

Registered Organisation inspection panel member training

Unit 4 *Reviewing reports*

Purpose of the Training and Context of Report Reviewing

This unit introduces a consistent and structured approach to reviewing archaeological and heritage reports for CIfA Registered Organisation inspections. Because the sector encompasses a wide variety of organisations - ranging from contracting units and consultancies to curatorial teams and specialist groups - reviewers cannot be expected to be experts in every type of work. Instead, this module emphasises a consistent and principled approach to assessing quality, transparency, and compliance with professional standards. Although submissions may come from marine archaeologists, built-heritage specialists, geophysical survey companies, excavation teams etc, the underlying principles of good reporting remain constant. The module is designed to support reviewers in evaluating work from across the UK and beyond, enabling fair and robust decision-making grounded in evidence. Using an eleven-step model, reviewers are equipped to understand professional expectations, identify issues that require clarification or improvement, and contribute to raising standards of clarity, accountability, methodological rigour and public benefit within archaeological and heritage reporting.

Selecting a Balanced Sample of Reports

Selecting an appropriate and representative sample is one of the first and most important tasks in the review process. Because organisations differ widely in their areas of work, geographic coverage and internal structure, samples must reflect this diversity. A balanced sample should demonstrate the range of services undertaken by the organisation, the different environments in which they operate, and the variety of heritage assets they work with. It should also include reports spanning the allowed review period – generally three years for Registered Organisation inspections - so that reviewers can understand both recent performance and any changes or developments over time. A carefully chosen sample gives a realistic and comprehensive picture of capability and professional competence, rather than a narrow or selective snapshot.

Step 1. Using Standards and Guidance Effectively

Professional standards and guidance documents form the essential foundation for consistent report reviewing. CIfA Standards and Guidance define the minimum expectations for a wide range of report types, including desk-based assessments, evaluations, excavations and building surveys. In addition to CIfA guidance, national and regional sources also provide crucial context. Historic England's Good Practice Advice and Advice Notes support work in England, Equally, Cadw in Wales and Historic Environment Scotland provide local expectations for reporting. Local authority briefs or planning requirements may also influence report scope and structure. Reviewers should keep relevant documents to hand so that they can compare the report directly with established professional

requirements. This helps determine whether omissions or deviations are justified, or whether they indicate weaknesses in method, structure or understanding.

Step 2. Quality Assurance and Professional Accountability

Quality assurance processes are key indicators of professional practice. Reviewers should look for evidence of internal checking and oversight, such as a completed QA or version control sheet showing who prepared, reviewed and approved the report, and when each stage occurred. A complete QA record shows that an organisation or individual understands their responsibilities for accuracy and accountability. However, missing or inadequate QA, or reports that show significant errors despite seemingly complete QA documentation, may indicate problems in internal processes, training or consistency. Where QA systems appear rushed or ineffective, reviewers should consider whether these issues are isolated or indicative of broader organisational challenges, and note them for further discussion in inspections or application feedback.

Step 3. Understanding Purpose and Audience

A report must clearly explain its purpose and intended audience, so that reviewers can judge whether its scope, level of detail and analytical depth are appropriate. Reports may be prepared for planning applications, fieldwork reporting, research, conservation management or internal client use. If a report's title does not reflect its actual purpose - for example, if a high-level constraints assessment is presented as a desk-based assessment - this can create confusion for planners, curators or other users. Reviewers should ensure that the purpose, title and content align, and that the report uses appropriate language for its audience. Reports intended for non-specialists must communicate clearly and avoid unnecessary jargon, while technical reports must justify methodological choices and conclusions transparently.

Step 4. Non-Technical Summaries and Accessibility

Non-technical summaries are essential for ensuring that non-specialists can understand the reasons for the work, the methods used, the main findings and the key conclusions. A good summary is concise, clearly written in accessible UK English, and free from jargon or unexplained acronyms. It should faithfully reflect the content of the report, including any significant findings and public benefit. If the summary is unclear, incomplete or misleading, it can cause misunderstandings for clients, planners or community stakeholders and may indicate broader issues with the report's communication quality.

Step 5. Research Aims, Objectives and Public Benefit

Clear research aims and objectives provide the basis for meaningful archaeological and heritage work. These should be explicitly linked to relevant national, regional, thematic or period-based research frameworks, and they should be revisited as work progresses. Reports should also explain how the work contributes to public benefit, whether through new data for the Historic Environment Record, improved planning decisions, research contributions, or community engagement. When aims, frameworks or public benefit are missing or unclear, the work may appear unfocused or

disconnected from wider knowledge or practice. Reviewers should assess whether the conclusions address the original aims and explain how effectively they have been met.

Step 6a. Methods, Techniques and Use of Specialists

The methods section should outline the approaches used and explain any deviations from the Written Scheme of Investigation or project design. Such changes should be justified and, where necessary, supported by evidence of agreement from the monitoring authority. Reviewers should consider whether the chosen methods were appropriate and proportionate to the work's purpose, and whether relevant specialists were involved at the correct stages. Reports should also acknowledge methodological limitations or constraints and explain how these affect confidence levels in the results. Transparent discussion of challenges demonstrates professional judgement and awareness of limitations.

Step 6b. Documentary Research and Assessment of Evidence

A strong evidence base is essential for meaningful interpretation. Reports should draw upon appropriate documentary sources, including the Historic Environment Record, historic and modern maps, aerial photographs, LiDAR, geotechnical data, local archives and thematic or typological studies. Significance and impact assessments should be clear and justified, identifying what contributes to significance, the level at which it is valued, and the potential impacts of proposed development upon that significance. Reports should also outline options for avoidance, reduction or mitigation of harm to, or enhancement of significance. Inadequate research or unclear significance and impact assessments can limit the credibility of conclusions.

Step 7. Integrating Data Sets and Discussing Results

Interpretation and synthesis are at the heart of professional reporting. All relevant datasets—including stratigraphy, finds, environmental evidence, building fabric or documentary research—should be integrated into a coherent analysis. Specialist data should not be isolated in appendices without being incorporated into the main interpretation. Reports should place their findings within a wider context, drawing on comparative sites and research frameworks to explain their significance. Effective integration results in a clear and logical narrative; weak synthesis often leads to superficial or contradictory conclusions.

Step 8. Quality of Illustrations, Plans and Photographs

Visual material is central to clear and informative reporting. Illustrations, plans and photographs should be legible, correctly scaled, well-labelled and of appropriate resolution. Poor-quality visuals—such as blurred images, missing scale bars or unclear location plans—can undermine the report's clarity and credibility, as well as indicating potential weaknesses in training or QA processes. High-quality visuals, on the other hand, support accurate interpretation and demonstrate professional competence.

Step 9. Assessing Conclusions

Acknowledgement: Vanessa Clarke MCIfA, Heritage Team Leader

Conclusions should flow logically from the evidence and discussion, directly addressing the research aims and objectives. They should neither overstate nor understate the significance of the findings.

Step 10. Further Work

Where further work is recommended, such as evaluation following a desk-based assessment or additional analysis after excavation, this should be justified by the evidence presented. Reports should not attempt to make planning decisions, which remain the responsibility of planning authorities advised by curators.

11. Archiving Standards and Long-Term Access

Archiving ensures that the results of archaeological and heritage work remain accessible for future research, planning and public benefit. Reports should include a clear archive list, accession numbers for physical material, DOIs for digital archives, and a data management plan explaining how data is stored, transferred and preserved. Timescales for deposition should be realistic, and files should be prepared in appropriate archival formats such as PDF/A. Where applicable, OASIS records should be completed. Archiving is a core element of professional accountability and not an optional extra.