5C1 HER Benchmarks and Audits Discussion:

Introduction and outline

Subject: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

Dear all,

Today we are launching the HERs Benchmarks and Audits discussion here on HER Forum. The discussion will remain open until 5pm on 15th November to ensure as many list members are able to participate as possible. For the background to this discussion please refer to my e-mail of last week - https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=herforum;620e7b93.1310 . Before we start I thought it would be useful to outline how we intend for this to work.

Last week we provided some broad themes we hope to cover in the course of the discussion. To help structure and focus the discussion, and to start things off, we have set out a number of specific questions at the end of this e-mail (although discussion is not limited to these).

As mentioned in my previous e-mail we have put a copy of the 2002 Benchmark report and the current Audit specification in the file area for reference. The files are in a folder called 'Benchmark and Audit Discussion' (see https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/filearea.cgi?LMGT1=HERFORUM&f=/Benchmark_and_Audit_Discussion)

The HER Forum list will still be open for business as usual so do feel free to post on other topics. To make it easier to follow the discussion please include B&A2013 in the subject line of your e-mail.

The HER Forum e-mail list is open to anyone with an interest in HERs and all list members are welcome to participate in the discussion. Please can you ensure that when you post, even as a reply, you sign off with your name and organisation (if applicable). Can I also take this opportunity to remind list members that the HER Forum archives are publically available online and can be read by non list members.

If you want to change your e-mail settings please use the HER Forum FAQ (available here https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/filearea.cgi?LMGT1=HERFORUM) for details on how to do this.

We always welcome feedback on the format of these discussions, what worked and what didn't. Please get in touch with me off list if you have any comments (including ideas for future topics) we can use to improve future discussions.

If you have any queries about this specific discussion, please get in touch with me off list.
The discussion is now open. To start off the discussion the questions we would like you to consider are:-

 * Do you currently use the benchmarks?
    * If so, for what purpose?
    * If you do not use the benchmarks, why?
 * How do you see development of the benchmarks going forward?
 * How do you see the inter-relationship between benchmarks and the HER audit process?

In your response it would be helpful if you could indicate if you have undertaken an audit, and if so when.

Over to you!

We hope you will all enjoy the discussion.

best wishes

Sarah

Sarah MacLean MA MIfA
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor English Heritage

29th October 2013

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

Hi,
From my perspective I think there are three fundamental questions that the HER community needs to address first.

Do we need HER benchmarks?
I think this is a good question to ask and personally I think the answer is a resounding yes, but it's fundamentally tied up with the answer to the second question.

What do we, as a community, want the HER benchmarks for?
I think that the HER benchmarks can be used to define what a HER or HER service is. Thanks to the NPPF access to a HER is now a requirement for a planning authority, but although we have a lot of guidance (IFP2 etc.), we seem to lack a full and proper definition. Personally I think this is important in helping us to protect our services at a time when discretionary spending in local authorities is under such pressure. I also feel that reporting our progress against the benchmarks helps inform those authorities supporting the HER as to the range and quality of the service which they are paying for. Furthermore, failure to reach a national benchmark or standard is valuable evidence when trying to garner support for HER development.

How do we measure ourselves against the benchmarks?
Personally I think the HER Audits should be an important part. The audit should provide the baseline data from which we can measure ourselves against the benchmarks, BUT we will still need some form of external moderation if we are to achieve a robust measurement. Should this be an integral part of the English Heritage audit or perhaps we could submit our assessment to our regional ALGAO HER groups for comment? With the latter, it does provide an opportunity to provide an ALGAO 'stamp of approval', the former English Heritage's.

Best wishes
Rob

Rob Edwards
Historic Environment Records Officer
Cheshire Archaeology Planning Advisory Service

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

One question is how does the auditing and benchmarking actually ensure that a dataset is fit for purpose?

This may sound a daft question but as an example we are currently finding that any one HER enquiry (typically for a 2km radius search area) is giving an error rate in the NGR of records of anywhere from1% up to 20-25% . That includes records that are completely in the wrong place, ie many kilometres distant and ones that are "only" a few tens or hundreds of metres wrong. Much of this has come from pushing a paper based, more intuitive record into the unforgiving digital environment but it is very hard to identify without going through record by record and checking. Some errors might be caught by checking and changing 6 figure NGRs to 8 or 10 figure, but others would be very hard to detect.
How does benchmarking and auditing address this particular issue? It is one that is of vital importance if we are to argue, that hand on heart, our HERs are worth having.

Jenny Hall

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

Hi Jenny

If an auditing and benchmarking process encourages HERs to upgrade to using GIS systems that use polygons to depict archaeological sites that should be described as areas rather than points, would that help? There can still be problems of misplaced sites (human error, computer glitch), but polygons are much better for intersecting a search area than the single NGR at the centre of a field system, area of watermeadows, or linear monument.

Rachel

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Rachel Edwards
Arboretum Archaeological Consultancy

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

My general feeling is that while Benchmarks and Audits probably are a good thing that the Benchmarks are too prescriptive and difficult to achieve. It would be interesting to know which HERs feel that they have achieved all of the 1st stage Benchmarks and if any feel they have achieved all of the 2nd stage Benchmarks. Given that the Audits are so heavily reliant on the Benchmarks this makes achieving targets set in them also difficult. When we carried out our audit a few years ago I was surprised how difficult it was to find samples of the various documents asked for (in some cases none at all were forthcoming) – presumably because so few HERs had managed to do them. Personally I would like to see the Benchmarks radically reviewed.

Regards,

Mike

Mike Shaw
Archaeologist, Education & Enterprise
Wolverhampton City Council

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

The answer is, as pretty much always, 'it depends'. Higher quality fit for purpose GIS datasets are important for the development of HERs and interoperability with other systems, but the lack of an adopted standard in England is frustrating. However we do have the work of the Scottish Royal Commission and two HER21 projects to guide us. A defined standard and an applicable benchmark would be beneficial and underpin the argument for access to the resources to get the work done in one batch, rather than piecemeal. However, some sites are always going to be poorly defined and at best only located to 4 or 6 figure references. Ultimately the combination of digital data and digitised hardcopy will have benefits which way outstrip the limitations.

Rob Edwards
Historic Environment Records Officer
Cheshire Archaeology Planning Advisory Service

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

Dear all,

In response to the discussion so far I thought I would add a little background information about the current process. However please note that this only refers to the Audit programme run by English Heritage which only covers HERs in England.

The idea of an audit is to highlight both the strengths and the weakness of the HER to assist the HER with planning a work programme to address the issues (Audit Action Plan). The audit doesn't just cover Data Content and Data Standards but also service provision, information management and organisation management. It is an opportunity for the HER to step back and take a holistic look at the 'HER' and identify priorities for future work.

Re data quality - In the current audit specification (see https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/filearea.cgi?LMGT1=HERFORUM&f=/Benchmark_and_Audit_Discussion for a copy of the full document or contact me off list if anyone wants a copy) covers data quality in section 3.6.2 (page 37). If an HER identifies specific data quality issues in this section then they would likely consider adding work to address this in their audit action plan. Explanation of audit action plans are covered in Section 5 of the audit specification.

HERs are invited to revisit their audit every 3 to 5 years. For the revisit they will receive a custom made specification based on their action plan. This then provides the opportunity for the HER to assess progress against tasks they have previously identified.

It is not expected that the HER will have everything the audit asks about. However the audit is very much about each HER identifying their own gaps and using the audit to move forward.

all the best

Sarah MacLean
English Heritage

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

Hi Rachel,

Yes, in theory, polygonisation would help, in that in creating the polygon, someone has looked at the record and considered whether it is in the right place. The obvious first step ought to be asking is the site in the right place, followed by what is its extent. Not sure that that has happened though with some of the datasets we have seen recently. Also nearly all of the problems we have had are with sites that are discrete not linears or extensive.

Jenny Hall

30th October 2013

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

As it stands benchmarking is there to try to ensure that all HERs meet certain minimum standards across.
-the bare minimum of the data on each record (not even requiring a description!)
-a minimum level of access
-a minimum level of staffing
-that they be digital records linked to a GIS.

It was and is a worthwhile exercise. For instance without it the Heritage Gateway would not have been possible, but the principal aim, to make HERs a statutory service has never been achieved The closed we have some is the statement in the NPPF that every LPA should have or have access to an HER.

They were largely the work of Stewart Bryant in the early 2000s, based on the work David Baker carried out in the 1990s. There were more 'aspirational' level 2 benchmarks, but in these days of salami sliced budgets few HERs have aspirations rising much above survival .

In this context Jenny's comments are not very helpful. Accuracy of things like NGRs is very difficult to measure and hence near impossible to include specific requirements in a benchmark: The level of accuracy that would be vital for a market cross would be unachievable for a reported antiquarian find. If she has specific complaints about the accuracy of data from specific HER/s she ought to take them up with that/those HER.

For my part the glaring omission in the current benchmarks is a standard level of data for a GIS.

Chris Wardle
Leicester City HER

Subject: B&A2013 - Recap from yesterday

Dear all,

Just to recap from yesterday these were some of the questions that were raised during the discussion:-

- Do we need Benchmarks?
- What do we, as a community, want the HER Benchmarks for?
- How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks?
- How to audits and Benchmarks address specific issues like data quality?
- Which HERs feel they have achieved all of the 1st stage Benchmarks?
- Which HERs feel they have achieved all of the 2nd stage Benchmarks?

Can you answer any of these? Answers in an e-mail :)

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean MA MIfA
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

In rely to Chris Wardle's comments I accept that I am looking for better quality standards than most HERs can afford but that doesn't stop them being something to aspire to and to develop methodologies to address. The problems I am talking about are to do with actual errors in the NGRs, not issues to do with linears, extensive sites/complexes, ill-defined records from antiquarian sources etc etc

If we want the whole archaeological community and well beyond to support HERS they have to be worth having and fighting for. I have hung my head in shame on a couple of occasions recently when our client had looked at the raw data from an HER before we had cleaned it up and I realised what they had seen.

Obviously not all HERs are the same and some will be shining examples but in order for global support they all have to be reaching certain standards.

Jenny Hall

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

Perhaps a leaf could be taken out of the Open Source software communities book here (in terms of data quality that is). In their world if someone has a specific requirement for an improvement to a software feature they can either wait until the

joint effort of contributors gets around to making the change based on perceived demand and the availability/capability of volunteer code contributors OR they can invest in getting their need met by 'incentivising' the development (i.e. paying for it to be speeded up by making a contribution to developers) which is then available for all other users but they get what they need (more or less) when they need it.

In a similar way if a requestor of data from an HER has a specific data requirement but it does not currently meet their needs they could wait for it to happen or if they are time limited take what the HER has, commission the improvement and feed it back into the HER for the benefit of others.

The HER is not, after all, free to produce and I am sure that does sometimes happen.

I appreciate that there is not for the most part a community of volunteer 'improvers' who could be 'incentivised' but I presume that contractors producing work for clients based on HER outputs are requested to feed back the results of any 'cleaning up' they have to do of the data or additional information gathered as a condition of the supply of data in a format that can easily be absorbed. How much that actually happens I have no idea. If contractors do not highlight the challenges HERs face to clients and encourage them to pay a contribution towards the work required to feed it back perhaps they are missing a trick. I appreciate they have to make their money from the contract but at the same time they should not be ashamed at the quality of HER data they present if they do not make it clear to clients why it is as it is.

I do not want to set off a fire storm here and I also appreciate this is slightly off topic but I am not often moved to comment. Aspiring to these 'higher standards' is all most local authority funded HERs can manage under the current regime of cutbacks and threats to their existence. The methodologies to address shortcomings I would have thought can only realistically consist of getting others to fund improvement (charity/third sector/'clients').

Jon Robinson

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

Just to pick up , our clients pay for every HER enquiry we make at a very high hourly rate (I have just worked out we have paid over £1000 for HER data requests in the last year).

I spend a lot of time explaining the history of the HERs to clients, why the data is as it is etc but there is a point beyond which it can't be defended and we are just left red-faced on behalf the whole archaeological community.

We, as contractors, feed data back to the HER in the form of reports, comments and amended datasets amongst others. Sometimes we would like to feel appreciated and included as part of the solution, not part of the problem. We all know about the problems and issues surrounding HER data, but contractors are actually very quiet about the quality of the data they receive. That is presumably perceived as them being happy with the data they get, but that may not be the case.

I do feel passionately about supporting HERs but have been finding it harder and harder to say the content is worthwhile when there are so many mistakes. I fully understand staff involved in HER content management being defensive, been there, done that, but that doesn't make the problems go away.

As this dicussion is about benchmaking and auditing, how accessible are the resulting documents to users of the HERs? The more information that is available about any HER, maybe makes it easier for the rest of the profession and the wider world to engage and work together to solve the problems.

Jenny Hall

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

Dear all,

I don't know if it is helpful but there is a brief summary of the audit process in Informing the Future of the Past at http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/ifp/Wiki.jsp?page=SectionB.2#section-SectionB.2-HERAudits . This briefly explains how they work.

The audit reports that English Heritage receive are treated in confidence and are not shared with third parties. However the HER may choose to share all or part of their reports, although we would recommend HERs work within Data Protection Act and any guidance their host organisation provides. If anyone has any further queries about the audit process I'm happy to answer these on or off list.

The Benchmarks are available in the HER Forum Files are at https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/filearea.cgi?LMGT1=HERFORUM&f=/Benchmark_and_Audit_Discussion (see pages 5 to 9 of the Benchmark document in the folder).

Thank you to everyone who is participating in the discussion, especially those who don't often post to the list. The contributions so far have been interesting and provoked useful discussion. Yesterday Rob asked 'what do we, as a community, want the HER benchmarks for?'. Perhaps considering this and the recent posts should we be asking what do we mean when we say benchmark?

all the best

Sarah MacLean
English Heritage

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

Issues of GIS quality aside, the current audit specification includes a range of documents covering aspects such as recording policies, metadata and the like, that HERs should hold (see Sarah's previous post for a link to the audit specification). I'll have to admit that I'm not sure if the audit requires this information to be made publicly available (our last audit was on the 2008 specification). Open and accessible documented standards and/or metadata could easily be incorporated within a new set of benchmarks, either as a stated benchmark or, if we follow an outcomes orientated approach, as the evidence base to prove compliance with a benchmark.

Rob Edwards
Historic Environment Records Officer
Cheshire Archaeology Planning Advisory Service

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

My thoughts on these discussions so far:

·   *Do we need Benchmarks?*

I'd suggest that benchmarks are very important to help us protect the service that we (as an HER) provide and (where we don't meet a benchmark) to provide evidence to our parent organisation to gain support for HER developments. Other organisations may also want to see that the HER is of a certain standard; and the benchmarks help with this. For example, archaeological contractors or academic researchers or district councils may be able to use the results of the Audits and Benchmarks to understand the quality of the data they are receiving, and/or to lobby for improvements to the HER (and the HER data) from the HER's parent organisation (where this is lacking).

·   *Do you currently use the benchmarks?*

As part of the audit process; and if we need to demonstrate to our parent organisation (the County Council) that the HER is lacking in certain areas.

·   *How do you see development of the benchmarks going forward?*

The benchmarks definitely need updating. The benchmarks as they currently stand (from 2002) need updating to incorporate changes in local government, changes in the planning system and agri-environment systems, and how HERs interact with other professionals / the public /etc.

·   *How do you see the inter-relationship between benchmarks and the HER audit process?*

I personally think that the Benchmarks and the Audit system should be very closely aligned. The Audit process acts as an external, funded, independent verification of the benchmarks – and as such allow HERs to help protect or develop their service (see *Do we need Benchmarks?, above*).

·   *How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks?*

HERs need some external moderation if we are to have an independent, robust and verifiable measurement against the Benchmarks. I think the English Heritage Audit process is the best way to do this. I think Rob's idea of getting the regional ALGAO HER groups comment is interesting – but in these times of dwindling resource, resources to do anything effective (over-and-above 'rubber-stamping' the EH Audit process) will be lacking.

·   *How do audits and Benchmarks address specific issues like data quality?*

I think the earlier discussion about data quality (from an archaeological contractors point-of-view) is interesting. I'd suggest that to ensure we have 'fit-for-

purpose' datasets (particularly GIS datasets); we need better measurements for data quality, derived from better standards. This then needs to be incorporated within the Benchmarking and Auditing process.

However, as Sarah eludes:

What do we mean when we say benchmark?

The current Benchmarks include sections on:

- User Services and Access

- Information Coverage and Content

- Information Management

- Organisation Management

I'd suggest that this is still broadly appropriate – but there are areas where we may need refinement. Also, I would argue that the Audit process could be more streamlined (although steps to do this have already taken place, there is still some-way to go).

Also – making the results of the Audit and Benchmarks available publicly should be encouraged – this would enable greater openness and transparency – and allow us (and others) to lobby for improved HER services. Could (or should) – for example – English Heritage hold on their website a summary of each HER's Audit and how that HER has (or hasn't) met its benchmarks?

Anyone else got any thoughts on this? I imagine that this is one of the main chances that we as the HER community can influence future Benchmarks and Audits.

Best regards,

Graham

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Graham Tait
Archaeologist
Historic Environment Team
Devon County Council

31st October 2013

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Recap from yesterday

- Do we need Benchmarks?

In the absence of a statutory mandate for HERs, the combination of the benchmarks with the NPPF is a useful alternative. The NPPF requires planning authorities to provide access to a HER, and the benchmarks broadly define what that should

mean. Obviously not all HERs will meet all the benchmarks, but as an *aspirational* statement of the services we aim to provide they are very helpful.

- What do we, as a community, want the HER Benchmarks for?

As I said above, to my mind they are a quick and easy way of assessing what services we already provide and what we should be aspiring towards. I like the way they are set up at the moment, as they are loose enough to fit into any structure but still definite enough to act as a common standard.

With increasing variation in software packages used from one authority to the next "benchmark compliance" can be useful when putting services out to tender as well.

- How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks?

We don't, at least not formally, although I occasionally go down the list with a highlighter…

But they are very useful for forward planning: I can set a goal of meeting a particular stage 2 benchmark (for example, we are in the process of digitising our grey literature archive) and use the fact that it **IS** a service benchmark to mug the Finance Department for their small change.

- How to audits and Benchmarks address specific issues like data quality?

They don't directly. But they do provide a way to identify shortcomings and prioritise resources to improving data quality where it falls short. That doesn't just mean financial resources either – it can mean help from commercial units to improve on the data they have been processing, volunteer time, or liaison with higher education institutions (one of the local universities around here has agreed to give their archaeology students HER enhancements to do as a coursework exercise!)

Which reminds me – we're due an audit.

- Which HERs feel they have achieved all of the 1st stage Benchmarks?

I know we don't – although we hit a lot more of them now than we did when I started after more than 6 months with no HER officer in post! We've even started hitting some of the stage 2 benchmarks. But there are some of the stage 1 benchmarks that I can't see us achieving any time soon (the requirement for a **full time** HER Officer is something of a non-starter for a small unitary authority in the current economic climate, even if I do keep dropping hints about extra hours…)

Rod Millard
Historic Environment Record Officer
Planning and Transport Development
Bath and North East Somerset Council

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Recap from yesterday
To add the point of view of another small authority officer:

Although I recognise the benchmarks as a good thing, and generally worth working towards, I find that many of them (and the Audit process) is geared towards multi-

staff units in Counties. For example there is no chance that I would be able to arrange a dedicated user facility, carry out formal outreach projects, or hold a reference section larger than a couple of dozen books. This is related to the staffing levels (currently 0.8 FTE) and the relatively junior position that I hold in the department (I'm just one of seven "specialist" planning officers, we're not even allowed to talk to senior/executive officers!) which means that it's a fight just to keep what I have. There are also other benchmarks, such as forward plans, where I know that I should write something up but as I am the only person who would read it the whole process seems rather redundant.

I think that given the above and Jenny's point, which I have heard before from other people, we do need benchmarks and audits but they are not really doing what they need to do - i.e. they are aimed more at impressing Council managers rather than improving HER services.

Hugh

Hugh Winfield | Archaeologist |
North East Lincolnshire Regeneration Partnership

Subject: Benchmarking & Empiricism

Dear All,

Vis-a-vis Hugh Winfield's last comment, as an outsider, but one who did look after an HER or two many moons ago, I'd like to raise a more theoretical perspective.

Much of the discussion so far has been of an empiricist character *(one definition: undue reliance upon experience, practice or observation without recourse to theory or the science of the matter)*, seeing audits or benchmarking as a method to achieve practical outcomes such as 'hard' data, secure high-status posts, future funding or development. I do not disagree that these may be worthwhile in themselves, but archaeology in all its facets is socially-embedded. Benchmarking is part of a wider, longer-lasting regulatory process in our society. Benchmarking is being applied to a whole range of human activities that a two or three decades ago would have been unthinkable. It is a purposeful intrusion of bureaucracy to bring previously unpredictable or not-well-measured services & activities under scrutiny and/or control. Whilst we may wish to embraced this intrusion as useful though domesticating, we can also decide not to embrace benchmarking, to pursue a wilder, more innovative, entrepreneurial, more risky, less constrained activity.

Ben Jeffs' exposition of the St Helena HER is heuristic. What happens if data organising / analysing software becomes far freer & variable, allowing one to combine, store, reconstitute data in any way one likes? Where does benchmarking fit if we are using a mixture of Google, Flickr, tumblr, Pinterest or Facebook data sets? One could also embrace the Big Data approach where you just store data, not in any particular way or format or structure, and use proprietary algorithms to mine that data to provide the info required by researchers. *(Remember, each time you click on a 'Like' or a 'Share' in Facebook, it's worth ~£2.50 to someone, somewhere)*

The usefulness of HERs & their data, or any data set, is not governed by how well they are benchmarked, but by the imagination and analytical skill of the researcher.

In my view, while benchmarking may be useful for managers, it is a 'dead hand' that eventually stifles innovation, is a drag on change, and encourages a 'bean-counter' attitude to the past, our past, which is appropriated and re-cast by each succeeding generation.

Sorry that this is more of an opening gambit rather than fully argued discourse, but did want to keep things short.

Cheers,
Neil Campling

1st November

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Recap from yesterday

- How to audits and Benchmarks address specific issues like data quality?

As many but not all HBSMR users will be aware, HBSMR includes a series of reports that test data compliance with the benchmarks. We took the benchmarks that could reasonably be turned into an objective test, and the reports list the % of records that pass or fail. There is also a mechanism for selecting the failing records to work through and correct them.
This is perhaps data completeness rather than data quality, because a record can pass a test even if the data is wrong, so long as it is present and feasible. I'm not sure there is any way of automatically testing for "correctness", only presence, consistency and plausibility.
Without the benchmarks, we could of course have produced a series of tests anyway, and many HER officers impose far more rigorous tests on their own data; but they are more valuable when pegged against a national scheme.

Picking up another topic from this thread, Jenny Hall noted the existence of mistakes in HER records, even to the extent that they question and undermine the very existence of the HERs. I thought this was rather an over-reaction - any collection of records gathered from mixed sources over xx decades is going to be riddled with issues, and they can only be gradually improved. But I do think we should focus on how to address this. There are two main ways: reactive and proactive. Reactive: HERs should provide more responsive methods of fixing quality issues when they arise, and I don't think this happens very effectively at the moment. Jenny's posts implied that most contractors heaves a big sigh, slag off the HER a bit, fix the data for the purposes of a report, then move on. This doesn't help address the problem, but to do more would be very onerous in the context of a commercial project. Corrections that are buried in a report's appendices are rarely going to make it back into an HER – they are just as likely to be typo's (that's a Friday apostrophe btw, light-heartedly controversial). In the proposed "HERMES" portal that we are currently scoping and consulting on, we are wondering whether there should be simple mechanisms for posting back observations and corrections to the HER, explicitly identified as such. Proactive: I also think there should be more strategic direction in the enhancement exercises, and the spatial aspect is one that is currently highly variable, arguably not fit for purpose in many HERs. In the West of Scotland we had to spend over 2 person years improving the spatial data in the mid-90s, specifically for planning purposes; some HERs have now polygonised everything, while others still have GIS points generated from grid references that are all over the shop. It's highly variable without obvious justification, and the audit and benchmark process can help address this.

Yours
Crispin Flower
exeGesIS

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Recap from yesterday
We can empathise with Hugh at Bedford Borough Council, also a unitary authority –
there are 1.8 of us so we feel positively well-off in comparison! Nonetheless, we fully
echo Hugh's views. We have discussed undertaking a mini-audit with English
Heritage (who incidentally have been very helpful), which I will try and pursue but
once again it is trying to find the time.

We also sympathise with Jenny as our HER data is far from perfect but the reality is
that we are making very little headway in its maintenance and enhancement, as there
is very little time left after development management and the one community project
we are involved in.

Regards

Vanessa Clarke
Senior Archaeological Officer
Bedford Borough Council

Subject: Re: Benchmarking & Empiricism
Certainly some interesting ideas coming forward!

I think it's important that we keep some clear space between what we refer to as
standards and what we refer to as benchmarks. Standards can a requirement to
reaching a benchmark, but I don't really see that a standard should be a benchmark.

Personally, and it would seem to strike a chord with some, I'd like to see a set of
benchmarks based around outcomes (it's not my idea I hasten to add). I think the
benefit of such an approach is that it leaves the HER to determine the actual nuts
and bolts as to how it reaches its objective. HERs are quite diverse with different
organisations providing a wide range of HER related services. I think that we should
try and define core set of benchmarks which will define what a HER is and what the
baseline services are (that should be fun, anyone remember the HER job
description?). It doesn't prevent us developing benchmarks for the other services, a
modular system, so in effect each HER has its own, for want of a better phrase,
'compliancy profile'. It shouldn't be arduous as you can ignore the benchmarks
irrelevant to your service. I think a modular approach would help shape the audit
process too, enabling the HER to focus in on areas relevant to their service.

Neil raises a lot of interesting and valuable points and certainly challenges our
thinking. But, and I think this is a real big but, data standards i.e. MIDAS Heritage are
very important. As much as it appeals to me, we cannot leave it to the semantic web
to sort out. What keeps this HER funded is its contribution to planning and land
charge services; not searches, not researchers, not HLF projects and not public
outreach. They have their own IT systems and the path (for me) to providing
accurate, fit for purpose data with some degree of interoperability has been time
consuming and painful. We need, as a community, to build on this. We need the
suppliers of such IT software to begin to see the value their clients see in this and

begin to develop effective interoperability tools to enable this to happen. It can only happen through defined national data standards.

I'd like to add that we carried out a HER audit in 2009/10. This wasn't management driven or a management decision. We, at the coal face, have found it to be a very useful exercise; especially the action plan which has helped us target our limited amount development time effectively. It has proven a very useful tool in negotiations with management. It has proven a very useful tool in our service reports to our partners and SLAs. I sometimes think we all have a bit of a moment when we see some of the documentation required, however we have found that in many instances our host organisations already have such polices – it's just finding them!

Rob Edwards
Historic Environment Records Officer
Cheshire Archaeology Planning Advisory Service

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Recap from yesterday

Hi Crispin,

Having spent 10 years managing a SMR and now 10 years as a "contractor" I feel that I have a fairly rounded view. I am in Wales, largely using Welsh HERs, but they have possible been better resourced than others. Given the limited staff time for most English HERs I believe that similar issues will exist in the English HERs.

I do not "slag" off HERs to our clients, that would be unprofessional. I spend a lot of time explaining why the history of the records and why there are issues. "Contractors" are not the bad guys - we are all professional archaeologists and ought to take account of each others views to build something better. The HERs at the end of the day actually are paid for by all of us as they are funded by taxpayers money one way or another.

Just to illustrate the problems with data a bit I downloaded the Archwilio app last night and spent an hour or so looking at records for places around me. The first record had a very bad transcription of the site name, wrong site type and wrong period, even though the description clearly said what it was. The second record had no name and no description, The third record was in the wrong place with the wrong site type.... and so on and so on.

The HERs are very difficult to engage with in terms of feeding data back and we do what we can. The Archwilio app does provide a way of all of us feeding information back - Wish it was available in that format on the PC so it was easier to type and compare with old maps, google earth etc - it would be easier to feed data back as you were working as well something to do in the odd spare moment.

Whether the HERs will be able to deal with the data that is fed back is another question. If a 100 people used it once a week and sent 3 revised records back and 1 new site a week, that would give 300 edits and 100 new records a week to be dealt with on top of existing work loads!

However back to the point I think benchmarking and auditing is important, but the documenst need to be publicly available for each HER. For instance, as someone using the HER I need to know that there is a backlog of X years on sourcing local journals so I know what definitely won't be included in the data I receive. But maybe

the process needs to involve the users of the HERs to gain a understanding of the problems and work out solutions for everyone's benefit. Using the HER as a user is a different experience to managing the data and that experience should be harnessed.

Myabe if each HER had a number of random 1kmsq analsyed by an external body on a regular basis, this would give some idea of the scale of the sort of problems that hide from the benchmarking/auditing processes.

I ofetn wonder what the "curators" honestly think of the HER when they are trying to use it against planning applications....

Jenny Hall

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Recap from yesterday

Hi Jenny
I don't think I said contractors were bad guys or unprofessional! I agree with most of your points, and yes an assessment of random sampled areas would be one way of assessing quality.
I agree that statistics and audit outcomes should be public, at least in part. It would help inform users and stimulate improvement. As an interesting parallel, throughout development of the SHINE dataset for agri-environment it has been useful to display the progress and results from each HER area on a public map @
http://www.myshinedata.org.uk/shine-progress
Crispin

PS at the risk of getting flamed… in my personal experience (using the HER only as an archaeologist resident in Wales, and not in a professional capacity, and comparing with all the English ones that I do see professionally) the Welsh HERs are *less* well developed than *most* of the English ones. The density of records per km is one indicator of this, as is the completeness/coherence of individual records. But without published audits, who could say?!

Subject: Re: Benchmarking & Empiricism

I would fully support Rob Edwards points about data standards, and they are vitally important for those of us who want to access the data, and feed it back. I like Neil Camplings thoughts but whilst there is the ocean of data wandering around the internet and we make full use of this as well as HER data, there has to be that definitive data source which is rigorously checked and managed.

Jenny Hall

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Recap from yesterday

I'm not sure density of dots per 1kmsq cannot be used to show how developed HERs are.   The density of sites across much of Wales is probably going to be less than certain parts of England due to the nature of the landscape and how densely that landscape was used in the past.   I agree that the Welsh HERs generally lack descriptions for many sites - partly a by-product of them being computerised very

early on when computer memory was very small and every character ate into valuable space and they are still trying to catch up with that.

But as Crispin says without published audits comparing and contrasting standards across HERs comes down to personal experience. Publishing audits maybe provides an external prod to improve, although might feel uncomfortable.
We (Trysor) became an IfA RO because a potential client said we would need to be one to be considered for a contract. It all looked too hard and difficult to go through the process but the external pressure focussed our minds and we are very pleased to have been an RO for several years with the improvements that process brought us

Jenny Hall

Subject: Benchmarking & Empiricism

Following on from one of Rob's points, I have been thinking recently about the differences between HERs and the data that they cover which I think is relevant to the conversation.

As some kind of explanation, working within a planning department I have very different pressures from a lot of other HERs and that is expressed in my work on creating the area's Local List, as well as other projects on pro-active enhancement of 18th-20th century records through historic photographs, modern photographic surveys of historic areas and studying historic planning files. These are not things that I would expect most HERs to do, but comes from what my bosses and peers need the HER to do in our area. This has a knock-on effect on other work such as checking local journals, running audits, integrating historic notes/research on some of our bigger/older sites and so on, and I have had to streamline my DM work as much as possible without harming the results (which has been made easier by the economic downturn/recession, for example in 2007 I did almost no HER work as DM took almost all of my time).

On the other hand I think that we probably all use very similar sources for our information (OS maps, client reports etc), and are heading in roughly the same direction for output (detailed entries with polygons for most of the background database, more general alert style information for development management outputs).

How all this fits into benchmarking and auditing is, as Rob suggests, perhaps not the easiest thing to work out.

Hugh

Hugh Winfield | Archaeologist |
North East Lincolnshire Regeneration Partnership

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - Welcome to the HER Benchmark and Audit Discussion

I do wonder how big a problem this actually is. When we first transferred the Black Country SMR on to a GIS-based system I noticed similar problems of misplaced sites, though not a huge amount. It was relatively easy to correct those which were way out because somebody had put in the wrong letter prefix – the discovery that

one Black Country foundry was located off the west coast of Scotland was a particular source of wry amusement. Less easy were those where someone had just put in the wrong number so a site was just 100m out or whatever but I usually have a quick check through data before it goes out and over the years have – as far as I know - ironed out pretty much all of the anomalies. I do sometimes look at data from other HERs as part of my research or out of interest when I am visiting an area and can't actually recall noticing anything significantly awry. I would agree that it would be useful if Contractors would point out any discrepancies – or indeed researchers or other users of HERs online. I suspect few do, however, - in Contractors cases presumably because they are up against a tight time deadline.

Mike Shaw
Archaeologist, Education & Enterprise
Wolverhampton City Council

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - subject lines

Sarah,

I'm disappointed that there has been so little take up of your request for HERs who feel that they meet the 1st and 2nd stage Benchmarks. Can no one claim to meet all of the Stage 1 Benchmarks 20 years or so since they were first defined? This would in itself argue for a radical overhaul.

Mike

Mike Shaw
Archaeologist, Education & Enterprise
Wolverhampton City Council

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - subject lines
Hi Mike,

I don't think there is any disagreement about re-examining the Benchmarks! However the sector does need to talk about what it wants, how it sees the Benchmarks working, how they relate to audits etc. So ideas on these are very much welcomed as part of the discussion.

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor
English Heritage

Subject: FW: Benchmarking & Empiricism

I think Rob has hit the nail on the head here. We need to be certain about whether we are talking about standards or benchmarks. Benchmarks may indicate a certain level of achievement but if the level is artibrary (as the first benchmarks really were) then they don't necessarily tell you whether you are meeting your professional responsibilities or not. From memory the first set of benchmarks were introduced in large part because the government was felt likely to be more receptive to making HERs statutory if we had a close definition of what an HER actually was and what services it should provide. As HPR never happened the main driver to achieve the standard was lifted. There was no-one to provide an objective assessment and so we all looked at the level 1 benchmarks, gave ourselves the benefit of the doubt and said 'yeah, I've got that' and went away happy. There was no incentive to achieve them and no penalty for not doing so.

I think we do need benchmarks but they need to be made meaningful and, to my mind, include stronger basic standards and fewer aspirations. The current benchmarks only really contain two references to standards at level 1 - 'compliance with MIDAS and INSCRIPTION' and 'compliance with national spatial data standards'. All the other benchmarks refer to aspects of the service such as policies, outreach and resources which could in theory be present in a completely hopeless service. They were also launched in the full flood of Blairite Britain with its multiplicity of standards, measures and (for some) resources. We're simply not in that world now and I doubt we're going back.

The HER sector is under huge pressure and in future more and more LPAs may be tempted to stick the HER on a shelf but claim to 'maintain or have access to a HER'. The lowest level benchmark needs to define tightly what information should be in the HER, a minimum acceptable quality standard, and how accessible the information is. If there is to be a policy aspect to the level 1 benchmark keep it short and relevant. Having just completed the Audit (which is definitely worth the effort and thanks to EH for supporting it) I think we now have more policies than other teams in the council who are ten times our size and many are really not necessary or are subsumed in wider corporate policies. There are also aspects of the benchmarks like getting the HER or even the Forward Plan adopted that are simply unrealistic.

I also think that we need to allow room for variation in different HERs, in particular as regards some of the more aspirational benchmarks (outreach, education etc). Since the first benchmarks we have seen the ongoing march of community archaeology and in Kent at least most of our outreach and educational activities are now delivered through a community archaeologist, not via the HER. Ten years ago the HER led the way on outreach but now we mostly restrict ourselves to maintaining the website. Other HERs will support community groups or HLF projects in their work rather than carry out this kind of activity themselves. They don't deserve to be marked down for it. I also occasionally have a democratic fit and wonder if these kind of activities aren't for our democratically elected lords and master to prioritise or not as they see fit rather than for ALGAO/EH to insist on.

In summary then I'd say make the benchmarks support us with strong standards and proper external (EH) scrutiny but otherwise leave us to choose our own directions. Perhaps instead of a higher level benchmark we could have a continually changing set of great case studies of HERs doing exciting things and then we can choose our own priorities and lines of development.

Paul Cuming
Historic Environment Record Manager
Kent County Council

Subject: Re: Benchmarking & Empiricism

This all seems very sensible. Perhaps we need some basic Stage 1 Benchmarks – compliance with data standards, regular updating, availability on a website etc - which most HERs could achieve without any great difficulty and then a number of more advanced stages.

Mike

Mike Shaw
Archaeologist, Education & Enterprise
Wolverhampton City Council

4th November

Subject: B&A2013 - Week 2 and an announcement

Dear all,

Welcome back after the weekend. Hope you are all rested and ready to start discussing Audits and Benchmarks again.

After the brilliant start to the discussion last week some of you may be struggling to keep up with the different strands of the discussion, I know I am! To make it easier this week I am going to split the discussion into 5 broad conversation threads. To start each thread off I will summarise the main points people made last week that fit under that theme. I'm sure some points will be relevant to more than one conversation but at least this way it might be easier for people to catch up and jump in.

The five threads will be

 *   What are Benchmarks?
 *   What we want the Benchmarks for? this will include ideas for what they could cover
 *   How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks? Including ideas of new ways this could be done
 *   How do you see the inter-relationship between Benchmarks and Audits?
 *   Ideas for the audit process

Do feel free to start additional threads on related topics but be sure to include 'B&A2013' in the subject line so we know its part of the discussion.

I'll try and get the threads started up as soon as I can but please bear with me, this may take a few minutes :)

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean MA MIfA
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor
English Heritage

Subject: B&A2013 - What are Benchmarks?

Dear all

What are Benchmarks?

This is perhaps a crucial question that needs to be asked before any can be drafted up. Can we all agree on what they are? What is their relationship with standards and guidance?

Rob Edwards has suggested "that we keep some clear space between what we refer to as standards and what we refer to as benchmarks. Standards can be a requirement to reaching a benchmark, but I don't really see that a standard should be a benchmark."

Rob has also mentioned the idea of a set of benchmarks based around outcomes as this would allow the HER to determine what approach they use to reach the objective. Would this be something that would take into account the diverse nature of HERs? Hugh Winfield has pointed out that the current benchmarks can be unachievable for smaller, unitary authority HERs.

Rob went on to say "I think that we should try and define core set of benchmarks which will define what a HER is and what the baseline services are". He also suggested that in addition to core benchmarks there be modular benchmarks that HERs could use depending on what would be most relevant to them.

Although many of those who currently use the Benchmarks who participated last week were keen to still have them (although I think everyone agreed they need revising) Neil Campling made this comment about how he defines Benchmarks- "In my view, while benchmarking may be useful for managers, it is a 'dead hand' that eventually stifles innovation, is a drag on change, and encourages a 'bean-counter' attitude to the past, our past, which is appropriated and re-cast by each succeeding generation." Hugh Winfield also suggested that they were aimed at Council managers. Paul Cuming pointed out that whilst they indicate a certain level of achievement but that if the level is arbitrary they don't tell you a lot.

So back over to to you. What do you think Benchmarks are? How would you define them as a concept?

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean MA MIfA
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor
 English Heritage

Subject: B&A2013 - What do we want the HER Benchmarks for?

Dear all,

What do we want the HER Benchmarks for? What do we want them to cover?

Those who contributed to this side of the discussion last week seemed to be broadly in agreement as to what they wanted the Benchmarks for. These included

- to define what a HER or HER service is
- help us to protect our services
- helps inform those authorities supporting the HER as to the range and quality of the service which they are paying for
- to provide evidence to our parent organisation to gain support for HER developments
- Other organisations may also want to see that the HER is of a certain standard; and the benchmarks help with this
- a quick and easy way of assessing what services we already provide and what we should be aspiring towards
- With increasing variation in software packages used from one authority to the next "benchmark compliance" can be useful when putting services out to tender as well.

However Hugh Winfield felt that the current Benchmarks are *"aimed more at impressing Council managers rather than improving HER services"*. Is this what they need to be? Could they/should they do both?

What do you want the Benchmarks for?

In terms of content the current Benchmarks cover the following 4 areas

1. User Services and Access
2. Information Coverage and Content
3. Information Management
4. Organisation Management

Some of you have started to make suggestions for revised Benchmark content such as:-

- standard level of data for a GIS
- better measurements for data quality derived from better standards. This then needs to be incorporated within the Benchmarking and Auditing process
- updating to incorporate changes in local government, changes in the planning system and agri-environment systems, and how HERs interact with other professionals/the public/etc.
- The lowest level benchmark needs to define tightly what information should be in the HER, a minimum acceptable quality standard, and how accessible information is
- compliance with data standards, regular updating, availability on a website etc

Paul Cuming wants to see meaningful Benchmarks which include stronger basic standards and less aspirations.

What do you think about the content of the Benchmarks? Thinking about what you want then for, what content should they contain?

Or perhaps Benchmarks should look very different. Paul Cuming has suggested that *"instead of a higher level benchmark we could have a continually changing set of great case studies of HERs doing exciting things"*.

Share your thoughts.

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean MA MIfA
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor
English Heritage

Subject: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks

Dear all,

How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks, both now and in the future?

In his e-mail on Friday Paul Cuming explained how originally there was no one to provide an objective assessment of HERs against the benchmarks - *"there was no incentive to achieve them and no penalty for not doing so"*. However several participants have noted that the current HER audit specification is structured around the Benchmarks allowing some sort of assessment to be made. Crispin Flower also pointed out that there are some reports than can be run in HBSMR to test data compliance with the Benchmarks.

How are you measuring your HER against the Benchmarks? Some HERs are doing self assessments like Bath and North East Somerset.

Mike Shaw queried whether anyone currently meets Level 1 or Level 2 Benchmarks. Can anyone respond to this?

In terms of moving forward many participants felt that the Benchmarks should be measurable, and verified by an independent body. Graham Tait said that "*HERs need some external moderation is we are to have an independent, robust and verifiable measurement against Benchmarks".* Do you agree?

Some suggested this could be done through the audit process but Rob Edwards also suggested that HERs could self assess and this assessment be submitted to regional ALGAO HER groups for comment.

What are your thoughts on measuring HERs against Benchmarks?

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean MA MIfA
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor

English Heritage

Subject: B&A2-13 - How do you see the inter-relationships between Benchmarks and audits

Dear all,

As part of the background provided in the invitation to participate in the discussion it was noted that - *the different origin for the audits and benchmarks has led to a considerable degree of overlap in the measures, and circularity in the references to one another.*

How do you see the inter-relationship between Benchmarks and audits? How should that relationship work moving forwards?
Graham Tait felt that "*the Benchmarks and the Audit system should be very closely aligned. The Audit process acts as an external, funded, independent verification of the benchmarks*".

Mike Shaw felt that the Audit process was very heavily reliant on the Benchmarks, making the targets set in the audit difficult to achieve.

What do you think? Should there be an inter-relationship between Benchmarks and Audits? If so, how do you see this working in future?

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean MA MIfA
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor
English Heritage

Subject: B&A2013 - Ideas for the audit process
Dear all,

As part of this discussion we have been looking at the inter-relationship between benchmarks and audits. There is already a thread discussing the inter-relationship but some of the discussions have thrown up comments and ideas about the audit process as a whole. I have therefore teased these out into a separate thread for discussion.

As you will be aware from Jane Golding's e-mail in July we are looking to make the process easier for HERs to work with and have already conducted an online survey asking for comments. However HERs may want to take this opportunity to discuss audits further.

Several HERs have talked about how useful they found their audits.

Jenny Hall asked if the results of audits are published at all. English Heritage do not provide the information to 3rd parties but the HERs are free to do so if they wish. Graham Tait suggested that perhaps a summary of each audit be put on English Heritage's website.

What do you think about HER audits? Have you any suggestions for how the process could work?

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean MA MIfA
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor
English Heritage

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks

Hi all,

>Mike Shaw queried whether anyone currently meets Level 1 or Level 2 Benchmarks. Can anyone

>respond to this?

A comprehensive no to this – not even close to stage 1! L

Helen Wells
Historic Environment Record Officer
Leicestershire County Council

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks

I didn't realise that I came across so negatively until I read Sarah's summaries! Apologies to all, I will try to be more positive and upbeat....

After a few minutes thought, here is the Level one compliance breakdown for North East Lincs:

1.1 - Mostly (on web page, will probably fill in the blanks at next update, it used to be up there but I guess I got carried away during a previous rewrite)
1.2 - Mostly (see above)
1.3 - No (planning application consultations recorded, and pre-apps and utilities, but not other consultations/users, partly so I don't have to think too hard about the DPA but also to save time)
1.4 - No (unlikely to be achievable)
2.1 - No (but a statement could easily be put on the web page)
2.2 - Yes (I think)
2.3 - Yes
3.1 - No
3.2 - Yes (I think, if I'm right in assuming that by using HBSMR you are effectively forced to be MIDAS compliant by the structure of the database - assuming it is used correctly)
3.3 - Don't know

3.4 - No (pointless given small size of reference collection)
3.5 - Probably (would need to ask IT)
3.6 - No
3.7 - No (I don't really have a backlog, and all records were recast between 2005 and 2010, so I'm mostly left with enhancements some of which have forward plans)
3.8 - No (unless writing "Panic" in big red letters on a page of A4 counts)
4.1 - Yes (record is specified in Council's contract with Balfour Beatty and is to be included as an evidence base for the local plan)
4.2 - Yes (sort of, the Council still owns the HER but the contract states that it is to be administered by Balfour Beatty Workplace)
4.3 - No (who would adopt them? who is meant to adopt them? Do they get a cuddly toy?)
4.4 - No (although the Conservation Officer and myself have had a draft "Strategy" for a couple of years)
4.5 - No (only 0.8 FTE, although I'm not sure which 20% of me isn't being employed)
4.6 - No (pointless as only 1 member of staff, it wouldn't be so much of a tree as a stump or maybe a rock)
4.7 - Yes
4.8 - No

So a grand total of 9/23 when I get around to re-writing my web pages!

Hugh Winfield | Archaeologist |
North East Lincolnshire Regeneration Partnership

5th November

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks

I think Hugh's compliance list sums up neatly the problem with the current benchmarks - the answer to most is 'it depends what you mean by ...'

Chris Webster
Historic Environment Record
Somerset County Council

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks

When I cut and pasted Hugh's reply I didn't think we'd do this well - although this is mostly on the back of having had an HER audit. The outreach part is the only bit we would really struggle with, Stephen does walks and talks, but that is reactive; the time and resources to develop a pro-active approach to outreach falls by the wayside when looking at the massive backlog we have (and finding time to write all these policies!)

1.1 - Yes
1.2 - Yes
1.3 - Yes - and largely meet part 2 as well
1.4 - No (on our xmas list)
2.1 - On the action plan to be completed by 2015
2.2 - Yes (or at least mostly achieved)

2.3 - Yes
3.1 - In progress - for completion by 2015
3.2 - Yes (I think, if I'm right in assuming that by using HBSMR you are effectively forced to be MIDAS compliant by the structure of the database - assuming it is used correctly) (sorry for keeping your wording there Hugh, but you summed it up so nicely)
3.3 - Working on this - GIS policy in place
3.4 - To be completed by 2015 as per action plan
3.5 - To be completed by 2015 - although probably falls under corporate IT policies
3.6 - Yes, audit completed in 2011/12 and working on action plan at present
3.7 - Yes, and forward plan created to address backlog
3.8 - No (unless writing "Panic" in big red letters on a page of A4 counts) (again, Hugh put it so well, why change it - although is on action plan for completion by 2015)
4.1 - Yes
4.2 - Yes (SLA with Luton Borough Council to provide their HER)
4.3 - We have a Mission Statement, which has been approved by Assistant Director, but never thought of getting it adopted as the HER is already adopted by the Council
4.4 - Yes, we have an officially approved forward plan - we are the resource, and if we can pull in extra income we can use it, that counts as budgetary provision I believe?
4.5 - Yes, although I would prefer to see this worded as qualifications **OR** experience, and is membership of a professional body really imperative to meet the benchmark? If Stephen were to leave then I would not meet this criteria, despite having done the job for the past 10 years.
4.6 - Yes in as much as the Council has an organisational chart which we fit into.
4.7 - Yes
4.8 - To be completed by 2015 as per action plan

Sam Mellonie
Central Bedfordshire

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks

Another cut & paste job ;)

1.1 Stage 1
1.2 Stage 1, and part of Stage 2
1.3 Stage 1
1.4 Not Really – we participate in outreach activities organised by the Museums & Galleries Service, but we don't plan our own
2.1 Most (not all) of Stage 1
2.2 Stage 1 and part of Stage 2
2.3 Yes
3.1 On my to do list
3.2 Also assuming that we hit this by using HBSMR
3.3 No Idea
3.4 Stage 1, and should hit Stage 2 this time next year
3.5 I think this falls under Corporate IT Policy, but I would have to check
3.6 Stage 1 (ish) – we're overdue for our repeat audit though
3.7 Stage 1, and should hit Stage 2 this time next year
3.8 On my to-do list
4.1 Yes (the joy of being a unitary authority…)
4.2 Stage 1 – I'm not sure stage 2 applies.

4.3 In Progress (I have a draft written plan but it's not been formally adopted YET)
4.4 see above
4.5 No. I'm not full time, and I'm not a member of the IFA.
4.6 We have a small shrub. Most of the time I'm at the bottom of it, except when we have a student in on placement.
4.7 Yes
4.8 Yes

Rod Millard
Historic Environment Record Officer
Planning and Transport Development
Bath and North East Somerset Council

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks

In my case not very well.
I should start off by saying that ever since I came her 9.25 years ago I've been a 'one man band' providing the all archaeological advise and doing everything on the HER. The picture got did not improve 15 months ago when I decided to go part time.

To summarise:
- In terms of documentation and outreach this HER does not even come close to level 1. The incentive to write documents when the only person likely to read them is me is not great. Outreach requires much more in the way of time and resources.
-The data quality is good (or at least I would like to think it is)
-Coverage of all aspects of historic environment is good. Though our current 'local list' is so poor that it is not in the HER, and I confess to struggling with how to include Conservation Areas.
-There is no original material in the HER. Though I am concerned about long term storage of digital material held elsewhere, mainly 'cos I don't believe either the museum service or the CRO are yet geared up to cope.

Chris Wardle

Subject: B&A2013 - What are Benchmarks for? / Why measure ourselves against the Benchmark? (Fitting square pegs into round holes?)
Dear All,

Seems like a significant number of HERs are not meeting the available benchmarks in any consistent or tractable manner. Dare I say we might be trying to shoehorn things that are individual, variable, distinctive (like feet) into standardised trainers? I doubt if benchmarks necessarily make HERs fit for purpose, which is dependent much more on local circumstances, outcomes, environment. I think a lot of HER officers just try as best as they can with the data they have to provide a "service" to their customers i.e. researchers. If by doing so they meet a benchmark or two, so much the better, but few if any researchers ask "does this HER meet the benchmarks?". Data, and data storage / handling will always be less than optimal, it's how we as researchers look at, define, mine, analyse and recapitulate data that makes the difference. Some data sets in other walks of life, for example historical economics data, were entirely inaccessible until researchers began to define proxy measures and go to the raw data / original documents. Nobody had benchmarked historical archives at the time they began to give up their secrets. And say we just do

succeed in getting all the HERs up to set 'standard' or benchmark, I think you'll find that Joe Public will have moved on, having reinterpreted history & the meaning of all the data we have neatly packaged up, and are looking for something else. HERs are socially embedded, they are the creation of a classifying, empiricist minority of educated people. If you ask developers or the ordinary person in my neighbourhood if HERs should be protected from budget cuts, HERs would get short shrift. By all means keep the data, but all this talk of benchmarks for a service is a bit like (to quote Paul Erlich) re-arranging the deck-chairs on the Titanic. If you doubt the very real influence of socio-political views on the handling, examination & presentation of archaeological / historical data, just have a look at the BBC 4 programme on the evidence for a Jewish exile *(Searching for Exile)* recently aired.

Sorry if this has come over as a bit of rant, but I just don't see how benchmarks can guarantee innovative, fresh, profound meaningful information provision, research or historical perspectives. Can we benchmark the human in our service?

All the best,
Neil Campling

6th November

Subject: B&A2013 - What are Benchmarks for? / Why measure ourselves against the Benchmark?
The core function of the HER is to compile an index of assets, interpretations and activity associated with the historic environment. It doesn't do the research for the enquirer, but it can provide a good jumping off point.

Looking at two of the existing standards (not benchmarks) MIDAS Heritage and the Monument Type Thesaurus. At the basic level they mean a researcher will get results whose data is standardised when dealing with multiple HERs. For many this may not matter, but for those to compile baseline data this is a godsend and I say this as someone who has worked as a archaeological contractor and as a HER officer who as now spent years of his working life trying to reconcile disparate and unstandardised datasets. Furthermore the thesaurus enables us to have agreed definition of what we mean by a type of site. The researcher can use this to get the best results when querying multiple data sources. These standards are alive and constantly evolving allowing them to respond to changes and innovations. They enable us to make our data more open, more accessible and by their clarity and documentation allow people to build on them and produce their own applications. They underpin and allow the Heritage Gateway to work. The Heritage Gateway allows you to cross search sixty odd different datasets. In my eyes that's pretty innovative and it's just the start of what can be achieved by opening up our data.

Personally I want a set of benchmarks which are relevant, which are targeted at what we want to achieve and not how we get there, but we have to accept that we will have to incorporate some standards as a benchmark. As I've rather inelegantly tried to get across, we shouldn't be looking at either standards or benchmarks as a straight jacket or set of rules, or developing ones that act as such. We need open standards that enable aspiration and innovation. However, if the HER is not there this isn't going to happen. No standards, no definitions and I doubt HERs will survive; because who is to say that the HE designations held in a land charges system

doesn't comprise a HER for the purposes of the NPPF? Still it'll give us much more time to sit back and wonder at infinite diversity of it all.

Rob Edwards
Historic Environment Records Officer
Cheshire Archaeology Planning Advisory Service

Subject: B&A2013 - Updates to discussion information
Dear all,

I have realised that when adding files to the discussion folder I forgot to include the current audit tables along with the current audit specification. I have now remedied this oversight and the tables are available at https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/filearea.cgi?LMGT1=HERFORUM&f=/Benchmark_and_Audit_Discussion . If you can't open any of these files let me know and I will e-mail you copies.

I also understand that some of the links on the 5C1 page (http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/protection/national-heritage-protection-plan/plan/activities/5c1) were broken. These have now been fixed but if you are still having problems you may need to refresh your browser cache.

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean MA MIfA
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor
English Heritage

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - What are Benchmarks for? / Why measure ourselves against the Benchmark?

The discussion about benchmarking has proved most interesting. I realise the Welsh HERs have so far not commented. In my case this was because the introduction stated that the discussion was to guide English policy, which I understood to mean that EH were not terribly interested in our comments! However, it seems like an opportune moment to give a little feedback based on the Welsh experience of using the existing set of benchmarks.

In Wales the funding structure and a hiatus in HER data entry due to the development of a new shared HER system meant that we were able to turn our attention towards the creation of benchmarking documents. We appreciate this is an entirely different situation to that in England where it appears on the whole that one person is attempting to maintain and update an HER while performing a range of other functions. And I accept that writing some of the benchmarking documents does feel like a box-ticking exercise, but the burden of creation is lessened by sharing examples from others. Additionally, if the benchmarks are subject to review, perhaps these should be the first to be modified.

All four Welsh HERs have been able to create sufficient documentation to allow us to be recognised by independent validation as having achieved the stage 1

benchmarks, although the benchmarks were slightly modified to reflect the Welsh system. In order to prevent duplication of effort we shared expertise and led on different benchmark documents over a number of years, all of which we felt were useful in order to both contextualise the HERs and the environment in which they exist. The documents are useful to extract summary information for web content and outreach materials and can be used as a point of reference to assist others in understanding the HER. They have also been an aid to define what the HER is for ourselves and others. Of particular use is the Benchmark relating to manuals for use and maintenance of the record which can be supplied to new employees and others working on the data. The process of creation of the documents has also been useful in identifying the materials that fall under the jurisdiction of the HER staff and those which are the responsibility of others, eg the archive material (temporary or longer term) that is created and housed within our building. Creating a collection policy and photograph management policy highlighted priorities for data creation when HER deposition is the intended product, just as the disposal policy highlighted what materials should not be retained within the HER but passed to an accredited archive repository or discarded.

The creation of the audit is a useful (albeit time-consuming) exercise in understanding what the HERs actually consist of. In Wales we did not complete any database content and instead simply created an audit document describing and illustrating the research and its outcomes based on a specification circulated by the RCAHMW. We found that the burden of work was lessened by the existence of benchmarking documents (or it could instead contribute to their creation) as some of the content is similar enough to simply import and slightly modify benchmark document text for the purposes of the audit.

It is vital to understand the content and constituent parts of an HER in order to manage it effectively and the audits highlighted areas of the records which require improvement. We created action plans and targeted these identified areas through our funding streams in order to improve the content and quality of the HERs.

Quality issues are addressed when they can be, and as already highlighted in these discussions, presence or absence of information and simple quality checks (eg erroneous entries in controlled fields) can be performed through such processes as the audit, but the actual accuracy of data is more difficult and can only be improved through feedback from those using the data. If some contractors feel that all NGRs and other data should be accurate then they should feed all cleaning up of HER data that they undertake for their clients back to the HER (and highlight it as such) in order to rectify mistakes. It is important for the archaeological community as a whole to take some responsibility as users of, and therefore contributors to, HERs. HER officers could not possibly visit each site/feature recorded in order to verify each and every element of the data (nor should they be expected to do so). Contractors/others who undertake fieldwork are in the position of being able to check accuracy and we feel it is their responsibility as HER users to do this. The Welsh access and charging guidance (that users sign up to when receiving HER data) clearly states that users are responsible for the accuracy of the information and requests that new or amended information is made available.

Adherence to recognised data standards, as promoted through the benchmarks, has improved the interoperability and interpretational value of the HER data in Wales and we strive to ensure that the four records use the same terminology for this purpose. We meet under the auspices of the Extended National Database (END) with the RCAHMW (NMRW), the National Museum, and others, on a quarterly basis in order to work on terminology and data standards issues. The benchmarks have again

proved a useful context for some of this work and have driven aspects of it. While these opportunities may be simply be a reflection of the different structure of archaeology in Wales, and while it is certainly a strength inherent in the system, we do all consider the benchmark and audit process to be a valuable contribution to the HERs.

Finally, while it is a perfectly understandable argument that bureaucratic documentation stifles creative development and wastes precious time that could be used elsewhere, the experience in Wales is that the HER benchmarks provide a useful framework within which the HERs can operate and allows HER officers the opportunity to define the service they do (and wish to) provide, supported by documentation that can be used as we see fit.

Nina

Nina Steele
Historic Environment Record Archaeologist
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - What are Benchmarks for? / Why measure ourselves against the Benchmark?

Thanks Nina. It's always useful to have the opportunity to learn from the experiences of the other home nations.

Rob Edwards
Historic Environment Records Officer
Cheshire Archaeology Planning Advisory Service

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - What are Benchmarks for? / Why measure ourselves against the Benchmark?

Dear all,

I couldn't agree more and would like to encourage people to participate, regardless of who you are. Thank you Nina for being our first Welsh HER participant in the Benchmark and Audits discussion :)

EH are facilitating the discussion because we were asked to, partly because the HIPs team help to facilitate HER Forum e-mail list and meetings. However you all know HER Forum is open to anyone with an interest in HERs and is not restricted to England. The discussion will help to inform a project EH are involved with but that does not restrict discussion to English HER officers at all. It has been really good to see posts from contractors and other interested parties who are not HER officers (although you may have been in the past!) as it introduces new ideas and new questions. So colleagues in Wales, Scotland and beyond are more than welcome to join in too.

Looking forward to reading more discussion posts.

all the best

Sarah MacLean
English Heritage

7th November

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks
Dear all,

Interpretation of the text is a very valid point.

Thinking about Benchmarks in general, rather than specifically about the current draft
Benchmarks, how would you propose resolving this issue? Is it about the wording of
the benchmarks? Is it about how they are measured against? Is it about having
Benchmarks at all? - case studies have been suggested as an alternative. Or could is
it something else entirely?

all the best

Sarah

Sarah MacLean
Heritage Information Partnerships Supervisor
English Heritage

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks
Sarah,

I think that tightening up the text, ditching some, adding others and perhaps splitting
some benchmarks off into a separate section (perhaps aimed at "County"
level teams?) would deal with it nicely. For example 4.1 is currently:

i. Resolution of governing body to adopt the Record formally, in accordance with the
'Benchmark' Scheme.
ii. Where the governing body is not the local planning authority (lpa), or acts on
behalf of one or more local authorities, formal recognition of the Record is desirable
from the relevant lpas. This might, for example, be incorporated in service level
agreements.

I would suggest that something similar to the following would be an appropriate
alternative:

a. A formal statement within a Local Plan (or equivalent) committing the appropriate
Local Planning Authority(s) to maintain and enhance the Historic Environment
Record.

b. Formal adoption of the Historic Environment Record, and a commitment to
maintain and enhance the record in line with national and local frameworks and
strategies, through the publication of a Supplementary Planning Document (or
equivalent) which has been through public consultation. Adoption should be at
Cabinet level or above in each local authority that the record covers.

I would think that most of us have reached level "a" but would like to get to "b" if we had the backing and resources. The documents needed for "b" could include optimum and minimum staffing levels, required resources, forward plans etc set out in a strategy or similar.

Hugh

Hugh Winfield | Archaeologist |
North East Lincolnshire Regeneration Partnership

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks
Dear all,

I think Hugh's post raises an interesting question. Do the benchmarks from 2002 just need modifying slightly or a complete rethinking and reworking?

There is not a final definitive view of what new benchmarks would look like or how they could work - hence holding this discussion to try and get some ideas and feedback from the sector and explore the idea of Benchmarks and Audits. With that in mind don't be afraid to use this opportunity to think outside of the box if you want to. People have already shared some ideas of how to do things differently, including Hugh's suggestion below of a separate section for 'County' level teams.

So don't be afraid to post! It's all useful.

all the best

Sarah MacLean
English Heritage

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks
Surely the basic benchmark is just to getting the HER adopted by resolution of the council (any council that uses the record for planning purposes) which can be done with a straight forward report to the executive. Noting the definition of a site of archaeological interest in the GPDO is one being within a site registered in any record adopted by resolution and known as the County Sites and Monuments Record. Of course the wording in the GPDO is out of date!

This does not have to be done in the context of any other kind of plan or document so not dependent on anything or anyone else. Mention in the context of a development plan or any other kind of planning document or heritage strategy produced by any tier of local government for whatever purpose is desirable maybe but not strictly necessary. I would hope most HERs will have therefore achieved the basic benchmark anyway? One less to worry about. Things need to be simplified and streamlined at the moment.

Sue

Sue Whitehouse
Historic Environment Officer, Education & Enterprise
Wolverhampton City Council

8th November

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks

Sue,

The problem that I would have with that option is that our executive are very reluctant to accept reports on single issue or day-to-day maters, which is how this would be viewed, especially on something that could be considered to be a "policy". Conversely putting requirements into something with a wider remit like our draft heritage strategy or the new Local Plan is comparatively easy. It will all depend on the democratic structure of each particular council as they each have their idiosyncrasies, and my wording could be adapted to allow each HER to easily meet the basic requirement no mater how their unitary/districts run.

But I think you're right that the method is not really the issue and that the important thing is to get the actual concept/aim of the benchmark right.

Hugh Winfield

Subject: Re: B&A2013 - How do we measure ourselves against the Benchmarks

Hugh

Yes I take your point. However the GPDO came into force in 1995 and I would hope that since then most SMRs / HERs will have picked up on the need to get the record adopted and historically this basic level of benchmark may well have been achieved. Here at Wolves we did get such a resolution in place and the SMR was also included in the UDP, and fortunately the policy is saved, but for how long I don't know. It was not something appropriate for Core Strategy level and I have no idea if there will ever be resources to get a Historic Environment SPD in place. But, at least I can rest assured that there is a resolution somewhere that says the SMR (HER) has been adopted. I suppose I am thinking that if you can tick off one requirement fairly simply (or discover someone already did it years ago) then you can put your resources into achieving one of the more challenging benchmarks.

Sue Whitehouse
Wolverhampton City Council