Review of the development and implementation of OASIS in England

Final Report

Author(s): Adrian Smith; Sarah Cairns; Clare Vokes - Pye Tait Consulting
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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Research

In June 2011, Pye Tait Consulting was commissioned by English Heritage to review the development and implementation of OASIS (Online Access to the Index of archaeological investigationS) in England, including the preparation of an updated strategy consistent with Heritage Protection Reform (HPR).

The research was carried out in three linked but distinct phases and this document represents the final project report:

Phase 1: Review of the development of OASIS to date including setting the context for future change

The objective of this phase was to fully document the historic development of OASIS and the context for future change, in order to provide a starting point for a deeper exploration of the issues within phase 2.

Phase 2: Detailed analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in respect of OASIS

The objective of this phase was to provide detailed evidence of the issues concerning the use and uptake of the OASIS system, in order to inform the development of a forward strategy for OASIS or its successor.

Phase 3: Preparation of a forward strategy for OASIS (Final report)

The objective of this phase was to build upon the findings from Phases 1 and 2 in order to provide an evidence-based forward strategy for OASIS with priorities for the short, medium and long term.

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1 The Phase 1 report was submitted to English Heritage in July 2011; the Phase 2 report was submitted in October 2011.
1.2 Business Case

OASIS is currently at a stage where it has just about outgrown the system on which it is hosted and it needs to move to a new IT platform and re-engineer the underpinning system architecture. This provides the opportunity for an evaluation of the project to date and the development of a revised strategy which sets the future development into a historic environment context.

The development of Heritage Protection Reform over the past decade has seen the merging of the archaeology and historic built environment sectors into the historic environment. PPS5 encapsulates this within the government’s planning system and there is a need to align OASIS to this.

The project aligns with English Heritage’s National Heritage Protection Plan (NHPP) Sub-section 5C1 – Enhancing the Capabilities of HERs².

2. Methodology

Phase 1: Review of the development of OASIS to date including setting the context for future change

This phase consisted of a literature review, drawing on OASIS project reports, monitoring information and communications; reports commissioned by English Heritage and other professional bodies, as well as journal articles.

To identify the key current strengths and weaknesses associated with OASIS, a small number of face to face and telephone discussions were undertaken with representatives from English Heritage, member organisations of the OASIS Project Board, as well as other relevant professional bodies. Contributors included:

| Archaeology Data Service (ADS) | Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP) |
| Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) | Council for British Archaeology |
| English Heritage | Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) |
| Society for Museum Archaeologists | |

Phase 2: Detailed analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in respect of OASIS

Phase 2 involved 40 in-depth telephone interviews with the following types of organisations:

- 20 x HER Officers (and equivalent roles) involved in the OASIS validation process;
- 10 x commercial contracting units (involved in the production and delivery of data into OASIS);
- 10 x other users of OASIS (including universities, societies, community groups and museums).

The interviews explored the benefits and issues associated with current uses of OASIS, as well as future development considerations. The length of individual interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour for HERs, and was in most instances slightly less for contractors and other users.

In addition to the telephone interviews, Pye Tait posted a discussion thread via the on-line JISC HER Forum in October 2011 which attracted over 20 responses from HER Officers and equivalent roles.

The first element of this phase was to develop a sample strategy for 40 telephone interviews. To ensure balanced and broadly representative research, the sample included organisations using...
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OASIS to varying extents. Statistical information relating to each organisation’s uptake/level of involvement with OASIS was provided to Pye Tait by the Archaeology Data Service (ADS).

For HERs, this information included:

1. Whether the HER is validating OASIS records;
2. Number of OASIS records currently logged in the system;
3. Number of OASIS records signed off by the HER.

For contractors and other users, this information included:

1. Number of OASIS records created;
2. Number of OASIS records completed;
3. Number of grey literature reports sent by other means (i.e. not attached to the OASIS record when signed off by the National Monuments Record).

The resulting sample frame, including a list of organisations that participated in the telephone interviews, is presented in Appendix 1.

The key themes used to inform the SWOT analysis are presented in Appendix 2.

Phase 3: Preparation of a forward strategy for OASIS (Final report)

Based on the findings from the preceding phases – Pye Tait developed a set of draft priorities for the OASIS forward strategy. These were explored in greater depth as part of a focus group facilitated by Pye Tait at the ALGAC-HER Committee Meeting in Birmingham on 26th October 2011.

The key themes used to inform the focus group discussion are presented in Appendix 3.

Finally, Pye Tait attended the OASIS Management Board Meeting in York on 1st November 2011 where the key findings from all research to date were presented and discussed in order to firm up the overall direction of the forward strategy and inform the final report.
3. Development History of OASIS

3.1 What is OASIS?

The OASIS project (Online Access to the Index of archaeological investigations) was borne out of a partnership between the Archaeology Data Service (ADS), the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP) of Bournemouth University and English Heritage, under the aegis of the ADS based at the University of York. OASIS is an IT system and data capture process designed to enable information resulting from historic environment fieldwork to be indexed, validated and transferred efficiently from producers to users.

OASIS consists of an online data form that can be used by those involved in archaeological fieldwork to capture and record the data they gather in the course of their investigations. The form can be submitted to the local Historical Environment Record (HER) where information is validated, typically by the HER Officer, and exported to the local archive. This information can then be used to inform an assessment of whether the archaeological restriction placed on a planned development can be discharged so the development can proceed.

Following the validation of data by the HER, information provided through OASIS is passed to the National Monuments Record (NMR) where the meta-data is entered in the national Excavation Index (EI) and the linked grey literature report signed off for entry into ArchSearch - the online catalogue of the Archaeology Data Service. The NMR also shares information with the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP), in order to inform this project’s programme of documentation and analysis of sector activity.

3.2 Background

The need to make basic information and data accessible is fundamental to any knowledge-based discipline. OASIS was originally developed to meet this need in the context of archaeological investigation, with particular concern to address the implications of the UK Government Department of the Environment’s Planning Policy Guidance, ‘Archaeology and Planning’ (usually referred to as PPG16), introduced in 1990, and the subsequent Planning Policy Guidance 15: Planning and the Historic Environment (PPG15), introduced in 1994.

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4 http://www.oasis.ac.uk/faq.cfm?country=england
PPG16/15 placed a duty on developers of archaeologically sensitive sites to undertake, at their own expense, appropriate archaeological investigations before any potentially destructive interventions were made. The result was an explosion in the quantity of scientific field archaeology undertaken in the UK. By 2002 it was estimated that some £35 million had been spent on around 28,000 archaeological investigations, ranging from simple desk-based assessments to full-scale excavations.

The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME), which merged with English Heritage in 1999, created the Excavations Index (EI) in 1978 to maintain a unified list of archaeological investigations in England from the earliest times to the present day. However, it became increasingly difficult for users of archaeological data to keep track of available information due to the large quantity of investigations undertaken since PPG16. In addition, it was often difficult for users to obtain detailed information on the findings of these investigations. Much of the new work generated by PPG16 was carried out by private archaeological consultancies rather than publically funded agencies or universities. Findings were therefore often presented in the form of reports presented directly to developers and local authority officers, rather than through conventional academic reporting channels such as peer-reviewed journals or refereed publications. The result was an ever-increasing mass of ‘grey literature’. Moreover, much of this literature was difficult to access because it was archived, in physical or digital form, in Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) and Urban Archaeological Databases (UADs).

Access to archaeological fieldwork data has also been hindered by the growing use of digital technologies for the production of reports. Contrary perhaps to expectations, these digital reports are even more fragile and ephemeral than their paper counterparts. This is primarily due to HERs having limited storage capacity, with budgetary constraints squeezing space available for digital record preservation; similarly museums have limited interest or capacity to archive digital archaeological records. Further study would be required to determine the extent to which skills or knowledge gaps may affect digital records management.

To help rectify this situation, English Heritage commissioned Bournemouth University in 1995 to undertake the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP), to compile systematic information about archaeological investigations undertaken from the introduction of PPG16 in 1990, to the present day. This was published initially in hard copy form as The Gazetteer of Archaeological Investigations in England, issued as supplements to the British and Irish Archaeological Bibliography. Recognition of the limits on the accessibility of the paper version led to the deposit of an electronic version of the archive with the NMR. It was this situation that led to the conception of OASIS.


Key distinctions between OASIS and the AIP

Whilst there are currently overlaps in the roles of OASIS and the AIP to record and facilitate improved access to historic environment information, it is important to note the differences.

OASIS has emerged primarily as a reactive digital system to capture, record and archive archaeological fieldwork, with increasing focus on developer funded activities.

The AIP actively seeks out data from HERs and selected contractors in order to prepare summaries and extracts of fieldwork primarily for the benefit of the academic community. To capture new information, such as environmental impact assessments as well as activities not related to the planning system, the AIP makes its own suite of forms available for individuals and groups involved in data gathering, although it does also make use of OASIS to access and work with archived data. The AIP also benefits from a copyright exclusion, with the notable benefit being its ability to access pre-planning application reports for academic purposes, where client confidentiality prevents this information being shared with the HER.
3.3 Visual Timeline

The following timeline, prepared by Pye Tait, charts the key developments in the history of OASIS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>NMR establishes Excavations Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>PPG 16: Archaeology and Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>PPG 15: Planning and the Historic Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Launch of OASIS Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Completion of initial OASIS Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Piloting of Data Capture Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Completion of Pilot Scheme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Excavations Index launched to provide central list of archaeological excavations
- New government planning guidance to Local Authorities requires investigation of archaeological sites before any planned development
- Further development of planning guidance confirms need for archaeological investigations as part of planning process
- OASIS project designed to make findings from AIP available on-line to all legitimate users
- First version of OASIS data capture form developed as a way of providing updates to AIP
- Six-month pilot of data capture form for use by HERs and contractors begins in August 2002
- User responses to pilot scheme leads to revision of information flow to increase linearity for validation purposes

- PPG leads to vast increase in quantity of contractor archaeology undertaken
- Excavations Index unable to keep up with mass of new investigations
- A new Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP) to chronicle investigations taking place from 1990 (project is on-going)
- Archaeology Data Service (ADS) commissioned to create online concordance of AIP and EI indexes
- Online Data capture form provides potential way to continuously update the new unified index
- English Heritage sees potential value of OASIS form for connecting HERs and central data collection
- EH funds further development and piloting of OASIS form, leading to national rollout in 2004

Continued overleaf
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>National rollout of OASIS Form</td>
<td>Introduction of OASIS Form to Scotland</td>
<td>OASIS Final Project Report</td>
<td>HER Data Sources Audit</td>
<td>MEDIN Maritime Events Project/Introduction of PPS5</td>
<td>Review of OASIS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- OASIS forms go live on 1 April 2004
- New functionality to allow attachment of grey literature/inclusion of marine archaeology data
- New functionality for geophysics data; increased uptake of form and uploading of grey literature
- Data audit reveals that OASIS has not been fully incorporated in HER workflows
- A MEDIN-funded pilot project to record data relating to ship wrecks in the East Inshore planning region
- PPS5 replaces PPG15 and PPG16 – more holistic approach to planning for the historic environment.
- Conservation area appraisal option added to form

**HERs Validating Records:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>24</th>
<th>43</th>
<th>58</th>
<th>64</th>
<th>74</th>
<th>80</th>
<th>93</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**OASIS III**

- Records in system
- With report attached

Records in system:
- 2004: 316
- 2005: 2231
- 2006: 4568
- 2007: 8021
- 2008: 12523
- 2009: 15522
- 2010: 19447
- 2011: 24731

With report attached:
- 2004: 1075
- 2005: 2986
- 2006: 5323
- 2007: 5814
- 2008: 9142
- 2009: 12726
- 2010: 12726
- 2011: 12726
3.4 OASIS I: A Unified Electronic Index

The OASIS project was initially conceived and funded to provide the Historic Environment sector with a unified electronic index for all archaeological investigations. In practice, this first phase of the OASIS project (OASIS I) involved integrating the AIP and EI records to produce a single concorded list. This work was undertaken by the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) based at the University of York. The project began in January 2000, and when the first stage was complete in 2001 it had generated some 67,000 records covering archaeological investigations in England from 1700 to 1998.

These records can be thought of as a kind of electronic library catalogue, providing basic information on all these archaeological investigations, using a standard format based on the Dublin Core metadata standard, and including:

- The name of the project
- A short description
- Dates of the project
- The location of the artefactual and paper records
- The name of the organisation responsible for the work
- Any bibliographic records
- The location of the fieldwork, according to Ordnance Survey national grid reference
- The principle types of archaeology found, and its date

The field for bibliographic records could contain URLs to provide links to more detailed information held in electronic form either in the ADS archive or on the website of HERs and contractors.

At the time of the OASIS project there was clear awareness of the need to maintain the currency of the database by incorporating information about subsequent archaeological investigations. However, inefficiencies in the flows of data between those involved in archaeological investigations, particularly those working in the context of PPG16, acted as a potential impediment to this. The information flow as it then existed required the archaeology contractor to furnish a copy of the completed excavation report to the local HER. The HER would then archive the report and enter its details on to its own system. The information would then be submitted by the HER to the NMR, and

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often have to be rekeyed for entry in the EI\textsuperscript{10}. This could resulted in:

a) duplication of effort by those compiling the information;

b) a significant time-lag between the completion of investigations and their availability to legitimate potential users – including other archaeologists, academics, planners, heritage and conservation professionals, and students.

Therefore, as part of the OASIS project, a standardised on-line data capture form was developed to facilitate the flow of information between those involved, or interested, in archaeological investigations. The form would have entries for all the information needed to populate the AIP fields. The information would need to be keyed in only once by the contractor, and then submitted to the local HER for validation and inclusion in the local database, and also to the NMR for validation and inclusion in the EI\textsuperscript{11}.

3.5 OASIS II: Pilot Phase for the Data Capture Form

With funding support from English Heritage, the ADS moved on to refine and pilot the data capture form and methodology developed as part of OASIS I. Twenty HERs across the nine English Heritage regions were recruited to participate in the pilot stage. Feedback from the initial training days in June 2002 with the partner organisations raised concerns about the information flow in the initial OASIS model. It was realised that much of the apparently redundant rekeying of information served as a process of review and validation by the agencies involved\textsuperscript{12}. The separate submission of the form to HERs and the NMR could potentially lead to several different versions of the information being archived in different locations, with different levels of validity\textsuperscript{13}.

During the course of the pilot a more linear flow of information and validation was therefore developed, and technologies created to underpin this flow. The archaeology contracting unit would fill in the form with the standard details included in the OASIS record and submit the form online to the ADS. The data would be uploaded to a secure area of the ADS server, to which the contractor, HER, NMR and ADS would have password protected access. Automatic e-mails would be generated to contractor, the local HER and the NMR to notify them of form submissions and modifications to each form. After initial notification, the HER could then validate the information to ensure that it was correct and import an edited version into its catalogue. When the HER had completed its validation process, an e-mail would be generated to the NMR, which could then check that the


appropriate standard terminology had been used before importing the record to the EI\textsuperscript{14}. The result was a sequential review and validation of the form, first by the HER and then by the NMR. In addition, the new form would provide a way of uploading grey literature in digital formats (Word, PDF or HTML) with the OASIS form, so that the reports could then be downloaded by the ADS, HER, and NMR\textsuperscript{15}.

The official pilot phase began on 1 August 2002 and ran for six months, during which it generated more than 200 completed forms\textsuperscript{16}. Feedback questionnaires were circulated towards the end of the pilot, and participating HERs were invited to a feedback session in York in February 2003. In March 2003, the findings of the pilot phase were brought together in an initial report, which found that most of the concerns initially raised had been addressed by enhancements and modifications to the form. The main modifications to the form involved increasing, from five to twenty, the number of ‘significant artefacts’ that could be listed.

The development of the form during the pilot phase paid close attention to ensuring that the form would enable data transfer between different IT systems (‘interoperability’). This was accomplished by working to the information standards defined for English Heritage by the Forum on Information Standards in Heritage (FISH). The heart of this is the use of datatype definition mappable to MIDAS XML, an XML schema which provides a ‘common format for the storage, processing and exchange of historic environment information\textsuperscript{17}.

3.6 OASIS III: National Rollout 2004-Present

Following the completion of the pilot and the successful modification of the form to meet the concerns raised by participants in their feedback, English Heritage began the national rollout of the OASIS system. All HERs were invited to participate in regional training events, and those who could not attend were sent Training Manuals. The OASIS online form went live on 1st April 2004\textsuperscript{18}. Since then, the implementation and take-up of OASIS has been followed by the compilation of monitoring reports at three to six month intervals, and board meetings at six monthly intervals.

The monitoring reports show that there have been steady increases in the uptake of OASIS by HERs, with a particularly sharp increase between 2010 and 2011. The result is that the total number of HERs validating records increased from only four in the first year of the rollout (2004), to 94 in 2011.


\textsuperscript{17}“FISH Interoperability Toolkit”, n.d., http://www.heritage-standards.org.uk/.

\textsuperscript{18}OASIS III: First Monitoring Report June 2004, downloaded via http://www.oasis.ac.uk/downloads.cfm?country=england
Almost all HERs now use OASIS\(^{19}\) and as at 2010, a total of 291 individuals or organisations had registered to use the system and create records. It is the largest archaeological contracting units that use the form most frequently and consistently\(^{20}\).

There has been a correspondingly steady increase in the number of records in the system, with total approaching 25,000 by October 2011.


\(^{20}\) OASIS: A report to stakeholders (July 2010)
The proportion of forms submitted with grey literature reports has increased considerably. In 2006, two years after the national rollout began, only 24% of forms had been submitted with reports; but by 2011, this proportion had increased to 51%. There are currently around 10,000 grey literature reports archived by the ADS and this figure is understood to be growing by an average of 300-500 per month.

The ADS holds and maintains the archive for digitised grey literature reports within the ArchSearch library, which receives hundreds of thousands of hits or downloads of reports per year and acts as a sustainable research resource for the wider profession.\footnote{Hardman, C (2010) ‘Our grey literature legacy: opportunity of headache?’. The Archaeologist. Summer 2010 (No.76).} This suggests that the core purpose of the OASIS project – to make archaeological information more widely accessible – has been highly successful.

Finally, digital technologies have proliferated in recent years—particularly the development of sophisticated digital Geophysics and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data. In order to respond to this potential, the ability to record GIS ‘event boundary information’ through the upload of a single zipped GIS file was incorporated into OASIS in September 2006.\footnote{ALGAO (2010) GIS Guidance for Historic Environment Records in England; Final Report. p. 16; “OASIS: FAQs”, n.d., http://www.oasis.ac.uk/faq.cfm?g11.} Additional form pages to record geophysics events were incorporated by 2008.

### 3.7 Improving Standards and Consistency in Event Recording

As a nationwide system, OASIS makes information available to the public in a way that was not feasible prior to its introduction. It aims to ensure that producers of fieldwork data (not only contractors but also societies, community groups and museums for example) are recording event information in a joined-up and consistent way, resulting in a more cohesive national record.

According to the majority of HER Officers interviewed as part of this research – a key benefit of OASIS is that grey literature reports are opened up to the public domain via the Archaeology Data Service (ADS); in turn providing access to knowledge for anyone who wishes to use it.

The OASIS form allows the HER to identify certain information about an event that may be missing from the grey literature report, such as the Event number; HER number and/or Scheduled Monument (SM) number. It can also be possible to identify from the OASIS form where contractors are supplying information to the wrong local authority, such as where a fieldwork site crosses a border.

Where non-planning related fieldwork is concerned – most HER Officers recognise that without OASIS the HER may never have been made aware that a particular piece of fieldwork has been undertaken.
Several HER Officers commented that the ‘managed projects’ tool within OASIS is very useful as a means of highlighting which OASIS records have been signed off by the contractor and need to be validated, thereby enabling HERs to direct their validation efforts accordingly.

The opinions of HER Officers relating to OASIS appear to be influenced, in part, by the number of contractors completing OASIS forms in their geographical area and the extent to which contractors supply accurate information and on a regular and consistent basis. One HER Officer commented that they have been able to successfully validate a relatively high proportion of OASIS records as they deal with a very small number of contractors, and most if not all of them can be more easily “geared up” to using OASIS proficiently.

“The contractors in our own area are well trained, but the national contractors are harder to influence.”

“In terms of data standards, OASIS focuses the minds of contractors.”

For contractors, OASIS can be used as a project management system, enabling them to track progress on the status of the recording and archiving of information. Furthermore, contractors report they particularly like being able to operate their own branded web-page within ArchSearch, incorporating a directory of reports they have produced and providing a showcase of their work to support tendering and other business development activities.

Academics identify significant benefits to be gained by using OASIS. These include online access to digital copies of grey literature reports allowing better awareness of what activity is taking place and information produced. Perhaps the greatest benefit for this user group is that digital data can be obtained more quickly and used more easily than obtaining hard-copy reports.

### 3.8 Towards Consistency with Heritage Protection Reform (HPR)

Heritage Protection Reform (HPR) aims to achieve a modernised approach across the historic environment, with a better designation process, wider participation and improved management.\(^{23}\)

A fundamental aspect of this process will be the introduction of more streamlined and unified processes for the compilation, submission, archiving and provision of historic environment information. Categories previously separated are being united into a holistic concept of ‘Heritage Assets’ as defined by Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5)\(^{24}\). This will require a broadening of the scope of information and archiving activities of HERs to include the full range of these assets.


\(^{24}\) Heritage Asset: “A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape positively identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions. Heritage assets are the valued components of the historic environment. They include designated heritage assets, and assets identified by the local planning authority during the
PPS5 requires closer integration of HERs, as the main source of information on local heritage assets, into the local planning process. Where an application for planning consent is made, and where these plans are likely to affect heritage assets, the historic environment record should be consulted and the heritage assets themselves assessed to determine the significant impact of the proposed development.

Stemming from PPS5 and proposals under Heritage Protection Reform (HPR), the OASIS system is likely to need significant redesign and rethinking to embrace a wider range of relevant heritage assets and historic environment functions.

There are several key challenges to this. First, different methodologies exist for recording information, with archaeology traditionally placing greater emphasis on recording and archiving compared with other functions such as conservation. Linked to this challenge are issues of interoperability, as well as those cultural issues and barriers typical of being forced or encouraged to adapt to new ways of working. Second, there is the risk of gathering too much information within OASIS that may be of little use. Decisions would therefore need to be made on the level of detail and types of information that should be recorded for different aspects of the historic environment.
4. Draft Forward Strategy for OASIS

This section presents a Draft Forward Strategy for OASIS for review and consideration by the OASIS Management Board. The strategy is based on a phased approach to implementation and includes seven key priorities. Each priority is underpinned by evidence from the research and supported by options and recommendations appropriate to its implementation.

4.1. Summary of Key Priorities for OASIS

**Phase 1 (Short Term)**

1. Crystallise the future vision for OASIS and how it is intended to integrate with and complement existing systems such as HERs, the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP), the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) and the Heritage Gateway;

2. Develop the brand and identity for the future of OASIS;

3. Work towards a more efficient and inclusive system that complements current information flows within HERs and seeks to prevent working practices that lead to data double-handling;

**Phase 2 (Medium Term)**

4. Establish mechanisms to improve and engage societies, community groups, museums and academics with OASIS; particularly in view of the Coalition Government’s Localism agenda;

5. Offer flexible, accessible and tailored forms of training for HERs, contractors and others, relating to the value and benefits of OASIS; as well as functional and operational aspects of the system.

**Phase 3 (Longer Term)**

6. Take steps to broaden OASIS to encompass a wider range of event types and historic environment disciplines and asset types;

7. Enhance the interface, functionality and ease of use of the OASIS form.
4.2. Priority 1

Crystallise the future vision for OASIS and how it is intended to integrate with and complement existing systems such as HERs, the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP), the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) and the Heritage Gateway

4.2.1 Evidence to support this priority

Several research respondents have described the existence of parallel and apparently competing sources of publically accessible historic environment information.

The majority of HER Officers appear to view OASIS as a possible threat, due to the apparent duplication of work and subsequent availability of information that already forms part of the HER. This highlights a need for the distinctions to be made clearer, particularly on the basis that HERs contain much greater detail relating to a specific asset/locality than OASIS is likely to contain.

The fact that OASIS has previously been communicated and marketed as a ‘project’ rather than a service available for the benefit of HERs, may also have contributed to some negative views or misconceptions about OASIS from within the HER community.

One respondent expressed concern that placing too much information in the public domain, particularly relating to the potential value of sites, could lead to higher incidences of heritage-related crime.

Among those contractors interviewed as part of this research, the majority commented that they use both the OASIS grey literature library as well as archaeological journals as sources of valuable data for maintaining local archaeological knowledge and for comparing finds and reports by other archaeologists, both professional and amateur.

Where communications and marketing are concerned - some respondents described existing communications from the ADS as good or reasonable, whereas others reported not having received any kind of updates other than validation reminder emails. This indicates one of two things; either there is a lack of awareness among some HERs around the types of information and updates available; or that more/better communications are needed. Without exception, commercial contractor and academic user respondents claimed not to have seen or heard of any kind of marketing or promotion activities relating to the OASIS system, although this may be open to interpretation as to what types of communications might constitute ‘marketing’ and ‘promotion’.

Finally, some confusion also appears to exist around how far back the event recording system should go – with one HER Officer suggesting that contractors may be either deliberately or mistakenly submitting OASIS forms for historic rather than for current events. It should be noted that the ADS has “actively
discouraged contractors from entering old projects into the form”.

### 4.2.2 Options and recommendations for the future

All users\(^\text{25}\) of OASIS need to be able to recognise that the system can facilitate an efficient approach to recording and archiving new information and changes relating to the historic environment.

In order to better engage all users of the system – OASIS needs to more clearly define for all users, its:

- Purpose;
- Objectives;
- Current and future user groups; and
- Benefits.

This information needs to be set against other information services and made clear through an effective approach to:

- Marketing;
- Communications (such as system updates; newsletters; sharing of good practices; and case studies); and
- Training activities.

Case studies and examples of good practice relating to OASIS could be used to demonstrate how OASIS adds value. This might include showcasing examples of rich archaeological sites that have been reported via OASIS. One HER Officer described several projects that have recently been completed by academics that used OASIS as a secondary research source.

OASIS offers its own unique characteristics in comparison to other systems, primarily by focusing on ‘event’ data rather than ‘monument’ data – particularly in relation to the planning system. Despite this, improved integration is needed between OASIS and other existing systems in the future so that academics, researchers and the general public understand where to go for the information they need. Where the AIP is concerned, some form of auto-synchronisation might better enable OASIS records and AIP records to be updated.

Where there is confusion around how far back the event recording system should go – there is a need to:

1. Consider whether there is merit in permitting older information to the form;
2. Clarify this position for HER Officers; and
3. Clearly define the parameters of “current” and “old” projects.

For as long as participation in OASIS remains voluntary, it will be important for the OASIS Management

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\(^{25}\) In this context the term ‘users’ refers to data producers (such as contractors and community groups); data validators (HER Officers); and other users of the system.
Board to seek regular feedback from HER Officers, contractors and other users relating to the issues and challenges associated with the system, including ‘testing’ reactions to recent changes and improvements that may have been rolled out. Only by working directly with users can a system be developed that is truly responsive to users’ needs.

This could be achieved by commissioning an annual online survey. By using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions – the Board can seek to measure users’ ratings of certain elements of the system as well as gathering respondents’ views and opinions to inform future improvements. The establishment of baseline information from the results of the first survey could enable the Board to track changes in perceptions in subsequent years.

There is need for an on-going Advisory/ Management Group to maintain consensus of the interests of main stakeholders and to manage the marketing strategy of the system.

Such a Group would act to manage and negate the likely issues arising from the future planned changes to the system. Issues are anticipated to include, for example:

- Lack of buy-in from HER Officers which may mean that requirements for completion of OASIS forms are not set out in planning briefs (NB: Section 4.4.1 includes coverage of wider issues, such as the lack of power among HER Officers to influence the requirement of planning briefs);
- Changes in Heritage Planning Policies – although the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires archive deposition it gives less detail around reporting than PPS5;
- Some HERs resisting the use of OASIS because it does not fit smoothly with existing systems and work processes’;
- Contractors, universities and local societies not using OASIS for submissions on non-development control work.
4.3. Priority 2

Develop the brand and identity for the future of OASIS

4.3.1 Evidence to support this priority

The Historic Environment Research Archives, Links and Data (HERALD) project was conceived in 2009 and builds upon the foundations of OASIS. The purpose is to bring together in one cost-saving package, a suite of existing online forms for recording historic environment information.

HERALD is currently at draft project proposal stage, with most developments having been on hold since January 2010 pending further project work on HEGEL and outcomes of further research.

Presently the ADS has to expend significant time and resources updating different recording databases, meaning that information may only be updated at best once a year and therefore becoming quickly out of date. Furthermore the current incarnation of OASIS is working at the limit of the software, for example it has insufficient scope to take account of users’ suggestions for tailoring the form and improving its overall flexibility. The proposed objectives under HERALD include:

- Integration of a suite of online tools to more closely align with the planning process;
- Agreement on a single sector-wide standard for event recording;
- Reduction in the proliferation of proprietary technologies, to avoid problems with long-term sustainability of these technologies;
- Establishment of a stable long-term host for HERALD resources.

The Project Design for HERALD highlighted the complexities of moving towards the new system, with a project timescale indicated at two years to allow for design, consultation, technological development, testing and roll-out. Further work on HERALD is currently subject to improved national intelligence on OASIS and the needs of its users.

Anticipated benefits of the future planned developments for OASIS are many-fold and include improved functionality leading to increased interoperability. Further benefits are expected to comprise increased numbers of grey literature reports and improvements in the standard of submissions.

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26 The purpose of the HEGEL project to bring about a step change in the way in which unpublished research (grey literature) relating to historic environment investigations is made available.

4.3.2 Options and recommendations for the future

In order for OASIS to offer improved flexibility to meet the needs of different types of data producers and users, the Management Board has already identified the need to migrate OASIS to a new web-based IT platform. Ideally the future platform will move away from ColdFusion ‘middle-ware’ in favour of JAVA, thereby enabling improved tailoring of the form, including much-needed drop-down tables and thesauri to improve standardisation of terminology.

As OASIS has been in operation for over ten years, there may be a greater likelihood of buy-in by HERs to a software update under the OASIS brand, rather than giving the impression that HERs and indeed other data producers and users have to get to grips with an entirely new system.

Consideration needs to be given to the relative merits of maintaining the OASIS ‘brand’ versus migrating to an alternative name such as ‘HERALD’ or ‘OASIS 2’.

Moving to a new brand could create disparity and confusion among some current and future users of the system. However many who are sceptical about the existing system may prefer a move away from what they perceive to be the “same old, same old”.

Without doubt a new name would necessitate more marketing, more explanation, and may risk losing any existing good feeling which OASIS carries. Many users and data producers are only now able to reference OASIS after ten years – which in many ways is a measure of its success.

A survey of a sample of users relating to the brand and name may be a useful way of informing a decision on the most appropriate way forward.
4.4. Priority 3

Work towards a more efficient and inclusive system that complements current information flows within HERs and seeks to prevent working practices that lead to data double-handling

4.4.1 Evidence to support this priority

Statistics illustrate that there has, historically, been a large backlog of forms in the system that i) await completion by contractors; and ii) await validation by HERs. This process can take weeks or several months and as at October 2011 there were:

- 24,731 OASIS records in the system;
- 16,500 completed by the contractor;
- 11,586 signed off by the HER;
- 11,586 signed off by the NMR;
- 11,584 completed
- Leaving 13,147 incomplete records in the system

As the chart below shows, there is little indication that the backlogs are being addressed.

Figure 3 OASIS Records in system, signed off and completed (2004-2011)

NB: Stages 1 to 5 step from the back to the front of the bar chart
The backlog within HERs (indicated by the margin between stages 2 and 3 in Figure 3) appears to support the findings of the HER Data Sources Audit 2009 that OASIS is given a low priority at HER level, leading to a “disappointing gap” between the numbers of records completed by contractors, and the number validated by HERs.\(^{28}\)

**Typical process flow for completion and validation of OASIS records:**

Practices for completion of the OASIS form vary, largely for reasons of economy and expedience. It is common for a Senior Archaeologist to initiate the form, often at the outset of a project, and for the remainder of the form to be completed by someone other than the Senior Archaeologist once the project is either well underway or finished.

Among the majority of commercial contractors, usual practice involves completion of the form by a nominated employee who has ‘ownership’ of the process as part of their overall responsibilities. In some cases this individual is not a trained archaeologist or archivist but holds a role akin to an administrative data entry position.

In the case of universities, respondents described a hierarchy of OASIS form completers spanning the Senior Archaeologist; followed by the Archaeologist working on the project; and finally the university department’s Senior Archivist. Among University Archivists who contributed to the research, there are reported difficulties of working on an OASIS form where no direct involvement has been had with the work carried out.

Within the planning system, a fieldwork report is typically validated and ‘signed off’ in the first instance by the Development Management (or Development Control\(^ {29}\)) function. This is to ensure archaeological fieldwork meets requirements associated with a planning condition with a view to that condition being discharged. HER Officers tend not to be involved at this point unless, as in the minority of cases, dual responsibilities are held.

In the majority of cases, HER Officers receive a copy of the grey literature report from Development Control once it has been signed off, and review this report in order to update the HER.

It is reported by HER Officers to be days, weeks or even months later that contractors complete and submit the OASIS record (or ‘form’) to the HER for validation. This fact is corroborated by contractors, who report in most cases that they prefer to submit the OASIS form at the end of a project when the grey literature report has been finalised and information can be used to inform the content of the form.

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\(^{28}\) OASIS Final Project Report (June 2008) v1.2.

\(^{29}\) From this point forward, and for ease of reference, the term ‘Development Control’ is used as a catch-all description to denote the development management function.
As a result of this process, the OASIS form is often validated retrospectively; acting more as a quality checking tool to ensure that the content of the OASIS form accurately reflects the grey literature report; and identifying pertinent information that will serve to enhance the local record that has already been created.

The following typical scenarios exist concerning how responsibility is taken for validating OASIS records:

- Invariably there is one individual responsible for OASIS validation within an HER – typically the HER Officer/HER Assistant;
- Within a minority of local authorities OASIS records are validated by individuals occupying a ‘dual role’, i.e. with additional Development Control responsibilities;
- In a small number of reported instances – HERs use work placement students or volunteers to validate OASIS records as, otherwise, a lack of time would impede their ability to work through the backlog of forms; and
- English Heritage data management personnel contribute to record validation in order to help HERs clear their backlogs.

According to HER Officers, the fundamental challenge with OASIS in its current guise is that it does not align with existing workflows and the OASIS form is not the primary means by which HER Officers import information to update and enhance the HER.

Consequently, OASIS is often little more than a checking tool, in some cases marred by issues associated with the quality of information received by data producers and commonly leading to a situation where HER Officers are duplicating effort. This duplication occurs where the HER has already been updated, possibly months earlier, from the contents of the grey literature report (reported in the majority of cases); and/or because the grey literature report is considered to be the most rich and reliable source of information over the OASIS form.

The reported time taken to validate an OASIS record varies considerably among HERs highlighting clear disparities in work processes and the ways in which the OASIS form is used. In some cases this is reported as 10 minutes and in others over an hour.

HER Officers report that they are reluctant to perform validation activities (leading to potentially quite significant delays) where data producers submit an OASIS form and:

- attach a grey literature report which has not yet been signed off by Development Control (applicable in cases linked to the planning system);
- attach an old version of the report;
- do not attach the report at all and the HER has not already received it through other means.

Generally speaking, HER Officers feel that OASIS represents an additional work burden and that, should
resources become too stretched in the current era of public sector spending cuts, validation activities will become less of a priority over other work. The exception appears to be among HERs that receive OASIS records in lower volumes, where it is easier to make the time available for validation.

One HER Officer commented that where repeated changes are made to the OASIS form by the contractor, this requires additional validation and time to be spent on the record where this can be ill-afforded. It was suggested that validation activities should only be required once the OASIS form is entirely complete and approved internally by the contractor.

The lack of participation in OASIS by some contractors appears to be exacerbated by the lack of enforcement by some local authorities to make the OASIS form mandatory within the planning brief or Written Scheme of Investigation. A small number of HERs made the point that they do not have any input, or have any power to input into whether OASIS form completion is included within planning briefs. In other cases where this is indeed a requirement – HERs generally report that they either lack the time to carry out follow-up activity, or that contractors still fail to respond to requests for information.

Whether or not OASIS contributes to more efficient information flows was attributed by many contractors to the quality of relationships with local HER officers and to the time and resources HERs are able to devote to validating and answering queries relating to OASIS. There is a clear issue that where data producers perceive HERs to not be validating their completed forms – this affects levels of commitment to OASIS.

4.4.2 Options and recommendations for the future

“Surely what we all want is a definitive record of event, but there are so many ways of how HERs work that maybe one size doesn’t fit all.”

The issues raised in relation to workflow efficiencies and double-handling of data will require a cultural shift in how OASIS is perceived, as well as strategic and operational changes to the system and working processes. These issues run wide and deep and consequently ALL recommendations from this report will contribute something towards the overall improvement and therefore greater usage of OASIS. These include establishing and communicating the vision and brand for OASIS; improving engagement with data producers outside of the planning system; improving form functionality; as well as providing appropriate and on-going training.

Consideration should be given to developing and implementing one or more different processes for working with OASIS that take into account the varied working practices in operation across HERs. Several possible options are presented in this section and these would benefit from further research and testing among HER Officers to determine their relative feasibility. It should be noted that the adoption of one or more of these options will not contribute all that is necessary to solving the problems associated with information flows and duplication of data.
With the exception of number 5 - it should be noted that the following options are not mutually exclusive.

**Option 1 – HERs initiate the OASIS form as opposed to contractors**

The rationale behind this suggestion is born out of a local study carried out by North Yorkshire HER in 2011:

“The from a wider HER perspective, it would be useful to explore the potential for the OASIS process to be ‘reversed’, with the HER initiating the OASIS record, through export or upload, and the emphasis then being on the contractor or other participant, to complete the additional details on the form. The HER can then be notified, and download and import the additional data thus added, without duplicating effort. This would improve the efficiency of the process, increase concordance between systems, improve the quality and number of records, and make validation easier.”


Opinions on this approach are divided, with a small majority of HERs either against the idea or uncertain as to whether this would be suitable across the board.

The main reported advantages are as follows:

- Greater control over the quality of data on the OASIS form;
- Improved concordance between the HER and OASIS form;
- Potential for improved efficiency of information flows (as the contractor might otherwise not create an OASIS record until after the work has been completed);
- Improved consistency for the creation of event records within the HER; i.e. that this information is recorded early and means the HER is as up-to-date as possible;
- Reduction in duplicate OASIS records/event numbers being created where a ‘replacement’ contractor takes over (such as where land is sold off and alternative arrangements are made for archaeological fieldwork to be carried out).

The main reported disadvantages are as follows:

- Ownership of the OASIS form would be taken away from contractors when a great deal of work has been done to encourage them to complete the form either as part of planning brief requirements or as good practice;
- HERs that do not assign event numbers to contractors from the outset have no reason to enter into a dialogue at this early stage – making this an unnecessary step;
- HERs are not necessarily going to know that work is taking place and this would involve additional work to find out;
HER Officers simply wouldn’t have time to initiate the records for the same reason that they don’t have time to validate the backlog of existing OASIS records.

**Option 2 – Development Control to take more ownership of OASIS**

OASIS data should be better incorporated into the planning based requirements of local authorities. This might be achieved by considering the most appropriate formats for OASIS data to be made available and by improving interoperability between data in various systems using OASIS submissions as a common reference for archaeological interventions.

Linked to this is the suggestion that Development Control functions should take responsibility for validating the OASIS record once they have approved and signed off the Grey Literature reports. This option would require engagement and training of a new audience of validators and the fact OASIS is not mandatory within Written Schemes of Investigation (WSIs) will remain a hurdle. This option also potentially undermines the quality-checking and data-basing strengths of the HER Officer role.

**Option 3 – Reminder emails to contractors**

This option involves introducing centrally-generated reminder emails to contractors to complete OASIS forms, particularly where submission of the form is logged as a requirement of a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI).

This approach might be effective at increasing form completion activity, although consideration will be needed around the volume and frequency of reminder emails. I.e. HER Officers report that validation reminder emails are currently burden-some, therefore a weekly or monthly ‘batch update’ may be the most appropriate way forward.

**Option 4 – Improving links with museums**

Work should continue to engage museums with OASIS – the purpose being to encourage their issuing of Accession numbers through OASIS, i.e. reference numbers that relate to physical finds and deposits resulting from fieldwork.

Furthermore, where museums have strict guidelines on the quality of the archive they take from a contractor – this highlights the importance of museums undertaking a validation role.

**Option 5 – Make unvalidated data available in the public domain**

This option would enable contractors to upload the OASIS form to the public domain. The ‘health warning’ that it has not yet been validated for accuracy would signal its temporary status. The main advantage would be to speed up the information sharing process, but the risk presented would be inaccurate data. This could have a knock-on effect in the trust placed by regular users of OASIS and also not solve the issue of contractors failing to complete OASIS records.
4.5. Priority 4

Establish mechanisms to improve relationships with and engage societies, community groups, museums and academics with OASIS; particularly in view of the Coalition Government’s Localism agenda

4.5.1 Evidence to support this priority

The vast majority of HER Officers advocate the need for OASIS to engage more with data producers beyond the realm of planning, as the system provides a vital tool for identifying fieldwork that might not otherwise be known about by the HER. The fundamental issue is how to make this happen on a more regular and consistent basis.

The use of OASIS by community groups is still extremely low compared with major developer-funded fieldwork. Amateur archaeologists often have a deep understanding of their local area, its history and sources. With that in mind it is important these groups understand the benefits of OASIS, moreover that these benefits are explained in the right way so as to engage interest and encourage buy-in. One also needs to consider the demographics of amateur archaeologists, with many beyond retirement age and potentially lacking sufficient IT expertise to fully navigate, complete and submit the forms.

One HER Officer raised the issue that where users of OASIS are concerned, such as students and academics, there is a risk that its use could cut HERs out of the loop as an information source. Whilst it is clear that OASIS is designed to support the availability of information for updating HERs – several respondents expressed concern that OASIS is trying to become an “ueber-HER”, indicating that it risks being perceived as a competitor information source in the future.

“OASIS has a complexity to it at the moment and people aren’t sure who they are reporting work to. Is it OASIS or is it the HER?”

Museums have little capacity for storing and archiving digital archaeological data. Despite this, research has indicated that the grey literature library is considered a reliable source of information and as an educational resource.

4.5.2 Options and recommendations for the future

Investing heavily in the engagement of community groups could be a potentially monumental exercise. Having said that, the vast majority of HER Officers agree that these efforts should continue.

OASIS offers a ‘professional framework’ for recording amateur fieldwork data and this could be a key
selling point for engaging with amateur groups.

Another possible solution to engaging these groups might be the development of a shortened and simplified version of the OASIS form, using more accessible and simple language.

Key information to include should cover:

- Location of the site;
- Type of event;
- When the fieldwork was undertaken;
- By whom;
- For what purpose;
- Conclusions;
- Supported link to the fieldwork report.

Significant investment in marketing and training would be required – not simply on how to complete the OASIS form but covering the values and benefits associated with OASIS, such as the publishing of information for the benefit of the wider community.

Activities might include increased publicity through leaflets and events, with help from professional bodies and membership associations.

The Council for British Archaeology (CBA) may be well placed to continue to lead by example on community engagement activities. The CBA runs a series of annual traineeships aimed at community groups and the use of speakers at members’ events could help to promote, and further participation in, OASIS.

To attract the attention of non-professionals and lay users, a more user friendly public interface for the grey literature library, searchable by keyword or map reference, may be beneficial. Intelligent and advanced search tools could appeal to local societies that research genealogy or family geography. One academic suggested approaching potential users though non-mainstream routes such as The University of the Third Age.

Where museums are concerned, there may be merit in tailoring OASIS more to meet their needs, notably by amalgamating information currently supplied via other forms into one single OASIS form (such as landowner details/inventory of artefacts due to be deposited as a result of an investigation). The Data Protection implications of including information such as landowner details would need to be overcome, such as the need for consent for the information being used by third parties and being made publicly available.
4.6. Priority 5

Offer flexible, accessible and tailored forms of training for HERs, contractors and others, relating to the value and benefits of OASIS; as well as functional and operational aspects of the system

4.6.1 Evidence to support this priority

The majority of HER Officers responding to the research highlighted a lack of consistency between contractors concerning the quality of information contained on the OASIS form, particularly in respect of project summaries. Poor quality or missing information can mean additional time being spent by HER Officers in dealing with an OASIS record, which is still considered to be easier and more efficient in some cases than going back to the contractor. Issues primarily relate to:

- Lack of time and willingness to complete the OASIS form properly;
- Lack of knowledge and training relating to OASIS – a particular issue where staff responsible for OASIS within a contracting organisation leave their position;
- Pressure under which the contractor operates.

Equally as variable is whether HER Officers follow-up with contractors to correct errors, or whether they choose to undertake remedial activities themselves as part of the validation process. The vast majority of HER Officers do regard the validation of OASIS forms as essential and so will edit data as part of their commitment to preserving the quality of information within the public domain.

“HERs are responsible for standards and consistency which is what we’re here for. The contractors shouldn’t be expected to do that.”

Contractors who had received one-to-one training from English Heritage, praised it as being comprehensive and easy to follow. These respondents emphasised the need for this type of training be revisited, particularly where staffing changes may have taken place. When asked who should deliver this training, all respondents believed the local authority should take responsibility.

4.6.2 Options and recommendations for the future

Most HER Officers acknowledged the need for future training to improve understanding and appreciation of the purpose, benefits and value attached to OASIS, extending beyond how it can fit within existing workflows.

Currently, English Heritage delivers face to face training and consultancy to support the use of OASIS within HERs, which is highly valued and therefore should continue.
Anecdotal evidence points to a real demand for face to face refresher training from an OASIS expert, not just for the HER community but also for contracting units, particularly smaller organisations where staffing changes can impact on the efficiency and quality of information received. Indeed, if OASIS seeks to encourage wider participation from academics, museums and community groups, then training will need to be directed and tailored appropriately.

Consideration also needs to be given to alternative forms of training should financial and other pressures inhibit English Heritage from being able to discharge these duties to the same extent in the future. Online tutorials may provide a flexible solution to contractors who need to train new staff quickly to be able to complete the OASIS form. To ensure consistency it may be helpful if training materials could be developed by English Heritage and rolled out nationally.

Given the potential costs associated with delivering regional events and locally-based training sessions, consideration will be needed as to how to add the most value through this type of activity. Some respondents made the point that operationally-focussed training (relating to the mechanics of using OASIS) could be delivered effectively through written guidance materials, on-line training modules or webinars, meaning that events and locally-based training could focus on the wider issues and the “bigger picture”.

“Regular workshops are a useful thing. If it’s a talk or a lecture then people will switch off.”

Suggestions from some contractors and societies for a detailed on-line OASIS manual and associated FAQ pages, highlight that more should be done to publicise and signpost these types of help resources that are already available.

Consideration should be given to the long-term value of English Heritage continuing to undertake validation activities on behalf of those HERs unable to perform this task for whatever reason; i.e. as part of the Heritage Data Management (HDM) function. Whilst this is currently a viable way of keeping up with validation activities, the use of local Heritage Data Coordinators in a supportive training capacity will be important to overcoming negative perceptions of OASIS held by some HER Officers. It is hoped that, in time, this approach will assist the ideal situation whereby OASIS validation is a self-sustaining activity undertaken by local authorities.
4.7. Priority 6

Take steps to broaden OASIS to encompass a wider range of event types and historic environment disciplines

4.7.1 Evidence to support this priority

The OASIS form was conceived specifically to deal with land-based archaeological sites. This original conception of the OASIS form as a means of submitting a relatively small amount of excavation metadata is becoming increasingly restrictive in an environment where HERs need to record and handle records for an increasing number of different types of sites, such as wrecks (with the associated need to meet the requirements of marine archaeology) as well as a wider range of historic environment disciplines as a result of Heritage Protection Reform (HPR), such as Conservation. A key issue is that certain sources of event information are not currently shared with, nor accessible by, HERs.

Wider range of event types

Most respondents to the research struggled to understand what additional event types should be covered that are not already recommended by the INSCRIPTION standard such as the Events thesauri. What emerged as most important among respondents was that event types should be interpreted consistently by HERs as well as contractors.

Some contractors expressed concern that recording a greater variety of heritage assets and event types may create more work for HERs, thereby increasing an already large backlog of records awaiting validation.

It should be noted that the Data Standards Unit within English Heritage has recently produced, in consultation with the HER community, a thesaurus of archaeological/architectural event types that are currently in use by the sector\(^\text{30}\).

Wider range of historic environment disciplines

There are mixed views on the potential for OASIS to be broadened out to record data relating to a wider sphere of historic environment disciplines (i.e. beyond traditional archaeology) as well as a wider range of asset types. A clear vision is needed of the circumstances in which information about events is needed in the public domain, i.e. whether work materially affects the evidential value or other significance of an asset, and hence whether a record of the intervention should be required.

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\(^{30}\) As reported by the English Heritage Data Standards Unit in a post on the HER Forum.
Positive comments described OASIS as offering a solid process for recording events relating to archaeology, with no reason why the process shouldn’t be pursued in relation to other aspects of the historic environment, such as built heritage. Indeed, two HER Officers described how OASIS already incorporates reports relating to historic building consents, as Historic Buildings Archaeologists are involved in recording information to inform the process.

A number of issues and considerations were raised by respondents that would need to be taken account of should the idea of widening the remit of OASIS be taken forward.

Firstly, cultural differences and disparate methodologies are reported to exist between archaeology and other historic environment disciplines, with the role of Conservation Officers cited by several respondents as being less about recording specific events and more about gathering information ad hoc as part of the wider consent regime.

Secondly, while the concept of uploading information to an on-line resource is generally considered to be good practice - respondents were keen to make the point that some historic environment disciplines work primarily to a paper-based system and are likely to require a substantial – and as some respondents reported – “impossible” hurdle to align workflows to fit with OASIS.

“I don’t think other disciplines would engage with OASIS. In some two-tier offices, conservation barely engages with planning let alone OASIS so that would involve a lot of training to explain why it’s important. They are already wrestling and struggling with existing systems – so OASIS coming in would be off-putting.”

It is important to note that the above views are perceptions of research respondents. This highlights a possible need to work with representatives from other historic environment disciplines to explore their willingness to work with OASIS and what may be needed to enable their engagement with the system and with the HER as a whole.

Another issue relates to the mechanics of the OASIS form itself, which one HER Officer described as being geared more towards “invasive” methods of investigation appropriate to the role of archaeologists but not necessarily other functions.

Some HER Officers questioned whether broadening the remit could lead to a lack of distinction between the role of OASIS and that of the Heritage Gateway, i.e. that OASIS may become less focussed on events/interventions and more focussed on monuments. It was considered important that the focus should remain on recording fieldwork and events in keeping with the vision of OASIS thus avoiding any confusion of the very separate purposes of the Heritage Gateway and OASIS.

Where HPR and PPSS are concerned – a small number of respondents raised the issue that developers may be unwilling to pay for and allow the time for multiple interventions and assessments to take place – particularly as neither HPR nor PPSS are statutory.
A note on Desk Based Assessments (DBAs)

A range of views were expressed as to whether or not Desk Based Assessments (DBAs) should be recorded via OASIS – the basis of the argument being whether or not they can and should be classified as an ‘event’. There is also a lack of clarity among HER Officers as to whether or not OASIS already permits the inclusion of Desk Based Assessments (DBAs).

The main concern around DBAs per se is one of reliability – particularly given that they can involve subjective opinions about the archaeological potential of a site. Several respondents highlighted issues of confidentiality that can inhibit the release of DBAs to the public domain, given that they are often commissioned as part of the pre-planning stages of a proposed development. HERs in favour of incorporating DBAs into OASIS believe that they can open up useful background information on a site which could prevent duplicate enquiries needing to take place in the future. One HER Officer described how additional value can be gained by referring academics and other researchers to their content for the purpose of context-setting and providing a summary of a site.

4.7.2 Options and recommendations for the future

To broaden OASIS to encompass a wider range of historic environment disciplines (i.e. beyond traditional archaeology) would require consultation with these groups to identify the opportunities and barriers to their participation in OASIS.

This would require the development of a carefully constructed questionnaire designed to explore how historic environment information recording might be improved and joined up under the auspices of HPR and PPSS5, with the opportunity to test certain ideas around the OASIS process and identify the types of issues and challenges that would need to be overcome. The questionnaire should be made available using a mix of methods (such as telephone and online) to offer maximum flexibility for respondents.

HER Officers would also need to be consulted to identify and work around any resource implications that may result from a potentially increased volume of records requiring validation, i.e. efficiencies in the current system should be improved prior to introducing more OASIS records to the HER.

Depending on the outcomes of this consultation, any engagement strategy with other historic environment disciplines would need to focus on the benefits of participating in OASIS, particularly where current working practises do not necessarily align with the format and approach for recording information using this type of approach.

Consideration should also be given to the amount and types of information requested by other historic environment disciplines; i.e. the emphasis should be on ensuring sufficient relevant information is acquired but with minimal burden.

The OASIS form could potentially be expanded and divided into sections according to particular
disciplines/specialisms. The reporting requirements for each specialism would need to be developed through initial collaboration and consultation to ensure that expectations are fair and realistic.

OASIS might also encourage and incorporate larger thematic studies, such as resource assessments and studies of roman remains across a particular area. These reports are likely to be academic in nature and may currently be completed without the knowledge of the local HER Officer.

Where Desk Based Assessments are concerned, OASIS already provides a mechanism to identify whether they meet the required standard for inclusion – therefore it seems more should be done to communicate this to HER Officers.
4.8. Priority 7

Enhance the interface, functionality and ease of use of the OASIS form

4.8.1 Evidence to support this priority

A significant issue for HER Officers is the lack of consistent terminology control within the OASIS form. Whilst the available thesauri are considered to be a positive and essential feature – the use of free-form text boxes mean that contractors are not obliged to conform to the standards set. If OASIS derived data is perceived to need a lot of work to align to the required standards, this could present a sizeable barrier to the system being adopted or required as part of specifications. It is recognised that significant IT investment would be needed to implement these types of changes.

On the whole HER Officers feel that the content of the OASIS form is useful, although around half of respondents report the user interface as being somewhat “clunky” and even “labyrinthine” – with too much information presented at once and much time spent “to-ing and fro-ing” between screens and sections of the form.

The vast majority of HERs interviewed stated they do not use the import routine for updating OASIS meta-data to the HER, including those HERs using HBSMR software. The main reasons given include:

- It is simply easier to review and synthesise the content of the OASIS form manually;
- The HER may only have a small number of OASIS forms awaiting validation at any one time – making it sometimes easier to update the HER manually;
- The import tool would not ultimately improve efficiency as the majority of the time is spent validating the record;
- The HER Officer is approached to create an event number at the start of a project rather than at the end; and
- The OASIS form is not actually used to update the HER at all – serving merely as a ‘checking tool’ against the record that has already and previously been created.

Whilst there is some recognition among respondents of the tool’s potential to improve efficiency in updating the HER from OASIS records - there appears to be a lack of knowledge among HER Officers around how the import routine works and most admitted to not being familiar with it.

One HER Officer described the HBSMR import routine as limited in its functionality, having been designed to a mid-price specification that with greater investment could be more intuitive and more fully automated.

In respect of those HERs not currently working with HBSMR software (believed to be some 30-40% of
HERs) – one respondent to the research stated they have considered developing a MIDAS XML script but has concluded that in order for it to be successful it would have to be well written and would take a long time to develop. The importance of human intervention as part of the validation process (such as dealing with quality issues) was also cited as a “valid reason” why manual updating of the HER would continue to be the preferred option within many HERs.

Another commonly reported issue by HER Officers relates to the submission of GIS boundary file data (including shape files and polygons) which are often either not supplied by the contractor or not completed accurately. Where this is the case, HER Officers tend not to validate this part of the OASIS record as it is deemed to be potentially too erroneous. Where a new site is being investigated then the feedback is that GIS data would be invaluable if contractors were able to complete this accurately.

A small number of HER Officers reported issues opening files that require auto-cad software, which is overcome by simply insisting that the main body of a report is uploaded in Word or pdf format.

Some contractors accept that use of OASIS promotes consistency of language. In other cases respondents feel the form imposes constriction of terminology which has the effect of forcing those inputting data to make a “best guess” which can sometimes be misleading.

A further anxiety for commercial contractors, albeit only in a small number of cases, is that the OASIS form can be difficult to complete where a landowner refuses to give up a find, or where a museum cannot be found for deposition.

4.8.2 Options and recommendations for the future

The terminology used by the OASIS form should dovetail more closely with the events thesauri, as recommended by INSCRIPTION, in order to ensure professional standards are adopted across the historic environment sector.

There is a need to simplify the OASIS form, such as through the use of separate interfaces for different types of users. OASIS would also benefit from more intuitive help options built into the form, such as “question mark” or “light bulb” buttons that will lead to a new dialog box with explanatory notes, guidance, as well as useful hints and tips.

The automatic import routine should be maintained but it may warrant refinements or better promotion with training/guidance for HER Officers. Indications are these refinements may be needed to improve its functionality, scope, and to overcome any perceived concerns or difficulties relating to this part of the system. This will require time and investment to identify how the import routine can be improved, and the underpinning system changes required to action these developments.

The following list of additional and specific suggestions for enhancements to OASIS includes ideas previously put forward to the ADS by users of the system, suggestions from stakeholders interviewed as
part of this research, as well as ideas emerging from the local study undertaken by North Yorkshire HER. They are not listed in any order of priority.

**Form functionality enhancements:**

1. Enable uploading of grey literature documents as .zip files if the file sizes are otherwise too large;
2. Enable saving of each section of the form during completion;
3. Enable use of special characters;
4. Expand and develop the range of XML schemas available for download;
5. Improve GIS functionality for downloading shape files, including trenches;
6. Improve support for accuracy of location reporting (such as grids and/or map windows);
7. Improve support for recording ‘negative interventions’ (i.e. where a site bears no significant finds or offers limited or zero potential);
8. Improve support for recording a site with both terrestrial and marine elements;
9. Improve support for accessing and validating the ‘Archive’ section of the OASIS form;
10. Improve consistency of terminology (such as through the use of look-up tables);
11. Increase flexibility for the selection of ‘project type’, to allow for historic building recording and evaluation;
12. Remove download limit on the number of records;
13. Provide clearer and more comprehensive instructions to minimise the risk of errors (such as incorrect dating)
14. Increase the scope of the glossary to include a wider variety of find types along with more guidance on the appropriate terminology to use;

**User experience enhancements:**

1. Add the HER event number and planning application number on the OASIS form – to better ‘join up’ OASIS with local authority information;
2. Allow HERs/data producers/NMR to keep track of records they have downloaded already and those they haven’t;
3. Provide HER-specific guidelines for using OASIS which are easily accessible following log-on;
4. Provide an enhanced search facility to identify specific projects more easily (which is currently a time-intensive task for HERs);
5. Increase the number of projects that are visible on one page;
6. Improve support for multiple logons for the same organisation;
7. Improve support for user preferences (e.g. the number of records visible on one page/the number of emails received following updates to the status of records);
8. Create summary statistics for all users of OASIS;
9. Create better links with academic, research and community groups and enable them to download records more easily;
10. Create an easier process for HERs to move a record which isn’t in their area;
11. Allow the HER to see (and edit) the report release delay that the contractor has specified.
Administrative enhancements:

1. Design a better means of tracking the creation of a record (for developer-funded fieldwork this might involve the HER creating an ‘event identifier code’ which can then be added to the OASIS form by the contractor once completed);
2. Review and if necessary update location and county listings to make it clearer where grey literature items are located (particularly where not uploaded with the OASIS form);
3. Consider clearer procedures for when a contracting unit closes and records are not completed;
4. Improve support for cross-boundary data recording, such as a maritime survey of English terrestrial waters, or a region-wide survey;
5. Enhance the archive section of the form to include details about deposits (including physical deposits) and their archive location;
6. Develop web services of key OASIS information that could be drawn into third party applications;
4.9. Draft Action Plan

The following Draft Action Plan summarises the options and recommendations from this report:

**Phase 1 (Short Term)**

**PRIORITy 1: Crystallise the future vision for OASIS and how it is intended to integrate with and complement existing systems such as HERs, the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP), the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) and the Heritage Gateway**

1.1 Clearly define the purpose, objectives, current and future user groups of OASIS, as well as the benefits to users of participating in the OASIS system;
1.2 Develop an effective approach to OASIS marketing, communications and training activities;
1.3 Acquire, publish and share case studies and examples of good practice;
1.4 Improve integration between OASIS and other historic environment information systems, i.e. HERs, the AIP, the ADS and the Heritage Gateway;
1.5 Clarify the time-parameters for event recording in OASIS (i.e. ‘old’ vs. ‘current’ projects);
1.6 Seek regular feedback from OASIS users such as through an annual online survey to establish baseline data and measure progress of the forward strategy year-on-year;
1.7 Maintain an on-going Advisory/Management Group to look after the consensus of the interests of key stakeholders and to manage the implementation of the forward strategy

**PRIORITy 2: Develop the brand and identity for the future of OASIS**

2.1 Migrate OASIS to a new JAVA-based IT platform;
2.2 Consult and agree on the most appropriate brand (e.g. ‘HERALD’ or continuation of ‘OASIS’).

**PRIORITy 3: Work towards a more efficient and inclusive system that complements current information flows within HERs and seeks to prevent working practices that lead to data double-handling**

3.1 Consider the implementation of one or more flexible options for managing the flow of information using OASIS; and taking into account the varied working practices between local authorities (see below suggestions)
3.2 Consider initiation of the OASIS form by HERs;
3.3 Consider placing more ownership of OASIS upon the Development Control function within local authorities;
3.4 Consider invoking reminder emails to contractors (taking into account appropriate volume/frequency of emails such as ‘batch’ reminders);
3.5 Continue to develop links between OASIS and museums;
3.6 In the interests of efficiency, consider whether HER validation of OASIS records is needed at all.
**Phase 2 (Medium Term)**

**PRIORITY 4: Establish mechanisms to improve and engage societies, community groups, museums and academics with OASIS; particularly in view of the Coalition Government’s Localism agenda;**

4.1 Continue efforts to engage these groups with the benefits of participating in OASIS;
4.2 Work with stakeholder organisations/professional bodies (such as the Council for British Archaeology) to support communications, marketing and training activities;
4.3 Develop a shortened and simplified version of the OASIS form for use by these groups;
4.4 Consider amalgamating the OASIS form with other data collection forms (such as landowner details/inventory of artefacts);
4.5 Consider developing a more intuitive search tool to appeal to societies with special interests, such as genealogy.

**PRIORITY 5: Offer flexible, accessible and tailored forms of training for HERs, contractors and others, relating to the value and benefits of OASIS; as well as functional and operational aspects of the system.**

5.1 Work towards a more consistent and self-sustaining local authority validation process that does not rely on the short term solution of English Heritage validating OASIS records on behalf of some HERs;
5.2 Continue face to face training in relation to OASIS (highly valued by users);
5.3 Prioritise training relating to the purpose and benefits of OASIS (linked to the vision) in order to maximise engagement;
5.4 Develop online tutorials to support training relating to functional and operational aspects of OASIS;
5.5 Enhance/improve signposting of on-line guidance and help materials.
Phase 3 (Longer Term)

PRIORITY 6: Take steps to broaden OASIS to encompass a wider range of event types and historic environment disciplines and asset types.

6.1. Consult with a range of historic environment disciplines to determine the opportunities and threats to their engagement with OASIS;
6.2. Develop an engagement plan to promote the benefits of participating in OASIS by other (non-archaeology based) historic environment disciplines;
6.3. Segment the OASIS form for ease of use by different historic environment disciplines;
6.4. Consider the inclusion of larger thematic studies within OASIS;
6.5. Improve awareness of existing mechanisms through which Desk Based Assessments (DBAs) can be reviewed against required standards for inclusion within OASIS.

PRIORITY 7: Enhance the interface, functionality and ease of use of the OASIS form.

A detailed list of specific considerations applicable to each of the sub-headings, below, is contained in Section 4.8.2.

7.1. Enhance form functionality;
7.2. Improve ease of use;
7.3. Improve form administration.

4.10. Further Research

It is essential that regular dialogue is maintained with the historic environment sector to build and sustain engagement with OASIS; as well as to test ideas and measure progress as part of the development and implementation of the forward strategy.

Pye Tait Consulting is well placed to assist English Heritage and the OASIS Management Board by developing and facilitating an independent annual survey of OASIS data producers, HER Officers and other users, to report back to the Board on progress against the vision and overall strategy. We would also be able to assist with primary research across other historic environment disciplines to identify the opportunities and threats associated with broadening the remit of OASIS under the auspices of Heritage Protection Reform (HPR) and Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5).
## Appendix 1: Sample Frame

The information below lists the 40 organisations that participated in a telephone interview, including details relating to levels of OASIS activity as advised to Pye Tait by the Archaeology Data Service (information correct as at July 2011).

### Table 1: HERs

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<th>Organisation Name</th>
<th>No. records in System</th>
<th>No. records signed off</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>% records signed off vs. records in the system</th>
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<td>Devon Historic Environment Record</td>
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<td>231</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kent SMR</td>
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<td>277</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bristol City SMR</td>
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<td>81</td>
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<tr>
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<td>135</td>
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Review of the development and implementation of OASIS in England
Final report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation Name</th>
<th>No. records created</th>
<th>No. records completed</th>
<th>No. reports sent by other means</th>
<th>% records completed vs. records created</th>
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Table 2: Contractors
## Table 3: Others

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<th>No. records completed</th>
<th>No. Reports sent by other means</th>
<th>% records completed vs. records created</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>117</td>
<td>66</td>
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<td>North Pennine Archaeology</td>
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<td>Northamptonshire Archaeology</td>
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<td>282</td>
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Appendix 2: Discussion Themes – Phase 2 SWOT Analysis of OASIS

Based on the research undertaken during phase 1 – the following key themes have been identified that should be explored as part of the phase 2 analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with the OASIS system. The SWOT analysis will, in turn, inform the development of a forward strategy for OASIS.

1. Information flow between data producers, HERs and end users of OASIS
   - Benefits of OASIS for improving event recording
   - Issues associated with duplication of effort (OASIS in conjunction with HERs/AIP);
   - Resourcing issues within HERs;
   - Impact of local authority structures/local ‘ownership’ of OASIS.

2. Functionality of the OASIS form
   - Efficiency and ease of use;
   - Interoperability/compatibility between systems (including import scripts);
   - Standards for event recording;
   - Quality of information received for validation (HERs);
   - Other specific issues relating to functionality, user experience and administration.

3. Transition to HPR-consistence
   - Expansion of OASIS for recording and archiving data relating to a wider range of heritage assets;
   - Closer alignment of OASIS to the principles of PPSS: Planning for the Historic Environment;

4. Future strategy for OASIS
   - Improving flexibility, compatibility and overall value
   - Opportunities for wider engagement (such as museums and community groups)
   - Priorities for training
Appendix 3: Discussion Themes – ALGAO/HER Committee Meeting

This discussion follows the completion of Phase 2 (40 x telephone interviews with combination of HERs, data producers and other users of OASIS) and will inform the development of the forward strategy as part of Phase 3.

Questions:

1. In the interests of informing a forward strategy for the development and enhancement of OASIS - what are the opportunities associated with each of the key emerging messages (below)?

2. What are the risks and challenges?

3. What else needs to be considered and why?

Key emerging messages from HER Officers:

1. Crystallise the future vision for OASIS and how it is intended to integrate with and complement existing systems such as HERs and the Heritage Gateway;

2. Provide for a more efficient means by which OASIS can better complement current information flows within HERs; and b) prevent barriers within HERs such as working practices that lead to double-handling of data;

3. Embed tighter language standards and protocols within the OASIS form;

4. Provide greater concordance between OASIS data and GIS systems used by the HER to improve the accurate recording of event boundaries, trenches and other shape files;

5. Push for OASIS to be specified as a mandatory requirement within all planning briefs – to encourage and support HER Officers to follow-up on incidents of non-completion;

6. Establish mechanisms to increase engagement of academics, museums, societies and community groups with OASIS; particularly in view of the Coalition Government’s Localism agenda;

7. Offer flexible, accessible and tailored forms of training relating to the value and benefits of OASIS; as well as functional and operational aspects of the system; (options to consider
include one-to-one visits, on-line tutorials and webinars);

8. Improve marketing and communications of OASIS, including: sharing of good practice; updates on new developments; as well as exemplar models of how OASIS should be used (such as through the publication of case studies);

Key emerging messages from commercial contractors, universities, societies and community groups:

1. Update the OASIS system interface to simplify form completion and improve ease of use;

2. Speed up the validation process which at present can take weeks, months or over a year;

3. Increase the scope of the glossary to include a wider variety of find types along with more guidance on the appropriate terminology to use;

4. Provide more training and support through face to face; on-line and telephone channels (this should also seek to address any possible misconceptions that exist relating to OASIS).