



Countryside Quality Counts

Countryside Quality Counts (CQC): Tracking Change in the English Countryside

Summary

Countryside Quality Counts (CQC) is a project to develop a national indicator of how the countryside is changing. It is funded by the Countryside Agency Landscape Access and Recreation (LAR) division, in partnership with Defra RDS, English Nature and English Heritage. The project aims to understand how and where change is occurring, and most importantly, where it matters the most. This information can be used to help plan future landscapes and manage change that delivers public benefits - enhancing and maintaining landscape character and quality for this and future generations.

The CQC project is currently undergoing a second phase of development and consultation, involving further refinement of the database for the period 1998 to 2003. The consultation will be undertaken in autumn 2005 and spring 2006, providing an important opportunity for the landscape community to collaborate in developing a national indicator of landscape change. An updated indicator will be delivered in November 2006 to coincide with the launch of Natural England: the new Government agency, comprising English Nature, parts of the Countryside Agency and most of Defra's Rural Development Service.

www.cqc.org.uk



The Importance of Change

Change matters: it is behind the evolution of every landscape, and represents a key factor in planning for sustainable development. We need to know how and where change is occurring, and whether change matters or not. This will help us to ensure that policy is based on sound evidence and decisions are made within a relevant context.



Prickwillow, Cambridgeshire* 1972

1983

1994

A Brief History of CQC

The need for a good understanding of the state of our countryside and the ways in which it is being transformed was emphasised in the 2000 Rural White Paper for England¹. Although the Paper recognised that it was essential to base policy on science and practical experience, it also recognised that there were major gaps in our knowledge about landscape change.

To help understand how the countryside is evolving, the Rural White Paper stressed the need for future monitoring and made a commitment to publish an indicator of change in countryside quality that would take account of such attributes as biodiversity, tranquillity, heritage and landscape character. In response to this, the Countryside Agency took up the task of developing such an indicator, working in partnership with Defra, English Nature and English Heritage, through the Countryside Quality Counts (CQC) project.

The CQC project aimed, for the first time, to construct an indicator of change in countryside quality across the Joint Character Areas (JCAs) of England. The project resulted in the construction of an indicator of change in countryside quality for the period 1990 to 1998, based on analysis of the transformation in a wide range of landscape features - including woodland, agriculture, settlement and development, semi-natural habitats, historic features, boundary features, river and coastal elements - using the JCAs as a spatial framework (see Sources of Data overleaf). The project began in May 2002 and the first stage of the work concluded with the publication of the indicator in June 2004: showing where changes in the extent or condition of features that shape the landscape are occurring, and whether these changes matter in terms of landscape character.



The Context of Change

The extent to which changes in the elements that shape character matter for the overall quality of the countryside can only be determined by understanding the context in which they have occurred. In some places, for example, change may be transforming an area's character by adding new landscape patterns, while in others change may be restoring previous patterns in a landscape that has been modified by recent activities.

For the purposes of the CQC project to date, the context of change has been understood in terms of the Joint Character Area (JCA) descriptions, published by the Countryside Commission/Countryside Agency in the late 1990s². In addition to the features that make each JCA distinctive, these descriptions included the factors that had recently influenced them, or might influence them in the future (see Statements of Change).

The first review of countryside change was undertaken through regional consultations in the autumn of 2003, led by Professor Roy Haines-Young of The University of Nottingham. Local knowledge was drawn on from the start: stakeholders considered the adequacy and accuracy of the statements about change in the original JCA descriptions and the importance that had been assigned to them. They were then asked to review the associated statistical and geographical information and reach a conclusion on the significance of change for landscape character as represented by this data. It was through the consultation exercise that the judgement of change and significance was partly determined³. The next phase of the project will expand the evidence base and place even greater emphasis on consultation with the landscape community, so that the judgements about change can be made more robust.

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 Nature and English Heritage.

Applications

The diverse range of data involved enables the CQC methodology to be used for a wide range of applications, including monitoring the impact on agricultural landscapes of the new Environmental Stewardship scheme, and reporting on landscape change within National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). The CQC approach also holds potential for monitoring Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks, and will contribute to the evidence base underpinning the work of Natural England: the new Government agency, comprising English Nature, parts of the Countryside Agency and most of Defra's Rural Development Service.

Statements of Change

The CQC approach uses the Joint Character Areas (JCAs) of England as a spatial framework. Within this framework, the context of landscape change is explored using a series of change statements for each JCA. The statements are based on the original JCA descriptions, as well as the CQC Character Area profiles (1990-1998), Historic Character Area profiles (supplied by English Heritage) and fine-grained profiles (derived from the recent agri-environment targeting statements). Each statement includes a description of the 'Changing Landscape', as well as 'Landscape Visions' of what could and should be done to ensure enhancement, restoration and maintenance of landscape character.

For example, in the case of the Bowland Fringe and Pendle Hill JCA, the change statement for 'Woodland' would include:

Changing Landscapes

- Decline of riverside woods due to excessive grazing and lack of management has been an issue.
- Damage to smaller areas of semi-natural woodland from grazing stock and wild deer has been significant.

Landscape Visions

- Renew the area's stock of mature floodplain, parkland, and hedgerow trees and avenues, which have a significant impact on the visual character of the area.
- Manage semi-natural woodlands, particularly the area's distinctive clough and riverside woodlands. Protect riverside trees and marginal vegetation from erosion.
- The conservation and management of riparian woodland, semi-natural and ancient woodland, hedgerows, hedgerow trees, and avenues should be considered.

Sources of Data:

Woodland

- National Inventory of Woodlands and Trees
- Ancient Woodland Inventory
- Woodland Grant Scheme Data
- English Nature Habitat Inventory Data
- Forestry Commission Felling Licenses
- Land Use Change Statistics (LUCS) Woodland Loss

Boundary Features

- Countryside Survey 2000
- Countryside Stewardship Monitoring
- Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Monitoring

Agriculture

- June Agricultural Census
- Point X Data
- Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS) Data

Settlement & Development

- Land Use Change Statistics
- 2001 Urban Boundaries
- Draft Rural Urban Definitions Data
- Point X Data
- National Land Use Database (NLUD) Register of Previously Developed Land
- Landfill Sites

Semi-Natural Habitats

- Land Cover Map 2000
- Countryside Stewardship and ESA Agreements
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) Condition
- Point X Data
- English Nature Habitat Inventory
- Farmland Birds

Historic Features

- Ancient Monuments at Risk Register
- Countryside Stewardship and ESA
- Farm Buildings At Risk
- Turning the Plough Data
- Parkland Extent 1918
- County Historic Landscape Character Assessments (where available)

River and Coastal Management

- Countryside Stewardship and ESA
- National River Water Quality Monitoring
- Environment Agency Flood Map
- Point X Data

Contextual Data Sets

- Less Favoured Areas (LFA) Boundaries
- Extent of Common Land
- Extent of Open Access Land
- National Trails
- Environment Agency Risk Assessment Mapping for Rivers, Groundwaters, Transitional Zones and Coasts
- 2001 Population Census
- Point X Data

Key Aspects of the CQC

- Provides a robust and socially grounded context within which decisions can be made.
- Draws upon local knowledge and understanding in identifying key issues of change.
- Bridges the scale between local and national work (helping people to locate themselves within wider trends).
- Provides a framework for developing a shared understanding of the threats and opportunities facing the countryside.
- Provides an integrated means of monitoring landscape-scale delivery.
- Reinforces the importance of landscape character and its contribution to quality of life.

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 and enhancing local distinctiveness.



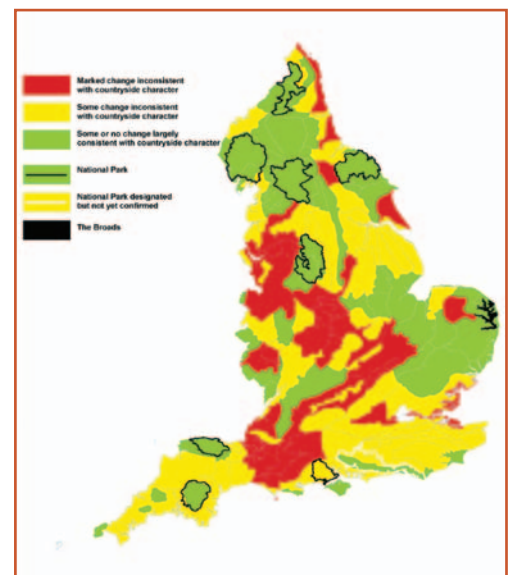
📷 Leighton Bromswold, Cambridgeshire*: 1983 ▲ 1994 ▼



Key Findings So Far

The CQC indicator showed that for the period 1990-1998, about 42% of our landscapes were either stable or showed changes that were consistent with existing character area descriptions. For 26% of our landscapes the changes were marked and inconsistent with these descriptions. In the remaining 32% of our landscapes the changes were inconsistent with existing descriptions, but they were of less significance in terms of their impact on overall character.

	Number of Character Areas	% of Character Areas
Marked change inconsistent with character	41	26%
Some change inconsistent with character	50	32%
Some or limited change consistent with character	65	42%
Total	156	100%



NOTE: the map and statistics have been revised to take account of those assessments that were less clear cut across the assessment boundaries. Allocations now show those areas where change was 'possibly marked and inconsistent with character' in the MCIC group rather than SCIC. Those areas showing some or limited change that are consistent with character are merged into a single class. Reallocations have a marginal effect on the overall indicator statistics.

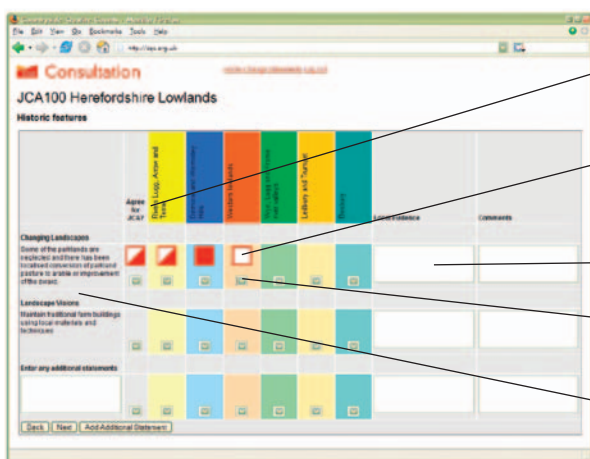


CQC Consultation

The CQC project is entering a new phase of development and consultation, aiming to refine and update the JCA profiles for the period 1998 to 2003. This will be carried out in consultation with the user community – again, putting people at the heart of the project.

The consultation will be substantially expanded and deepened from the previous assessment, in order to capture the important contextual information that will allow the project to make judgements about the significance of change. Landscape professionals and others will be consulted using an innovative, web-based approach during September to the end of November 2005, and again from April to June 2006. An updated indicator of change will then be delivered in November 2006 to coincide with the launch of Natural England.

The online consultation tool is quick and easy to use. Consultees are able to register online and obtain a unique username and password, allowing them to complete the consultation as and when is convenient. The illustration below gives an overview of the consultation process:



- Users relate changes to the whole of each JCA, as well as to JCA sub zones.
- Users select whether change statements are a “key issue” a “secondary issue” or “not applicable”
- Users input local evidence to support their comments
- Users select relevance of change statements using drop down menus
- Change statements

For more information about the Countryside Quality Counts project, and to participate in the consultation, visit www.cqc.org.uk

CQC is sponsored by the Countryside Agency Landscape, Access and Recreation division, in partnership with English Nature, Defra RDS, English Heritage and Defra. Analysis and assessment is being undertaken by a team led by the University of Nottingham. Consultation and communications activity is being carried out by Countryside.



References

¹ Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (2000) *Our Countryside: The Future - A Fair Deal for Rural England* (Rural White Paper), DETR

² The Character of England map is contained within the Countryside Commission Regional Countryside Character volumes (published between 1998 and 2000). For more information visit the Countryside Character section of the Countryside Agency website at: www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR

³ Nottingham University Consultants Ltd (2004) *Constructing an Indicator of Change in Countryside Quality (Final Report)*. The Countryside Agency, Cheltenham.

Images marked * have been taken from the Countryside Agency's New Agricultural Landscapes (NAL) project – a study of the impact of modern farming methods on English lowland landscapes: first conducted in 1972 and subsequently in 1983, 1994 and most recently in 2005. The main conclusion of the last completed study in 1994 was that such landscapes were still losing features of value, as they had been since the start of the study series, though generally at a slower rate than in the past. The NAL project is due to report on the recent period of change ('94 to '05) early next year.