

## **COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY QoLA TOOLKIT**

*Extract from CA Website 24/4/07*

### **Quality of Life Assessment - What Matters and Why?**

Quality of Life Assessment is a sustainability appraisal tool for maximising and integrating environmental, economic and social benefits as part of any land use or management decision.

Natural England, along with English Heritage and the Environment Agency, is currently reviewing and evaluating the Quality of Life Assessment technique.

### **Quality of Life Assessment Toolkit**

From this page you can download guides and reports to help you use and understand the Quality of Life Assessment approach.

### **Isn't it dangerously reductionist - doesn't breaking down and separating benefits risk missing the holistic value of complete areas or environments?**

Not if the process is done properly. If the combination of different qualities and values in one place has value or importance (distinct from and greater than each of them separately) then this should be identified as a benefit or service in its own right, and go through the decision process just like any other benefit. If it is substitutable, a management aim can be set to get it substituted. If it cannot be substituted (and more rich and complex environmental and social qualities often cannot) this would justify a management aim of resisting any change than would lose the holistic benefit (even if all the separate benefits could be substituted for).

### **Does it provide a pretext for developers to trade everything away?**

'Capital' is only metaphor. The approach proposed here has moved emphatically away from some previous approaches to environmental capital which suggest that all, or large classes of, benefits can be interchanged. We say that (for example) access to somewhere to play football can only be traded for access to somewhere else to play football, newt habitat for newt habitat, jobs for jobs for the same people (and so on). A decision whether to sacrifice a football pitch for a pond for newts - or either of them for jobs - has to be

This approach also emphasises two points that should strengthen protection. First, if there is already not enough of some important benefit or service, substitution should aim to *increase* the amount, not just keep it constant. Second, many benefits or services (notably historical and cultural ones) are not substitutable at all - though it does hold out the potential of increasing the benefits obtained from finite and irreplaceable assets by managing them differently.

### **Who does the evaluation? Where do the judgements about 'importance' and so on come from?**

For some kinds of benefit, such as greenhouse gases or biodiversity, the main source of data and judgements about importance is expert science. At the other extreme, recreational benefits depend entirely on the preferences, views and habits of the people affected. If nobody actually uses a site for recreation (for example because there are better facilities elsewhere) it can't be judged important for this purpose. For many services, we need methods and processes to draw together both expert and community sources of information and judgement.

### How much time and effort does it take?

This is a bit of a 'how long is a piece of string?' question! The official pilots took anything between a few person days and half a person year. Some of the shorter exercises were at least as useful as some of the longer ones. The new guidance provides advice on minimising the effort by avoiding steps which are not necessary for a particular purpose, and not doing anything in more detail than needed.

Our hope and expectation is that, for any given level of thoroughness and detail of assessment, QoL Assessment should take *less* time for a given quality of result than other methods. But at the same time, it is becoming clear that sustainable development will require us to put *more* effort into researching, understanding and responding to the environmental and social consequences of many decisions than hitherto. QoL Assessment should reduce the *extra* effort which sustainable development is going to require.

### Does it give you a single aggregate value for an area or feature?

No. Unlike some economic approaches, the QoL Assessment approach proposed here does not attempt to do this. It starts from the idea that different kinds of benefit and service are *not* interchangeable in any simple numerical way. That is, we cannot say 'providing habitat for X more rare snails is *worth* depriving Y people of their local football field, or spoiling such and such a view'. There is no 'common currency' in which we can add up different kinds of benefit: they have to be accounted for separately. The reasons are set out in the economics report.

Obviously many decisions require us to judge whether it is worth sacrificing a certain amount of one thing in order to gain a certain amount of something else. QoL Assessment treats these decisions as unavoidably political. It does not claim to reveal the 'right answer', but instead to make plain what the trade-offs are.

### Is it permissive or restrictive?

This again depends on how it is applied. Developers have tended to fear that QoL Assessment would provide a new excuse for a 'BANANA' approach - 'Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything' while environmentalists have tended to fear that it will allow developers to trade everything away! Practical experience so far has tended to reassure both camps. Remember that QoL Assessment does not bypass any of the statutory protection regimes or alter the economic realities of development. It can neither let developers get access to anything currently given statutory protection, nor enable environmentalists to force developers do anything which does not stack up commercially. At best, it should increase the potential for *reconciling* environmental, social and economic aims. At worst it should clarify and systematise the options and consequences where quality of life and development still unavoidably conflict and a political decision is ultimately needed.