

Standard and guidance for historic environment desk-based assessment

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Introduction	3
1 Application	5
2 Principles: the code of conduct and other regulations of CIfA	6
3 Procedures	6
3.1 Project initiation	6
3.2 Briefs/project outlines, specifications and project designs	7
3.3 Sources and data collection	8
3.4 Assessment of significance	9
3.5 Reports	10
3.6 Monitoring	11
Annex 1 Sources of information	12
Annex 2 Report contents	14
Annex 3 Recommendations for digital archives	15
Acknowledgements	16

STANDARD AND GUIDANCE

for historic environment desk-based assessment

INTRODUCTION

This *guidance* seeks to define good practice for the execution and reporting of desk-based assessment in line with the regulations of CIfA, in particular the *Code of conduct*. It seeks to expand and explain general definitions in the *Code*.

The key section of this document is the Standard. It is only a few lines long, and deliberately lacks detail. In part this is because it is impossible to foresee every circumstance and prescribe for every investigative method. Nor does the Institute seek to dictate to its members in detail the means by which projects are conducted, but rather to outline procedures by which outcomes or products can be attained and against which performance can be monitored. The historic environment expert is left free to make a considered selection of appropriate established techniques and to develop new methods.

If the project has failed to determine *the nature, extent and significance of the historic environment within a specified area* because of the way in which it was conducted, the Standard has not been met. It is a 'sub-standard' project. The caveat for meeting the Standard is 'as far as is reasonably possible', because there may be good reasons why a well-conducted assessment stood no chance of success.

Defining 'reasonably possible' relies on shared professional judgement and values. This is where the guidance section comes in. It is not binding per se, but advises on what the profession presently considers good practice. Departures from the guidance should be undertaken with caution, and it is advisable to document the reasons.

The Standard defines a required outcome and the guidance advises in broad terms how the profession currently anticipates that the end product will be reached. This document contains more detailed guidance on the legal, policy and practice requirements of the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man, and complements government or practitioner guidance, but it applies to CIfA members' work universally and would benefit from additional sections from those able to draft them. Professional practitioners are likely to produce their own yet more detailed handbooks and procedural documents on how they interpret and implement the CIfA guidance.

The Standard and guidance has many potential applications, but is principally used by

- those involved in commissioning archaeological work, be they developers and their agents, planning archaeologists, or archaeologists designing their independent research, to define the quality required
- those undertaking the work, to assist in their own quality management and to show clients and peers that they are attaining a certain quality

The Standard and guidance applies equally to paid or unpaid archaeologists. For CIfA members and Registered Organisations compliance with the Standard is an obligation of membership/Registration: failure to meet the Standard may be judged to be in conflict with the regulations through the Institute's professional conduct procedures.

Professional practice is changing. New methods are being developed, and the circumstances in which archaeological work is commissioned and conducted are subject to changing legal, administrative and ideological perspectives. Comments and recommendations on this document are welcome at any time.

STANDARD

Desk-based assessment will determine, as far as is reasonably possible from existing records, the nature, extent and significance of the historic environment within a specified area. Desk-based assessment will be undertaken using appropriate methods and practices that satisfy the stated aims of the project, and that comply with the *Code of conduct* and other relevant regulations of ClfA. In a development context, desk-based assessment will establish the impact of the proposed development on the significance of the historic environment (or will identify the need for further evaluation to do so), and will enable reasoned proposals and decisions to be made on whether to mitigate, offset or accept without further intervention that impact.

GUIDANCE

Definition

Desk-based assessment is a programme of study of the historic environment within a specified area or site on land, in the inter-tidal zone or underwater that addresses agreed research and/or conservation objectives. It consists of an analysis of existing written, graphic, photographic and electronic information in order to identify the likely heritage assets, their interests and significance; the character of the study area, including appropriate consideration of the settings of heritage assets; and, in England, the nature, extent and quality of the known or potential archaeological, historic, architectural and artistic interest. Significance is to be judged in a local, regional, national or international context as appropriate.

Purpose and context

The purpose of a desk-based assessment is to gain an understanding of the historic environment resource in order to formulate as required

1. an assessment of the potential for heritage assets to survive within the area of study
2. an assessment of the significance of the known or predicted heritage assets considering, in England, their archaeological, historic, architectural and artistic interest
3. strategies for further evaluation whether or not intrusive, where the nature, extent or significance of the resource is not sufficiently well defined
4. an assessment of the impact of proposed development or other land-use changes on the significance of the heritage assets and their settings
5. strategies to conserve the significance of heritage assets, and their settings

6. design strategies to ensure new development makes a positive contribution to the character and local distinctiveness of the historic environment and local place-shaping
7. proposals for further archaeological investigation within a programme of research, whether undertaken in response to a threat or not.

Such assessment may be undertaken

- in response to proposed development, other land-use change or natural decay or erosion that threatens the historic environment
- within a programme of research not generated by a specific threat to the historic environment
- in connection with the preparation of management plans to conserve the historic environment

The scope of desk-based assessment therefore will vary according to the circumstances in which it is carried out. Desk-based assessment may be instigated or commissioned by a range of different individuals or organisations, including local planning authorities and their advisors, national advisory bodies, government agencies, private landowners, developers or their agents, archaeological researchers, etc. The scope should be agreed with relevant parties in advance.

1 Application

- 1.1 The guidance applies to all types of non-intrusive assessment of the historic environment (above or below ground, inter-tidal and underwater) however generated.
- 1.2 This document provides more detailed guidance on working in the legislative and practice framework of the UK, Channel Islands and Isle of Man, and seeks to amplify directions given in appropriate national planning policy (see Appendix 6), and be compatible with current guidelines issued by regulatory authorities. CfA members and Registered Organisations must comply with the Standard and should follow the guidance wherever they work: they are additionally responsible for making sure that they are aware of and comply with local requirements.

2 Principles: the Code of conduct and other regulations of the CfA

- 2.1 An archaeologist undertaking desk-based assessment must adhere to the five principles enshrined in CfA's *Code of conduct* and the rules governing these principles, see <http://www.archaeologists.net/codes/cifa>.

3 Procedures

3.1 Project initiation

- 3.1.1 The historic environment varies greatly from place to place, and its survival or form is often due to very localised conditions. Consequently, it is good practice to consult historic environment information and regional research agenda at the outset of any new study in order to establish appropriate investigation criteria.
- 3.1.2 In the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man the conservation of the historic environment is a material consideration in the planning process.
- 3.1.3 Within the planning framework, the local historic environment record and the local authority's historic environment advisers should be consulted to determine whether further information is required. In Northern Ireland developers are advised to undertake their own appraisals prior to submission of a planning application.
- 3.1.4 Certain developments fall within special regulations or statute differing from or additional to the standard planning process (eg some projects initiated by public utilities, statutory undertakers, Crown Commissioners, Ministry of Defence, etc). Desk-based assessment undertaken for such developments should aim to follow the procedure set out above.
- 3.1.5 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) applies to proposed projects that are considered to have significant environmental effects (as defined in EC Directive 85/337) and requires a systematic analysis of such effects before a decision to permit or prevent the project is taken. Applicants are required to provide information for the deciding agency to consider in the decision-making process, and further give bodies with relevant environmental responsibilities an opportunity to set the scope of the required impact assessment and to comment on its conclusions before consent is given. EIA is mandatory in relation to certain projects and may be extended to others. Appraisal and desk-based assessment are integral elements of EIA. Non-intrusive and intrusive fieldwork may also be required. Careful consideration should be given to the overlap with landscape and visual assessments, and with the assessment of the setting of historic environment assets, whether designated or not. See Appendix 1 for definitions and the ClfA *Standard and guidance for field evaluation*.
- 3.1.6 It is imperative that the scope, aims and methodology of desk-based assessment be discussed with the local authority's historic environment adviser prior to the commencement of the EIA, and tailored to the specific needs of the site or development.
- 3.1.7 Where EIA does not apply, consultation with the local authority's historic environment advisers in advance of research to seek to agree the aims and methodology will ensure that unnecessary work is avoided and that the results are useful and properly able to inform the planning process. Confidentiality issues should be accommodated by all parties involved.

3.2 Briefs/project outlines, specifications and project designs

- 3.2.1 Desk-based assessment should be carried out according to a written specification or to a project design agreed by all relevant parties, so that performance and fitness for purpose can be measured.
- 3.2.2 A brief (or project outline in Scotland) is an outline of the circumstances to be addressed. It does not provide sufficient detail to be a measurable standard, but it could form the basis for a specification or a project design that sets out a schedule of work in sufficient detail for it to be quantifiable, implemented and monitored, ie a measurable standard. A project design may also include additional information that covers contractual details such as staffing levels or cost relevant to the commissioning but not necessarily the monitoring body. A project design may be prepared in response to a brief/project outline or it may be a research proposal independent of the planning framework (see Appendix 2).
- 3.2.3 Any archaeologist undertaking desk-based assessment should use all appropriate sources and expertise. In the case of projects affecting complex or multi-faceted heritage assets, special consideration should be given to the role of the archaeologist in either leading or contributing to a historic environment team also including other experts in built heritage or historic landscape. The archaeologist should seek to contribute to inter-disciplinary assessment and should not ignore or downplay the significance of other historic, architectural or artistic interests of the heritage asset.
- 3.2.4 For desk-based assessment within the planning framework, a brief/project outline will usually be prepared by the planning archaeologist or curator and issued by the commissioning body or their agents. The brief/project outline or a specification may be prepared by the commissioning body or their agents, but should be agreed in advance with the planning archaeologist.
- 3.2.5 The specification or project design should set out the scope of the end report and should identify relevant data standards for record organisation and content that will be used in information recording systems employed by the project.

3.3 Sources and data collection (including field visits)

- 3.3.1 All work should conform to the specification and/or project design and be agreed by all relevant parties before work commences. Any variations should be agreed in writing by all relevant parties.
- 3.3.2 Sufficient and appropriate resources (staff, equipment, accommodation, etc) must be used to enable the project to be completed within the timetable and to an acceptable standard. Any contingency elements must be clearly identified and justified. It is the role of the archaeologist undertaking the work to define appropriate staff levels. All staff, including subcontractors, must be adequately briefed and aware of the work required under the specification, and must understand the aims and methodologies of the project.
- 3.3.4 All staff, including subcontractors, must be competent for their project roles, and employed in line with relevant legislation and ClfA regulations (see Appendix 6). The author and/or manager should preferably be an accredited member of ClfA. ClfA Registered Organisations have undertaken to comply with the *Code of Conduct*, have been quality-assured by ClfA within the last two years and are subject to a complaints process. Because of the complexity and sensitivity of most commercial work, those

commissioning or specifying such work are recommended to seek to ensure it is undertaken by a ClfA Registered Organisation.

3.3.5 Full and proper records (written, graphic, electronic, and photographic as appropriate) should be made for all work. Digital records created as part of the project should comply with specific data standards.

3.3.6 The archaeologist undertaking desk-based assessment should consider all appropriate sources of information and give an assessment of their relevance and reliability. All sources consulted should be listed in the report, whether or not they have been productive. All other potentially relevant sources that have not been consulted should be listed and the reasons for not consulting them given. The report should contain a full discussion of the implications of the choice of sources consulted in relation to the reliability of the conclusions reached.

3.3.7 The range of sources containing potential information that need to be consulted in undertaking desk-based assessment will vary according to a number of factors:

- the size and location of the site
- the nature and quality of existing information
- the exact purpose and scope of the study

A list of sources of potential sources is provided in Annex 1, but this is by no means exhaustive.

The archaeologist should also contact the relevant HER before undertaking the assessment in order to check

- what digital images and cartographic resources are available within the HER that could potentially be used for DBA, subject to appropriate copyright and licence arrangements (eg scanned tithe maps, aerial photographs)
- whether there are any other DBAs for the study area or adjacent areas that are available or being produced
- the sources that may have been already used by the HER as part of any HER appraisal for the development or land-use change that DBA aims to address.

3.3.9 Unless access is restricted, the archaeologist undertaking desk-based assessment should visit the study area in order to assess its character, identify visible historic features and assess possible factors that may affect the survival or condition of known or potential assets. All assessments should include an explicit statement as to whether or not a visit has taken place and, if so, a description of the procedures used and any constraints to observation encountered.

3.3.10 Health and Safety regulations and requirements cannot be ignored no matter how imperative the need to record archaeological information; hence Health and Safety will take priority over archaeological matters. All archaeologists undertaking fieldwork (eg a site visit) must do so under a defined Health and Safety policy. Archaeologists

undertaking fieldwork must observe safe working practices; the Health and Safety arrangements must be agreed and understood by all relevant parties before work commences. Risk assessments must be carried out and documented for every field project, in accordance with the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992.

3.3.11 All equipment must be suitable for the purpose and in sound condition and comply with Health and Safety Executive recommendations. It should be noted that diving equipment in particular is subject to statutory controls under the Diving Operations at Work Regulations, over and above suitability for purpose and sound condition.

3.3.12 The archaeologist undertaking desk-based assessment should ensure that he or she has adequate insurance policies, public and employer's liability cover, and some relevant form of civil liability indemnity or professional indemnity.

3.4 Assessment of significance

3.4.1 An assessment of the significance of historic assets should include consideration, in England, of the archaeological, historic, architectural and artistic interests pertaining to the heritage asset, their significance, and the extent to which that significance relates to different elements of the asset's fabric.

3.4.2 Assessment should include where appropriate evidence of the potential reduction of significance due to truncation or the erosion of deposits, alterations to buildings, etc.

3.4.3 Assessment should also identify the potential impact of proposed or predicted changes on the significance of the asset and the opportunities for reducing that impact. It should consider how the significance of the asset might be enhanced, and might suggest how loss of significance of one interest might be offset by enhancing that of another (eg through increased knowledge and public appreciation).

3.5 Reports

3.5.1 All reports should be written in a clear, concise and logical style; technical terms should be explained. Reports submitted in support of planning applications are public documents which need to be easily understandable by a non-specialist audience.

3.5.2 The content of desk-based assessment reports will vary according to the scope of the proposals and the complexity or otherwise of the information available from existing sources; presentation may also be determined by the requirements of the body or person commissioning the work.

3.5.3 Reports should contain as a minimum:

- non-technical summary
- statement of research and/or conservation objectives and how they have been addressed by the study
- clear map of study area

- aims and purpose of assessment including the context of development or other land-use change
- methodology including sources consulted (see 3.3.7)
- identification of existing heritage or archaeological site management plans that may be in operation in the locality, and where sufficient information about the proposed development is available an assessment of the impacts that new development may have on them
- description of the heritage assets and archaeological potential of the study area
- an assessment of the interest and significance of each asset and its setting, focusing on those aspects that will be affected by any proposed or predicted changes
- assessment of the nature of the effects and options for reducing or mitigating harm. Opportunities for positive effects should be identified as well as negative impacts and mitigation options.
- a description of the area's historic character and the effect of proposed development upon it (where appropriate, this should include options for conserving or enhancing local character)
- conclusion, including a confidence rating and the extent to which the aims and purpose have been met
- supporting illustrations at appropriate scales
- supporting data, tabulated or in appendices
- index to and location of archive
- references

The contents are discussed in more detail in Annex 2.

- 3.5.4 Where the project is carried out within the planning process, the report should contain sufficient objective data to enable 'an informed and reasonable decision to be made', including a decision to require further evaluation of the site. Non-compliance with the agreed specification or project design should be pointed out by the local authority historic environment adviser to the archaeologist undertaking the work, and their client if appropriate, at the earliest opportunity.
- 3.5.5 Subject to any contractual requirements on confidentiality, copies of the report should be submitted to the appropriate Historic Environment Record and national monuments record, where appropriate, and an OASIS form should be completed to notify and provide information to the relevant local and national authorities, within six months of the completion of the report or earlier as may be specified by contractual or grant conditions. This should contain sufficient detail to help researchers to find and access the project archive.

3.6 Other considerations

- 3.6.1 Desk-based assessment may be undertaken before development proposals are in the public domain. The archaeologist undertaking this type of work has a duty of confidence to the client but must emphasise their professional obligation to make the results of work available to the wider community within a reasonable time.

- 3.6.2 It is advisable for desk-based assessment to be governed by a written contract to which the specification or project design may be attached. Such contracts or agreements should include reference to the defined area of study outlined on a map; to the brief/project outline, specification or project design (see 3.2); to conditions for access; programme, method and timetable for payment; copyright arrangements (Appendix 6).
- 3.6.3 All project archives should meet the requirements of the ClfA *Standard and guidance for the creation, compilation, transfer and deposition of archaeological archives*.
- 3.6.4 It is advisable to include statements on ownership and copyright in a written contract or agreement. It is normal practice for both the copyright and ownership of the paper and digital archive from archaeological work to rest with the originating body (the archaeological organisation undertaking the work). The originating body deposits the material with the recipient museum or repository on completion of the contracted works, and normally transfers title and/or licenses the use of the records at this stage.
- 3.6.5 Material copied or cited in reports should be duly acknowledged and all copyright conditions (such as those for Historic Environment Records, national monuments/historic environment records or Ordnance Survey maps and the National Grid) observed.
- 3.6.6 All aspects of publicity must be agreed at the outset of the project between the commissioning body and the archaeologist undertaking the project.
- 3.6.7 Any costs to be charged by the local authority historic environment advisers must be agreed in writing at the outset of the project.

ANNEX 1

Sources of historic environment information

Archaeological databases

Source type

Historic Environment Records, archaeological excavation and survey records, Archaeological Data Service, national monuments records, national buildings records, Listed Building lists, Scheduled Monuments lists, regional inventories, public and private collections of artefacts and ecofacts, Internet.

Source location

National heritage bodies, Royal Commissions, local authorities Historic Environment Records, museums, archaeological trusts and units, universities, Ordnance Survey, local archaeological and historical societies.

Online sources

Archaeology Data Service
Heritage Gateway
CANMORE
Coflein
Intute
PastScape

Historical documents

Source type

Charters, registers, manuscript collections (secular and ecclesiastical), deeds, wills, estate papers, electoral rolls, contemporary published accounts (eg county and agricultural surveys), industrial investigations.

Source location

The National Archives, parish records, estate collections, museums, national and local libraries, county and district archives, study centres, press libraries, Ordnance Survey, British Library.

Online sources

Access 2 Archives

Cartographic and pictorial documents

Source type

Early maps, prints and paintings, tithe maps, Ordnance Survey maps, estate plans, Admiralty charts.

Source location

The National Archives, parish records, estate collections, museums, national and local libraries, county and district archives, Ordnance Survey, press libraries, private collections, Ministry of Defence hydrographic office, local archaeological and historical societies.

Online sources

Access 2 Archives
MAGIC

Aerial photographs

Source type

Aerial photographs. Satellite images

Source location

National registers of aerial photographs (including RAF and Ordnance Survey flights), museum collections, national heritage bodies, Sites and Monuments Records, university collections, private collections (in some instances a flight may be commissioned as part of the study). Online sources such as Google Earth or Microsoft MSN Virtual Earth.

Geotechnical information

Source type

Borehole and test pit logs, site surveys, geological maps, offshore surveys.

Source location

Client geosurvey records, Ordnance Survey, British Standards Institute, British Geological Survey publications, commercial offshore survey companies, universities.

Secondary and statutory sources

Source type

Regional and period archaeological studies, landscape studies, local knowledge, dissertations, policy statements and research frameworks, legislative documents, European directives, local development plans, unitary development plans, constraints maps.

Source location

Libraries, local landowners, local and national museums, universities, academic journals, monographs and other publications, local archaeological and historical societies.

Online sources

HEREIN

ANNEX 2

Report contents

Non-technical summary

This should outline in plain, non-technical language, the principal reason for the work, its aims and main results, and should include reference to authorship and commissioning body.

Introduction

This should set out the circumstances leading to the commission of the report, any restrictions on reporting or access to relevant records, size, surface geology and topography of the study area.

Aims and objectives

These should reflect or reiterate the aims set out in the project design or specification.

Methodology

The methods used and an outline of sources consulted, including any variation to the agreed project design or specification, should be set out carefully and explained as appropriate. The methodology for assessing significance should be explained.

Summary of archaeological results

This should outline, as a series of objective statements organised clearly in relation to the methods used, the known and potential archaeological interests by period and/or type. Their significance with reference to (included) supporting evidence should be indicated.

Development or other impact (if appropriate)

This should outline the likely impact(s) of the development and other factors on the known or potential archaeological resource. If the precise impact cannot be evaluated, this should be stated.

Conclusions

It is appropriate to include a section which summarises and interprets the results, and puts them into context (local, national or otherwise). Other elements should include a confidence rating or statement on the reliability of sources used, or limitations imposed by particular factors. Recommendations on further work may also be required, but in most circumstances within the planning framework this will be the responsibility of the relevant planning archaeologist or curator.

Appendices

These should consist of essential technical and other detail to support the above. They may consist of a copy of the brief/specification for the work; summaries of sources of evidence consulted with reference to location, catalogue numbers, etc; transcripts or copies of

documents (where copyright permissions exist or are attainable); project archive catalogue; list of consultees; index to site codes.

Illustrations

Most reports will need to include location plans for the development area, plans of the existing and proposed developments, and at least one figure showing known or potential archaeological interests within or affected by the development area. Any figures should be clearly numbered and easily referenced to the National Grid.

References and bibliography

A list of all primary and secondary sources used, as well as potentially relevant sources not consulted, must be given.

Other

Contents list, acknowledgements, disclaimers.

ANNEX 3

Recommendations for digital archives

Projects vary in their organisation and implementation, even where standards and best practice are employed. This annex thus provides a checklist for the types of data to be included in the digital archive of a desk-based assessment. Where those data types do not exist, they need not be created. Where they are not available in digital format, they need not be digitised. The archive has two components: the minimum archive is the index level record; with other materials as appropriate. Thus, the archive should consist of:

1. Index level record

An index level record for the investigation conforming to relevant standards. Typically, this will be an OASIS entry. The exact content and structure of that record should be developed in consultation with relevant heritage agencies and identified in the project design. Local circumstances will dictate form of delivery though digital supply should be preferred, in order that the record may be appended to existing databases without the need for manual data entry.

2. Other associated data sets

Other associated data sets as identified in the project design, such as a project specification document, project design document and desk-based assessment report. If other forms of digital data, such as GIS or databases are used, these should also be supplied. The precise composition of the archive will vary with local circumstances.

Data creation

All data created as part of a project design should follow standards and guidelines for good practice. Data that is being deposited in a digital archive should be supplied in a form consistent with that archive's deposition guidelines.

Further guidance on the management and archiving of digital data can be obtained from the Archaeology Data Service. Contact details for the Archaeology Data Service are included in Appendix 7.

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