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# AN AMBITIOUS LAND USE FRAMEWORK FOR ENGLAND

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## INTRODUCTION

The UK Government has committed to both reach net zero by 2050 and to halt and reverse the loss of nature globally by 2030. The way we use and manage land is critical to delivering these targets, yet our land resources are scarce, with many other competing pressures including food production, forestry, housing and enabling public access to nature. A more strategic approach to land use is needed to more effectively integrate and balance these demands on land, and help allocate public and private funding effectively to deliver for people and planet.

Our *Land of Plenty* report provides a roadmap for how agriculture and land use sectors can move towards a nature-positive pathway to meeting climate commitments, while producing nutritious food and supporting farmers and communities. As part of this vision, WWF calls on UK governments to work with communities, local authorities, and landowners to develop a set of land use frameworks to fill this gap, alongside a decarbonisation strategy for agriculture and land use.

The Government is expected to publish its Land Use Framework in 2023. This briefing sets out WWF's vision for a land use framework in England that enables us to make the best use of our land resources for climate, nature and people.

## WWF'S VISION FOR A LAND USE FRAMEWORK

A land use framework for England should provide a **clear long-term vision for how best to use our limited land resources to meet the 'Triple Challenge'** of mitigating and adapting to climate change, reversing biodiversity loss and meeting the nutritional needs of the population, while ensuring a just transition. This must include consideration of the need to **avoid offshoring impacts overseas**.

Critically, a land use framework must be a **cross-government mission** and demonstrate how policies are expected to deliver land use change in a coherent way across departments, not just within Defra. Policies and principles needed to deliver a land use framework must be led by **national targets and scientific evidence**, and the land use framework and modelling underpinning it will need to be adaptive and forward-looking, building in new data and evidence as it becomes available.

As potentially competing national policies on land use come together in practice locally, a land use framework will also need to incorporate **principles that give mandate to local communities to collectively make decisions on land use** – whether through local plans, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, or actions under Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) and forestry schemes.

Decision-making on land use at national and local levels, as well as monitoring and evaluation of policy, needs to be supported by better and more accessible data, including **spatial planning and decision-making tools**.

# STRUCTURE: PILLARS OF AN EFFECTIVE LAND USE FRAMEWORK

## **(1) Overarching vision for land use in England**

The land use framework should set out government's long-term vision for land use and define the priority objectives for our land. This should include a commitment to multi-functional land use that delivers:

- mitigation of and adaptation to climate change
- halting and reversing the loss of nature by 2030
- food production that is aligned with the provision of sustainable, nutritious diets to all citizens
- sustainable development under the National Planning Policy Framework.
- public access to nature.

## **(2) Coherent, evidence-based land use policy**

Currently, government policy relating to land use is disjointed. The Government's Net Zero Strategy provides little detail of how the agriculture and land use sectors are expected to deliver emissions reductions and removals to contribute to meeting Net Zero. The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) sets out a range of targets and policies which are intended to ladder up to halting nature loss, but these appear to have been developed in tandem and without providing evidence for how policies are expected to meet targets. Similarly, ELM schemes, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) and the planning system must be better integrated.<sup>1, 2</sup> A land use framework presents an opportunity to bring siloed land use policies together under one delivery-focussed process.

Designing a land use framework will require a systems approach, by clarifying links between nature, climate, agriculture, food and planning policies and providing clear guidance at local council, community and land manager level for how these policies fit together. While this should be the priority for a 2023 land use framework, achieving real policy coherence may require a cross-government review of policy and regulatory structures driving land use at different scales - as recommended in the Net Zero Review.

To guide this, the revised Net Zero Strategy must include a decarbonisation plan for agriculture and land use providing the evidence of how ELMs and other policies are expected to contribute to the government's Net Zero commitment, in alignment with its Environment Act and commitments in the Food Strategy. It should also explicitly recognise the role of diet shift in enabling a transition to a sustainable land use sector.

## **(3) Principles for local decision-making**

The land use framework should set out common principles for how land-use decisions should be made locally to balance national objectives and local priorities, in a way that promotes genuine local community input. These principles should apply to development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), Biodiversity Net Gain and given weight in the planning system. A land use framework should empower local authorities and communities with sufficient resources and tools to apply these principles at local level.

Building from the Food Farming and Countryside Commission's pilots and principles, and Regional Land Use Partnerships in Scotland<sup>3</sup>, local authorities should be empowered to develop local or regional land use frameworks that ensure communities, farmers and land managers are at the heart of the conversation. WWF's 'Wholescape' Programme in Norfolk is also developing an exemplar for local

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<sup>1</sup> Countryside Stewardship plus appears to link to LNRS which is welcome. However, it is unclear whether LNRS' scope will cover actions principally designed for climate mitigation and adaptation.

<sup>2</sup> BNG is only linked to LNRSs by the provision of extra credit for a 'strategic' site. This could be strengthened, e.g. through local authority Site Registers for ecological improvement, thereby creating spreadsheets of BNG investment parcels aligned with LNRS.

<sup>3</sup> [Partnerships\\_brief\\_final.pdf \(ed.ac.uk\)](#)

engagement at landscape scale, with the aim of meeting the Triple Challenge across land and sea through deliberative engagement. This will provide key learnings for delivering locally responsive outcomes for climate, nature and people.

#### **(4) Accessible data and tools**

Optimal decision-making around land use requires a robust and accessible evidence base. The Geospatial Commission's *National Land Data Programme* will be critical to enabling better data collection and access, and therefore better decision-making. Local councils need up to date, free to access, high quality data, covering nature sites, flood risk, water quality and information about agricultural land. Similarly, the *Natural Capital and Ecosystems Services Programme* should be appropriately resourced given its importance both to assessing land use policy efficacy and leveraging private funding towards climate mitigation and nature restoration.

## **CONTENT: WHAT A LAND USE FRAMEWORK SHOULD DELIVER**

### **(1) Climate, nature and food on an equal footing**

Food production, measured primarily in terms of tonnes of food produced, has been the highest priority in determining land use in England since WWII, and Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine have both seen a renewed concern about food security. However, it is now recognised that the greatest threats to a resilient food system are climate change and biodiversity loss.<sup>4</sup> The land use framework needs to put nature, climate and food goals on equal footing, recognising their interdependencies and that through multi-functional land use, we can often achieve all three within the same landscape.

### **(2) Wider public value**

A land use framework needs to bring together national level ambitions on nature, climate and food goals with the needs of local people. This means consideration of how land use changes can support sustainable livelihoods and communities. It also provides an opportunity to enable more equitable access to nature for health and recreation. Whether through the planning system, Local Nature Recovery Strategies or new principles for local land use frameworks, delivering public value requires genuine community engagement and co-design.

### **(3) Nutritional security**

A land use framework and the policies that underpin it must put nutrition and diet change at its centre, not least as shifts in food consumption are key to reducing existing demands and trade-offs for land. The Government food strategy committed to broadly maintain current levels of self-sufficiency in food production. However, this approach to measuring food security does not take into account the quality of food being produced, including whether it will deliver nutritional security and improve public health outcomes. Land use targets and policy should enable delivery of healthy, sustainable diets to all citizens, including ensuring these diets are the most affordable. In practical terms this means producing nutritious, low-impact foods such as legumes and pulses, 'less and better' meat, dairy, and eggs, and limiting production of commodity crops used as ingredients in ultra-processed food products.

### **(4) Nature and climate friendly farming for all**

Not all land is equally productive for food, so a strategic approach to land use through a land use framework can help match farming practices to the capacity of the land. On high yielding land, regenerative practices and the use of 'eco-infrastructure' such as wildflower habitats, shelter belts and hedges can boost pollinators and pest control services to help sustainably optimise yields. Less productive land can support more extensive and/or culturally significant farming practices, including those which create and maintain semi-natural habitats, including meadows, heath, and wood pasture.

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<sup>4</sup> [Impact of climate change and biodiversity loss on food security - House of Lords Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/library/research-briefings/briefing/snippets/2022/07/impact-of-climate-change-and-biodiversity-loss-on-food-security)

Existing woodlands, peatlands and wetlands need to be well protected and restored to maximise their contribution to meeting our climate and nature goals.

### ***(5) Prioritising our best agricultural land to feed people***

Our best agricultural land should be prioritised for food, not for feed or biofuels. WWF's *Future of Feed Report* outlines that reducing the amount of cereals that we feed to livestock would free up land to grow highly nutritious food for people, while also opening up new space for nature. The report shows it is possible to stop using our best land to produce crops for livestock, but still produce sufficient livestock protein domestically to meet national dietary recommendations by focusing on the use of by-products, forage, and other low-opportunity cost feeds instead.

Moreover, if the UK ceased to cultivate crop-based and that land was dedicated to feed people instead, we could feed around 3.5 million more people a year.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, our forthcoming report on achieving net using low or no bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) will also look at the land requirement implied by our targets for BECCS and the impact growing these crops domestically will have on food production and biodiversity.

Lowland peatlands present a challenge, being some of England's most fertile soils but with huge potential for carbon storage and nature restoration. Our research on lowland peat identifies that a mosaic approach would achieve multiple benefits, including sustainable vegetable production in some areas, while raising water tables in others to support paludiculture or restoration. A land use framework should encourage multi-functional use of lowland peat for climate, nature and sustainable food production, while discouraging the use of peaty soils for feed or low nutrition crops like sugar beet.

### ***(6) Mechanisms and principles to guide public and private finance***

The government has set itself a target of raising at least £500m of private finance into nature recovery per year by 2027, increasing to more than £1bn by 2030.<sup>6</sup> It is essential that private finance is leveraged towards delivering the right environmental outcomes in the right places, and that communities are appropriately engaged in large scale land use changes. A land use framework could helpfully guide this, through better spatial data, principles for local land use decision-making, and clarity on how ELMs and private markets will work together to meet national objectives.

### ***(7) A reduction in overseas footprint***

A land use framework will also need to take account of our consumption footprint overseas, to ensure that we aren't simply meeting our food, nature and climate targets at home by offshoring our impacts. WWF's *Global Footprint Report* found that the UK needs to cut its footprint of consumption and production by 75% by 2030 to stay within safe planetary boundaries. Our domestic consumption of forest-risk commodities and other resources, as well as the way we use land, will be critical to putting the UK on a trajectory towards a liveable planet.

### ***(8) Links to the marine environment***

Terrestrial, aquatic and marine environments do not exist in isolation, and all have a critical role in meeting the Triple Challenge. There need to be clear mechanisms to consider the impact of land use decisions on aquatic and marine environments (and vice versa), from nature, climate, food and development perspectives. This should extend beyond the planning systems to incorporate all decisions concerning the use of resources at land and sea.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

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<sup>5</sup> [Threatened delay to farming reforms benefits no one – Inside track \(greenallianceblog.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Making the most out of England's land \(parliament.uk\)](#)