

Briefing

October 2023

KEY MESSAGES

A Land Use Framework can help manage competing pressures on land and bring people together for better decision-making

Local decision makers are best placed to decide on suitability of land and benefit to their community

A national framework can both guide and aggregate local decisions, ensure national targets are clear, and met, and help with local commitment and access to necessary information

Cross-sector leadership from the outset enables better decisions

Accessible, spatially-explicit data leads to better outcomes

Inclusive and transparent public involvement is key to reducing conflict and delays

Land Matters:

Learning from research about land use frameworks

Land is a limited resource under huge pressure – with the need to build new houses, develop energy and transport infrastructure, reach net zero, deliver biodiversity net gain, consider food security and access to nature – and more.

Land use is too often presented as a binary choice. Either we have new affordable housing, or improve people's access to healthy green space. Either we preserve ancient woodland, or we introduce greener transport.

As political parties return from recess, land use will be a common denominator of many of the policies being discussed. We urgently need a different approach to land use, meeting multiple needs, to find better solutions overall.

A Land Use Framework enables both national and local policymakers, businesses and communities to navigate the pressures and opportunities already in front of them.

How could a Land Use Framework help?

A Land Use Framework is a way to bring people together to manage competing pressures on land with better decision-making. It could help with some of the most pressing challenges concerning every constituency – ensuring that new housing developments are close to jobs and public transport, solar panels are put in the right places, enough healthy food is grown where it is best suited, rivers are kept clean and much more.

Over the last three years, the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission has been exploring the design and use of land use frameworks with local partners in Devon and Cambridgeshire. Our research has shown that a Land Use Framework is a credible approach to managing the choices and tensions inherent in land use decision-making. It has huge potential to improve outcomes and deliver better policies.

LOCAL DECISION-MAKING WITHIN A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Our work in Devon and Cambridgeshire has shown that a Land Use Framework will be more effective if delivered at different spatial scales. Local decision makers are best placed to decide how land could be employed to benefit local communities, businesses and landowners, to meet current and future needs. A national framework both sets out the national needs and ambitions, and aggregates local efforts, in a dynamic relationship, to make sure that the UK is meeting important national

targets. A national framework provides clarity and coherence for cross-boundary or landscape-scale decisions, strengthens incentives for local involvement, and curates and coordinates access to relevant information and datasets. To provide appropriate coordination and coherence, our research recommends a national, independent body. This would work across all departments to ensure that expertise and information are appropriately weighted in the discussions around land use, like the recommendations from the House of Lords and the Geospatial Commission, among others. This body would bring together the relevant evidence base, and the ministers (or leads) from each department, to bring a 'land led' focus in discussions about opportunities and potential conflicts for land use.

LEADERSHIP

Decision-making works better when leaders, stakeholders, and land managers from across all sectors come together from the beginning. They will often have the material accountabilities and control (e.g. statutory responsibilities or ownership of the land) and can identify opportunities, risks and potential. Together they can share expertise, insight and aspirations in coming to optimal decisions about land use.

DATA

The pilots also show that having an accessible, spatial evidence base is critical for informed decisions. Often the right data is not known or accessible to decision makers, perhaps held privately, or available but so complicated that non-experts cannot meaningfully engage with it. One of the advantages of a Land Use Framework is bringing together different sectors to identify the relevant information for decision makers. When developed into an engaging spatial data visualisation tool, (see Cambridge pilot) data transforms from a block to an enabler, facilitating meaningful stakeholder engagement, informing discussions and helping to weigh opportunities and conflicts.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The process in Devon and Cambridgeshire explores where a Land Use Framework can potentially reduce conflict and delays in policymaking and reduce public backlash. With an open and inclusive approach to decision-making, communities are involved from the outset. This has a significant impact on the level of public support for ideas in development, learning from effective practice in major project delivery in other nations. As policymakers reflect on the HS2 situation, the importance of this early involvement and deliberation becomes clear.

Time for a Land Use Framework

The latest science supports multifunctional land use as the most effective route to meeting the many demands on limited land. Our work over the past five years suggests that a Land Use Framework for England can manage competing pressures on land and encourage multifunctionality.

A Land Use Framework is a pathway to ensuring land is used optimally to meet national targets in a way that benefits people and planet. It is a policy solution whose time has come, and our pilots show it is practical, feasible and desirable.

