

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

Summary of report's recommendations

Introduction

As part of the Oxford to Cambridge (OxCam) Local Natural Capital Plan (LNCP) project we commissioned a study to understand how a Natural Capital approach and data could be used to influence planning and growth policies at different scales. From this study we have learnt a lot about how this approach can be applied in a practical way and our report contains a number of recommendations on how the adoption of this approach can be supported. Outlined below is a summary of these recommendations but the full report is available to view on our website www.oxcamlncp.org.uk. As part of this study we have also made recommendations on how the Natural Capital approach can be incorporated into the proposed planning reforms. These recommendations are not covered below and are instead available in a separate document.

Recommendations for taking forward a Natural Capital approach

Adoption of a Natural Capital Approach

- Because of their local knowledge, ambition and ability to work collaboratively the Local Nature Partnerships should be advocating and driving a Natural Capital approach and Biodiversity Net Gain aspirations at a strategic and county level
- The Natural Capital approach should be presented as an evolutionary transition and stepping stone from the Green Infrastructure (GI) approach. This combined approach should build on GI policies and initiatives but emphasise the additional benefits that a Natural Capital approach and its detailed evidence base can bring to assist with decision making
- There should be increased use of environmental opportunity areas or mapping to support strategic planning e.g. to support the planning of environmental protection, creation, and nature recovery areas, possibly through the development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies, as well as areas for growth and development
- There needs to be greater communication and socialisation of what the Natural Capital approach is, what it means in practice, what benefits it brings and how it can be used, in order to support its embedding at all levels of the planning process
- There also needs to be a greater emphasis in communications from the environmental sector on the relevance of a Natural Capital approach, its simplicity, ease of use, and the wider need to protect and enhance our natural environment. The natural environment is a really important communication / marketing tool to promote the positive aspects of the OxCam Arc. If we tap into this, it could provide strong imagery to help wider audiences engage with the OxCam Arc and view it as an opportunity for significant environment enhancement
- The environmental sector should ensure that there are relevant policies within the OxCam Arc Environment Pillar and the Government's Environment Act to embed a Natural Capital approach within strategic decision making processes. Similarly there will also be a need for strategic frameworks and an Arc Environment Strategy that supports this approach
- The use of Natural Capital data and mapping should be a material planning consideration to ensure that planning applications are determined using the Natural Capital approach

- At strategic and senior levels we need greater drivers and inclination from those in the top positions of decision making bodies to help those lower down to be confident in incorporating Natural Capital data in their day to day work. As part of this it would be helpful for the natural environment to be made a priority in decision making within all organisations
- Local and National organisations e.g. Local Nature Partnerships, Developers, Government bodies, are currently taking different approaches to embedding the natural environment within their planning and decision making processes. The GI-led approach remains the main mechanism currently used. So until there is legislation, or strong support and guidance, there will not be a standard approach to embedding a Natural Capital approach to planning policy within the OxCam Arc or elsewhere.

Training and Support

- Opportunities for live testing the Natural Capital approach, with specialist support from Government, should be offered to Local Planning Authorities, neighbourhood plan teams and developers
- There needs to be clear information and support on how to take a Natural Capital approach and use a Natural Capital evidence base. In addition there should be greater advice and training on how to interpret and understand the data and use it to make plans, take decisions, and identify key principles, opportunities and strategic priorities. Specifically, some form of support structure or body should be developed to provide these
- It is recommended that environmental planning methodologies and training materials which integrate the GI and Natural Capital approaches (and make use of Natural Capital and Ecosystem Service data) should be developed and shared.
- To encourage the use of this approach by Local Authorities, developers and infrastructure organisations. The creation of Natural Capital champions and a community of practice to promote and support the use of the Natural Capital approach, and to act as advocates for it, is recommended
- A Natural Capital approach user guide (that has been tested with potential users) should be developed to make the use of this approach and its associated data more straightforward, efficient and easy to use in decision making
- The report recommends that we need more exemplars of how this approach has been used and Government agencies, as operational bodies, should be the first to embed the Natural Capital approach within their work. If they do this then developers/housebuilders or minerals and waste restoration projects might follow their example
- For a Natural Capital approach to be adopted an Environmental Net Gain methodology and metric will be required. This would allow decisions to be made considering, and valuing, the whole range of Natural Capital themes, assets and Ecosystem Services

Evidence Bases

- Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services data (with shared metrics and datasets) that works at a landscape scale should be made more widely available, easier to use, and shareable to encourage the use of the Natural Capital Approach and support cross-border sharing of information. This would help to give a consistent approach, clarity and guidance to strategy and planning teams. As part of this it would also be helpful if examples were provided on how this data was used to make judgements
- Natural Capital and Ecosystem Service 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. This would allow for a more focused assessment and comparison of site allocations and project design work. It would also ensure the data is robust enough to withstand challenges to any decisions made on the basis of this information

- In addition for the Natural Capital approach and data to be used at site level it needs to be made more location and context specific, as well as being ground truthed. The use of this approach also needs to have more legal/policy standing to encourage its use by developers at a site level
- The report recommends that future Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services data and mapping should seek to measure the quality/condition of environmental assets and include detailed environmental opportunity mapping and data on irreplaceable habitats. This enhanced data would be especially helpful when investigating offsetting, net gain credits and would link with work on Environmental Land Management (ELM) policies and Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
- It is recommended that a central body is appointed to host Natural Capital and Ecosystem Service data and evidence bases. As part of this there needs to be a system of who can and cannot freely access the 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. Therefore it is essential that the Spatial Framework is supported in its efforts to take a Natural Capital approach
- It is recommended that a Natural Capital investment approach is incorporated within the OxCam Arc Spatial Framework. This would build upon the detailed OxCam Arc wide evidence base to produce strategies and plans which will attract and manage long term sustainable funding for Natural Capital and wider environmental projects.
- A Natural Capital Approach should be integrated into the Sustainability Appraisal work for the Spatial Framework in order to capitalise on an opportunity to undertake a data led approach to the Sustainability Appraisal and improve the efficiency of the process