

# Historic Environment Records (HERs) in England. Advice Note.

Draft

## Purpose of document

This document describes what a Historic Environment Record (HER) is and the role it plays in understanding and managing the Historic Environment particularly in the planning system

## Introduction

The historic environment includes all aspects of our surroundings that have been built, formed or influenced by human activities from earliest to most recent times. It highlights where we have come from and enhances our quality of life. The history that surrounds us gives us a sense of place and helps to define us as a nation. The historic environment is also a fragile, vulnerable, non-renewable and finite resource. Effective protection and management of the historic environment relies on access to good quality, authoritative information. Historic Environment Records provide this information.

## Historic Environment Records (HERs)

### What is a Historic Environment Record?

An HER is an information service with systematically organised information about the historic environment in a given area and can be accessed by anyone. It is maintained and updated for public benefit.

HERs contain and signpost information about historic landscapes, buildings, archaeological sites and finds. HERs also contain information from planning led research such as archaeological intervention reports or historic building records. HER content represents decades of collection and collation of information from a wide range of sources, including those from Ordnance Survey, Historic England, museums, archives and libraries. They are sources of information about their areas and the conservation management process.

An HER underpins the work of local authority historic environment services. They are generally hosted by single tier and county councils and by National Park Authorities. (Greater London HER is one exception in that it is managed by Historic England.)<sup>i</sup> Similar HERs exist in Scotland and in Wales.

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digital or paper and include aerial photographs, copies of early maps, antiquarian reports, characterisation studies, unpublished 'grey' literature and a reference library of secondary sources.

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. An HER requires an appropriately qualified and dedicated staffing resource for its upkeep and use by the public.

HERs have developed from the Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) which were created in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the lack of archaeological information available to owners, developers and planners, and the consequent loss of archaeological remains through urban and rural development.

### What is a Historic Environment Record Used For?

HER services provide access to information about the historic environment of the particular area of England they cover to fulfil a wide variety of functions which include:

- advancing knowledge and understanding of the historic environment
- informing strategic policies and decision-making relating to local plans, neighbourhood plans and land management
- informing development management 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
- 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

### 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 England is the primary source for records relating to designated historic assets of national importance including listed buildings, scheduled monuments, designated wrecks, registered battlefields and registered parks and gardens, as well as the National Marine Heritage dataset. Public access to mapped and description data for these designated historic assets is through the National Heritage List for England<sup>ii</sup>.

HERs signpost users to other relevant data sources, whether this is local records held in archives or museums, or national records such as the Library of Unpublished Fieldwork Reports held by the Archaeology Data Service<sup>iii</sup>, or the Church Heritage Record<sup>iv</sup>.

## Roles and Responsibilities

### Local Planning Authorities

Under the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), local planning authorities should either maintain or have access to an HER. Furthermore, "local planning authorities

should have up-to-date evidence about the historic environment in their area and use it to assess the significance of heritage assets and the contribution they make to their environment. They should also use it to predict the likelihood that currently unidentified heritage assets, particularly sites of historic and archaeological interest, will be discovered in the future.”<sup>v</sup>

The NPPF explains the information a planning applicant should provide to enable the determination of planning applications by the local authority. It states that “as a minimum the relevant Historic Environment Record should have been consulted”.<sup>vi</sup>

The NPPF, also covers the responsibility of the local planning authority to make historic environment data acquired as part of the planning process publically accessible, noting “copies of evidence should be deposited within the relevant Historic Environment Record”.<sup>vii</sup>

The planning practice guidance (PPG) on conserving and enhancing the historic environment notes that “historic environment records are publicly-accessible and dynamic sources of information about the local historic environment. They provide core information for plan-making and designation decisions (such as information about designated and non-designated heritage assets, and information that helps predict the likelihood of current unrecorded assets being discovered during development) and will also assist in informing planning decisions by providing appropriate information about the historic environment to communities, owners and developers as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework.”<sup>viii</sup>

### Historic England

Historic England monitors the standards of all HERs by coordinating and validating audits on a three-to-five-year cycle to review data quality, evidence compliance against national standards and indicators, and identify needs for enhancement. A summary of each audit will be published on the Historic England website.

Historic England has a responsibility for setting standards in heritage data. It collaborates with partners nationally and internationally to promote common standards, including specialist vocabularies<sup>ix</sup>.

Historic England is responsible for the operational management of the Heritage Gateway in partnership with ALGAO<sup>x</sup> and IHBC<sup>xi</sup>.

Historic England is responsible for working with partners to improve access to historic environment information.<sup>xii</sup>

### Other organisations

Some other organisations also have records of the historic environment. These are often tools utilised for management of the historic environment under their responsibility. Examples of these records are those held by the National Trust and the Church of England (The Church Heritage Record). These complement HERs, often with more management-specific information.

## Content and Coverage

### Content

An HER contains, or provides links to, information on the following<sup>xiii</sup>:

- Nationally and internationally designated heritage assets.
- Locally designated heritage assets.
- 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 such things as desk-based assessments, field evaluations, excavation reports, archaeological watching briefs, environmental assessments, conservation management plans and assessments, reports on significance from Design and Access Statements, reports on buildings, conference notes and proceedings, etc.
- Historic area assessments and characterisation studies such as Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC), urban archaeological databases, 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 palaeoenvironmental data.

### Temporal Limits

There are no temporal limits on the information recorded in an HER: it includes significant data relating to all periods, from the earliest human activity<sup>xiv</sup> to the present day.

### Geographic Limits

These are defined by the administrative boundaries (whether terrestrial, inter-tidal or marine) of the local authority(s) that an HER covers.

### Maintaining a Dynamic Historic Environment Record

HERs require 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 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.

### Supporting Reference Collections

An HER makes accessible relevant collections of published and unpublished reference materials that supplement the monument and event information contained in its database. Supporting reference collections serve a valuable role to answer enquiries.

### Deposit of Primary Archive Material

HERs are not responsible for primary archaeological archive material or primary documentary material unless local decisions to the contrary have been made. Original archival 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 an accredited archive. Digital primary archival material should be deposited with a Trusted Digital Repository<sup>xv</sup>.

## Data Standards and Security

### 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)<sup>xvi</sup>. As such, an HER will comprise of a digital database recording monument, event and source records. This is linked to a geographic information system (GIS) for recording spatial data.

### 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. The Heritage Information Access Strategy (HIAS)<sup>xvii</sup> states that “Local Authority HERs should be the first point of call for and primary trusted source of investigative research data and knowledge”, and data sharing is integral to HIAS. HERs follow the HIAS principles, as well as guidance for data sharing set out in *Informing the Future of the Past*<sup>xviii</sup>.

### Data Backup and Security

Local Authorities will ensure adequate data backup and security procedures<sup>xix</sup> are in place for HERs. Historic England will ensure a security copy of all such data exists.

In addition, host organisations also need to provide adequate support for IT hardware and software (including GIS), and training opportunities for staff in these.

## Public Access and Engagement

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, 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, telephone access, and where necessary, visitor access.

HER host authorities are expected to support and provide resource 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 will also be made accessible through the Heritage Gateway<sup>xx</sup>.

## Service Delivery

### Local Priorities and Outcomes

In order to effectively manage their Historic Environment Record, host authorities will use the HER Outcomes Framework to ensure local priorities and stakeholder needs are met<sup>xxi</sup>.

### National Priorities and Outcomes

HERs are expected to achieve the national HER Service Outcomes<sup>xxii</sup> and meet the national HER indicators as defined in the HER Excellence Framework<sup>xxiii</sup>. This is measured as part of an HER Audit.

## Plans, Policies and Services

Relevant plans and policies for HERs are developed and 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.

## Staff

HER service providers are expected to employ and support dedicated, appropriately qualified and competent curatorial staff to create their record and keep it up to date, and 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.

## 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

## References

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- i A list of Historic Environment Records in England can be found at <http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/>
- ii National Heritage List for England: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>
- iii Library of Unpublished Fieldwork Reports: <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/greylit/>
- iv Church Heritage Record: <https://facultyonline.churchofengland.org/churches>
- v [http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/policy/achieving-sustainable-development/plan-making/#paragraph\\_169](http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/policy/achieving-sustainable-development/plan-making/#paragraph_169)
- vi [http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/policy/achieving-sustainable-development/delivering-sustainable-development/12-conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment/#paragraph\\_128](http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/policy/achieving-sustainable-development/delivering-sustainable-development/12-conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment/#paragraph_128)
- vii [http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/policy/achieving-sustainable-development/delivering-sustainable-development/12-conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment/#paragraph\\_141](http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/policy/achieving-sustainable-development/delivering-sustainable-development/12-conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment/#paragraph_141)
- viii [http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/guidance/conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment/why-is-significance-important-in-decision-taking/#paragraph\\_011](http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/guidance/conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment/why-is-significance-important-in-decision-taking/#paragraph_011)
- ix Historic England's Corporate Plan: <https://historicengland.org.uk/about/what-we-do/corporate-strategy/>
- x Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers: <http://www.algao.org.uk/>
- xi The Institute of Historic Building Conservation: <http://www.ihbc.org.uk/>
- xii Historic England's Corporate Plan: <https://historicengland.org.uk/about/what-we-do/corporate-strategy/>
- xiii Managing Significance in Decision-Taking in the Historic Environment: <https://content.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/gpa2-managing-significance-in-decision-taking/gpa2.pdf/>
- xiv Including '*sites of early human activity without structure*' – sites that include, but are not limited to: places where people temporarily, but often repeatedly, dwelt; places where people exploited natural resources; places where people deliberately or accidentally deposited cultural material; and places which preserve a clear record of how the environment has directly influenced or been altered by human activity.
- xv Trusted Digital Repositories: <http://www.dcc.ac.uk/resources/repository-audit-and-assessment/trustworthy-repositories>
- xvi Forum on Information Standards in Heritage (FISH): <http://heritage-standards.org.uk/>
- xvii Heritage Information Access Strategy (HIAS): <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/support-and-collaboration/heritage-information-access-strategy/>
- xviii Informing the Future of the Past: <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/ifp/>
- xix Adequate back up and security procedures, as defined in Informing the Future of the Past: <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/ifp/>
- xx Heritage Gateway: <http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/>
- xxi Include short definition, and link to, HER Outcomes Framework
- xxii Include short definition, and link to, HER Service Outcomes
- xxiii Include short definition, and link to, HER Excellence Framework

## Further Information

[National Planning Policy Framework](#)

[Planning Practice Guidance](#)

[Heritage Gateway](#)

[MIDAS Heritage – The UK Historic Environment Data Standard](#)

[Forum on Information Standards in Heritage \(FISH\)](#)

## Contacts

### **Historic England**

Heritage Information Partnerships Team

Listing Group

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<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/technical-advice/information-management/support-for-hers/>

### **Local Planning Authorities**

Local planning authorities can be contacted via each relevant local authority website.

### **Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO)**

<http://www.algao.org.uk/>

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