

The Case for a Land Use Framework

From food production and climate change to housing and infrastructure, land and its proper use is the decisive but often unspoken element in policy. Ours is the most densely populated major country in Europe and yet at present there is no strategic approach to resolving competing claims that arise over this precious and finite resource.

Multiple government initiatives and targets depend on good use of land: the 25-Year Environment Plan and targets for housebuilding and tree planting; where and how to build the housing and infrastructure we need; our commitment to carbon net zero; and the ambitions of the Environment and Agriculture Bills. But these plans currently exist in silos; they need to work in concert with one another, since siloed targets can lead to perverse outcomes - the wrong trees planted in the wrong place, for example, or houses built without regard for their environmental impact or for how people want and need to live in a climate adapted future

Over the last year, therefore, momentum has been building for a land use framework. In February, leaders in UK land use - landowners and policy makers, farmers, and environmentalists - met at St George's House in Windsor Castle to explore its design. The framework would establish principles, with multi-functionality and concern for future generations foremost among them, that should govern land use decision-making. It would then provide structures for mediating conflicts over different uses of land, based on the best data and mapping available, both within government and on the ground between practitioners. And it would be given coherence with a vision that government, the private and third sector, and the public could get behind.

It would also provide a mechanism for achieving this government's fundamental purpose: levelling up and leaving no one behind

Why now?

Since February, Covid-19 has forcibly reminded us of our dependence on food and farming and the land that makes it possible - after decades of neglect, farmers were designated key workers. While some will argue that all other priorities must wait while we tackle the immediate economic devastation, the opposite is in fact true. If Brexit represented an unfrozen moment, Covid-19 forces the hand of decision-makers to act now: we are entering a new era and the decisions we take now will define our new settlement for decades to come.

Economic resources will be even more scarce but the need for reform even greater, not least to ensure that the whole country benefits: early research shows that northern 'red wall' areas have been worst hit. Meanwhile the prospect that the clear skies, the revival of wildlife and blue water that we have seen during the lockdown might become a permanent part of our future glimmers as a possibility. These two, the economic and the ecological, should not be treated separately. Our polling shows that the country is united on this and does not want a return to 'business as usual'.



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A land use framework will help the country move from recovery to renewal. The prize is a sustainable economy which works for every place in the country and a countryside that is both productive and ecologically resilient, supporting flourishing ecosystems and tackling climate change. Such a framework would have three fundamental objectives: achieving the government's priorities, resolving conflicts over land use, and contributing to UK leadership in tackling climate change.

Achieving the government's priorities

The objective of this government is to level up, improving R&D, infrastructure and technology across the country to ensure that no place in the country is left behind. In the wake of Covid-19, the government aims to *build back better*, embedding economic recovery within a wider project of national renewal. A land use framework will help direct, devolve and join up resources and money to the regions (including rural areas where resources are likely to be particularly scarce) that need it most.

But the government's purpose is not simply economic, without care for the environment. Instead, it has also pledged to plant 75,000 acres of trees a year, enhance the green belt, build flood defences, increase biodiversity and air quality, and create new Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks. Achieving these wide-ranging aims, especially under the extraordinary political and economic pressure created by Covid-19, will require a strategic approach and aligning all public money for public benefits.

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Resolving conflicts over land use

Departmental resources will be scarce in the years to come. In a scenario in which each department has its own targets and plans, competing incentive structures emerge - for example; Defra helps subsidize intensive farming systems, for greater productivity and cheaper food, which puts too many nitrates in water courses, and which the water companies (and their customers) have to pay to clean up.

A land use framework would iron out these competing incentive structures, providing clear guidance on cross-departmental priorities. Through comprehensive data mapping of available opportunities on the land, as well as clear principles and prioritisation, it would harmonise schemes like tree planting and housebuilding, rather than have them compete over vanishingly small and pressured resources.

Contributing to UK leadership in tackling climate change

COP26, which could have been a showcase for UK leadership on climate change, has been postponed for a year. Though a disappointment, it gives government a year to develop an environmentally sound response to Covid-19 that demonstrates global leadership. A land use framework would bring coherence and connection across the different aspirations in the COPs, integrate the regional and environmental aspects of post-Covid-19 renewal and in doing so set an international benchmark.