkshire
- 28 East Renfrewshire
- 29 North Ayrshire
- 30 East Ayrshire
- 31 South Ayrshire
- 33 Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park

- 23 City of Edinburgh

East Lothian Archaeology Service (ELAS)

- 24 Midlothian
- 25 East Lothian

- 26 Scottish Borders

- 32 Dumfries and Galloway

No Archaeological Service or HER Provision

- 18 Inverclyde

4.4 Maintaining a dynamic Historic Environment Record

HERs require ongoing active management if they are to properly reflect the changing nature of the historic environment and our understanding of its significance. HERs must be kept up to date with accurate information, including:

- New discoveries and interpretations
- New and amended designations
- Latest research and publications
- Records and outcomes of new investigations
- Significant changes to historic assets already recorded

Such information will come from a variety of sources, ranging from developer-funded fieldwork and recording, systematic investigations undertaken as part of national surveys, university-led research, community projects and private research to chance finds by members of the public and unexpected discoveries by property owners, developers and land managers.

In particular, local planning authorities, including National Parks, should ensure that information about heritage assets and the wider historic environment which is generated as part of the planning process is deposited into the appropriate HER.

4.5 Supporting reference collections

An HER makes accessible relevant collections of published and unpublished reference materials that supplement the information contained in its database. Supporting reference collections serve a valuable role to answer enquiries from varied audiences with their varied needs. Increasingly these are being made available via digital means, such as dedicated HER websites.

4.6 Deposit of primary archive material

HERs are not usually responsible for primary archaeological archive material or primary documentary material. Original and digital archive material that is acquired by HERs (where the HER is not the appropriate receiving archive, where the data creator does not have responsibility for deposition and/or no enforcement options are available) should be deposited with Historic Environment Scotland.

5.0 Data Standards and Security

5.1 Compliance with UK national data standards

The information content of an HER must be compliant with current national data standards for historic environment information, as set out by the Forum on Information Standards in Heritage (FISH) and the Monuments Inventory and Data Archiving Standards (MIDAS). As such, an HER will ideally comprise a digital database recording monument, event and source records. This is linked to a geographic information system (GIS) for recording spatial data using Primary HER Reference Numbers. Meeting these requirements will also satisfy the INSPIRE legislation (along with the quarterly submission of HER extracts to the Scottish Government Improvement Service's Spatial Hub). The principal guidelines for how to manage an HER are set out in the [UK HER Manual](#).

5.2 Data sharing

HERs are capable of providing, and of receiving and incorporating digital data in formats designed to assist the exchange of data between appropriate compatible information systems. Local Authority HERs should be the first point of call for, and primary trusted source of, investigative research data and knowledge. HERs follow guidance for data sharing set out in the UK HER Manual.

5.3 Data backup and security

Local Authorities will ensure adequate data backup and security procedures as defined in the [UK HER Manual](#) are in place for HERs. This is particularly important given the risk that Local Authorities now face from cyberattacks. The HER's Systems Security Policy should set out the arrangements relating to the HER's computer databases, including access and modification control, user permissions, anti-virus software, firewalls and data-backup procedures. It is important that an HER's Systems Security Policy complies with that of the host organisation.

In addition, HER host organisations also need to provide adequate support for IT hardware and software (including GIS), and training opportunities in these for staff. This should be routinely tested, and improvements made where possible.

6.0 Public Access and Engagement

6.1 The information held in HERs will, with few exceptions, be publicly accessible and HERs are proactive in promoting access and allowing others to contribute to it.

Users of HERs typically include developers, planning/environmental consultants, statutory consultees, property owners, land managers, farmers, academic researchers, local societies, amateur historians/archaeologists, teachers, students and interested members of the public — as well as historic environment professionals working in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Consequently, both conventional and online content may require further interpretation and/or explanation, depending on the user.

Each user is likely to have specific needs that require different solutions and levels of support so the HER will provide a range of options for accessing information, including, for example, web-based, electronic, and telephone access, and where necessary, in-person visitor access.

HER host authorities are expected to support and provide resources for HER staff to be capable of delivering an effective service to all users. HERs will be proactive in improving their service for users by collecting and acting upon feedback.

Local planning authorities will be proactive in promoting access to HERs. It is good practice to develop an outreach programme that advocates the HER and promotes its wider use. This is essential for:

- Identifying and targeting new audiences for the HER
- Retaining and encouraging existing HER users
- Creating opportunities for the participation of local communities in the maintenance and enhancement of the HER
- Developing joint outreach projects with other heritage and environmental agencies

Local planning authorities often signpost their HER services on their websites. Relevant online content is also accessible via linked data layers on PastMap.

7.0 Service Delivery

7.1 Local priorities and outcomes

In order to effectively manage their Historic Environment Record, host authorities should consider the use of an HER Outcomes Framework to ensure local priorities and stakeholder needs are met. An Outcomes Framework allows the HER to demonstrate what their work achieves and how they contribute to the wider corporate goals of their parent organisation.

7.2 National priorities and outcomes

In accordance with accepted best practice and national and international standards (Dublin Core, UK GEMINI, INSPIRE (Scotland) Directive 2009, MEDIN, GDPR), HERs are expected to achieve national recognised Service Outcomes in the following key areas:

- Content and coverage
- Data standards and security
- Access and engagement
- Infrastructure (service delivery)

7.3 Plans, policies and services

Relevant plans and policies for HERs are developed nationally for local implementation and should be regularly reviewed. In line with good business practice, these include: a forward plan; an information policy; recording guidelines, a disposals policy; an access and charging policy; an information services policy; a disaster plan; a succession plan and a statement of purpose.

HERs are expected to satisfy themselves that plans and policies relating to their record are compliant with relevant legislation.

7.4 Staff

HER service providers are expected to employ and support dedicated, appropriately qualified and competent archaeological staff to create their record and keep it up to date. The staff should also be able to communicate effectively with the diverse audiences that use it.

Staffing will include personnel with the qualifications and/or experience appropriate for compiling, curating, interpreting and mediating access to an extended range of historic environment information resources.

Maintaining the skills of HER staff is essential if they are to provide high-quality services. They will therefore have access to relevant continuing professional development (CPD) and training opportunities, including creating and maintaining HER skills across the sector.

7.5 Infrastructure

Sufficient resources to enable effective daily operation will include (but not be limited to):

- Licences and IT support for HER specific software that enable HER staff to maintain the HER, search the HER and provide HER data on request
- Provision and maintenance of appropriate IT hardware to enable HER staff to maintain the HER, search the HER and provide HER data on request
- Resource and support for public access to HER information, including enabling HER data to be provided online
- Where HERs charge for services, adequate support for raising purchase orders and processing invoices will be provided

8.0 Further Reading

[The UK HER Manual](#) is a set of working guidelines for staff and others involved in managing, running, using or supporting an HER MIDAS Heritage – the UK Historic Environment Data Standard is a British cultural heritage standard for recording information on buildings, archaeological sites, shipwrecks, parks and gardens, battlefields, areas of interest and artefacts. The ongoing development of HERs, and the standards behind them, are overseen by the HER Forum UK and the HER Forum (Scotland).

For a glossary of terms associated with the creation and management of HERs, see [UK HER Manual Glossary](#) and for specific technical data standards used within HERs [see UK HER Manual Historic Environment Data Standards](#).

[PastMap](#) provides access to multiple resources and enables cross searching of both national and local information relating to HES's National Record of the Historic Environment collections for Scotland, and includes basic details from participating HER datasets. It should be noted that HERs remain the primary source of information for decision-making within planning and other land-change processes.

The wider portal to Historic Environment Scotland's datasets is available via trove.scot which combines information from their Historic Environment Portal, Canmore, SCRAN, and Property in Care collections.

9.0 Where to Get Advice

- 9.1 The ALGAO-UK HER Committee informs, advises and acts for the ALGAO Executive Committee and membership of ALGAO UK on the development and maintenance of HERs, standards and the role of HERs in informing activities such as planning, land management, academic research and public outreach.

The Historic Environment Record Forum UK (HER Forum UK) promotes best practice among HERs and it open to anyone with an interest in HERs.

The Historic Environment Record Forum Scotland (HER Forum Scotland) promotes best practice among Scottish HERs and provides space for discussion regarding heritage data and data standards, development and maintenance of HERs, summaries of projects and on-going work, and enquiries. The group is proactive in working to guide emerging projects of all sorts, whether locally or across Scotland as a whole, and easing the assimilation of new data and data standards into the records.

The Forum on Information Standards in Heritage (FISH) is a professional discussion forum for the further development of heritage data standards.

- 9.2 HER Contacts (see also [HER contacts | HER Forum Scotland](#))

[Aberdeenshire, Moray, Angus and Aberdeen City](#)

[Comhairlie nan Eilean Siar](#)

[Dumfries and Galloway](#)

[East Lothian and Midlothian](#)

[City of Edinburgh](#)

[Fife and Dundee City](#)

[Highland](#)

[Orkney Islands](#)

[Perth and Kinross](#)

[Scottish Borders](#)

[Shetland](#)

[Stirling, Clackmannanshire and North Lanarkshire \(excluding that part of the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park in the Stirling Council area\)](#)

[WoSAS: Argyll and Bute, East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, North Ayrshire, Renfrewshire, South Ayrshire, South Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire, West Lothian and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park](#)

10 Acknowledgements

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