

# Making the best use of our land

Report from St George's House consultation 20-21 February

Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

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## About the event

### A note on Coronavirus:

*The spread of Coronavirus will rightly loom large in any public policy conversation for at least the next few years. It is too early to say precisely what its impact on land use policy will be, though it does cast light on the insecurities of dependency on global supply chains for food production. Just in time supply chains look more unstable than ever and as a result the government has defined key workers as including, "those involved in food production, processing, distribution, sale and delivery".*

*However, the country that emerges on the other side may be so radically transformed that all finds in this report should be treated as especially provisional. In particular, the enormous energy that will be required to rebuild the country from the economic devastation to come will mean civil service resources will be scarce and appetite for major reform, unless specifically tied to that rebuild effort, small.*

*A land use framework must, therefore, be tied to the general rebuilding effort with which the country will be engaged.*

On February 20-21 leaders in the world of UK land use met at St George's House in Windsor Castle for a consultation to discuss how we can make the best use of our limited land. Farmers and landowners, environmentalists and campaigners, planners and policy makers gathered together in an event kindly and expertly hosted by St George's House Trust. It was the culmination of a stream of work the FFCC has been carrying out for several years, a process that has helped bring together diverse voices to call for a more strategic approach to land use in this country.

Senior civil servants, policy makers, planners and landowners, environmental campaigners and leaders from farming and other rural organisations all gathered together to answer the following questions:

- Given the triple emergencies of climate, nature and public health, what mechanisms currently exist for ensuring land uses that drive change in the right direction?
- What's the best way, in your view, to achieve integration of ambitions for sustainable land use?
- At what levels (e.g. UK, national, regional, county, parish) should we try to achieve integration?
- Would a standing Land Use Commission facilitate an integrated approach to land use, or add an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy?

Land is the fundamental ingredient without which no government objective can be achieved. Proper use of it, especially on an island as small and densely populated as ours, is therefore essential. The starting position of each participant at the consultation was that land is not currently fully delivering on its potential to deliver a range of public needs, and that a more strategic approach would enable it to play a better role in delivering key social, economic and environmental objectives and aligning resources for public value.

There were of course differences in approach and emphasis over the consultation. But the level of agreement was extraordinary too; across farming and environmental sectors, in the civil service and among countryside campaigners, there is a recognition that the

governance of land in the UK, and particularly in England, is not fit for purpose and requires change in order to meet the challenges we face.

Equipped with a mandate to develop and test a land use framework, the FFCC is now focused on two outputs. Firstly, piloting some of the more strategic approaches to land use that were advocated in the consultation. Secondly, turning the conclusions of the consultation and the findings of the pilots into detailed policy. Both aspects of this strategy will involve working in partnership with stakeholders.

## The problem

Our planet is confronted by climate and ecosystems crises that threaten the quality of human life on earth. This is not some distant threat but rather an ongoing process of deterioration of our environment which is already well under way. Last year parliament declared climate change an emergency. The current pandemic and ensuing economic shutdown may offer, alongside much heartbreak and uncertainty, some very fleeting relief to the planet, but it will add its own pressures on land use – specifically the need to ensure adequate levels of national food production.

Thus far, action to meet the scale of the climate challenge has not been forthcoming. And in Britain, we could add to the climate and ecosystems crises a public health crisis driven in large part by poor diets. From farming for healthy food and enabling carbon sequestration to supporting habitat creation, a large part of the solution to these crises is to be found on and in the land.

Indeed, from climate change to housing and infrastructure, land is often the unspoken but decisive element in policy debate. Yet this debate – and, correspondingly, policy making – is too often siloed and too rarely focused on the potential for land to deliver multiple benefits. Or else, as with many spatial planning initiatives, work is concentrated solely on generating economic growth in urban areas. From the 25-Year Environment Plan to targets for housebuilding, from the work of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission to the Agriculture Bill and tree planting targets, multiple government initiatives and targets relate to land use, yet there is no joined up coordination between them. What's more, as we have explored in previous papers, often different targets and schemes incentivise contradictory practices.<sup>1</sup> In Cambridgeshire, for example, Defra are seeking to protect natural capital that is under threat from the Oxford-Cambridge Arc; MHCLG, by contrast, is seeking to maximise housebuilding and boost economic growth.

But how can these multiple objectives all be satisfied when our country is the most densely populated major country in Europe, and with an ageing population and net

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<sup>1</sup> <https://medium.com/the-rsa-food-farming-countryside-commission/public-value-background-review-6c77ae171d4a>

immigration ensuring it is likely to remain so for some time?<sup>2</sup> The University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL) conducted demand-supply analysis and found that to meet a “growing UK population’s food, space and energy needs while increasing the area needed to protect and enhance the nation’s natural capital,” the UK would need to free up another additional 7 million hectares.<sup>3</sup> The land for that is simply not there; the UK as a whole is only 24.25 million hectares.

This has two clear implications. Firstly, some realism is needed in terms of what is achievable and what is not. Endlessly expanding targets produced in siloes are not helpful when divorced from the materiality of UK land. Secondly, multifunctionality – the principle of land being carefully utilised to deliver multiple benefits – is not a luxury extra but instead an essential component of any more strategic approach to land use in the UK.

At the St George’s House consultation, participants sought to take the first steps towards designing a land use framework that could align governance mechanisms and policy objectives to deliver public value.

## The political opportunity

Brexit already represented an unfrozen moment. New legislative possibilities are emerging, sclerotic institutions are being shaken up and exposed to new challenges, and all old ways of doing things are subject to interrogation and transformation. The global pandemic will upend every system in this country in much more profound ways still. The bipartisan assumption of the last few decades – that globalisation, characterised by high levels of mobility and lengthy just-in-time global supply chains, would bring about greater global integration and adherence to liberal values – will come under considerable theoretical and practical strain. Food sovereignty may come to be regarded less as a romantic agrarianism than a hard-headed aspect of a realist foreign policy. Everything is up for grabs once more.

In December 2019 the Conservative party won a landslide majority. Though the manifesto itself was slim and frequently light on detail, the party promised transformational change – including in areas like housing, farming and climate change – which will depend directly on how we make decisions about land use. While it is unclear what aspects of the manifesto are realistically deliverable in the new context, a land use framework offers the best means for the government to deliver on their manifesto commitments and make the most of the unfrozen moment. It would do so in five key areas:

- A land use framework will support the government to raise agricultural and environmental standards

The government has pledged to “raise standards in areas like workers’ rights, animal welfare, agriculture and the environment (2019, 5).” Environmental and agricultural standards are about how we treat the land and those who work in and on it. If they are

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<sup>2</sup> Although a long-term downward trend in global mobility and UK net migration is a not implausible medium-term outcome of coronavirus, which would relieve some pressure on UK land. However, climate change could drive mass movement to the more temperate regions.

<sup>3</sup> The University of Cambridge, Institute for Sustainability Leadership (2014). ‘The best use of UK agricultural land’.

simply imposed at a statutory level without structures in place that can help land managers make the right decisions and meet those standards, then they will fall flat.

- A land use framework will mediate between conflicts over land and enable building the infrastructure that government has committed to

The government has committed to a huge amount of infrastructure spending, from its new deal for towns (2019, 26) to its £100bn infrastructure spending on roads, rail, flood defences, etc. (2019, 27), much of which is planned in small towns and rural areas. Above all, the government has pledged to build “at least a million more homes, of all tenures.” And crucially, it pledged to build them “in the areas that really need them” (2019, 31). To do so, it promises simplification of the planning system and to build beautifully. Alongside this, the manifesto committed to not just protecting but enhancing the Green Belt, prioritising brownfield development. These ambitious promises cannot be done without a structure in place that determines what needs doing where and involves the whole community in decision-making around critical infrastructure projects.

Additionally, the manifesto commits to governance that connects English and Welsh border communities: “Too often,” as the manifesto states, “infrastructure is focused on national connectivity within England and within Wales, rather than across the communities which live and work near the border. We will work with the Welsh Government and councils on both sides of the border to negotiate a transformative Marches Growth Deal, focusing on cross-border infrastructure which supports the local and cross-border economy” (2019, 47). Again, these complex areas of cross-national governance would be benefited by a straightforward framework that provides a mechanism for mediation.

- A land use framework will enable government to meet its key environmental targets

The Conservative manifesto built on the already considerable set of key environments with many new commitments both specific and general. 75,000 acres of trees a year are to be planted, and action on plastics, waste and litter is promised along with a new coast to coast path across the North and new National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty - all to be supported by a £640m Nature for Climate Fund (2019, 43). But all these commitments remain empty until it is clear both that they can be delivered and that they can be delivered in the right places. As experts at the consultation explained, activities like planting trees are not intrinsic goods; they only make sense if the right trees are planted in the right places, and in particular achieve convergence with the rest of the natural and built environment.

Similarly, the government has new commitments on the ‘Blue Belt’, achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and improving flood defences and air quality (2019, 55). It also pledges to “improve poor quality land, increase biodiversity and make our beautiful countryside more accessible for local community use” (2019, 31). These admirable commitments will only be delivered on and in the land.

- A land use framework will ensure farming remains a critical part of the rural economy and is sustainable for farmers and the environment alike

Farming, and specifically the need for a 10-year transition to agroecology, was the subject of another St George's House consultation led by the FFCC. The Agriculture Bill sets out the future direction this government will take farming as we leave the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), building on the commitment for a fair deal for farming set out in the manifesto (2019, 42). As a voluntarist scheme, the Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) that will take the place of CAP will not necessarily be sufficient to meet either government targets for farming or the real need to improve farming by 2030. They could lead, for example, to farmers ignoring the ELMs and doubling down on productivity at the expense of the environment. Or conversely, they could lead to so much diversification that levels of food production fall behind nationally satisfactory levels (and the current crisis emphasises the need to produce a large proportion of our food domestically). Perhaps worst of all, they could lead to farmers abandoning the fields altogether, with poorly managed land and endless suburbia taking their place. As the House of Lords Rural Economy Select Committee report showed, though most farm businesses are small employers, they have a local multiplier effect in the local economy – not to mention the significance they hold in the local and national imagination. Therefore, our post-Brexit farming policy too will need to be situated within a wider national framework that can set priorities around food production and environmental and biodiversity restoration – and ELMs should then flow forth from that framework.

- A land use framework will help deliver the meaningful devolution the government is planning:

Devolution has emerged as a cornerstone of this government's agenda. The manifesto's "ambition is for full devolution across England, building on the successful devolution of powers to city region mayors, Police and Crime Commissioners and others, so that every part of our country has the power to shape its own destiny." Further, the government commits to "publish[ing] an English Devolution White Paper setting out our plans next [this] year" (2019, 29). There has been ongoing debate about the best spatial units through which to deliver devolution, with metro mayors and LEPs rightly criticised for urban-centrism. To successfully devolve power to all communities in the UK, spatial units more suited to rural communities will have to be part of the bargain. Catchment areas, parishes and counties have all been discussed as possible small-scale units – but there will need to be regional coordination too, to ensure national coherence and to resolve those many land use decisions that take place across local boundaries. Here there may well be a useful overlap between the place-based, often rurally focused governance structures a land use framework would entail, and the government's wider devolution agenda.

**The opportunity is clear.** A land use framework will allow government a clear way of viewing all of its promises and targets within a shared frame of reference for delivery. As the CISL analysis discussed above makes clear, if each target were pursued in a silo the government would fail to honour its commitments simply because of the UK's shortage of land. Only through a systems-wide approach that encourages multifunctionality and considers all the UK's assets and needs in the round can they be delivered. With a government that has shown its recognition of the need for reform, there is a clear opportunity for a land use framework to emerge as a useful mechanism of delivery.

## The consultation: a summary

### A brief history of land use

A presentation guided participants through the major changes in land use and in policy governing land in the UK over the past century. We were reminded that the challenge is not new. In 1944 the government set out a White Paper on Land Use, looking ahead to the coming post-war reconstruction:

*“Provision for the right use of land, in accordance with a considered policy, is an essential requirement of the government’s programme of postwar reconstruction. New houses... the new layout of areas devastated by reason of age or bad living conditions; new schools...; the balanced distribution of industry...; the requirements of sound nutrition and of a healthy and well-balanced agriculture; the preservation of land for national parks and forests, and the assurance to the people of enjoyment of the sea and countryside in times of leisure; a new and safer highway system better adapted to modern industrial and other needs; the proper provision of airfields - all these related parts of a single reconstruction involve the use of land, and it is essential that their various claims on land should be so harmonised as to ensure for the people this country the greatest possible measure of individual wellbeing and national prosperity.”*

After the war, the Town and Country Planning Act and the Agriculture Act, both of 1947, attempted to realise this vision - despite the latter’s focus on formal productivity. Yet in the decades that have followed, land uses have become increasingly disaggregated from one another. Small-scale farming has lost its place as the bedrock of many communities, with monocultures taking its place. For all the national intent of the 1944 White Paper, the only spatial plans we have now are local. The result is that there are an enormous set of demands placed on the land - from the climate and ecosystem crises, from human needs and from government policies - with no means of reconciling them.



## Principles of a land use framework

The consultation found broad agreement on the principles of a land use framework. Some principles concern the overall vision for land use in the UK, others describe the way in which a land use framework should operate in practice. Together, these should form the basis of a land use framework.

### Vision:

- **Multifunctionality:** to deliver varied human and ecological needs where land is in short supply, land must be used to bring about multiple benefits
- **Going with the grain:** land should be used for the things which it is best at - the right trees should be planted in the right places, and so on
- **Circular ecology and a long-term view:** land should be viewed as a system that naturally changes over time, and managed so that it produces multiple benefits as it transitions through natural ecological cycles
- **Human needs and culture:** where possible, land should be used in a way that accords with the heritage of the place and increases social wellbeing
- **Future generations:** decisions about the land should be taken in the interests of future generations, rather than solely to meet immediate needs

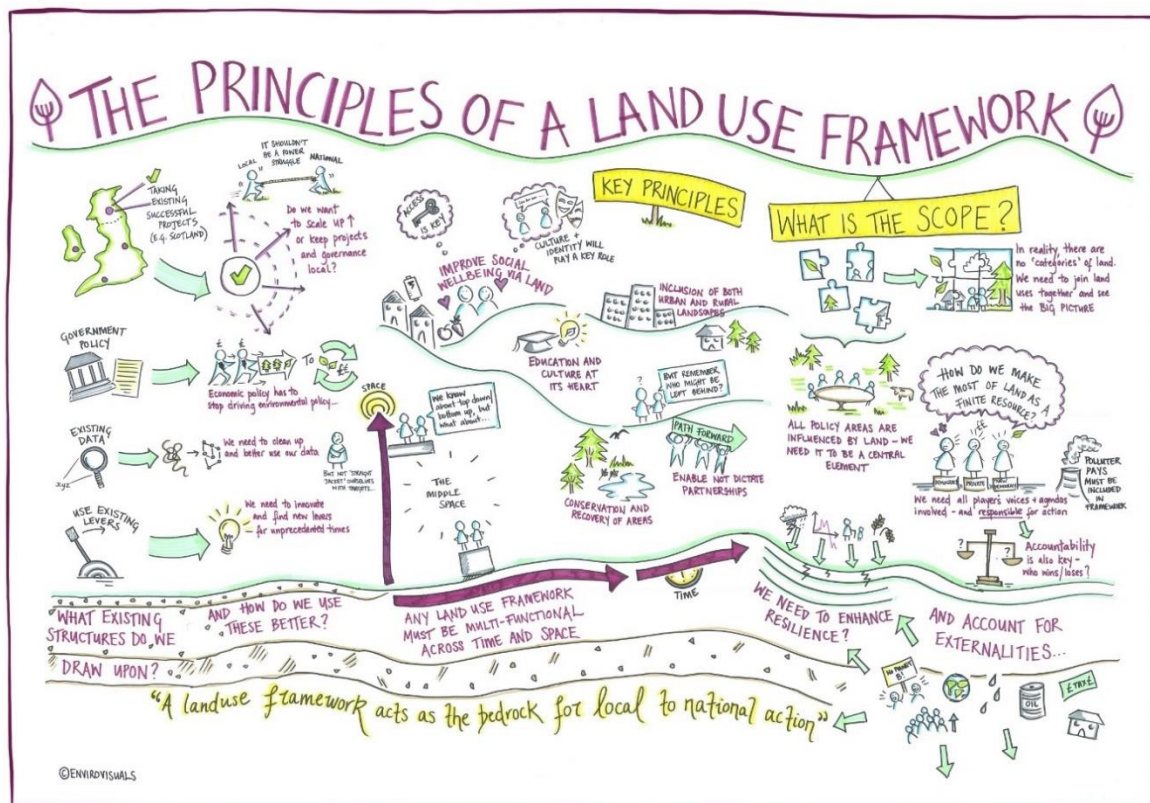
### Operation:

- **National framework, regional targets, local implementation:** while the overall strategic vision should be set nationally, targets should reflect regional and local variation and, as much as possible, local places, communities and stakeholders should be responsible for setting a local vision that satisfies the regional targets



and national framework. The national framework and regional targets should enable, not dictate, to local communities, and the three levels should be responsive to one another

- **Local engagement:** local communities and stakeholders should not merely be consulted ex post facto, as is so often the case in public consultations. Instead their engagement should be thorough and should shape decision making
- **Aligning the incentives:** the polluter pays principle must apply so that there is a cost to misuse of land. The corollary of this is that the positive system of incentives and subsidies (delivered by ELMs, taxation, private markets, etc.) must encourage integrated, multifunctional uses of land
- **Dynamism:** the framework must be responsive to how land use in other parts of the country affects what is required overall, and to how needs change over time
- **Learning from what exists:** where possible, a land use framework should learn from best practice past, present and internationally. A huge number of initiatives at local, regional and national level – River Basin Management Plans, Local Resilience Forums, etc. – have experimented with various forms of coordinated decision-making at different scales. The best of these should be emulated. Additionally, where possible, rather than creating entirely new structures and layers of bureaucracy, a land use framework should link together and scale up existing mechanisms for delivery
- **Data mapping:** consistent and reliable data, particularly of natural capital, should be captured and used as the basis for developing national, regional and local maps which inform what is needed where. They should map both what is, and what could be



## Implementing a land use framework

The FFCC is moving from research to implementation across the Commission's work. In developing a UK-wide land use framework that means two interrelated pieces of work: piloting a framework, and developing detailed policy recommendations for its implementation. At the consultation the FFCC and our friends and stakeholders took the first significant steps towards both.

### Piloting a land use framework

Given the current health crisis and the likely focus of political and civil service attention on coronavirus and its impact for the next few years, the FFCC plans - in keeping with its place-based and action-oriented approach - to trial these frameworks at the level of large counties or large parts of them, where there is sufficient scale to take a big picture view, but real potential for local visioning and engagement. Rather than proposing an abstract and top-down framework and hoping for ministerial support, the idea is to see what works in particular places and scale up from there. While the end objective is a national land use framework, in the interim the FFCC's efforts will focus on coordinating and cohering local efforts to manage land in accordance with the principles set out above. These will then influence our recommendations for the particular shape of a national framework.

Separate groups discussed four possible sites for a land use framework based on the first-hand experience of participants in each place. In the spirit of not reinventing the wheel, within these discussions the consultation moved beyond the abstract case for a land use framework and focused on identifying specific gaps that needed filling. These gaps fell

into four main categories: mapping natural capital and future opportunities for land at a granular level; ensuring land is used appropriately and delivers multiple benefits; the right legislative framework and decision-making structures for a land use framework; and setting an overall vision that guides how decisions about land are made.

The discussions we held, and the places we chose to focus on, should not be read as dictating the final decision we make about where to pilot a land use framework. Instead, they give a sense of the kinds of gaps which a framework would help resolve and the place-based variation we can expect across the country. The most promising sites for a land use framework are where the FFCC is already active on the ground, such as Devon.

#### Devon and the importance of mapping:

The Pioneer Project is part of the North Devon biosphere. Funded by Defra, it has pursued a natural capital approach to look at how agencies engage on the ground to improve integration for funding and investment. Within each 1km squared block it found that up to 13 different agencies currently govern different aspects of land use policy. Farmers and other land managers therefore are given all manner of information from different agencies with no overall coherence, making it harder to act to improve land management. Despite this high concentration of activity, resources are scarce leaving a planning system that is both clunky and starved of resources.

A land use framework in this area would largely be about mapping and coordination. It would show the natural capital within each small parcel of land, and therefore the opportunities (from carbon sequestration and providing curlew habitation to freeing land for sustainable housing) that align with government priorities (and the principles outlined above) that are available to land managers. While of course there is always room for innovation, and Knepp Castle has shown what can be done on unfavourable land, this would help land managers optimise use of their land. It would be a tool rather than a plan, and it should be a tool that is integrated with other aspects of an advisory service that helps land managers make decisions that are both economically viable and beneficial to the environment and ecosystems.

#### The Green Belts and multifunctionality:

There is a longstanding policy consensus that the Green Belt deserves protection, and the Conservative manifesto promised to go beyond this and enhance it. At present the country's 15 Green Belts serve their role as a buffer between city and country with considerable success. However, in large areas they provide very little environmental benefit, are frequently inaccessible to the public, and thus serve as a good example of a significant part of UK land which is currently not managed to deliver multiple benefits. Golf courses and other monocultures, for example, make up a substantial proportion of the country's Green Belts.<sup>4</sup>

A land use framework would renew the purpose of the Green Belt, explicitly extending their remit from acting as a brake on urban sprawl to actively enhancing the environment and tackling the climate and ecosystem crises. A framework could set priorities and act as

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.citymetric.com/fabric/london-s-golf-courses-could-provide-homes-million-people-even-low-densities-4778>

a de facto authority for the Green Belt (which, unlike AONBs and National Parks, currently lack any single management vision), setting a different set of incentives than those which currently encourage land banking.

#### North Yorkshire / North Norfolk and vision:

In both places there is currently a lack of coherence regarding how decisions about land are made. Divisions between old and new money, vested interests in the form of agribusiness and existing political settlements, and a lack of clearly marketed opportunities to improve land management all hamper the prospects of a coherent approach to land use that delivers multiple benefits.

A framework in North Yorkshire or North Devon would provide clarity of vision and share opportunities and best practice among local authorities and land managers. In addition to the principles listed above, a cohering and easily identified narrative would provide stakeholders a shared goal - this could be a climate-oriented target like net zero, or something in the tradition of place making.

#### Wales and the right legislative framework:

In Wales, the Environment Act and the Future Generations Act, both of 2016, provide a legislative backdrop that is beginning to serve as the basis for a more thoroughgoing land use framework. The Future Generations Act sets out seven wellbeing goals which are then underpinned by a 'sustainable development principle' to encourage a strategic and long-term approach to meeting those goals. While there is no explicit focus on it, several of the wellbeing goals - a healthier Wales and a resilient Wales, for example - segue neatly with land use.<sup>5</sup> There are shortcomings with the Act, of course. First and foremost, it only applies to public bodies and so has limited capacity to influence the behaviour of landowners and other stakeholders. It also has limited powers of enforcement.

The Environment Act is another component in the architecture of what could become a land use framework for Wales. It places a requirement on Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to provide 'area statements' that detail the natural resources in a chosen area, the benefits they provide, how the land is currently being sustainably managed, and how it can be better managed in the future. NRW is then required to implement the area statements. The Act is broad in scope - it dictates that every part of Wales must fit within at least one area statement.<sup>6</sup>

Together, the Future Generations Act and the Environment Act put Wales in a more advanced legislative position than England to begin piloting a land use framework.<sup>7</sup> (Scotland is also in an advanced position through its Land Commission, which focuses on ownership and taxation as well as land use. In Northern Ireland detailed work from the James Hutton Institute and the Land Matter Taskforce produced a land strategy for Northern Ireland - with Stormont now unfrozen work there can recommence too. All the nations of the UK were represented at the consultation.) The FFCC is in conversation with

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<sup>5</sup> <https://futuregenerations.wales/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/150623-guide-to-the-fg-act-en.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2016/3/section/11/enacted>

<sup>7</sup> Scotland and Northern Ireland were also both represented at the consultation. Scotland has a Land Commission, focused on ownership and taxation as well as land use.

Natural Resources Wales about how best the existing framework there could be supplemented to provide a more comprehensive pilot of a land use framework.

