



Learning Paper

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KEY MESSAGES

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Land use decision-making ranges from the local to the strategic: a MLUF must be able to accommodate top-down targets and bottom-up detail, and – critically – capacity for implementation.

Scale determines available evidence, which actors can be engaged and the kind of actions that are possible.

Choosing the right scale matters, and often that means choosing a scale that people understand.

The MLUF must have a broad scope and a long-time horizon, encompassing all major land uses and likely future scenarios.

Stakeholders want to understand how a MLUF operates at different scales.

Some interoperability in the MLUF process is desirable for those operating across boundaries.

Multifunctional Land Use Framework Action Research: Scope and Scale Lessons

This practitioner learning paper sets out the core scope and scale findings from our pilot testing of the Multifunctional Land Use Framework (MLUF) process in Devon and Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority.

Through these pilots we wanted to understand how a MLUF could help decision-making at the county, or ‘larger than local’ level.

In Devon, funded by the Environment Agency and the Geospatial Commission, we worked with leaders across the county to understand how a MLUF could be used on the ground by people working to balance the land use demands of flood risk and resilience, water quality, food production, nature recovery and housing development.

In Cambridgeshire, funded by the Geospatial Commission and WWF, we worked with county-wide stakeholders to explore how a MLUF could help local leaders manage competing pressures on land.

We took a developmental evaluation approach to the project, which meant adapting to new findings as they emerged, and following at times divergent evolutions of the action research projects in each county. The process generated case studies – both as part of the pilots and already operating on the ground - which illustrate the principles and ways of working of the MLUF approach, and demonstrate how these foundations can support effective action on the ground. The evidence concerning MLUF-style components gleaned from these local level examples illustrates the dynamic relationship between bottom-up and top-down forces that any MLUF approach will need to address in order to be successful.

For a broad overview of FFCC’s work on the MLUF, please see our [2023 report](#) and the Rough Guide resources on the FFCC website.

Land use decision-making ranges from the local to the strategic: a Multifunctional Land Use Framework must be able to accommodate top-down targets and bottom-up detail, and – critically – capacity for implementation.

The three scales which we have used most in our thinking about land use have been national, county, and local scales.

There is no objectively correct scale at which to think about land. All the different scales people use have their own merits. It is possible to divide the country into political districts, river catchments, landscape character areas, bioregions, economic zones and more. Each of the major land-based sectors has its own favoured scale(s) with which to look at land; while transit planning might take place at a regional scale, a water company would tend to work at catchment scale, and a farmer is likely to be making their plans at a field scale. This diversity requires a Multifunctional Land Use Framework to be useful at each of these various scales.

In our pilots we worked with stakeholders to look at land use challenges at a county and local scale. The boundaries of our pilot areas invariably cut across other important geomorphological, hydrological, cultural, political and commercial boundaries. We decided to work along local authority boundaries for two reasons: first, there are clear lines of political representation and accountability for citizens living in the local authority, this enables their voices to be better heard in the development of their county Multifunctional Land Use Framework; second, there is capacity within the local authority to convene the high-level leadership and strategic perspective needed to develop a county Multifunctional Land Use Framework.

Involving institutional leaders and grassroots stakeholders in the Multifunctional Land Use Framework process was helpful, offering valuable insights into how leadership working groups could be structured. This strategic overview ensures that cross-sector targets are identified at the highest level. Engagement with stakeholders on the ground is critical to provide granular detail and information for difficult decisions. Representatives from different sectors can give helpful insights into how people interact with policies in practice and the reality of policy in a particular place.

Working at the **national scale** offers a few different advantages. There is generally a high quality of data and evidence available. This scale offers a strategic overview of the country's total land use balance. At the national level there are actors with the resource available (e.g. national arms-length bodies, third sector organisations, universities, etc.) to generate high quality data and evidence to fill gaps in our knowledge about the country's land use needs. However, the granularity of the data and evidence at national level is limited and rarely can this evidence be used as the basis for local scale land use decision-making. It is challenging for land use decision makers working at this scale to anticipate how decisions made at this level will be received at the local scale. National government can however set national priorities based on the evidence it has available and it can also set the conditions for achieving this better balance of land uses through a mixture of regulations and incentives. Engaging with large land-based business interests at the top level is key to designing the right package of regulations and incentives.

Working at a **county scale**, of the size of our pilots in Devon or Cambridgeshire, offers a mixture of the advantages to be found national and local scales. The quality of data and evidence at this level is mixed, often data recorded at county level is more accurate than national level. However, in some counties for some sectors no county level data has been recorded or what has been recorded is privately held, forcing actors in this sector to rely on national level datasets. In each county data availability is varied and what is available often depends on the resources available to the sector in question or the resources allocated at the local authority level. At county scale it is possible to think about

land use strategically. While it does not offer the comprehensive overview of a national scale assessment, it has the benefit of being close enough to the local level that actors can conceivably bring local knowledge to bear on strategic conversations. Inviting the scrutiny of those with local knowledge helps to catch errors, omissions or oversights that may be present in the data and evidence available.

Working at a **local scale** (e.g. farm scale, sub-catchment scale, or community scale) offers its own set of advantages. At this scale it is much easier to use local knowledge about land to inform decisions. Local knowledge is often hard to access as it is rarely codified and translated into a form that others can access, this accumulated knowledge and experience is often known exclusively to the practitioner(s) who are engaged in a particular field. For example, the knowledge that farmers have of their soil type is frequently of a drastically higher resolution than it is practical to map at a national or even county scale. These practitioners need not necessarily be land managers or landowners, recreational land users can also have highly valuable local knowledge (e.g. birdwatchers, anglers, rambles, etc). This knowledge is invaluable for ground truthing the outputs of land use models and the quality of land use data.

Scale determines available evidence, which actors can be engaged and the kind of actions that are possible.

The scale at which you engage in an issue determines three factors: the information available to you about the issue you are working on; the actors who you can partner with in tackling this issue; and the possible actions that you can take to effect change. In our work on the Multifunctional Land Use Framework, we have found these three factors (evidence, actors & actions) to vary significantly depending on scale.

Questions the pilot team often heard were:

- *Who* would interact with a Multifunctional Land Use Framework?
- *What* would their involvement look like?
- *When* would they contribute?
- *How* would they contribute?

In the table below we can see how the evidence, actors and actions change at these different scales:

	National	County	Local
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At this level the evidence available serves to highlight strategic priorities • At this scale it is possible to calculate important land use metrics such as self-sufficiency and overseas land use • The data and evidence are rarely granular enough to be used to make individual land use decisions • Few opportunities for ground-truthing evidence, but this is somewhat compensated by the resources available at this level to use complex land use modelling approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At this scale national level datasets are often not the best data available • Evidence used at this scale needs to be more granular in order support the land use decisions that get made at this scale (e.g. planning decisions) • Evidence is variable at this level, some actors are forced to use national level data where they do not have access to better local datasets • Some opportunities for ground-truthing and fewer resources for complex land use modelling approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field scale evidence is the most variable • This evidence can be of the highest, most granular quality, or it may simply not exist at all • National and County level datasets may not be granular enough to support high conviction decisions at this level • The highest quality evidence can be held as local knowledge, which can be hard to access or share • Greatest opportunities for ground-truthing, complex land use modelling approaches available only to the best resourced actors at this scale
Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Governments • National and international NGOs • National and international businesses • Academic institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combined, Unitary and Local Authorities • Regional and local NGOs • Large landowners • Businesses • Local Universities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landowners • Communities • Parish/district councils • Citizens
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting outcome based targets • Incentivising landowners to deliver these outcomes • Regulating to prevent or prohibit certain land use management choices or changes in land use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating local plans and strategies • Convening a leadership group • Large multifunctional collaborative projects can be planned by actors at this scale • Creating and maintaining a shared evidence base for land use decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The majority of land use choices are made at this level

Choosing the right scale matters

People are more likely to resonate with policies that are directly related to their neighbourhood, their town, or their county. One Cambridgeshire leadership group member described this as making interventions on a ‘human scale’ that ‘people understand as their home and their landscape.’

At a county scale, there are actors and organisations from across the system who can form the core of a leadership group to deliberate on land use challenges and who wield sufficient power to influence or directly enact land use change. At this scale there will be a local authority that, as long as they are resourced to do so, has the capacity to support and facilitate a leadership group to undertake a county land use process. As a political body, the local authority (whether a county council, a unitary authority or a combined authority) has the advantage of being able to engage at multiple scales. Political representatives can amplify citizen voices, bringing local views to bear on county scale land use discussions, and they can also engage with members of parliament and national government to bring nuance to national level discussions of land use.

Scale really matters to the way people think about and engage with land use. **Richard Kay shares his reflections**, *“most long-time planning policy officers were not overly concerned with Regional Spatial Strategies (and their loss), because they were actually too strategic. Peterborough, for example, found it difficult to relate to issues in Southend (108 miles away), yet they were both included in the same ‘plan’. The RSSs themselves even realised that, so they started having sub-regional, largely county based, chapters in them.”*

What most long-time planners regret the loss of is county based ‘structure plans’. Structure Plans still felt ‘local’ enough for all parties to be interested, and the public understood them because they lived in that county. The public never really identified with the ‘East of England RSS’.

Structure Plans worked across local boundaries and were strategic enough to enable bigger-than-local decisions to be made. But they were ‘homely’ enough that both the public and the professions could see and understand the trade-offs, such as where something should be located and where other things should not.”

An advantage of working at a local scale is that it is possible to meaningfully engage citizens in certain land use decision-making processes and to address their concerns and priorities. During our listening tour in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, we heard many times from citizens about the varying quality of public consultation, with the few successful efforts being those that engaged early enough in the process that the land use decision maker can respond to concerns raised. The key challenge when working at this scale is that it is impossible to act strategically without referring to what is going on in a wider context. It is only by assessing the net outputs from land across counties, regions and nations that we can assess how close we are to securing all the things that we want from our land. This means that those acting at a local scale rely on actors at the national and county levels to provide them with this information.

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough listening tour participants:

“We are not being heard – there’s lots of consultation but it’s not acted on.”

“It needs to be easier to input into consultations - people are consulted but only at late stages. This needs to be turned upside down and people consulted at the beginning before the plans are drawn up.”

The pilots provided a snapshot into what working groups that support the leadership group might look like. In the process of developing (and updating) a county wide strategic framework there is a clear need for a body that acts as a critical friend of the leadership group. The purpose would be to bring a more granular and nuanced perspective to the deliberations of the leadership group. This working group could look like the Design Group in Devon or the Leadership Group in Cambridge – comprised of individuals from a broad range of sectors and representatives of community groups – that are closer to decisions being made on the ground. This working group would support the functioning of the nested approach to working at multiple scales, by connecting those with on-the-ground knowledge to those creating the county level targets, which are in turn fed into the national land use ecosystem.

CASE STUDY: SCALE & UNDERSTANDING – RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT & SCALE - HERITAGE ECOSYSTEM IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Key Themes: Sense of place; Local customs; Personal scale; Impact assessment; Heritage ecosystems

MLUF Principles & Ways of Working: Land-led; Locally Responsive; Learning From What Works

A novel approach to mapping citizens' priorities is being piloted in Cambridgeshire, revealing the different quality of insights that can emerge from local-level research. Cambridge Heritage Research Centre is undertaking a community-led research project, to develop a 'Heritage Ecosystems Impact Assessment' (HEIA) methodology and pilot this approach with local communities along the East West Rail project.

Researchers are interested in the heritage ecosystems, intangible heritages, and cultural landscapes that work together to construct peoples' relationships with place. A heritage ecosystem is defined as "the interconnected relationships between people, their environment, and their more recent and distant pasts, and the significance they attach to these relationships." Heritage ecosystems are about the relationships that are built over time between people and the environment as they live, work, and play in a place. Examples of things that make up a heritage ecosystem could include that place in the village used by children to make a 'den', just as their parents did a generation earlier. Or the name of a hill that is known only to local residents that once you use it, becomes a sign that you are beginning to embed yourself in a place and its local custom.

In order to capture these intangible qualities, researchers are asking participants to mark up a map of the area with places of personal importance to them. Researchers are using these maps alongside other qualitative data captured in interviews to create a summary of the anticipated impacts of the proposed East West Rail project to towns and villages in South Cambridgeshire for developers.

The Multifunctional Land Use Framework must have a broad scope and a long-time horizon, encompassing all major land uses and likely future scenarios.

We heard in both Devon and Cambridgeshire that a Multifunctional Land Use Framework which did not cover both developed and undeveloped land would be incomplete. There are already policies covering certain areas of land use, such as the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) covering built development and the Local Nature Recovery

Strategy (LNRS) covering nature and biodiversity, but there is no framework covering land use in its full complexity. Stakeholders have been clear that another initiative with a partial focus could be counterproductive, duplicating and competing with existing land use policies and initiatives. There is, however, appetite among stakeholders for a framework that could help them manage the trade-offs between land uses and identify the opportunities for multifunctionality.

The Multifunctional Land Use Framework pilots explored the idea that a county's land use mix should correspond to the needs of the population and the capacities of the land itself, but we know that these factors are subject to change. At an early leadership group meeting in Cambridge, we heard concern from members about how different climate scenarios could increase frequency of both flooding and droughts. The extent of warming in each scenario could change the capacity of Cambridgeshire's land to deliver the outcomes that it does currently. Farmers noted that if regular droughts were to become the norm farmland may require irrigation to maintain its productivity, but this would place additional strain on Cambridgeshire's already stressed water supply. In the Fens, frequent flooding could cause some areas of farmland to become too expensive or impractical to drain. Other factors like population growth or the growth of the life sciences industry will drive demand for, and respond to the extent of, housing and transport development. The result is a complex outlook in which multiple future scenarios must be anticipated.

A Multifunctional Land Use Framework must support decision makers to consider multiple future scenarios, to ensure that we have an adaptive and resilient land use mix. One present challenge to this kind of long-term thinking is that current policies do not require us to think that far into the future. For example, local plans only require consideration of the fifteen years following their publication. We heard concern that plans and strategies are not adjusting quickly enough to reflect the best understanding of climate change and other forces affecting land use. The Multifunctional Land Use Framework process would be a good forum for these conversations to take place.

Stakeholders want to understand how a Multifunctional Land Use Framework will work across scales.

Stakeholders at all scales want to know how the Multifunctional Land Use Framework will interact with their existing work. That is why we have proposed a nested approach, with a national land use body publishing a national Multifunctional Land Use Framework, which will help to coordinate government's land use priorities. At present there is no body tasked with coordinating government ambitions about land use and there is little join up across departments about the combined implication of government targets requiring land to be delivered. To deliver on land-based pledges, government will have to be clearer about where it expects these pledges to be delivered.

At the county scale we propose the convening of a county-level land use body, which we call the leadership group. This group will engage in a principle-led process to develop a county Multifunctional Land Use Framework. This provides a shared evidence base for land use decision-making. Siting these strategic conversations at a county level makes engagement with local level stakeholders (e.g. individual landowners, sub-catchment bodies, estates) and communities viable in a way that is not possible at national level. This county approach provides a route to bring local knowledge to bear on the insights generated by data-led discussions.

The creation of county-level land use bodies, means that stakeholders at this level can engage in dialogue with national government about what can feasibly be delivered in each area. Through this dialogue the leadership group could agree the county's contribution towards national targets with a national land use body. This process should

mitigate against setting unrealistic targets while also providing a channel of communication for county-level stakeholders to keep national government informed of progress as well as emerging opportunities or challenges.

Some standardisation of the Multifunctional Land Use Framework process is desirable for those operating across boundaries.

A repeated question in the pilots was: if there are different approaches to creating a Multifunctional Land Use Framework in each county, how are people and organisations operating in a cross-border capacity going to solve the administrative and technical problems that divergent approaches will bring? To ensure a Multifunctional Land Use Framework has as much utility as possible for users, we think it important that a national Multifunctional Land Use Framework specifies the core principles and processes used to create the county level outputs. To maximise ease of use it would also be beneficial for the formatting of the outputs to be standardised.

The data and evidence used, the participants taking part and the targets derived from the framework process will differ by county. If a standardised process is used it has benefits for the leadership group reporting upwards to government as well as for users of the framework that operate in a cross-county capacity.

CASE STUDY: EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK – HOW INTEROPERABILITY CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Key Themes: Strategic scale; Defra objectives; Local vision; National Parks

MLUF Principles & Ways of Working: Outward & future-focused: Strategic & Granular

Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) have a variety of scales to consider when thinking about land use within Exmoor National Park. ENPA produces a management plan entitled 'Partnership Plan' to convey that it exists for the place and all its stakeholders, to cover the whole park. As a National Park Authority it is the planning authority for Exmoor, so considers applications at a granular scale through the lens of the NPPF as well as writing the Local Plan. The ENPA also owns roughly 7% of the park (nearly 5000 hectares) so is directly responsible for decision-making for that land.

As it lies across two counties, Devon and Somerset, the park faces challenges in terms of differing county approaches (which are sometimes also opportunities). In this context a Multifunctional Land Use Framework holds the potential to support the ENPA in a number of ways. Currently, Defra sets out the goals it wants the national parks to achieve in pursuance of its overarching National Park purposes. A Multifunctional Land Use Framework could be a way of coalescing organisations around Defra's specific outcomes for the National Park.

Such alignment needs to exist at both the granular and strategic scale. At the granular scale this looks like ENPA working with farm businesses and communities to support the achievement of outcomes in the Exmoor Vision. At the strategic scale ENPA, regulators and strategic collaborators need to work to define the shared responsibility stakeholders have for maximising the outcomes the National Park is pursuing, both within its boundaries, and to outcomes outside of the park in both counties.

Conclusion

In considerations of scale and scope, it is important to remember that people resonate with “human scale” interventions that align with their sense of place – their neighbourhood, their town, their county. Choosing the right scale determines the level of evidence, the people and organisations that will engage, and crucially the type of actions that are possible. The MLUF needs to accommodate both top-down and bottom-up flows, and be able to operate simultaneously at a variety of scales from national to intensely local. In addition to geographical scale, timescale is important – the MLUF must take a sufficiently long-term view to accommodate the full evolution of even the slowest land use change processes. It must also embrace sufficient standardisation of core principles and processes to enable smooth cross-border working.

This paper is one of four setting out the findings from our pilots. The series is available on [*A Rough Guide to the Multifunctional Land Use Framework*](#), which brings together learnings, discussions and tried and tested ideas about a MLUF.

To find out more about FFCC’s work and join the MLUF Practitioner Community, contact georgie.barber@ffcc.co.uk