

‘Making the most out of England’s land’

House of Lords Land Use in England Committee

February 2023

Strutt & Parker introduction and comment

This briefing note summarises the main points from the Land Use in England Committee’s report.

The concept of co-ordinating or planning land uses is not at new one at all. Indeed Scottish has a [land use strategy](#) and a [Land Commission](#) that provides advice and guidance on strategic land use issues.

However, there is nothing like this in England at the moment, despite this call and previous calls for more strategic co-ordination and planning (see box below).

The Royal Society is one of the latest of a number of organisations to propose that England needs a land use framework. It concluded in its February 2023 report on [Multifunctional landscapes - informing a long-term vision for managing the UK’s land](#), that the increasing multiple demands on land will require science and innovation to increase the sustainable productivity of land for the multiple outputs society wants and needs. This ‘necessitates a strategic rethink of the way decisions are made about how landscapes and the services they provide are managed.’ The land use frameworks, for each of the home countries, need to be flexible so they can evolve as evidence or policy needs change, and ‘be in place long enough that individual land managers can use them to inform their own management and investment decisions.’

Professor Sir Charles Godfray, director of the Oxford Martin School at Oxford University, suggested that an apolitical body should look at land use, which he says will change as within a decade many processed meat products will be made with plant-based meat substitutes.

The **Food, Farming & Countryside Commission** also called for a land use framework. Its 2022 proposal is based on the principles *Place, People and Public Value*, and the Commission suggests that it would be developed collaboratively - starting with local communities and setting out agreed principles and practices for decision making by local and national organisations. The full proposal can be found [here](#).

Peter Hetherington, in his 2021 book *Land renewed: reworking the countryside* also calls for a new approach to thinking around land. He calls for a cohesive strategy, across government, both to build resilience into our food system, from growers and producers to retailers while, at the same time, addressing the climate emergency. His proposal is for a new land and countryside agency in England, partly modelled on both the Scottish Land Commission and former bodies in England, abolished since 2010. He says that this is crucial to ensure the new Agriculture Act, including the new Environmental Land Management regime, and the new Environment Act, aimed at restoring nature, are complementary.

The **Campaign to Protect Rural England’s** 2017 paper *Landlines: why we need a strategic approach to land* made the case for a strategic approach to land use. It starts from the assumption that the current approach is delivering land use that is far from optimal for almost everyone. It suggested the establishment of a new Land Use Commission, which comprises representatives from all the key sectors with an interest in land and, at least initially, would be independent of Government. It might presage the creation of a new Department of Land Use as advocated by Lord Deben.

Some of the most advanced attempts to show what changes to land use will be required to produce enough food and also meet national goals for climate change mitigation and adaptation have been produced by the **Climate Change Committee**. The government has committed to the UK becoming net-zero in terms of carbon emissions by 2050. With the agricultural sector a net contributor to climate change because of the level of greenhouse gases it produces, this will have implications for land use on farms and estates.

The Committee’s 2018 report *Land Use: Reducing emissions and preparing for climate change* made a number of recommendations that are very challenging for the farming sector and would lead to significant structural change. Its main conclusion is that national goals for climate change mitigation and adaptation are unlikely to be met without fundamental changes to the way land is used and managed. It says that new land use policy should promote transformational land uses and reward land managers for public goods that deliver climate mitigation and adaptation objectives, better reflecting the value of the goods and services that land provides.



One of the strengths of a land use framework, as the Land Use in England Committee notes, is in making the link between national, regional and local policy clearer, including addressing trade-offs, conflicts and risks. It could also improve how policies are designed for and work in rural places; this is often called 'rural proofing'. Currently information or data on the effectiveness of policies is incomplete or non-existent so it would be positive if a framework helped produce better data on rural places.

There are numerous statistics on land, its use and the environment in the UK and it can be sometimes difficult to 'see the wood from the trees'. We think that key ones to help focus are:

1. UK self-sufficiency in food that is consumed by people, not animals, is falling. The UK is only 23% self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables. Many places that food is imported from are subject to political risks, significant environmental degradation or climate change risks.
2. The UK imports the majority of the timber it uses, another risk, so supporting domestic production is important.
3. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the developed world. This is a significant risk to future food production, a poor legacy to leave future generations and unfair to biodiversity itself.
4. The UK is highly reliant on imported energy, mainly gas, a risk in terms of energy security and the cost of living, but has had a moratorium on new wind farms in England until recently. If solar is scaled up in line with the UK's net zero target it would cover around 0.5% of the UK farmed area, less than the area covered by golf courses.

These are not simple issues at all and involve the rights and views of a large number of different stakeholders, not least landowners and managers. When this type of approach is discussed, it can quickly become an argument about different land uses versus others, and become confrontational. For example, food production versus tree planting versus solar farms and energy.

However, if the trade-offs and conflicts are not even considered or discussed, then the outcome of the ad-hoc patchwork of different land uses is highly unlikely to deliver many, if any, of the desired outcomes, and that will be frustrating to everyone.

The text is verbatim from the report's summary and body apart from the headings, which are the author's, and a few additional comments, which are indicated by square brackets and the introduction and comment by Strutt & Parker.

For a quick read, what are considered to be **key points have been highlighted in yellow** and **green (the really key points)**.

Summary of the main points of the report

Introduction

1. Land use in England is changing radically. Moving away from a landscape dominated by food production, we are now facing the challenges and opportunities of a new environment where nature and biodiversity restoration, carbon sequestration, new development and infrastructure needs and the role of the land for energy, access and wellbeing are all taking on a greater priority. There is, however, no reason why our ability to achieve food security should be compromised by these new priorities.
2. The Government has set itself a range of targets that will require changes to how we use land. Its current commitments include:
 - Maintaining our current self-sufficiency in food at just over 60%
 - Increasing woodland in England by one million acres
 - Increasing new habitats for biodiversity by one million acres
 - Enlarging the area of England covered by National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty from 27% to 30%, a 3% increase that amounts to around 1.8 million acres
 - Building 300,000 new houses each and every year.

The case for a Land Use Commission

3. Outside of the planning system, however, competing land use needs are not assessed by any overarching framework across England and there is no formal advisory or coordinating body outside of Government departments.



4. Based on the evidence we heard, we believe the case is compelling for the creation of a Land Use Commission, which will be tasked with enabling the development and promulgation of a land use framework to help landowners, managers and other decision makers to make the most appropriate decisions for land.
5. The model put forward by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, in particular, provides a comprehensive vision and was widely endorsed by those who championed a land use framework. See box below.

Land Use Case Study: Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

Since 2018 the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) has been convening discussions nationally, and trialling a Land Use Framework approach at a local level through pilots in Devon and Cambridgeshire, funded jointly by FFCC, Environment Agency and the Geospatial Commission.

The rationale is that pursuing a more deliberative and strategic approach to land use decision making would enable more government targets to be achieved, joining up the delivery of many complementary goals for jobs, housing, nature recovery and net zero.

Key issues addressed include what a good land use framework process and outcome look like, and what are the core ingredients needed to break down current sector silos and targets.

Two pilot projects (Devon and Cambridgeshire) were used in a series of deliberative discussions involving bodies across the land use sector operating at different scales and across different governance frameworks to try to understand what a good land use framework might look like, covering both the process and outcome.

The work also identified gaps and key questions affecting government targets, as well as trying to work out the trade-offs between the current plethora of government targets in each land use sector. These include how much food the UK should aim to produce and where; how much land should be devoted to energy and where it should go; how we can incorporate green infrastructure across the landscape and improve public access to nature; and how sustainable the UK should be for timber production.

Implications for a wider land use framework are that it must bridge across the whole of land use—urban and rural—and should cover not only agriculture, nature and net zero land uses, but also the planning system, and national planning schemes. It must also integrate with local land use frameworks if the approach is to succeed; top-down and bottom-up approaches need to work effectively together.

6. We heard that the value of a land use framework would rest in:
 - its ability to bring together national targets, objectives and funding streams;
 - show the "line of sight" from national strategy to local plans to individual holdings;
 - consider resourcing needs;
 - take advantage of new growth and investment opportunities; and
 - be flexible and adaptive at every level.
7. It is not intended that the Commission should have any powers of direction, but rather for it to be a supporter and facilitator of effective land use [so a similar role to the Climate Change Committee and Scottish Land Commission].
8. We also noted words of warning from witnesses to ensure that a land use framework does not become too prescriptive and inflexible; favour some objectives over others; lead to "zoning by the back door"; or embed top-down decision-making powers.
9. We were encouraged when we saw DEFRA's commitment to develop a land use framework by 2023. However, we are concerned that the proposal is too limited in scope. Then-DEFRA Secretary of State Rt. Hon. George Eustice MP told us that ... he saw the scope as being limited to tree planting, peatland restoration and food production. Such a limited scope stands in contrast to what many witnesses told us should be included in a land use framework to effectively embed integration and break down silos.

Multifunctionality

10. At the heart of this approach should be place-based multifunctionality—the concept that simultaneous multiple benefits can be achieved in the same location with the right approach.



11. We believe that a multifunctional approach lends itself most clearly to a principle of land sharing, driven by local circumstances and priorities. [Land sharing means delivering multiple benefits simultaneously in the same location, such as a patchwork of agriculture incorporating natural features such as ponds and hedgerows, rather than keeping agriculture and wilderness separate. The alternative approach is land sparing, which involves large, separate areas of sustainably intensified agriculture and wilderness.
12. We call for Government to provide urgent clarity on the ELMS programme to give certainty and confidence to the farming community.
13. Government should also examine how it can best develop improved environmental management skills among all land managers.
14. We highlight the importance of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) in ensuring that locally appropriate environmental initiatives are encouraged on the right land with input from their communities throughout every part of England. LNRS must also have sufficient weight in the planning system to ensure their effectiveness.
15. Similarly, the incoming policy of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) must be accompanied by proper monitoring and enforcement, particularly where expected biodiversity benefits are not delivered.
16. Afforestation is clearly a priority in future land use to help meet climate goals. However, targets are being missed and necessary skills may not be present. Incentives, support and regulation must be reviewed. There should be more support for active woodland management of the existing resource and investment in skills development.
17. There is little commitment to supporting public access to land in ELMS, and this must be reviewed as part of the development of a land use framework with a view to prioritising access as a public good and reducing potential conflict with other important land uses. It is particularly important to prioritise access near locations where people live, such as in and near urban and peri-urban areas.
18. Planning rules and accompanying guidance should be changed to stress the need for sufficient green infrastructure provision and protection in new development, for the improvement and enhancement of existing infrastructure. Similarly, ...making more of the multifunctional potential of the Green Belt... should also be a priority for the framework. It is not suggested, and we do not propose, that the land use framework sets any distinct housing development policy or replaces the planning system in any way.
19. Developing the framework should include extensive consultation with those directly affected, identifying opportunities for regular engagement and feedback, overseeing improvements to data collection and accessibility, and taking an open and transparent approach to information gathering and sharing.
20. We call for the Land Use Commission to be set up as an independent, statutory arms-length public body under the Cabinet Office, with commissioners representing all relevant Government departments and with a budget similar to the Scottish Land Commission or the Climate Change Committee [which are @ £1.5m and £4.5m respectively].
21. Among other priorities, we argue that the Commission's role should be:
 - to prepare and update the land use framework
 - to encourage the publication and use of accessible, open source land use data
 - to review the effectiveness and impact of laws and policies relating to land and to advise Government
 - to work across local and national government
 - to enable an integrated approach, and
 - to produce a triennial report on progress and on improving the effectiveness of the multifunctional land uses to be laid before Parliament for debate.

End