

Applying a Natural Capital approach and data to planning policy and the growth agenda in the Oxford to Cambridge Arc

Summary of Report

Project Aims

Investigate how a Natural Capital and Ecosystems Services (NCES) evidence base has been applied to planning policy making, focussing on the OxCam Arc

Identify the difference(s) applying a Natural Capital Approach can make to policy making?

Identify what could be put in place to allow a Natural Capital approach to be taken forward more widely in the future?

To test the use of NCES data in the creation of planning policy

Approach

The project was broken down into a series of work packages, with each work package focusing on a level of plan making. By splitting the work into work packages we were able to bring in specialists to work on their specialist areas. This allowed the work to be done in tandem, which was critical in delivering on time.

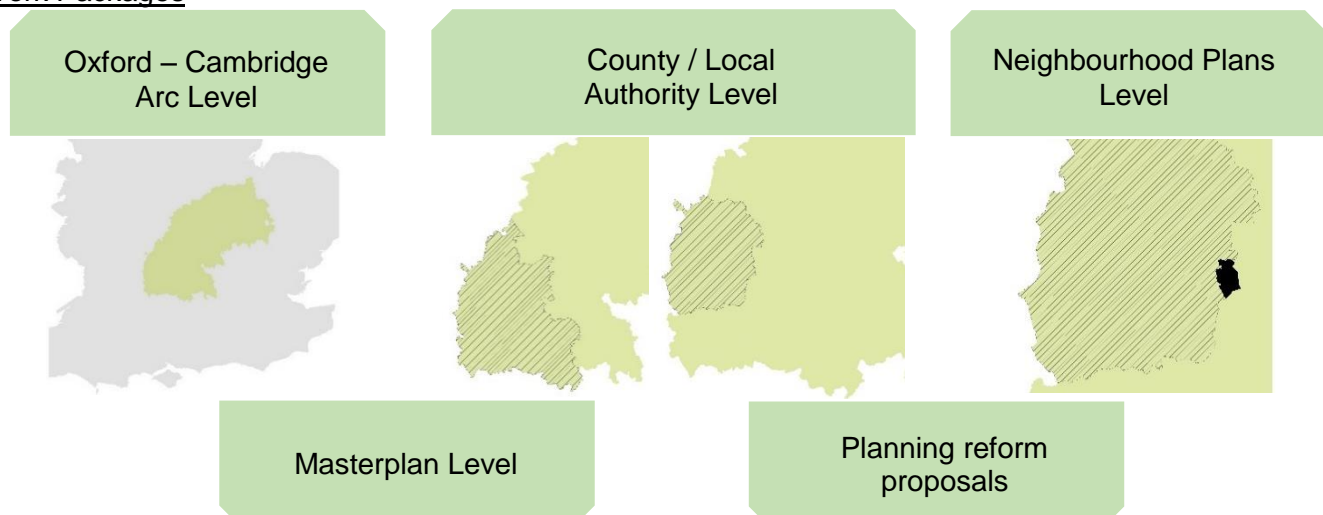
The main methodologies used were:

- **Desk research**
- **Interviews**
- **Workshops**

The project incorporated meeting, talking and learning from a wide range of teams and organisations. 'Live testing' the application of NCES data within plan making was also an ambition of the project, unfortunately this was only carried out in a limited way due to time constraints (as a result of the pandemic) and our timeline not aligning with plan reviews.

The partners that we focused our engagement on were local & national government representatives and Non-Governmental Organisations, for example Local Enterprise Partnerships. Within the planning system we focused on talking with policy and plan makers, rather than with development control. This was a conscious decision as NCES evidence needs to be embedded in the plans before it can strongly influence individual decisions.

Work Packages



Core Project Team

Name	Role	Work Packages
Jon Balaam	Lead partner	County & Local Authority / Neighbourhood Plan / Resource Management
Chris Bowden	Lead Researcher	All / Project Management / Main Report
Sally Chapman	Neighbourhood Plan Practitioner	Neighbourhood Plan
Jack Rhodes	Researcher	Masterplan
Ursula Stevenson (WSP)	Planning Specialist	Strategic / County & Local Authority / Masterplan / Planning Reform Proposals
Pippa Cheetham (Varsity Town Planning)	Planning Specialist	County & Local Authority / Masterplan / Planning reform proposals

Key Findings

Has Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services datasets been used in plan making?

OxCam Arc	<p>It has not yet been used to inform planning policies, however there is an expectation that the Natural Capital Evidence base created for the OxCam LNCP will be embedded in the Spatial Framework MHCLG are creating for the OxCam Arc. In its proposal paper MHCLG has committed to taking a Natural Capital approach and this will be the key to getting it embedded more widely as it will filter down to other policies</p> <p>Published sources by both Network Rail and Highways England also document the application of Natural Capital to major transport infrastructure, however it is unclear whether this data has made a major difference compared to what existing datasets would have achieved</p>
County/Local Authority	<p>None of the respondent teams had used NCES data to form policy yet and there were two main reasons for this. Firstly a lack of opportunity (i.e. Local Plan cycle) and secondly a decision to take another approach (i.e. Green Infrastructure)</p> <p>However there is a general movement in the direction of incorporating a Natural Capital approach to policy making at this level. North Northamptonshire for example are in the process of creating a Supplementary Planning Document for Natural Capital which is to encourage Environmental Net Gains</p> <p>Two further Local Planning Authority (LPA) teams said that they would like to take part in 'live testing' to incorporate a Natural Capital approach and make better use of the available NCES evidence base. Our researchers suggest that all LPA teams would welcome this opportunity if it were offered to them</p> <p>We undertook 'live testing' of the incorporation of the NCES approach into Bedford Borough Council's Local Plan. The conclusion was the approach was not yet at a stage where it would replace the existing Green Infrastructure methodology/policies, however it would be used to support the existing datasets and provide a wider narrative. We also tested whether it could be used to support the site assessment methodology and again it is likely to be used as technical background information with the potential to be the focal point of a new Environmental Net Gain policy in the future.</p>
Neighbourhood	<p>NCES datasets have not yet been used in a Neighbourhood Plans (NP) within the OxCam Arc, however all did at least have one environmental policy. Within the OxCam Arc even Green Infrastructure planning as part of the neighbourhood planning process is relatively unusual, except in Bedfordshire where there has historically been local authority support for the approach.</p> <p>During our 'live testing' work, parishes in Northamptonshire demonstrated a high level of willingness to engage with the Natural Capital approach and had a clear perception that the data and mapping would provide great potential in informing land use and identifying environmental opportunities. Our research demonstrated that it would help with the case for site allocations and the designation of 'green spaces'</p>
Masterplan	<p>We have three case study of Masterplans in which Natural Capital frameworks have been used. Only one of them actually influenced the site design, as with the other two case studies it was a post decision check. These case studies are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Marston Valley (Beds) - Tresham Garden Village (Northants) (had explicitly applied a natural capital approach and data to improve site design) - Waterbeach Barracks (Cambs) <p>It was clear from our discussions that the broad strategic NCES evidence base created by the LNCP was not suitable to be used at this scale. This was unsurprising as it was not designed to be used this way but it was agreed that the Natural Capital approach had the potential to improve Masterplan design</p>

There is widespread awareness through the planning system of the idea of a Natural Capital approach (except at the Neighbourhood Plan level). However there was little knowledge of how to take forward the approach and how to use NCES data in decision making and plan writing.

At a strategic level it is seen as being important for NCES data to be considered in the development of Spatial Frameworks or any Natural Capital investment strategies.

Green Infrastructure is widely used across all planning scales, it would be sensible to see the Natural Capital approach as an evolution to this, and to initially work with it and support it before taking on a leading role.

Currently one of the main deciding factors about whether a Natural Capital approach is prepared to be taken, is if there is, or has been, a practical opportunity to incorporate it in the development of a planning policy. For example if the Local Plan is due a review.

The biggest problem, and a major barrier, is in interpreting and understanding the data along with resourcing and data licensing restrictions of data.

Key Recommendations

Adoption of a Natural Capital Approach

- Make use of Local Nature Partnerships
- Evolution not revolution from Green Infrastructure
- Improve understanding of those in the top positions of decision making bodies to allow for a trickle down of support

Training and Support

- Improve general understanding of the concept
- There needs to be clear information, guides and support on how to take a Natural Capital approach and use a Natural Capital evidence base
- Community of practice/Natural Capital Champions amongst practitioners, led/supported by experts from Central Government
- Opportunities provided for live testing the Natural Capital approach, with specialist support

Evidence Bases

- NCES data (with shared metrics and datasets) that works at a landscape scale should be made more widely available, easier to use, and shareable
- NCES data that is made available should focus down to site level, should be made more accurate, and should include the most up to date information
- NCES data and mapping should seek to measure the quality/condition of environmental assets and include detailed environmental opportunity mapping and data on irreplaceable habitats
- A central body should be appointed to host NCES data and evidence bases

Spatial Framework

- The OxCam Arc Spatial Framework, because of its influence on policy making, is the key route to embedding Natural Capital into planning and policy making at all levels of the OxCam Arc