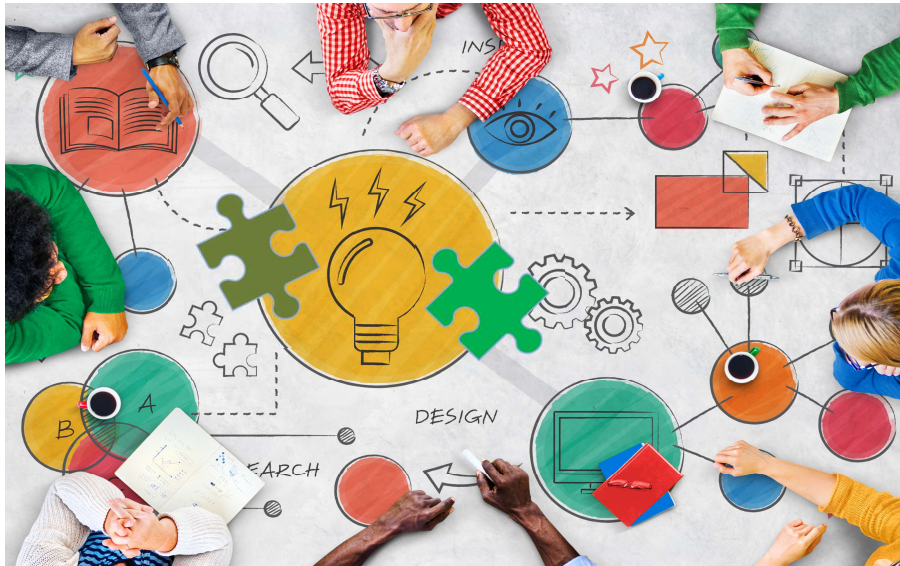


What do staff in the Scottish Government think about Natural Capital? Comparing a snapshot of views in 2023 and 2025.

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What is this briefing about?

In late 2023 we surveyed 50 staff in Scottish Government to understand their familiarity with Natural Capital (NC), and understand if and how it was being related to their work. Two years later we repeated the same survey, this time receiving 48 responses. This briefing summarises key findings, with a focus on what has or has not changed over the two years, and on discussing implications for future work to connect NC with policy development. Key messages:

- NC is a familiar idea to staff who work in a variety of policy areas, not just those working on topics directly associated with nature and the environment. However, few report much confidence or experience in connecting NC with their work
- Overall there is a very similar pattern of responses in 2023 and 2025; however, in 2025 there are signs of more familiarity with Scotland's Natural Capital Asset Index.
- Many respondents across all policy roles see a need to further embed sustainability issues in policy development. To do so, there is interest in both new and existing NC tools and data, but also other complementary approaches such as capacity-building or leadership.

Acknowledgements

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For further information about this project please visit our project website

<https://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/galvanising-change-natural-capital>

Why did we carry out this work?

All societies and economies depend on healthy ecosystems, but our natural resources are being degraded. To reverse this trend, it is widely agreed that decision-making across all parts of society needs to take better account of nature’s values – the idea of ‘mainstreaming’. Natural Capital (NC) is a way of describing nature in terms of how it provides goods and services to people (Ozdemiroglu, 2019). This quantifying the values of natural assets and ecosystem services. Representing nature in this way is expected to make it easier to connect with appraisal and decision-making processes.

The challenge of mainstreaming applies to all sectors, including the public sector and policy development. Many policy domains influence and are influenced by natural capital – including many that are not traditionally thought of as focused on nature or environment issues, such as transport or housing (Maes et al., 2020). As well as strategic-level endorsement for working with NC in Scotland, and national level statistics (Scottish Government, 2025) since 2020 there has also been an “ENCA” toolkit available, specifically oriented to policy staff (Defra, 2026). It is therefore appropriate and timely to check if and how NC being understood by those working in policy development.

What did we find?

Was there familiarity with the idea of NC?

Most participants also described themselves as familiar with the NC term. However, far fewer saw themselves as expert; and an even smaller proportion in 2025 (Figure 2).

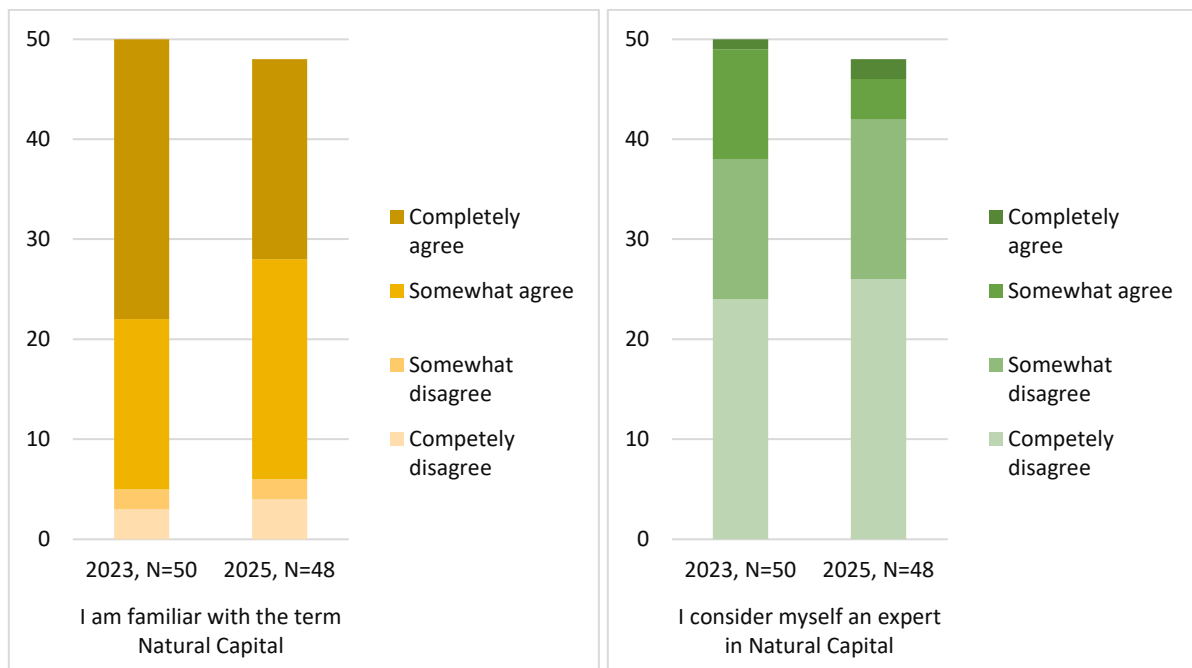


Figure 2 Comparison of respondents’ responses in 2023 and 2025, for their ratings of (1) familiarity and (2) expertise in NC.

Participants were also asked to describe NC using their own words, and their descriptions showed good similarity with the definitions such as those used by the Scottish Government (2025) and other sources (Ozdemiroglu, 2019). For example, most respondents talked about “the value of nature” and “the uses of nature” that benefit society and the economy. When we asked about for whom or what situations NC is useful, there was a greater diversity in responses; a few referred to it as a “niche concept”, some referred to it as relevant to specific topics such as planning and land management, whilst a few others expected that it should be relevant to “everything”.

Was there familiarity with data and tools related to NC?

We asked if there was familiarity with Scotland’s two national level datasets, the Scottish Natural Capital Accounts, and the Natural Capital Asset Index (NCAI). In both years of the survey, most people did not see themselves as familiar, let alone expert with either of these datasets (Figure 3). However, between 2023 and 2025 there was a notable uptick in familiarity with the NCAI.

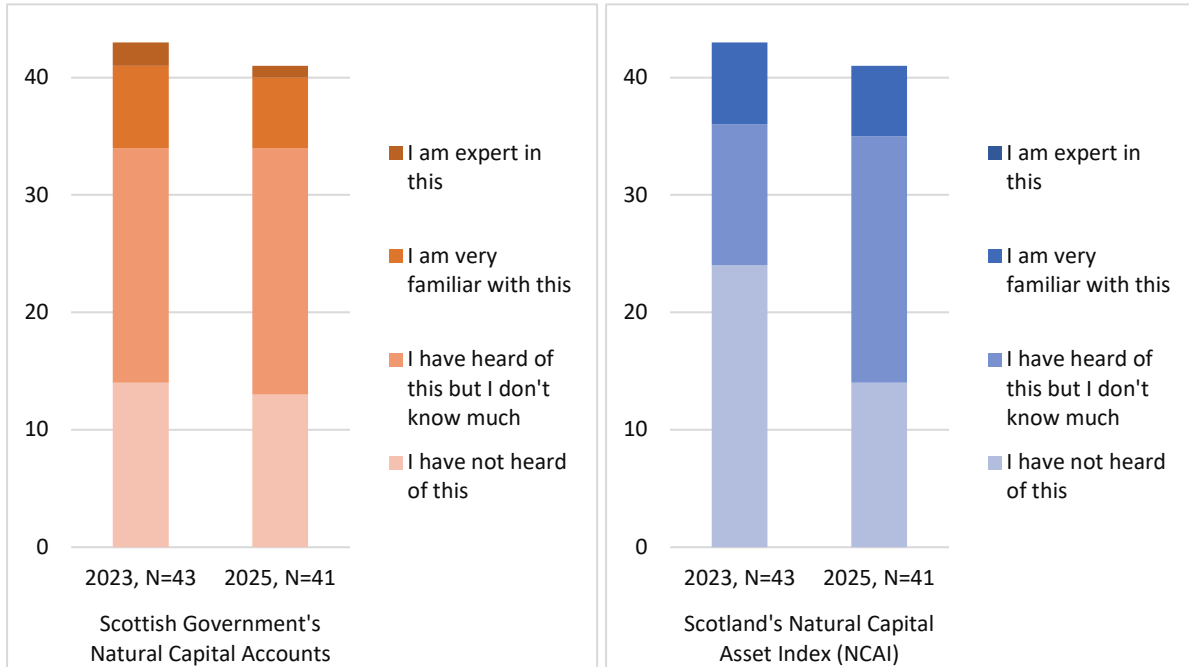


Figure 3 Comparison of respondents’ responses in 2023 and 2025, for their familiarity with national-level NC statistics.

We also asked about the ‘ENCA’ toolkit of data and tools that have been recommended for use by policy analysts and other decision-makers (Defra, 2026). By 2025 there were signs of slightly more familiarity with ENCA, but not yet any more confidence in working with it (Figure 4). When we asked if people remembered how they had learnt about NC or ENCA, some noted they had encountered it through on-the-job experience in environmental policy roles, others by attending webinars, and others referred to events and reports such as the Dasgupta report (2021).

This suggests that training events and communication are achieving influence, even if awareness and confidence are not yet as high as needed to work with the concepts. Respondents in non-environmental roles sometimes noted that they didn’t think the concept was ‘for’ them, which may also explain why some have not sought out opportunities to engage more deeply with NC.

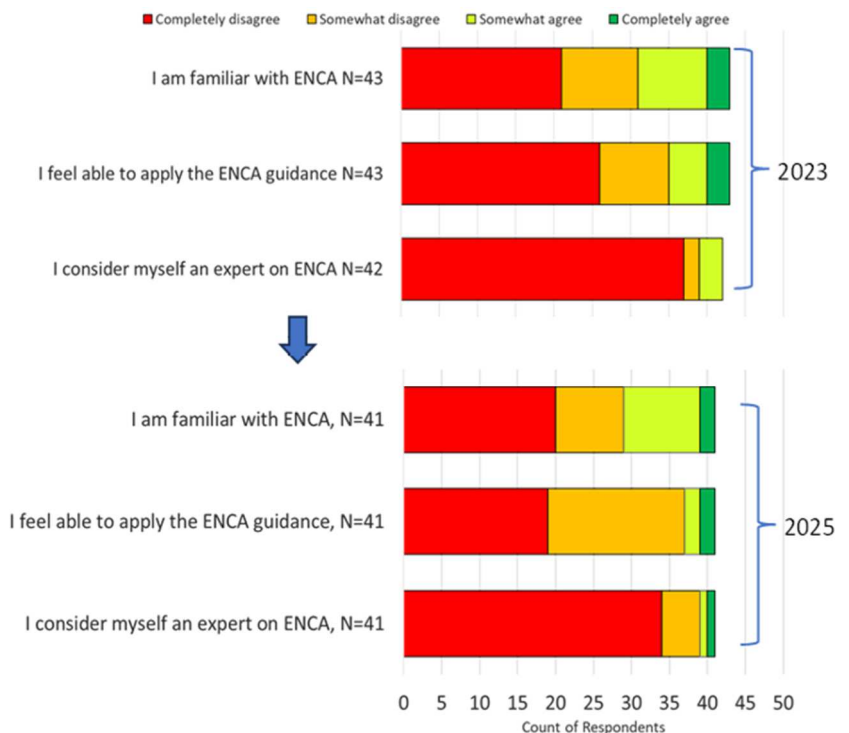


Figure 4 Respondents’ ratings of their familiarity with the ENCA toolkit in 2023 (N=32) and 2025 (N=41).

Was there a perception that changes are needed in policy development?

It might be expected that respondents were not interested in NC if they felt that environmental issues were already taken account of well in policy development. However, this was not the case in either survey, although there was a slight shift towards ‘somewhat agree’ rather than ‘somewhat disagree’ with the statement that we already do enough (Figure 5). Respondents were also given the opportunity to agree “no changes are needed” when we asked what changes could help embed sustainability (see next section), but both times a large majority of respondents did not. This suggests that most respondents do perceive a need for change. There was very similar pattern of responses between those worked on nature or environmental policy areas, versus those who did not.

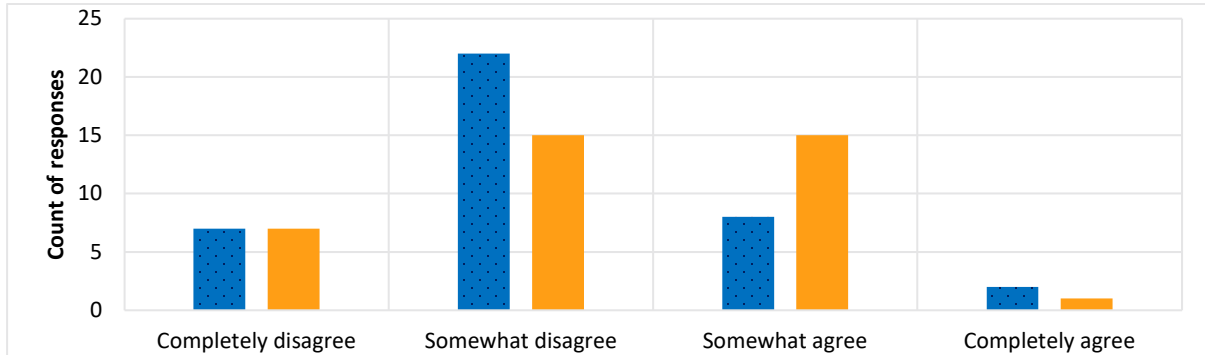


Figure 5 Likert ratings selected for the statement "We already do enough to consider environmental issues in policy development", N=39 for 2023 responses, in blue; N=38 for 2025 responses, in orange.

What was seen as impeding and helping change?

We asked about challenges that make it difficult to embed environment and sustainability issues into policy development. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with six categories of challenge: human resources (staff capacity), other resources (e.g. tools & data), timing (stage in policy cycle), organisational challenges (e.g. unclear responsibilities), commitment (political and public support), and framing (environment seen as unhelpful to other goals). In 2023, at least two thirds of the respondents somewhat or completely agreed that each of these items was a challenge, except for commitment, where the most popular response was ‘somewhat disagree’. In 2025 there were broadly similar patterns of responses, except commitment was now more often seen as a problem. Both times, human resources was most often seen as a challenge.

We also asked what types of changes could help to better embed consideration of these issues into policy development (Figure 6). The pattern of responses is not identical, but both times a clear majority show interest in all of the suggested changes. We also probed views on tools a bit more. Although many ask for more or different tools, it was also true – especially in 2025 - that existing tools were seen as related to NC and to embedding sustainability into policy development.

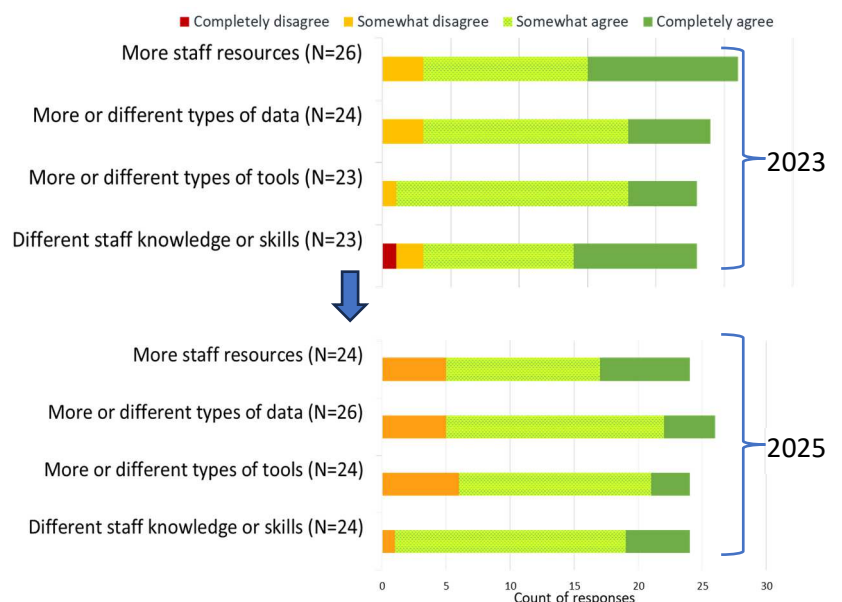


Figure 6 Respondents' responses to the statement "Ideally, what type of changes or resources could help to embed consideration of sustainability issues in policy development".

What are the main implications?

Overall, it seems that staff in Scottish Government have familiarity with NC but not much confidence in connecting it with their work. However, there is a desire to do more to embed sustainability considerations into policy development. Re-running the survey shows minimal changes in these views between 2023 and 2025. However, subtle shifts in early awareness, and recollections of events and training, suggest that efforts to build capacity and communicate on NC have had some effect.

It is important to recognise that working with natural capital to mainstream nature in decision-making is potentially transformative to the status quo, and thus disruptive and difficult. Thus, continued efforts are needed over time, and multiple approaches. As result, the tools and data that are already available and being added to through research efforts (e.g. McVittie & Glenk, 2025) should be helpful. However, they will also need complementing with other initiatives. This is in line with the idea of using multiple leverage points to achieve transformation (Lambe et al., 2025), applied with patience, persistence and reflection.

What will we do next?

Later in 2026, we aim to discuss with other staff in the Scottish Government what changes could connect Natural Capital with policy processes in different domains. For that discussion, we will also bring in ideas and insights from other parts of the project this work has been part of – notably, from discussions with agricultural policy staff, and from discussions with international experts. Discussion topics will likely include capacity-building for using existing tools and data, as well as how to appraise or diagnose opportunities to connect and adapt ongoing policy processes. We are now moving into the final year of this project, but also hope to support future cycles of effort, reflection and analysis.

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