

Briefing

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KEY MESSAGES

The Framework brings all policies relating to land use into one place. This shared picture is an essential first step to realise all national ambitions for land.

Four principles are at the heart of the Framework, a much needed 'connective tissue' to make it coherent across scales, sectors and landscapes.

A new Land Use Unit will be established to coordinate delivery, but meaningful cross-departmental collaboration is crucial to success.

The evidence base in the Framework is an important foundation to enable the best use of land, but there is more work to be done.

To turn principles into practice, we need to see investment in local capacity, skills, and trusted relationships between communities, farmers, councils and other actors.

Food security and farm viability are inextricably linked: ensuring the wider food system supports future-proofed farming is critical to success.

Coordination between all four nations will be vital for reconciling UK-wide commitments with devolved responsibilities.

England's Land Use Framework

A welcome first step – now delivery is everything.

GEORGIE BARBER

England's land is under acute pressure. Our food resilience is – at last – under intense scrutiny. Farmers are squeezed between low commodity prices and rising input costs. Growing food import dependence threatens food security at a time of geopolitical turbulence. And there are multiple demands on land not only to feed the nation, but also to meet climate and nature commitments, provide clean, secure energy, new infrastructure for economic prosperity and, not least, the government's housing targets.

It is into this charged landscape that England's first Land Use Framework arrives.

FFCC first advocated for a Land Use Framework in our 2019 report '[Our Future in the Land](#)'. Since 2020, FFCC, in partnerships with national and local government, land managers, businesses and communities, has run on-the-ground trials in Devon and Cambridgeshire, and [published its research on how such a framework could work in practice](#).

We welcome this important and substantial first step. Now we're focussed on how to ensure its successful implementation.

What's in the Land Use Framework?

The Framework is not a national plan that tries to tell people what to do, but rather a structure for collaborative decision-making between all with a stake in land use decisions. It brings all functions of land into one place to create a common and transparent picture. For the first time, land use decision-makers – local authorities to farmers, developers to conservation bodies – have a shared national evidence base to work from, and a process for working together.

It maps the competing and complementary demands on land across food, nature, energy and housing, and sets out a vision for 2030 and 2050. This includes spatially explicit evidence and principles for making better decisions across sectors.

Central to the Framework is a commitment to multifunctionality. One hectare of land can (and does) serve more than one purpose simultaneously – producing food while storing carbon, managing flood risk and supporting biodiversity, providing clean energy and affordable homes. The Royal Society estimated in 2023 that *without* multifunctional landscapes, the UK would need additional land twice the size of Wales by 2050 to meet all its demands.

The Framework commits to developing the evidence for land use and filling data gaps.

- A new Land Use Unit will be established to coordinate delivery, drive cross-departmental coherence and develop the evidence base.
- The Land Use Unit will publish updated spatial analysis; the new Make Land Digital programme aims to raise data standards and open up the Land Registry – a much-needed step to enable private sector investment in public goods.
- Digital tools for locating infrastructure – housing, energy, transport – will be made faster and more predictable, addressing a longstanding complaint from developers and planners alike.
- Further forward-looking data will be published, including a long-term assessment of climate change impacts on land use under 2°C and 4°C warming scenarios – essential to ensure the right investment in the public interest.

What are the challenges and opportunities?

FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

The Framework's guiding principles – multifunctionality; right use, right place; future-ready decisions; adaptive by design – are well chosen and important to see at the heart of the Framework. FFCC's own pilot work found that principles, when genuinely embedded in decision-making rather than appended as rhetoric, allow a framework to cohere across different scales and geographies. The test is whether these principles will be systematically applied across planning, energy, housing, health and agriculture.

CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL AMBITION, INCOMPLETE REACH

Land use decisions do not live in Defra alone. The Framework as published is primarily a Defra-led document, yet MHCLG, DESNZ and NISTA all have major claims on land. 70% of the UK's land is agricultural, and food security must be critical to any government's plans, so Defra's attention is essential. But where housing goes, where energy infrastructure is sited, what food and health policy imply for agricultural production – these decisions are made across Whitehall, often in isolation.

A particular gap: the Framework explicitly states it is not intended to be "a material consideration" in planning decisions or nationally significant infrastructure projects. This is striking. For a document intending to set a clear direction for land use, we wonder which of the principles are not a material consideration for land use decisions? With Spatial Development Strategies in development, aligning the planning system with the Framework, at all scales, is essential. Without this integration the Framework risks staying in the silos it intends to disrupt.

LOCAL DELIVERY REQUIRES REAL INVESTMENT

FFCC's trials demonstrated that effective land use decisions require sustained local capacity: skilled leadership and facilitation, a robust and accessible spatial database, and trusted relationships between communities, farmers, councils and all the other key actors. None of this is cheap or quick. And, of course, this is not just about land use, but about delivering any ambitious mission for the country.

The government must match the Framework's national ambition with a serious commitment to local delivery. Investing in the people, places and institutions on the ground will help ensure that the principles and tools announced in Westminster will stand a good chance of delivering the government's goals.

FOOD SECURITY AND FARM VIABILITY MUST BE CENTRAL

The Framework reiterates the government's commitment to food security. Defra must now integrate this commitment into the 25-year Farming Roadmap, the forthcoming food strategy, and the agrifood sector net zero pathway. Farmers need clear and coherent policies and investment aligned effectively to deliver the policies.

The Framework's highlight on water resilience is welcome and necessary. Farmers are already delivering water quality outcomes through ELM schemes while managing flooding, drought risk and pollution regulations. Managing land to mitigate flood and drought requires a catchment-wide, preventative approach with clear coordinating responsibilities. The Land Use Framework and the Water Reform Bill must be designed to complement each other from the outset.

DEVOLVED NATIONS: COLLABORATION, NOT DIVERGENCE

England's Land Use Framework will operate within a UK-wide context for net zero and biodiversity targets, with shared agricultural markets and trade policy. All four nations are developing their own land use policies, in line with devolved powers. Without coordination, divergent policy incentives risk disrupting each other.

Rivers, peatlands, upland catchments and migratory species do not stop at political boundaries. The River Wye catchment crosses the England-Wales border; the upland peatlands straddle the English-Scottish border. The Land Use Unit must have an explicit mandate to coordinate with devolved counterparts, and England's five-year review cycle should synchronise with work in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. The UK also has a land border with Europe on the island of Ireland; ensuring regulatory alignment matters here too.

What Happens Next?

The Land Use Unit must move quickly to establish its cross-departmental reach. Its first task should be securing substantive coordination mechanisms with MHCLG, DESNZ and NISTA.

The Framework's exclusion from planning considerations must be revisited. As Spatial Development Strategies take shape, the window to integrate the Framework into England's planning architecture is open now. It will not remain so indefinitely.

The data programme Make Land Digital, the Land Registry opening, and other future spatial evidence analysis needs a clear timeline and governance. Better digital infrastructure and data standards are the foundation for private investment in public goods; something Defra has made clear is needed for delivery. Delays here compound every other delivery risk.

The Framework will be updated every five years. That review cycle must be treated as a genuine evaluation and accountability mechanism. Civil society, farmers and local actors should be involved from the outset.

The publication of England's first Land Use Framework is a genuine milestone. But a policy is only as good as its delivery. The hard work begins now.

FFCC will work with the Land Use Unit and stakeholders to support its implementation, its research on multifunctional land use, and its convening role across farmers, conservationists, planners and communities.

For further information about FFCC's ongoing work on land use, please see our [Land Use Hub](#) or contact georgie.barber@ffcc.co.uk.