F.6 The questions people ask of HERs?

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F.6.1 A user-driven perspective[#](#)

Users judge HERs through their ability to respond to requests and the quality and integrity of the information they provide. Dialogue with users, both strategic and during the course of specific enquiries, is the key to providing a good enquiry service.

Many different types of question are presented to HER services. As HER services become more widely known and more accessible, the variety and complexity of questions asked of them increases.

Users come to HER services with greatly varying knowledge and interest in historic environment information. It is important that all users understand the scope and character of the HER information available in order to make informed choices about the way they chose to approach their enquiries.

Similarly, HER staff must gain an understanding of the purpose of an enquiry in order to be able to assist users to retrieve relevant HER information. It is possible to make some generalised assumptions about the information needs of various user groups, but it is actually the purpose of each enquiry that should dictate the response to information retrieval, not the user's affiliation to a particular user group.

HER services should provide clear guidance on the scope of the information available, and some guidance or assistance in selecting appropriate search types. The effective presentation of such guidance is especially important for Web-enabled HERs and other HERs that deliver information with minimum staff intervention.

F.6.2 Common enquiries[#](#)

The following types of enquiries are often presented to HERs.

Area-based enquiries[#](#)

Most enquiries presented to HERs are requests for information pertaining to a particular geographic area. This may be a search circle or polygon defined by the user, or an administrative area such as a parish or district. These types of enquiry are often presented by archaeological advisors to planning authorities, consultants, and contractors, who wish to make an appraisal of the archaeological potential of a proposed development site by examining the previously recorded information within the site and its environs. Other users, such as local history researchers and students, often wish to obtain a comprehensive archaeological or historic environment context for their place of study.

A request for 'all information' or 'any information' an HER holds for a particular area can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Expedience and legibility often demand that the search results are presented in a simplified form or exclude various categories of information (such as administrative and management information, crop mark plots, back-log grey literature references, non-digitised or otherwise non-accessioned survey information, portable antiquities information and so forth). The user should be made aware of how the information they receive from such requests relates to the entire available HER information holding.

Monument specific enquiries#

These are enquiries that concern specific named (or otherwise identified) monuments, buildings, or landscape features. In this case the user will have some prior knowledge of the monument or group of monuments concerned having visited the sites, read about them in other sources, or identified them from a map or aerial photograph. The user then requires further information from the HER. For example, 'Could I have any information you have about the Robin Hood and Little John standing stones?' These enquiries usually are straightforward, but confusion can arise if the user refers to the monument by a name not recorded or recognised by the HER or cannot give an accurate location. For example, 'Do you have any information about the humps and bumps in that field near Upton?' Often, if initially unsuccessful, these enquiries default to area-based enquiries in order to cast the net wider. This type of enquiry sometimes draws the HER's attention to hitherto unrecorded information.

Monument type enquiries#

Monument type enquiries are requests for information regarding all examples of a particular type of monument, building or landscape feature. For example, "Please provide me with details of all square barrows". These enquiries are often made by research users who wish to explore comparisons and variations in monument types, or examine their distribution, perhaps in the context of other landscape information. Users may also seek a comprehensive sample of monuments of the same type in order to make selections for conservation measures or survey projects.

Other enquiry types#

These include:

Management enquiries ? requests for information relating to the state of preservation or protection status of monuments, buildings or landscape features. For example, 'Is the abbey gatehouse Scheduled or Listed, if the latter what grade?' or 'Are there any known waterlogged Neolithic sites in the area?'.

Period-based enquiries ? requests for all HER information associated with a particular general period or date range. For example, 'Please supply any information about Iron Age activity in the area'.

Event-based enquiries ? requests for information regarding a specific archaeological recording event, list of events, or projects. For example, 'Do you have any information about the excavation carried out in Pidley during the 1960s?'

Archive or source enquiries ? requests for grey literature, aerial photographs, geophysical survey plots, and so forth. For example, 'I would like a copy of the Market Street evaluation report', or 'Do you know where the pottery from the Howegate excavations is stored?'

Finds enquiries ? requests for information about single artefact finds or groups of artefact finds. For example, 'Please provide me with details of all Bronze Age hoard finds'.

Thematic enquiries ? research users, especially from the higher education sector, frequently chose to express their enquiries in a thematic way, rather than a straightforward request for certain categories of information. For example, 'Have you any information to assist my research into the

relationship between the Roman transport system and industrial sites?'. These users hope to get some assistance in selecting appropriate search types and helpful ideas towards the research aims. The role of HER staff is to suggest sources of information, provide guidance in matching the available search mechanisms to the aims of the research, and to suggest other ideas and alternative approaches where possible. Clearly, HER staff should aim to be as helpful as possible, but should not be drawn into carrying out the research on behalf of the user.

Users may present combinations of the above enquiries. Thematic enquiries, and enquiries generated in support of research generally, are often the most demanding enquiries presented to HERs. HERs search systems designed to accommodate research user enquiries usually will be able to deal comfortably with the enquiries of other user groups.

All of these enquiries may be geographically qualified by the user to a specific area of interest that includes a whole HER administrative area, a subset of the HER area, several HER areas, or subsets of several HER administrative areas.

Users' lack of familiarity with HER information sometimes results in requests that HERs are not fully equipped to answer. For example, family history enquiries, enquiries about excavation opportunities, museum opening hours, requests for information about famous historic people, or the course of battles, are sometimes presented to HERs. HERs should be aware of related local and national information sources and be able to point users to more appropriate services and sources when applicable.

F.6.3 Search mechanisms and output types#

The choices of search mechanisms and output types available to users should be made clear at the start of the process of answering an enquiry. Any search charges, reproduction charges, or user license agreement stipulations also should be explained at the outset.

Potential bias in evidence, the under-representation or over-representation of certain information categories should be declared. Users will appreciate an honest appraisal of the integrity of their search results. It is not always possible or necessary, however, to discuss enquiries fully with each user. It is helpful therefore to produce some information about the range of search options, output types, licence requirements and the scope of the HER holdings as a leaflet, information sheet, or as part of the HER website. HER facilities delivered through a website or where dialogue with the user has to be limited should make available comprehensive information about the nature of the available HER information and provide plenty of hints for carrying out successful searches.

It is helpful to make available (either via a website or as text documents) brief sketches of the archaeological and historic context of the area covered by the HER on a period-by-period or thematic basis. Local and regional resource frameworks or research agendas (or links to these) should be posted on the HER website. This will enable those users who are unfamiliar with the area to gain a good understanding of the context of their search results and may suggest other avenues for investigation and research.

Common output types#

Users request different output types depending on their intended use of the information.

Text output Ideally, the composition of text output, the HER information fields delivered to the user, should be user-defined. It is desirable, however, to define some standard formats for text output. The following basic text output types suit a wide range of user demands:

- **Summary table**. A simple text list or table of HER entries containing only basic index information in a few fields (such as HER primary reference number, OS National Grid reference easting,

OS National Grid reference northing, locality, monument type or event type, period, evidence, protection status).
- **Basic records**. As above, but with the addition of fields such as description, archive/source type, archive/source title, date of compilation, date of last update, protection grade that provide a greater depth of information.
- **Comprehensive records**. A substantially complete HER entry incorporating all or most information fields.

Text output should be presented clearly and there should be options to enhance legibility for visually impaired users.

Many users appreciate text data in digital form, either as text files or documents, data tables, or databases. The latter two are preferable if the user intends to run their own searches and undertake finer analysis of the data or wishes to integrate the data with other data sets or a Geographic Information System. *Spatial output* The use of a Geographic Information System greatly increases options for the spatial representation of HER information (see figure 59). Many GIS applications allow the results of Boolean searches on a combination of HER database fields to be plotted instantly against various map backgrounds.

HER should develop a range of thematic base maps on which HER information may be plotted. These could include, for example, administrative boundaries, terrain features such as rivers and contours, geological background, the local Roman road system, historic shore lines, historic street patterns, or more sophisticated historic landscape character information.

Other potentially useful spatial information includes view sheds, 3D terrain models, or geo-referenced virtual reality models.

When providing distribution plots of HER information that are subject to a spatial constraint, the area of search should be clearly marked as a boundary ? either a circle, square, rectangle, or irregular polygon.

North points, scales and copyright information, should be included with each spatial plot.

Figure 59: The distribution of certain categories of HER information is often more readily understood when seen in the context of ancient topography, such as this interpretative map of part of the Neolithic fenland environment. (©Peterborough City Council and ©Crown Copyright. All rights reserved. 100024236. 2007).

Other output[#]

HERs usually are able to reproduce sources (such as grey literature reports, aerial photographs and interpretative plots, earthwork surveys etc.) that complement the text. Copyright, reproduction rights and use license agreements should be agreed where materials owned by third-parties are concerned.

Pragmatic decisions will have to be made to determine the amount of copying and staff time that can be allocated for each enquiry. Ideally, users should be given access to copying facilities and time to make their own decisions about what to copy.

The development of HER websites that allow access to supporting reports, documents and data, either by hosting such archives or providing links to other digital repositories, is to be welcomed. The Archaeology Data Service OASIS project allows authors completing online index entries for archaeological projects also to append digital versions of project reports.