

Briefing

November 2023

“When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect”

Aldo Leopold: A Sand County Almanac (1948)

WHAT IS A MULTIFUNCTIONAL LAND USE FRAMEWORK?

Inspired by the Public Value Framework, designed by Sir Michael Barber and adopted by Treasury in 2017, the Multifunctional Land Use Framework is a practical process that supports better, more sustainable decisions about land, by all those who need to make them.

It consists of a set of principles and practices for local and national government, businesses and communities, aligning top-down and bottom-up priorities, mediating competing pressures and encouraging multifunctionality.

It brings together key data and expertise, including spatial mapping tools, to guide leaders through better land use decisions, optimising land use for multiple benefits.

FFCC pilot programmes show that it is most successful if all sectors and bodies that depend on land are involved, with local authorities and stakeholders as implementation partners.

It is the optimal way to meet the many demands made of UK land.

The Multifunctional Land Use Framework

The key to better land use decisions

Land is a limited resource under huge pressure. It is critical for housing, energy, transport, net zero, biodiversity, food production, nature and much more. Biodiversity loss, climate change and sea level rise make it imperative that we make the most effective use of land. We need a way of making better decisions about land use that helps us to achieve a sustainable future. The Multifunctional Land Use Framework is emerging as the way forward.

Who benefits from a Multifunctional Land Use Framework?

The [Royal Society estimates](#) that we would need additional land twice the size of Wales to meet all the targets set by governments over the last few years. In order to solve this challenge, everyone needs a way of making decisions about land and making the most of the land available, whilst navigating diverse and dispersed ownership and responsibilities.

For decision makers, the MLUF enables them to base decisions on fully cross-sectoral evidence and priorities to try to ensure optimal decisions both for themselves and for society.

For policy developers, the MLUF provides benefits in policy delivery, by encouraging proper debate over land use, saving time and money. Collaborative approaches help align and pool resources, share data, knowledge and skills, leading to more sustainable decisions being made.

For strategic infrastructure planners, the MLUF offers the prospect of considering all aspects of the project at an early stage, aligning stakeholder interests and avoiding the late emergence of issues at the implementation stage.

For communities, early engagement in an MLUF is more likely to direct their energies and local knowledge into creative, practical ideas and solutions. It should reduce objections, optimise trade-offs and help avoid unintended or unforeseen consequences.

For farmers and land managers, the MLUF offers a more certain planning horizon, enabling them to integrate critical questions of food security and resilience in land use decisions.

For developers, the MLUF includes them in a balanced decision process with other stakeholders which leads to the right housing in the right locations for sustainability, community, jobs and public services.

Six MLUF Principles:

Land-led
Multifunctionality
Adaptive and resilient
Locally responsive
Outward and future-focused
Contributing prosperity

Six MLUF Ways of Working:

Collective leadership
Integrative
Transparent and inclusive
Strategic and granular
Evidence-led
Learning from what works

For the finance sector the MLUF offers insurers and finance providers a more strategic, long-term opportunity for risk assessments, asset values and return on investment calculations.

How do we know a Multifunctional Land Use Framework will work?

The MLUF has a firm foundation in on-the-ground experience from two pilot programmes built on years of FFCC experience of consulting with stakeholders. Farmers, landowners and local communities, as well as policymakers and experts, tell us they want a better way of making decisions by understanding the opportunities as well as the constraints and integrating land uses for their business and for public benefit.

We tested what a Multifunctional Land Use Framework process would look like, through action research in pilot programmes in Devon and Cambridgeshire & Peterborough. As a framework (not a strategy), it offers choices and opportunities to align local priorities and national considerations. Stakeholders praised the process as a credible and desirable way to help make better decisions about land.

Our pilots reveal that a Multifunctional Land Use Framework can help steer owners' or managers' decisions about their business or organisation's use of land including infrastructure (water, energy, transport, waste) and housing, while also ensuring that networks of green and blue infrastructure, open spaces, trees, wildlife corridors and coastal fringes contribute to urban and rural sustainability and the urgent need for nature recovery. We found that to achieve all this, the MLUF needs to cover the plethora of both planning and land management decisions, which already have targets, and food system resilience, which does not.

Institutional ownership must be broad-based. A Multifunctional Land Use Framework cannot be a policy that sits only with DEFRA. Whilst the rural economy, food production and environmental benefits sit largely with that department, using land in a multifunctional way has to consider other policy objectives. This can only be achieved by bridging current policy silos and working across other government departments and at different geographical scales. Stakeholders (and decades of public policy) tell us that nationally determined policies – while necessary to meet national-critical targets – have to be delivered locally. If they fail to appreciate or reflect local geography, economies, needs and opportunities, or incorporate detailed local knowledge, they are unlikely to be implemented effectively.

The components of a MLUF can be applied at national and sub-national levels, with coordination and interaction between the two, and work across different jurisdictions. A national, cross-sector body would provide leadership and oversight, both to align national considerations and targets and ensure that local delivery adds up to national priorities.

Our pilot programmes with stakeholders at the county level indicate that a Multifunctional Land Use Framework will lead to better public value in land use decisions. Stakeholders were initially concerned that a MLUF would

“We will be considering the government's proposals against what we've found in our research and the six principles we have derived from that. We will be looking for an approach that is land-led; adaptive and resilient for sustainability; locally responsive whilst covering England and beyond; outward and future focussed; and contributing prosperity and opportunity to communities. Most important it must be rooted in multifunctionality, working across government departments to make the most of this vital resource.”

Sue Pritchard, Chief Executive
Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

increase bureaucracy, but by the end of the process they considered that it was likely to reduce conflict overall. They were also impressed by the power of integrating data and maps at a range of scales and how useful these were in decision-making.

What next?

If current methods of making land use decisions worked, we would not – for example – have a shortfall in affordable housebuilding, conflict over road and rail infrastructure improvements, and tension between food production and environmental outcomes (to name just three). A new way of integrating land use pressures is urgently needed. FFCC's pilot Multifunctional Land Use Framework programmes show the way forward.

As we await the government's announcement on a Land Use Framework, there is growing support for the MLUF approach. This comes both from those who are looking for help in making decisions about optimal land use policy, such as local authorities, landowners and managers, civil society organisations and businesses; and from other policy and research institutions organisations such as [The Royal Society](#), the [House of Lords Land Use in England Committee](#) and the [Geospatial Commission](#) who are all arriving at similar conclusions.

Meanwhile, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland (and the Republic of Ireland) are developing their own land use decision processes. We are working with all four to ensure strategic and functional interoperability on critical issues at policy, landscape and catchment level.

FFCC's pilot programmes over the past year have demonstrated the potential of the Multifunctional Land Use Framework, which must in future be at the heart of integrated, collaborative and place-based decision-making, optimising the contribution of land to resolving the priorities of our time.