

# Briefing

March 2023

## KEY MESSAGES

Reconciling the finite availability of land with the increasing demands on its use requires a multifunctional approach so that the same piece of land can deliver multiple benefits.

There have been a number of calls in recent years for a Land Use Strategy for Northern Ireland, most recently from the Kendall review of the agri-food sector.

While a 'strategy' can imply a top-down approach, a Land Use Framework starts with a set of principles for guiding rather than dictating decisions at all levels.

A range of approaches is being taken to this issue in the different jurisdictions of the UK and Ireland – there is much to be learned from each other's experience.

A Land Use Framework would have a key role in helping to deliver a number of outcomes distributed across a wide range of Government strategies and policies.

FFCC is ready to host a Land Use Framework Working Group comprising experts, stakeholders and Government departments to start the task of developing a Land Use Framework for Northern Ireland.

# A Land Use Framework for Northern Ireland

## Reflections from our roundtable discussion

### Executive summary

There is a finite amount of land and yet increasing pressure on what it has to deliver, creating a pressing need to develop ways of deciding how it is best used. The challenge is how to secure multiple benefits from the same piece of land. A recent roundtable in Belfast discussed how a Land Use Framework for Northern Ireland might be developed and implemented. It considered:

- The merits of a Land Use Framework over a Land Use Strategy,
- Multifunctionality – the notion that land is a dynamic resource offering multiple benefits that can work in harmony,
- How the scope of a Land Use Framework should extend to all land uses including housing, energy, industry, infrastructure, agriculture, recreation and tourism,
- The role of multiple datasets as evidence for land use decision-making,
- The need to place agreed principles at the heart of a Land Use Framework, and
- The challenge of effective governance of an issue that cuts across departments and sectors.

Four steps towards a Land Use Framework for Northern Ireland began to emerge from discussion:

1. Agree a set of principles that can be applied at every level in the decision-making process.
2. Agree what outcomes we want from land – currently distributed across a wide range of Government strategies.
3. Collate multiple datasets on land use and integrate them as an evidence base for decision making.
4. Take the Framework with its principles, outcomes and data, and apply it to all land use decisions where there is a regulatory or support role for government.

This briefing paper concludes with a recommendation to form a Land Use Framework Working Group to take the work forward - a neutral space for key stakeholders and experts to collaborate with senior civil servants from a number of Government departments.

## Introduction

How do we reconcile the finite availability of land with the multiple demands on its use?

Traditional land uses such as food production, housing, transport, energy, water and recreation are now being joined by a raft of new demands:

- carbon sequestration is a priority – whether through afforestation, grazing practices or the restoration of peatlands,
- biodiversity needs space to recover from decades of decline,
- renewable energy, in its different forms, requires land,
- as climate change and other geopolitical events disrupt global food systems, the need for a resilient local food supply is making its way up the agenda while demand for agricultural exports continues to grow,
- green spaces are increasingly valued as essential to the wellbeing of the population, and
- a growing population and economy increase demand for land for housing, transport, tourism, recreation, clean water and aggregates.

Few would argue that the traditional combination of the market, the planning system, subsidy, taxation and regulation has delivered sustainable land use, even without these new demands. A raft of recent reports has highlighted the issues, with the latest from the Royal Society stating that to meet current policy targets for net zero and biodiversity in the UK, we will need additional land equivalent to over twice the area of Wales by 2050<sup>1</sup>.

In Northern Ireland, there has been growing momentum on the issue. In early 2022, the Independent Review of the Agri-Food Sector (ISRAF - the Kendall Review) recommended a 'land use strategy for Northern Ireland'<sup>2</sup>, acknowledging that theirs was the latest in a line of such recommendations going back to 2013<sup>3 4</sup>. Subsequently, as one of a number of decisions on future agriculture policy, Minister Poots committed to 'the development of a future land use

policy during the next mandate'<sup>5</sup>. In its June 2022 recommendations for the NI Executive, the Committee on Climate Change included a 'Net Zero delivery strategy for the agriculture and land use sectors that brings together how land can deliver its multiple functions'<sup>6</sup>. The Committee's March 2023 advice sets out how the Net Zero target of the NI Climate Change Act can be achieved including some very significant challenges for land use.

## FFCC's roundtable discussion

With these developments in mind and acknowledging the absence of a functioning NI Executive, the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) recently convened a roundtable event on A Land Use Framework for Northern Ireland. It brought together policy makers from Scotland, England and the Republic of Ireland together with senior leaders, experts and stakeholders from Northern Ireland. The roundtable heard how the House of Lords recently recommended a cross-departmental Land Use Framework for England and the establishment of a Land Use Commission to oversee its implementation<sup>7</sup>. The Lords committee drew on evidence from FFCC work on a Land Use Framework which is being testing with local stakeholders in Devon and Cambridgeshire<sup>8</sup>. In Scotland, ten years on from its first land use strategy, the third iteration builds on the principles and policies of the previous versions, aiming to achieve a holistic approach to land use decisions<sup>9</sup>. The current focus is on a number of Regional Land Use Partnership pilots and associated frameworks where local authorities, landowners and communities are experimenting with different approaches. And in the Republic of Ireland, as part of the Climate Action Plan 2021, the Government commissioned a Land Use Review 'to ensure that optimal land use options inform all relevant Government decisions' and the report on its evidence gathering phase has recently been published<sup>10</sup>. This aims to provide a baseline by identifying stakeholders, existing relevant policies and gaps in data, and integrating this evidence in a usable format. This will be followed by a second phase that will focus on policies,

measures and actions, and is likely to involve establishing a framework to inform them.

What follows summarises some of the key issues that arose from the roundtable discussion, followed by an attempt to describe how a Land Use Framework for Northern Ireland might take shape.

## Strategy or framework?

The Kendall Review's call for a land use strategy for Northern Ireland was unequivocal while also acknowledging that the proposal could be contentious. Land in Northern Ireland is owned by over 25,000 farmers, a wide range of businesses, dozens of public bodies, a number of NGOs, and countless other individuals. The history and culture of land ownership is complex and a top-down approach that dictates what people should do with their land would be unworkable – and the word 'strategy', which implies land-zoning for specific purposes, unhelpful. A 'framework', on the other hand, is a set of principles for guiding rather than dictating decisions at all levels – such as prioritising multifunctional uses, involving local communities, and using land for what it is best suited. A successful framework is likely to encourage multifunctionality, address trade-offs and identify synergies, be locally responsive, and integrate with existing plans and policies at different levels. It would have public value, people, and place at its core. This is the approach that is currently being piloted in Devon and Cambridgeshire.

## What do we mean by multifunctionality?

The answer to the conundrum of more demands on land than there is land to meet those demands lies in multifunctionality - 'the notion that land is a dynamic resource offering multiple simultaneous benefits, which can work in harmony with each other when utilised effectively.'<sup>11</sup> Examples might be a public park managed to maximise biodiversity, a housing development with solar panels on every roof, or farmland that produces food while storing carbon and improving biodiversity in soil, hedgerows and trees. On the other hand, a poorly planned retail park with car

parking as the dominant land use, covering prime agricultural land in solar panels, planting trees on peat bogs, or intensive farming in a drinking water catchment, would all undermine the multifunctional approach.

## What should be the scope of a Land Use Framework?

Multifunctionality is clearly something that cuts across sectors and needs to be the rubric for decisions on land for a range of uses including housing, energy, industry, infrastructure, agriculture, recreation and tourism. Thus, a framework will need the involvement of government departments within whose remits these issues fall. The House of Lords report identifies the UK Government's intention to confine the Land Use Framework in England to DEFRA's remit as a major weakness. In Northern Ireland, DAERA is fully engaged with the issue, but success will depend on participation from the Departments for the Economy and Infrastructure and probably Communities and Finance as well. Indeed, as most Departments are significant landowners, this needs to be an initiative that has the full backing of the Executive. A Land Use Framework has the potential to provide real coherence to a wide range of government policies, strategies, and initiatives.

## Data

Decisions on land use need to be evidence-based, a major part of which is the multiple, but usually disparate, datasets on land use and land cover. The roundtable heard how Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland is working with the UK's Geospatial Commission to pilot an authoritative land use and cover map that can be rolled out across Northern Ireland. This data along with maps of, for example, soil surveys, geology, historical use, designations, flood risk, water catchments and long-term weather predictions can be layered on top of each other to provide the best evidence to inform decisions on land. Such data, of course, are not fixed but need constant updating.

## Principles

The logical starting place for a framework is a set of principles that enjoys broad support, principles that can be applied at every level in the decision-making process. Such a set of principles for Northern Ireland was developed by the Land Matters Task Force in 2015 after engagement with a variety of stakeholders<sup>12</sup>. Eight years on, it makes sense to involve a range of interests in revisiting these. Of course, there will be little point in this if the principles are simply warm words that are easily ignored. A framework will also need to articulate how and where they should be applied, and by whom. The principles will need regular review (as has been the case in Scotland) to take account of new priorities and pressures.

## Governance

Given the cross-departmental and cross-sectoral nature of a Land Use Framework, oversight is unlikely to sit comfortably in any one department. The Scottish Land Commission was established six years ago as a statutory public body, performing a valuable advisory role for the Scottish Government and helping to promote collaboration between different parts of government and local government. The House of Lords has identified the need for an independent body to prepare and update a Land Use Framework for England, to monitor and evaluate progress, to highlight specific land issues, to engage with stakeholders and landowners, and to work across government departments, local authorities, and public bodies.

A particular governance challenge identified by the roundtable was how to align national targets and local decisions. If local land use decisions are guided by the principles and practices of a Land Use Framework, and informed by a broad range of data, and yet still determined by the preferences and choices of landowners and communities, how can policy makers responsible for national or regional targets ensure that aggregate local decisions will

deliver those targets? It's a question that needs further exploration.

## An emerging framework

We are now beginning to see how a Land Use Framework for Northern Ireland might take shape. It is presented here as four steps, but in practice, this is likely to be an iterative process.

- Agree the principles – an important consensus building exercise through a process of genuine co-design.
- Go to the other end of the issue and agree what outcomes are to be achieved. Ultimately, we want land to help deliver a range of outcomes (or results) for society. These are to be found in a raft of Government strategies and policy documents (Green Growth, Energy, Forestry, Peatlands, Agriculture etc) and there is a job of work to do in collating them along with their measures of success.
- Collate the data we have and identify and collect, if possible, the data that is missing. By layering different maps on top of each other (e.g. flood risk, water quality, soil type, agricultural classification, infrastructure), decisions on how to use land, and what uses to avoid, can be taken based on reliable evidence.
- Take the Framework with its principles, together with the collated outcomes and data, and apply it to all land use decisions where there is a regulatory or support role for government or local government, including the regional development strategy, local development plans, energy production, agricultural support, water quality, habitat protection, waste and pollution control. From a farmer's point of view, this should mean the development of an agricultural strategy with a well-designed menu of options and support mechanisms that enable and encourage the most productive (in terms of

food, nature, carbon, amenity etc.) and profitable use of their land.

## Next steps

FFCC would now like to form a Land Use Framework Working Group which will initially focus on the first two of the steps above – agree the principles and collate the outcomes. This would provide a neutral space for key stakeholders and experts to collaborate with senior civil servants from a number of departments. It would work to a brief agreed with government and to a reporting deadline. FFCC is prepared to host and facilitate such a working group based on a combination of its local knowledge and, elsewhere in the UK, its wider experience of the development of Land Use Frameworks.

## RELEVANT PLACES, PROJECTS, AND PUBLICATIONS

### NORTHERN IRELAND

[Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland](#), Land Matters Taskforce and James Hutton Institute (2015).

[Independent Strategic Review of NI Agri-Food Sector](#), DAERA (2021)

### ENGLAND

[House of Lords Land Use in England Committee: Making the most out of England's land. Report of Session 2022-23. HL Paper 105](#), House of Lords (Dec 2022)

[A new way to make decisions about land: briefing for policymakers on the Land Use Framework for England](#), FFCC (2023)

[A Land Use Framework for England: FFCC proposal](#), FFCC (2022)

### SCOTLAND

[Land use - getting the best from our land: strategy 2021 to 2026](#), The Scottish Government (2021)

[A New Vision for Land Use in Scotland - 6 Conversations](#), SEDA (2021)

### REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

[Land Use Review – Phase 1 Report](#), Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (2023)

### FURTHER READING

[Land Use Framework: information hub](#), FFCC

[Multifunctional Landscapes Policy Report](#), The Royal Society (2023)

[Shaping UK land use: priorities for food, nature and climate](#), Green Alliance (2023)

[Green expectations: engaging people on changing land use for climate and nature](#), Green Alliance (2023)

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## Appendix

- 1 Based on agricultural production, diets and food waste remaining at current levels. Page 19 of [Multifunctional Landscapes](#), The Royal Society (2023)
- 2 'DAERA should lead on a co-designed cross departmental land use strategy for Northern Ireland that complements and informs its Future Agricultural Policy Framework, future environmental schemes and the NI Peatland, Green Growth and Circular Economy strategies.' Recommendation 5a of [ISRAF](#), DAERA (2021)
- 3 Recommendation 22 of [Going for Growth](#), Agri-Food Strategy Board (2013).
- 4 [Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland](#), Land Matters Taskforce & James Hutton Institute (2015).
- 5 Decision 37 on page 9 of [Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland](#), DAERA (March 2022).
- 6 'Set out a Net Zero delivery strategy for the agriculture and land use sectors that brings together how land can deliver its multiple functions including: reducing emissions and sequestering carbon, adapting to climate change, food security, biodiversity, domestic biomass production and wider environmental goals. The strategy must clearly outline the relationships and interactions between the multiple action plans in development (e.g. including those for peat, trees, nature, plant biosecurity and biomass), be spatially and temporally targeted, and aligned with action in the devolved administrations.' P614 of [2022 Progress Report to Parliament](#), Committee on Climate Change (2022)
- 7 Recommendations 1,2,39,40,41 of [Making the most out of England's land](#), House of Lords (Dec 2022)
- 8 [A Devon Land Use Framework](#) and [Latest from FFCC Cambridgeshire](#), FFCC
- 9 [Land use - getting the best from our land: strategy 2021 to 2026](#) The Scottish Government (2021)
- 10 [Land Use Review – Phase 1 Report](#) Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (2023)
- 11 Para 188 of [House of Lords Land Use in England Committee: Making the most out of England's land. Report of Session 2022-23, HL Paper 105](#), House of Lords (Dec 2022)
- 12 [Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland](#), Land Matters Taskforce and James Hutton Institute (2015)