

Countryside Quality Counts

Tracking change in the English countryside

A project to develop an indicator of change in countryside quality based on landscape character, sponsored by the Countryside Agency in partnership with Defra, English Heritage and English Nature.

The Countryside Quality Counts Project has established a database to help us understand how the Character Areas of England are changing and what change means in terms of maintaining local distinctiveness.

www.countryside-quality-counts.org.uk

Summary

We need to have good information about the state of our countryside and how it is changing so that policy can be based on sound evidence. Fortunately, a number of datasets are available that describe different aspects of our rural areas and we can now use them to gain an insight into the way our landscapes are changing. The Countryside Quality Counts (CQC) Project aimed, for the first time, to bring these different sources of information together, and to use them to track change across the Character Areas of England.

The CQC Project resulted in the construction of an indicator of change in countryside quality based on an analysis of the transformation in woodland, boundary features, agriculture, settlement and development, semi-natural habitats, historic features, and river and coastal elements within the Joint Character Areas of England, over the period 1990 to 1998. Judgements about the significance of change were made in relation to a series of Character Area Profiles, based on the Character Area descriptions already published by the Countryside Agency in the mid-1990s.

The information used to construct the indicator of change in quality can be used by the Agency and other organisations interested in understanding patterns of countryside change. In the next phase of the project, the content of the database will be developed and the methods of analysing the significance of change will be refined. The indicator will be maintained and in 2006, it will be updated with information for the period 1999-2003.

The study

The need to have a good understanding of the state of our countryside and the ways it is being transformed was emphasised in the 2000 *Rural White Paper for England*. However, although the White Paper recognised that it was essential to base policy on sound evidence, it acknowledged that there were major gaps in our knowledge about countryside change and in the coverage of indicators describing the state of our landscapes. As a result the White Paper committed Government to publish a new indicator of change in countryside quality.

The Countryside Quality Counts (CQC) Project was set up to take the *Rural White Paper* commitment forward. The work was led by the Countryside Agency and co-sponsored by Defra, English Heritage and English Nature. It also drew upon wider partnerships with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), the Forestry Commission, and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. The project began in May 2002, and the first stage of the work concluded with the publication of the indicator in June 2004.

The Countryside Agency research notes

Box 1: Potential indicators within the four key thematic areas defining character and quality

a. Extent or stock of characteristic landscape elements

- semi-natural vegetation
- different types of woodland
- characteristic field boundaries
- characteristic buildings and settlements
- characteristic land use types
- hedgerow and field trees
- ponds

b. Characteristic features, in good condition and appropriately managed.

- roadside verges
- condition of linear features including stream sides, river corridors & canals
- field margins
- health of trees
- CS2000 vegetation condition measures
- water quality
- uptake of Woodland Grant Schemes
- uptake of Countryside Stewardship or similar measures
- uptake of ESA Schemes
- SSSI Condition
- state of repair of historic buildings
- ancient monuments at risk

c. Extent or stock of new elements

- development (eg. transport or communications infrastructure, green field development)
- agricultural buildings

d. Experiential aspects

- tranquillity/noise
- levels of traffic
- air pollution
- light pollution
- remoteness/rurality/wilderness
- disturbed ground
- access/welcoming feel
- viable rural communities
- appropriate management of visitor pressure
- appropriate wildlife
- evidence of active landscape management
- public opinion
- local distinctiveness or landscape character

The *Rural White Paper* envisaged that the new indicator of change in countryside quality should be more holistic than existing measures of countryside change, in that it should relate to as wide as possible a range of variables. The indicator, it was suggested, should include such themes as biodiversity, tranquillity, heritage and landscape character. It was also suggested that work should draw upon data resources such as the Countryside Survey 2000 and use the Countryside Agency's Character Areas framework.

Main findings

The CQC project has resulted in the construction of an indicator of change in countryside quality that has been designed to show **where** change in the extent or condition of the attributes that shape countryside character are occurring, and **whether these changes matter** in terms of strengthening or transforming landscape character. It is based on an analysis of change in woodland, boundary features, agriculture, settlement and development, semi-natural habitats, historic features, and river and coastal elements occurring within the Joint Character Areas of England.

The indicator showed that for the period 1990-98, about 40% of our landscapes were either stable or showed changes that were consistent with existing character area descriptions. For 23% of our landscapes the changes were marked and inconsistent with these descriptions. In the remaining 37% of our landscapes the changes were inconsistent with existing descriptions, but they were of less significance in terms of their impact on overall character. The indicator will be maintained and in 2006 it will be updated with information for the period 1999-2003.

Key research issues

Conceptualising indicators of Change in Countryside Character and Quality
A key issue that the project sought to resolve was the way in which change in countryside quality should be conceptualised and represented in the form of an indicator. At the outset it was recognised that many different ideas were embedded in the concept described in the *Rural White Paper*, and that to disentangle some of the issues the initial phase of the work should consider whether the Government's commitment was best addressed by considering the development of two separate indicators, one of **change in countryside character**, the other, change in **countryside quality**, where:

- the indicator of change in countryside character documents the scale and location of change, that is, **where change in the countryside is occurring**; whereas,
- the indicator of quality should help us to understand the significance of change, that is, **whether change mattered**.

This distinction was initially felt to be useful because the task of assessing quality, however it is defined, seemed inherently more judgmental than the task of documenting change. It therefore seemed useful to separate them.

The assessment of the scope and content of the potential indicators of character and quality suggested that they should cover a number of themes or issues (see Box 1), namely:

- a) The extent or stock of characteristic landscape element.
- b) A measure of whether these characteristic elements are in good condition and appropriately managed.
- c) The extent and form of new elements in the countryside.
- d) A measure of the key factors affecting the 'countryside experience' (ie. tranquillity/disturbance) and the benefits or services that it offers (eg. access, experience of wildlife).

It was noted that these themes could be grouped in different ways depending on whether separate or combined indicators of character and quality were to be constructed. Two options were therefore considered:

Box 2: Data sets used to construct the indicator of change in countryside quality

DATA SOURCE		
THEME	Woodland	National Inventory of Woodlands and Trees (NIWT) Ancient Woodland Inventory (AW) Woodland Grant Scheme Data (WGS)
	Boundary features	Countryside Survey 2000 (CS2000) Countryside Stewardship Monitoring (CS) ESA Monitoring
	Agriculture	June Census
	Settlement & development	Land Use Change Statistics (LUCS) 2001 Urban Boundaries Draft Rural Urban Definitions data Wind Farms
	Semi-natural habitats	LCM2000 Countryside Stewardship & ESA agreements SSSI Condition
	Historic features	Ancient Monuments at Risk Register (East Midlands only) Countryside Stewardship & ESA
	River and Coastal Management	Countryside Stewardship & ESA National River Water Quality Monitoring

- **Option I:** That the four themes should be collectively considered as a suite of indicators of change in countryside quality, as implied by the Rural White Paper, where quality is defined as an overarching concept that **includes** changes in character and condition, as well as changes in the experience of the countryside and in the benefits or services that it offers to people.
- **Option II:** That the themes could be divided into an indicator of change in character and a separate one of change in quality, as required by the Project brief. The most likely division would be to report on a), b) and c) as an indicator of change in character, while d) would be reported separately as an indicator of change in quality.

It was concluded that Option I was to be preferred, and that the CQC Project should deliver a **single** indicator of change in countryside quality.

The conclusion was based on two key findings:

- First, because while most people thought that the concept of countryside quality was more wide-ranging than that of countryside character, it was generally accepted that the latter played an important and essential role in determining the overall quality of the rural environment. Thus, while not all of the experiential aspects listed in Box 1 could be measured, those that were strongly dependent on character, such as ‘rurality’, ‘wilderness’, ‘remoteness’ and ‘local distinctiveness’ could. This suggests that the idea of an overarching indicator of change in countryside quality, in which character played an important role, should be retained.
- Second, it was concluded that it was misleading to align the factual and judgmental aspects of indicators with ideas of separate indicators of character and quality, because even if an indicator of change in character were constructed, it would still be necessary to make some interpretation of the significance of the changes that it showed. For example, we might map the scale of woodland change alongside those of the other landscape elements that determine character, but the overall measurement would be limited as an indicator unless we could say what the implications of those changes were for the overall character of the landscape. Thus, the judgmental aspects of indicator use cannot be avoided merely by proposing a separate indicator of change in character.

Thus, the indicator of change in countryside quality that has been constructed describes the essential role that landscape character plays in an assessment of the overall state or condition of our rural areas.

Building a national database

A second research issue that was explored was whether the data resources available at national scales were sufficient for the indicator to be constructed. The datasets considered (Box 2) were the National Inventory of Woodlands and Trees (NIWT), the Countryside Survey 2000 (both field survey and Land Cover Map 2000), the Agricultural Census, Environmental Stewardship and ESA agreement data, tranquillity mapping, Land Use Change Statistics (LUCS), together with any other biodiversity or historical landscape data that were available at national scales. In addition, the possible uses of the Post Office Address File (PAF) and the census of population were considered. The key issues explored were the appropriate geographic scales for analysis and reporting, the frequency of update, and the ways in which the outputs from the Project should link with other initiatives such as the Rural-Urban definitions study that has been led by ONS, and in which the Agency has been closely involved.

The evaluation of potential data resources showed that there was sufficient information available to construct the indicator, and that an initial assessment could be made for the period 1990-1998. The work also showed that the indicator could be updated on a 5-year cycle. The map and attribute data that

have been derived for each of the Joint Character Areas of England are now held in a National Countryside Character Areas Database (NCCADB) that is available to the Agency and its partners. However, indicators have little value unless we know what the implications are of any changes that they show. Thus, in addition to processing the datasets that provided the basis of the NCCADB, the work also focused on developing a body of contextual information that could be used to make judgements about the significance of the changes that were observed.

The Countryside Agency's Character Area Descriptions, which were published between 1996-99 alongside the map of Joint Character Areas, were found to be particularly useful for developing the evaluation framework needed for the interpretation of the indicator of change in countryside quality. These descriptions were based on work undertaken with a range of regional and local stakeholders in the 1990s, and contained information on aspects of change in countryside character they felt were relevant or important at that time. A set of a Character Area Profiles for the Character Areas of England were therefore constructed. These set out the key elements that give each area its sense of local distinctiveness, and the threats and opportunities. The profiles were then used to assess the significance of change.

The Profiles and the accompanying data were used to make an assessment of the character area as a whole, based on whether changes observed between 1990 and 1998 were consistent with maintaining or strengthening existing character of each area, or whether existing character was being transformed in important ways. The assessments for each individual character area then formed the basis for constructing national and regional headlines.

During 2005 the Character Area Profiles will be updated and extended by consultation with stakeholders and there will be further database development. This will ensure that the information available about our national character areas, and the threats and opportunities that exist in relation to sustaining their important qualities, continue to be relevant to policy customers at national, regional and local scales.

Conclusions

In setting out the Government's commitment to develop an indicator of change in countryside quality, the *Rural White Paper for England* suggested that the aim was to ensure that the things people valued about the countryside were properly taken into account and that local communities have the opportunity to play a part in shaping the landscape around them. It was also recognised that while the landscape will continue to evolve, the underlying proposition was that change should take place in ways that have the potential to improve, strengthen and develop countryside character and condition.

The CQC Project has developed an indicator that has addressed the ambitious aims set down by the *Rural White Paper*. The indicator, and the set of data resources that underpin it, will help those concerned with the integrity of the rural environment to argue not only that 'countryside quality counts', but that in the assessment of quality countryside character has an important role to play. The work has shown that by understanding landscape character and the ways it is changing at national and regional scales, we can make the kinds of decisions necessary to help us sustain the diversity and distinctiveness of the English countryside. Already, the outputs of the Project are being used in the context of developing methodologies for the targeting and monitoring of the new environmental stewardship schemes and spatial regional planning initiatives.

**Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website:
www.countryside.gov.uk**

The Character Area Profiles are available via the CQC website, and linked to a summary of the data used to assess the implications of changes in the elements that shape the character.

www.countryside-quality-counts.org.uk

Further reading

DETR and MAFF, 2000, *Our countryside: the future – a fair deal for rural England*. Cm 4909, London, The Stationery Office.

The Countryside Agency, 2004, *The new definition of urban and rural areas in England and Wales*. CRN 86 Cheltenham. Research Note.

The Countryside Commission, 1997-99, *Countryside character regional reports, volumes 1-8*. Cheltenham, the Countryside Agency.