

Case study

Aligning NCEA with the Sustainable Development Goals: NCEA's commitment and innovative approach with SDG Impact Transparency

The terrestrial and marine Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment (tNCEA and mNCEA) are flagship programmes of Defra

The terrestrial and marine Natural Capital and Ecosystems Assessment (NCEA) is a science innovation and transformation programme, which spans across land and water environments. It has been set up to collect data on the extent, condition, and change over time of England's ecosystems and natural capital, and the benefits to society.

(Defra, 2022)

Background

Defra's Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) aims to set an example, being recognised as a once-in-a-generation government programme of critical importance, making NCEA evidence difficult to ignore in all government decision-making processes.

Challenge

While NCEA is committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 15 (Life on Land) and Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water), it is crucial to recognise that the planet cannot afford the assumption of excellence in all sustainability domains by us or any government entity.

We must avoid disconnecting our roles and programme objectives from the United Nations' 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals. Instead, we should remain aligned with this global framework for sustainable development.

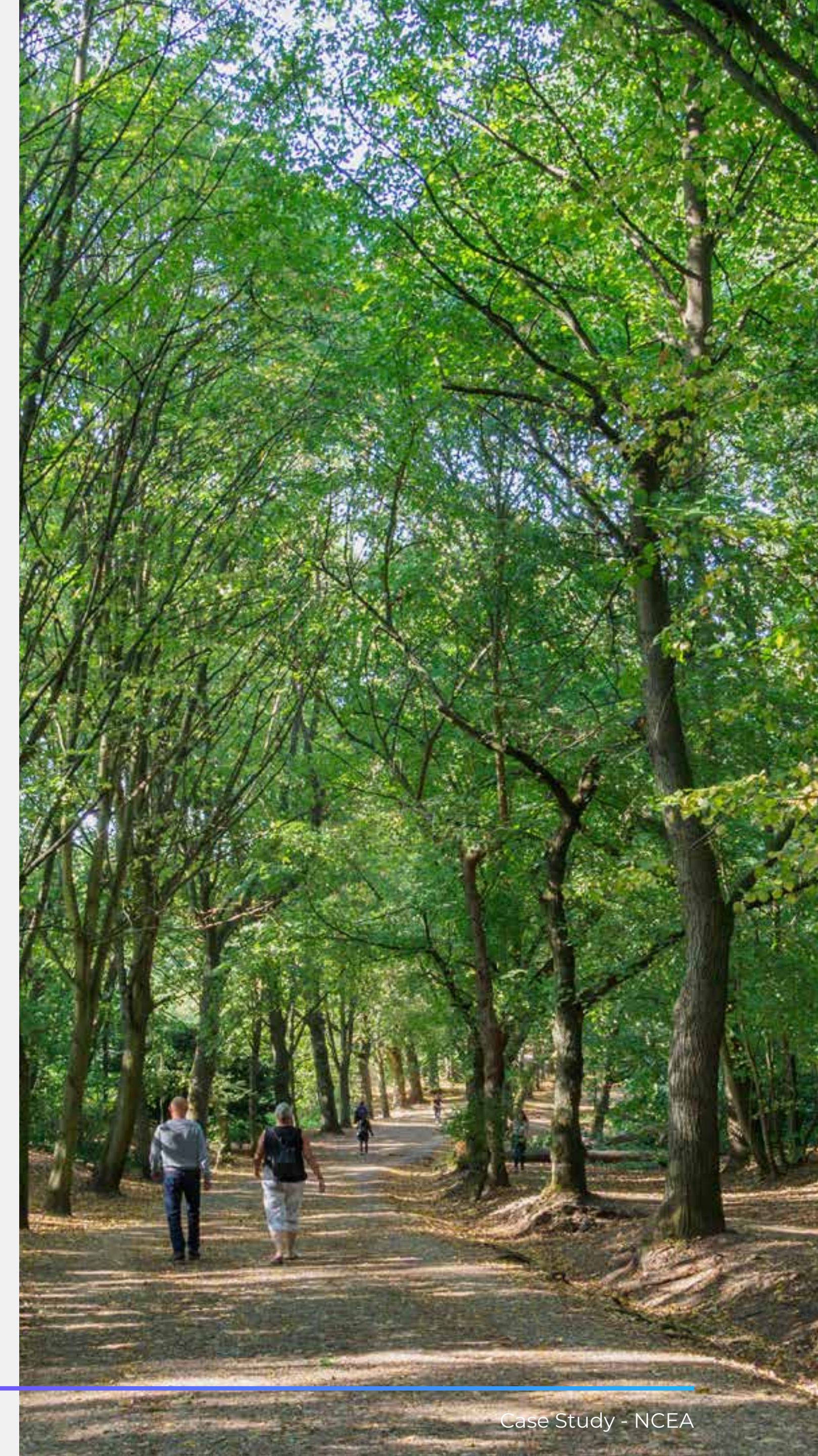
In our pursuit of success, it is essential to tap into our creativity and imagination to address the challenges and opportunities presented by these goals.

Why were Methods selected?

One of our Business Architects has spearheaded and developed an approach – the SDG Impact Transparency service.

Rather than evaluating the benefits of programme activities and outcomes solely based on an organisation's strategic objectives, this service assesses them in the context of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 specific targets. The SDGs are used as a framework to evaluate planned work or to guide the design and planning of a programme.

We proposed implementing the SDG Impact Transparency service as a trial. NCEA strives to set an example as a programme, and the management team displayed great enthusiasm and recognised that achieving this through SDG impact transparency was the path to follow. It was unanimously agreed that this initiative could add significant value to the overall programme.



Solution

We conducted an analysis of NCEA's impact on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

NCEA achieved high scores in relation to many of the SDGs i.e. benefits that would have remained hidden without the assessment. This affirmed the aspiration of NCEA to be an exemplar programme. Nevertheless, we formulated subtle improvement strategies aimed at achieving even better social, economic, and environmental outcomes, as well as quick-win enhancements - decisions that can be implemented today.

Why care about the SDGs?

The Sustainable Development Goals are an internationally recognised framework that allowed us to assess the impact of NCEA's activities. The SDGs can be used as a "common language" to communicate our outcomes globally and place them in context, which is crucial if we aspire to be world leading. This assessment against SDGs aids in conveying positive programme benefits beyond the intended scope.

The approach also uncovers any unintended consequences or harmful impact resulting in negative scores.

There is a lot to gain reputationally from acknowledging such findings along with the willingness to address them – an important addition when improving contribution to the SDGs.

Transparency can be powerful in shifting paradigms and behaviours. Being comfortable with any negative assessment results and publishing them, can remove programme risk because any negative scores can be easily corrected through devising careful treatments.

Transforming negative scores into positive ones reflects well on our performance but also instils a sense of accomplishment and responsibility.

Relevance to the wider organisation

Other Defra programmes could find value in adopting this framework as a fresh perspective.

The power of being transparent about the results extends to enhancing business cases, communications, and influence. Defra has embraced SDG Impact Transparency and this has the potential to serve as an inspiration for other government departments to adopt this as a mainstream approach.

Outcome

NCEA performs exceptionally well against numerous SDGs, notably achieving positive impacts on 11 SDG targets related to Life on Land (SDG 15) and Life Below Water (SDG 14), which align with Defra's own objectives. Additionally, it positively contributes to 31 other SDG targets, demonstrating benefits that extend beyond the initially defined scope.

This underscores the importance of thorough examination, as these broader benefits might have otherwise gone unnoticed. What a shame that would be for an exemplar programme!

The enhancement activities fell into two categories – actions that are in line with the programme objectives such as encouraging the uptake of NCEA data in all environmental decision-making and debates, and ways of working. For example, it was felt that offering alternative patterns of work in NCEA, would encourage greater female participation in leadership and research roles, aligning with SDG target 5.5.

One of the NCEA leaders said “This has been a journey for us. We would not have imagined these improvements without this approach. Thank you.”

Next steps

In NCEA, through the implementation of 21 subtle enhancements, we have the potential to generate positive impacts on 69 SDG targets, thereby fostering improved social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

Methods is in the process of creating a tool that can support other clients to simplify the procedure and offer visually appealing representations of the outcomes.

Please note that Methods have copyrighted this approach.

