

CPD CORNER

What's going wrong with desk-based assessments?

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On 15 October, the ClfA Annual General Meeting was hosted by Central Hall, Westminster, London. In order to maximise the impact of the day and to bring together members and non-members from across the historic environment sector, a CPD workshop is organised in conjunction with the AGM each year. The 2018 CPD workshop focused on desk-based assessments and attracted a considerable amount of interest, with 90+ delegates in attendance. These represented local planning authorities, archaeological contracting organisations, consultancies and universities. Presentations were heard from me, Kate Geary, Head of Professional Development and Practice, and guest speaker Ben Found, Senior Archaeological Officer for Kent County Council.

Central Hall,
Westminster.
Credit: J Parker
Wooding



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Why run a workshop on desk-based assessments?

A combination of increased levels of concern regarding the quality and efficacy of desk-based assessments, a higher number of sanctions imposed at Registered Organisation inspections and the launch of the Standards and guidance project (see page 19 this issue) highlighted this workshop as the perfect opportunity to bring the sector together to discuss *What's going wrong with desk-based assessments?* The interest and high attendance only served to further support this fact. Clearly, there was a lot to talk about.

Setting the scene

Desk-based assessments have become much-maligned more recently, evidenced by the increasing levels of feedback and reports received about alleged sub-standard assessments. Despite being enshrined in planning guidance, there still seems to be a lot of confusion as to what a desk-based assessment is and its overall purpose. Discussions with the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) highlighted several issues that were featured within the workshop discussions. These included confusion over terminology and the difference between desk-based assessments and heritage statements, the submission of unnecessary/unsolicited desk-based assessments, the regurgitation of Historic Environment Records (HER) information, inconsistent compliance with the Standards and guidance and, in some cases, the lack of a meaningful assessment of significance, potential and impact. To this end, the workshop was organised to address these concerns, bring together professionals from across the sector and identify the ways in which ClfA could help. Specific questions for ClfA related to the Standards and guidance.

Recap: How to comply with the Standard and guidance

The Spring 2017 issue (101) of *The Archaeologist* included a **Spotlight on the Standard and guidance for desk-based assessments** and reiterated that to comply with the Standards and guidance,

A desk-based assessment must:

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

With all this in mind, the presentations and discussions commenced.

Is it fit for purpose? Are updates or changes required to address the feedback or are the issues not associated with the Standards and guidance but something else?

Group discussion

A feature of the workshop included showcasing the perspective of the curator. It was important to include this role prominently within this first workshop to help frame the feedback received from ALGAO, but also to reflect the fact that the network of curators across the UK is a key component within the process, collectively receiving, reading and commenting on numerous desk-based assessments each week. Ben Found, Kent County Council, acted as guest speaker and highlighted the main issues currently faced by curators, using case studies from Kent as examples. Some of the key issues raised included the need for clearly defined research objectives and research questions, the receipt of unnecessary and unsolicited desk-based assessments, the lack of communication, the use of appropriate sources of information, the importance of local knowledge, looking beyond the research area to help assess

significance and the re-use of HER information. With client confidentiality, costs, resourcing and time pressures raised as counter issues for the contractors and consultants in the room, in addition to tight timescales, a lack of curatorial provision and the effects of local authority cuts, an interesting, lively and productive debate ensued.

Delegates were given the opportunity to assume different roles during discussions in order to acquire insight and enhanced appreciation of what other audiences may wish to gain from reading a desk-based assessment. This, in turn, served to highlight the challenges faced from different professional perspectives – these roles included contractors, curators, consultants, clients, ClfA employees, academic researchers and members of the public. Delegates were also asked to discuss what they saw as the main issues, (or alternatively what they didn't see as issues at all), how things could be improved, what the perceived barriers were to achieve consistent compliance with the ClfA Standards and guidance and what changes could be made to the ClfA Standard and guidance to help all involved.



Group discussions. Credit: J Parker Wooding

Take-home points

Ben's presentation and the feedback received from the discussions and the post-workshop survey has been extremely valuable and has provided a lot to think about. Ways in which the Standards and guidance could be amended to support those writing and reading desk-based assessments were highlighted and these will be considered in due course as part of the wider Standards and guidance project. However, some of the main take-home points highlighted in terms of the actual content of desk-based assessments and the processes involved during their compilation are outlined below:

- Speaking to your local curator early in the process, wherever possible
- Being clear about your objectives and research questions
- Not assuming a desk-based assessment is always necessary – engage with the curator and potentially save your client some money
- Not just regurgitating the HER gazetteer but trying to enhance and add value to

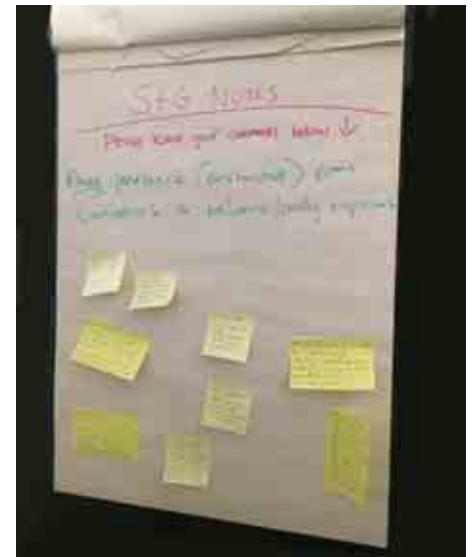
the information already available – remember public benefit!

- Always including an assessment of the significance of the site and its surrounding area

These may seem obvious to some but they are worth repeating, especially as they do appear to be issues that are being more frequently highlighted as problematic.

So what next?

This workshop produced lots of interesting discussion and extremely useful feedback from all perspectives across the historic environment sector. It represented the largest gathering of professionals at a ClfA event outside of the conference. As a result, additional workshops are now planned for 2019 in northern England, Wales and Scotland. These will provide an opportunity for further discussion and to showcase how issues may differ in those parts of the UK operating under different planning policies. Once these have been completed the feedback will be analysed and used to identify the changes that can be made to the



Feedback was collected in a variety of ways. Credit: J Parker Wooding

Standards and guidance, if required. Thank you to those of you who attended and contributed. It was great to be part of these discussions and I hope you found them useful too. For those interested in attending a future workshop – watch this space!