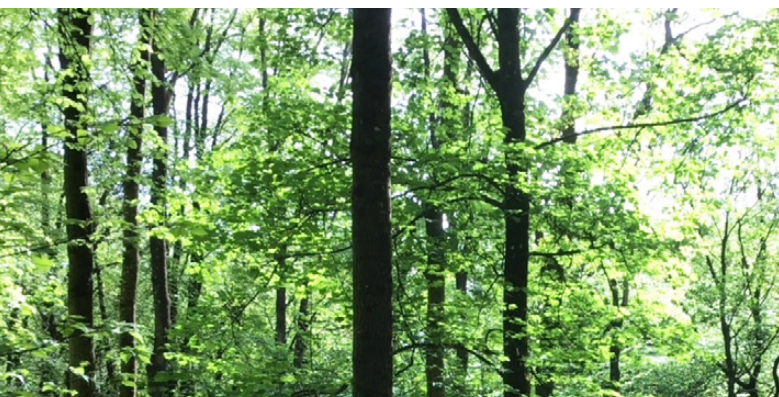




LAND of PLENTY?



Report of the **Northern Ireland Land Use Working Group 2026**

This report has been produced independently by the Northern Ireland Land Use Working Group. Its views and recommendations do not represent agreed Government policy, but are intended to inform ongoing discussion and future land use policy development.



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Department of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs

An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
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**LAND USE for
NET ZERO >>>
HUB**

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Note: This report is for the attention of the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in fulfilment of a request by DAERA to the Land Use for Net Zero Hub for a Rapid Response Project which has been executed by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission.

Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

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Members of the Working Group contributed on an individual basis. Not all views expressed in the report necessarily represent the views of every individual in the working group or their associated organisations.

Foreword

An assessment by 60 of the world's leading climate scientists states that in two years' time we will have breached the Paris Agreement warming limit of 1.5C. Meanwhile conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East and Africa are threatening our food supply chains and creating hardship, and much worse, for entire populations. We are disturbingly vulnerable to shocks from climate change and geopolitical events, and we are poorly prepared. Much of the resilience we need to deal with these shocks lies in how we manage our land – for food, for energy, for biodiversity, and to mitigate and adapt to climate change. It is important that we do that well, and that we do so with a sense of urgency.

There is a finite amount of land with increasing pressure on what society requires it to deliver, creating a pressing need to develop ways in which multiple benefits can be secured from the same piece of land. This is the land upon which all life depends.

In this report we propose a Land Use Framework, a process for making decisions that can reconcile the finite availability of land with the increasing demands on its use. At the core of the proposal is a multifunctional approach to land use.

This is an issue in which all of society has a stake: from farmers to urban dwellers, policy makers to developers, transport planners to community groups, hill walkers to financiers, and many more besides. The Land Use Working Group comprises a range of individuals drawn from government, NGOs, business and academia. While the group is a diverse one, it does not aspire to represent the views of the whole of society and therefore presents this report as the basis for wider stakeholder and public engagement. We offer the core proposal for a Land Use Framework for careful consideration, improvement and, we trust, broad support across government and wider society.

John Woods

Chair

Land Use Working Group

Status of this Report

This report has been prepared by the Northern Ireland Land Use Working Group in an independent and advisory capacity.

The views and recommendations set out in this report do not represent Government policy, but are intended to inform ongoing discussion and support the development of future land use policy and decision-making in Northern Ireland.

The report reflects the collective expertise and perspectives of the Group and is intended to make a constructive contribution to the next phase of work on land use.

Executive Summary

The Land Use Working Group was tasked with producing a report outlining what outcomes are wanted from land and a set of principles to be applied at every level in the land use decision making process. The purpose is to help guide land use policy making in Northern Ireland and form the basis of a future land use strategy/framework, supported by on-going stakeholder engagement.

The Working Group drew on experience and considered evidence from other jurisdictions in the UK and Ireland, and reviewed a range of strategies, policies and legislation alongside research evidence. It concluded that there is clear evidence that the demands on Northern Ireland's land far exceed the amount of land available. There is simply not enough land to meet the needs of society unless a multifunctional approach is taken.

The report recommends that the outcomes and principles agreed by the Working Group form the basis of a proposed Land Use Framework – a process that supports better, more sustainable decisions about land, by all those who need to make them including local and central government, businesses, NGOs and communities. The report also makes recommendations on a vision, the role of data, the scope and scale of decision-making, and the need for oversight of the proposed Land Use Framework.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE LAND USE WORKING GROUP ARE:

1. **A Land Use Framework** is adopted for Northern Ireland and this report is used as a basis for wider stakeholder and public consultation.
2. **VISION:** The proposed Land Use Framework is guided by this vision for Northern Ireland's land: *Land that supports life in all its diversity, that provides livelihoods in thriving communities and wellbeing for all citizens; that is cared for within ecological limits and for future generations; and that is nurtured to provide multiple functions.*
3. **OUTCOMES:** The proposed Land Use Framework is focused on achieving the following outcomes:
 - **SOIL:** Soils are restored to optimal chemical, biological and physical health.
 - **CARBON:** Our land sequesters and stores sufficient carbon to meet legal requirements and our share of national and international obligations.
 - **BIODIVERSITY:** Our land supports all forms of biodiversity, particularly those that are recognised as being under increased threat or pressure.
 - **WATER:** There is a secure and stable supply of clean water for public, commercial and environmental needs, while ensuring pollution and flood risks are minimised.
 - **FOOD:** Food production is sufficiently diverse and resilient to meet the nutritional needs of our population in the face of climate and geopolitical supply chain shocks.
 - **HOUSING:** Sufficient and affordable housing is available to meet the needs of the population.
 - **ENERGY:** A sufficient, secure, affordable and clean supply of renewable energy meets society's needs in a net zero future.
 - **INFRASTRUCTURE:** Communities benefit from the infrastructure they need to thrive.
 - **LIVELIHOODS:** Landowners have a range of options to earn a living from the land and citizens have opportunities to benefit from land-based economic and social activities.
 - **HEALTH AND WELLBEING:** Everyone has good and equitable access to green and blue spaces for recreation.

4. **PRINCIPLES:** The proposed Land Use Framework adopts the following principles:

- **MULTIFUNCTIONAL:** Land is recognised as multifunctional and opportunities for deriving multiple benefits are realised.
- **LAND ATTRIBUTES:** Land use decisions are based on the qualities, properties and characteristics of the land in question and the most suitable and beneficial functions recognised, valued and prioritised.
- **LOCALLY RESPONSIVE:** Local stakeholders and citizens are genuinely included in decision-making informed by broad public engagement, with local needs, aspirations and the sense of place, culture and history respected.
- **STEWARDSHIP FOR PROSPERITY:** the economic, social and environmental value of land is unlocked in a way that supports sustainable livelihoods, preserves its natural capital and supports a just transition to a net zero society.
- **LONG TERM, RESILIENT AND ADAPTIVE:** land is used in a way that both mitigates and adapts to climate change, achieves soil, biodiversity and water quality targets, and builds long term resilience.
- **ALIGNED:** Land use decisions align with commitments and targets at different spatial and administrative levels and across boundaries, and with relevant policy and legislation.
- **EVIDENCE-BASED AND PRECAUTIONARY:** Land use decisions are informed by appropriate and reliable data and governed by the precautionary principle.

5. **DATA, EVIDENCE AND TOOLS**

- Land use decisions are informed by appropriate and reliable data (including the use of mapping tools, and scientific and qualitative data) to evaluate risks, costs and benefits at several spatial and temporal scales, drawing on peer-reviewed research and innovation for long-term resilience. The natural capital approach to evidence-based land use decision-making is a valuable resource for the proposed Land Use Framework.

6. **SCOPE AND SCALE**

- Consideration is given to resourcing Community Planning Partnerships to implement the proposed Land Use Framework at appropriate levels within their local authority areas with effective local and citizen engagement.

7. **OVERSIGHT**

- A governance body, such as a Land Use Commission, is established to provide oversight for the proposed Land Use Framework.

Background

In February 2023 the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) convened a roundtable meeting that brought together policy makers from Scotland, England and the Republic of Ireland along with senior leaders, experts and stakeholders from Northern Ireland. The roundtable discussed the proposition that reconciling the finite availability of land with the increasing demands on its use requires a multifunctional approach so that the same piece of land can deliver multiple benefits.

Subsequently the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) asked the Land Use for Net Zero, Nature and People Hub (LUNZ Hub, a UKRI funded research programme) to convene a Land Use Working Group tasked with agreeing 'a set of principles and outcomes that will help to guide land use policy making in Northern Ireland and form the basis of a future land use strategy/framework, supported by on-going stakeholder engagement'. The LUNZ Hub appointed two of its member organisations, FFCC and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), to undertake this task.

The Working Group comprised experts, stakeholders and government departments and included the following areas of interest and expertise: farming, environment, community, local government, energy, water, planning, land profession, data and land use modelling, and land law. Membership from government comprised senior officials from DAERA, the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for the Economy.

It was not practicable to have all those with an interest in land represented in a Working Group of this nature. Members were therefore invited to participate in the group, not on the basis of representing any particular interest or group, but rather to bring their knowledge, experience and expertise to the task in a spirit of co-creation. Expertise from outside the group was invited to assist with deliberations.

The Working Group was chaired by FFCC's Director for Northern Ireland and the vice-chair was DAERA's Director of Natural Environment Policy.

The group was asked to:

- review objectives, targets and outcomes of existing government policies, strategies and plans for their impacts on land, alongside emerging pressures, to agree what outcomes are wanted from land
- consider land use decision making approaches taken by England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland
- consider the role of relevant science and land use models in future decision making
- consider, discuss and agree principles that could be applied at every level in the land use decision making process
- produce a report outlining an agreed set of principles and outcomes that will help to guide land use policy making in Northern Ireland and form the basis of a future land use strategy/framework, supported by on-going stakeholder engagement (see Annex A for Terms of Reference).

The group was asked to build on previous work, particularly the February 2023 FFCC roundtable discussion in Belfast, the 2024 FFCC roundtable in Edinburgh 'Land Use Decision Making in the UK and Ireland'¹, current land modelling work by the LUNZ Hub and material prepared by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) for DAERA to support internal consideration of land use in Northern Ireland.

At the group's first meeting it was agreed that the issue of governance and oversight of any future land use strategy/framework would be included in the report.

The group met five times between February and June 2025 and submitted its report to DAERA Minister, Andrew Muir MLA, in July 2025.

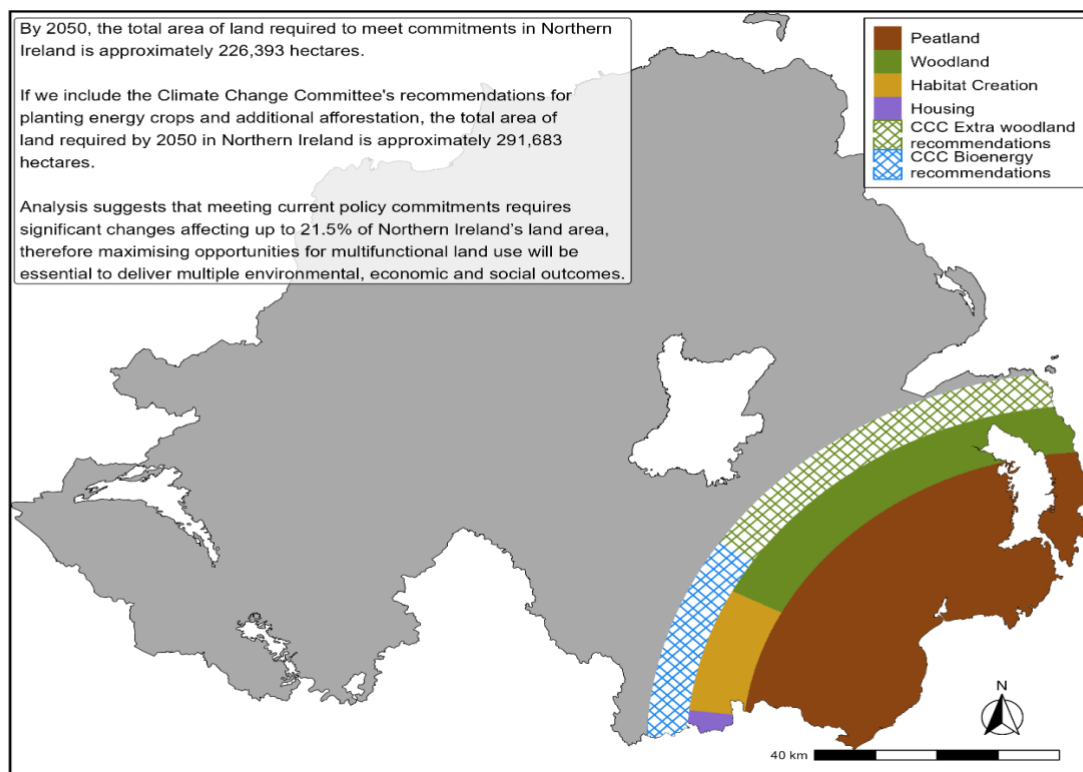
Introduction

How do we reconcile the finite availability of land with the multiple demands on its use? Traditional land uses such as food production, housing, transport, energy, water and recreation have now been joined by a raft of new demands:

- carbon sequestration is a priority – whether through afforestation, grazing practices or the restoration of peatlands,
- biodiversity needs space to recover from decades of decline,
- renewable energy, in its different forms, requires land,
- green and blue spaces are increasingly valued as essential to the wellbeing of the population,
- a growing population and economy increase demand for land for housing, transport, tourism, recreation, clean water, minerals and aggregates, and
- as climate change and other geopolitical events disrupt global food systems, the need for a resilient local food supply has become increasingly clear.

Few would argue that the traditional combination of the market, the planning system, subsidy, taxation and regulation has delivered sustainable land use, even without these new demands. A raft of recent reports has highlighted the issues, including from the Royal Society which said that to meet current policy targets for net zero and biodiversity in the UK, we will need additional land equivalent to over twice the area of Wales by 2050.²

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) recently conducted a competing land use demands assessment for Northern Ireland³ (see map below) which showed that there is simply not enough land to meet policy commitments unless a multifunctional approach is taken.



• Figure 1 - Representative map of competing demands on land (JNCC, 2026)⁴. The map provides a visual representation of the indicative scale of land-use and land-management action required to meet current policy commitments, it **does not represent where these actions should be taken**, simply **the scale of action required**.

The challenge, therefore, is to devise a means whereby multifunctional land use can be achieved such that all of the outcomes that Northern Ireland needs from its land can be sustainably delivered with the cooperation of the stakeholders needed to make it work. This requires consideration of several factors including what outcomes are to be achieved, what principles should be applied, the scale at which land use decisions are made, the role of data, evidence and modelling, and what forms of oversight might be appropriate. All the above are addressed in this report.

Not dealt with directly but an important consideration is the historical and cultural context of land use in Northern Ireland. The Working Group recognised from the start that it was embarked upon something that is much more than a technocratic exercise that would direct certain land uses to certain places depending on certain environmental, social and economic factors. It would be a mistake to approach this issue without recognising the historical and cultural perspectives that inform how we think about land.

The issue of who owns and occupies the land has long been an emotive and contentious issue in Ireland. The Land Acts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries transferred ownership from a small number of large estates to a very large number of small owner-occupied land holdings bringing about a social and cultural revolution with its origins in a movement that had often been connected with violent revolution.

The foreword to the Land Matters Task Force 2015 report, 'Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland'⁵, suggested that this relatively recent (re)acquisition of land has led to a culture of landowning focused on ownership, the use of land being secondary in importance. This is illustrated by the fact that very little agricultural land comes to the open market. Even with land prices reaching £20,000/acre⁶ many landowners who are not actively farming will not countenance selling. In essence, this attachment to the land is both cultural and emotional. Feelings about land and landscapes are felt strongly by non-landowners too, evidenced by individual objections to new housing, for example, or campaigns to halt development or to protect places felt to be beautiful or special.

The Working Group felt it was important to actively acknowledge that what people feel about land and how it is used is likely to have a significant influence on how they make or view decisions about land. At the group's first meeting members were asked to share reflections about what they feel about land and this proved to be a powerful practical illustration of our rich and varied emotional connections to land. The Working Group, tasked as it was with designing a decision-making process, agreed that any land use strategy/framework must acknowledge and accommodate such feelings.

Policy context

Northern Ireland has multiple strategies, policies and commitments relating to land use that are the responsibility of a number of different government departments. These have been reviewed at Annex B and provide context for the analysis described in the Introduction. Other significant policy decisions and activity include:

- Future Agriculture Policy Decisions (March 2022)⁷ includes a commitment to progress with developing a land use policy. Work has been underway in DAERA to scope the development of a future land use policy for Northern Ireland, which will be underpinned by science and evidence. The establishment of the Land Use Working Group is a continuation of this scoping work.
- The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 sets a target of at least 100% reduction in net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050⁸. It requires cuts in emissions in the land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) sector and in other sectors that impact on land use including agriculture, energy, buildings, industry and infrastructure.

- Climate change, biodiversity and land use are also closely linked. The UK Government (including the Devolved Administrations) has formally committed to protecting and conserving a minimum of 30% of land and sea for biodiversity by 2030, known as 30 by 30.⁹
- In early 2022 the Independent Review of the Agri-Food Sector (ISRAF - the Kendall Review) recommended a 'land use strategy for Northern Ireland'¹⁰, acknowledging that theirs was the latest in a line of such recommendations going back to 2013^{11 12}.
- In its June 2022 recommendations for the NI Executive, the Committee on Climate Change included a 'Net Zero delivery strategy for the agriculture and land use sectors that brings together how land can deliver its multiple functions'¹³.

Experience from other jurisdictions

Northern Ireland is not alone in taking steps to tackle the issue of how we make decisions on how land can deliver its multiple functions. The UK Government recently published the Land Use Framework for England¹⁴, Scotland has had a Land Use Strategy since 2011¹⁵, and the Irish Government has recently completed the second phase of its Land Use Review¹⁶.

The Working Group gained valuable insight into some of the challenges and successes of land use decision-making work carried out in other jurisdictions, hearing from experts from England (Georgie Barber – FFCC), Scotland (Hamish Trench - Scottish Land Commission), and the Republic of Ireland (Niamh Garvey – National, Economic and Social Council) (See Annex D).

ENGLAND

England is currently experiencing major change in the way decisions are made about land, with the UK Government's first Land Use Framework for England published in March 2026¹⁷. The Framework sets out England's approach to land use: the scale of the land use challenge and the vision for 2050, principles for making land use decisions, and signposting how the Framework will be implemented by various policies across government. A major development - and differentiator from Scotland's Land Use Strategy - is the spatial evidence and analysis, which lays out the spatial realities of meeting targets for food production, nature restoration, climate adaptation and mitigation, landscapes for water, space for communities, and energy generation. Key policies to support the implementation of the Framework include the 25 Year Farming Roadmap¹⁸, Environment Improvement Plan¹⁹, Food Strategy²⁰, National Planning Policy Framework²¹ and the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan²², among others. Added to this is the context of English devolution and what it may mean for implementation.

The lead up to current Land Use Framework development has seen recommendations from various expert bodies, including the Green Alliance, RSPB, Royal Society²³, Geospatial Commission²⁴, and the House of Lords²⁵. The FFCC was early to recommend a Framework for land use decision making²⁶, based on extensive consultation with land managers that highlighted the need for a decision-making process which could incorporate different views and work at multiple scales. The Land Use Framework makes clear that it is not a prescriptive mapping of future land use change, but rather a blueprint to support better, more informed decisions about land at different scales.

Pilot framework trials²⁷ carried out by the FFCC in Devon and Cambridgeshire provided rich learning for the Working Group. The value of engagement with people in place was a vital element, where public engagement not only informed decisions from a position of understanding community needs, but generated buy-in and agency. The

importance of employing the right data and evidence emerged strongly from pilot work. For those engaging with land use decisions, having access to data that is understandable and can be interacted with, is crucial.

Framework trials also brought together people who often work in silos, from planners to farmers, which allowed space for trust to build in others' expertise and approaches and to resolve potential conflict. The future of land use will require widespread engagement of stakeholders, so that progress can be made with the full support of those who deliver on many of the land use decisions.

SCOTLAND

In 2011 the Scottish Government published the first Land Use Strategy for Scotland²⁸, based on research, stakeholder participation and wider work undertaken since the Climate Change (Scotland) Act (2009)²⁹, which mandates the publication of a Land Use Strategy every 5 years. The Strategy sets a high-level, national policy agenda and provides a non-prescriptive framework for decision-making. The fourth and most recent Strategy, for 2026-2031³⁰, continues the vision, objectives, and a narrative for joining up policy³¹, as in previous iterations. It responds to stakeholder engagement and feedback, demanding a more 'active' strategy that can energise and guide action on integrated land use, promising a delivery plan for priority areas and principles for land use decisions.

Supporting and feeding into the Strategy is the Scottish Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement (2022)³², which comprises a vision and principles that inform the development of Government policy and action. The Statement adopts a human rights approach to land rights and responsibilities and aims to ensure land 'contributes to inclusive and sustainable economic growth and to social justice'. Viewing land as a public good in this way marks a distinction in Scotland, where focussing on rights and responsibilities around land contrasts with the utilitarian and outcome-driven approach in other nations, and thus affects the processes used for decision making.

While national-level policy sets out ambitious visions for the nation, Scotland has made the most promising progress in land use decision making at the regional scale, through Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs)³³. An innovation of Land Use Strategy 3³⁴, the pilot Partnerships have spotlighted a process where people fully understand the decision making that affects their communities, and by bringing together diverse stakeholders can open up conversation rather than being prescriptive. Projects like the NorthWest 2045 Partnership³⁵ and the South of Scotland RLUP³⁶ have shown how a ground-up approach can transform high-level vision into reachable targets at a regional level, with opportunities to understand what works where and ensure local voices have an opportunity to influence progress. The evaluation of the RLUP pilots³⁷ highlighted that, despite being under-resourced and requiring future long-term investment in community engagement, there is strong appetite and cross-stakeholder support for further RLUPs in Scotland. The Fourth Land Use Strategy intends to roll out RLUPs more widely across Scotland.

IRELAND

Insight into land use decision making in Ireland is significant given the similarities between land use patterns in both jurisdictions. Ireland published Phase 1 of its Land Use Review in 2023³⁸, providing an evidence base to determine the environmental, ecological and economic characteristics of land types across Ireland. Phase 2 commenced in 2023 and aimed to identify the key demands on land (both public and private) to inform policies for land use across key government objectives³⁹. Phase 2 of the Review is also intended to inform the preparation of future Climate Action Plans, including targets, policies and measures to achieve emissions reductions for the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry sector. As part of Phase 2 a citizen engagement working group informed and engaged stakeholders and citizens in the land use review process, which fed into outputs of the review process.

The Review included a report on Innovative Place Based Approaches that drew on wide experience and has potentially valuable lessons for land use decision making at local or catchment level that effectively engages key stakeholders and citizens.⁴⁰

Emerging conclusions from the Land Use Review included the view that there is no objective or technocratic ‘optimisation’ of land use; it is necessarily social and political and rests on navigating the right balance between ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ approaches:

The key elements of this are:

- Government leadership on the policy goals and approaches on agriculture, water quality, climate change, biodiversity and air quality, including leveraging the role of public lands in contributing to the transition to sustainable land use
- Government establishment of institutional arrangements and processes that achieve greater coherence between land use goals, support place-based design and delivery of actions and create feedback loops to national policies and provisions, especially ‘meso-level and multistakeholder’ institutions
- Continue building the fine-grained knowledge base and mapping technology to inform plans and actions
- Greatly enhance the capabilities required to guide action, use knowledge and engage landowners, communities and public agencies in the co-creation, implementation and monitoring of land use actions
- Aligning and scaling-up both public and private finance to incentivise sustainable land use and fund necessary investment.

In a recent parliamentary written answer, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine said that the Land Use Report Phase 2 was ‘under wider governmental consideration at present. [It] has sought to compile an evidence base to inform and support landholders and policymakers in their future decisions for land-use in the context of achieving Ireland’s agricultural, socio-economic, climate and environmental objectives. The report will not be an articulation of government policy or strategy in relation to land use, given that there are many economic, environmental, and social considerations to be balanced in the context of land use. Rather, this report will help to inform and support future considerations in this complex area including for example, leadership in leveraging the role of State-owned lands to achieve integrated land use objectives.’¹

A NOTE ON WALES

The Working Group did not directly consider experience in Wales. The following note is based on a paper provided to the Roundtable on Land Use Decision Making in the UK and Ireland, convened by FFCC in 2024⁴¹.

The approach to land use decision making in Wales has been developing since devolution in 1999 and has culminated in the development of a land use framework in the form of Future Wales 2040⁴² and the creation of Planning and Environment Decisions Wales (PEDW)⁴³.

With the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 firmly embedded in Welsh public sector decision making, Future Wales 2040 sought to deliver on the foundations set by Planning Policy Wales through a national development and land use framework. Published in 2021, this framework coincided with the creation of PEDW. To accelerate decision making, the framework identified pre-assessed areas for renewables development such as onshore wind alongside planning processes for Developments of National Significance that provide greatest impact and benefit to Wales.

¹ The final Phase 2 report, *A Living Land*, was published in July 2026. Available at: [Land Use Review – Phase 2](#).

In light of the 2026 election result, Plaid Cymru may take the opportunity to review Future Wales 2040 and to reshape how the plan works. Not least due to a greater focus on rural Wales by the incoming Government, the tensions created by significant onshore renewable energy development will no doubt be a driver. In addition, as well as land use, there is an opportunity to review the missing link between the land and sea interface, where connectivity is growing across energy, nature and climate.

A Land Use Framework

The Working Group was tasked with producing ‘an agreed set of principles and outcomes that will help to guide land use policy making in Northern Ireland and form the basis of a future land use strategy/framework, supported by on-going stakeholder engagement’ (See Annex A).

There is a distinction to be made between a land use strategy and a land use framework and one that the Working Group feels it is important to clarify. A land use strategy is generally understood to be largely imposed from the top-down, albeit after public consultation, and likely to be prescriptive in what it requires of land in different places. The ISRAF report⁴⁴ recommended a land use strategy while acknowledging that it could be contentious. A framework, on the other hand, is understood as a process that supports better, more sustainable decisions about land, by all those who need to make them including local and central government, businesses, NGOs and communities.

The Working Group also wished to make a distinction between the terms ‘land use’ and ‘land management’; the latter is not directly addressed in this report. Land use describes how land is used, for example for agriculture, forestry, infrastructure, housing or renewable energy. Land management is how, within that land use, the land is managed. For example, on agricultural land this might include crop selection, fertiliser usage, and stocking rates. There is some overlap between these definitions, and confusion may arise when ‘use’ is used to describe management. In addition, the proposed Framework could have a considerable influence on land management through its impact on policies and legislation that are aimed at securing the outcomes below.

As the Working Group proceeded with its deliberations it became apparent that the most practical and desirable way forward was to design a framework for making decisions about land. It is intended that all decisions about how land is used should be governed by such a framework extending from how to approach a specific proposal for a change of land use to more strategic considerations of how to bring about beneficial land use change through policy or regulation.

This report comprises six elements that could form a proposed framework:

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Vision | 4. Data, evidence and tools |
| 2. Outcomes | 5. Scope and scale |
| 3. Principles | 6. Oversight |

Table 1 summarises a proposed framework which is then discussed in detail below.

RECOMMENDATION

A Land Use Framework is adopted for Northern Ireland and this report is used as a basis for wider stakeholder and public consultation.

Proposal for a Land Use Framework	
Vision	
Land that supports life in all its diversity, that provides livelihoods in thriving communities and wellbeing for all citizens; that is cared for within ecological limits and for future generations; and that is nurtured to provide multiple functions.	
Outcomes	
Healthy eco- systems	SOIL: Soils are restored to optimal chemical, biological and physical health
	CARBON: Our land sequesters and stores sufficient carbon to meet legal requirements and our share of national and international obligations.
	BIODIVERSITY: Our land supports all forms of biodiversity, particularly those that are recognised as being under increased threat or pressure.
Basic human needs	WATER: There is a secure and stable supply of clean water for public, commercial and environmental needs while ensuring pollution and flood risks are minimised
	FOOD: Food production is sufficiently diverse and resilient to meet the nutritional needs of our population in the face of climate and geopolitical supply chain shock
	HOUSING: Sufficient and affordable housing is available to meet the needs of the population.
	ENERGY: A sufficient, secure, affordable and clean supply of renewable energy meets society's needs in a net zero future.
Economic & social needs	INFRASTRUCTURE: Communities benefit from the infrastructure they need to thrive.
	LIVELIHOODS: Landowners have a range of options to earn a living from the land and citizens have opportunities to benefit from land-based economic and social activities.
	HEALTH AND WELLBEING: Everyone has good and equitable access to green and blue spaces for recreation.
Principles - Land use decision makers should consider and apply the principles below to all land use decisions	
Multifunctional: Land is recognised as multifunctional and opportunities for deriving multiple benefits are realised.	
Land attributes: Land use decisions are based on the quality, properties and characteristics of the land in question and the most suitable and beneficial functions recognised, valued and prioritised.	
Locally responsive: local stakeholders and citizens are genuinely included in decision-making informed by broad public engagement, with local needs, aspirations and the sense of place, culture and history respected.	
Stewardship for prosperity: the economic, social and environmental value of land is unlocked in a way that supports sustainable livelihoods, preserves its natural capital and supports a just transition to a net zero society.	
Long term, resilient and adaptive: land is used in a way that both mitigates and adapts to climate change, achieves soil, biodiversity and water quality targets, and builds long term resilience.	
Aligned: Land use decisions align with commitments and targets at different spatial and administrative levels and across boundaries, and with relevant policy and legislation.	
Evidence-based and precautionary: Land use decisions are informed by appropriate and reliable data and governed by the precautionary principle.	
Data, evidence and tools	
Land use decisions should be informed by appropriate and reliable data (including the use of mapping tools, and scientific and qualitative data) to evaluate risks, costs and benefits at several spatial and temporal scales, drawing on peer-reviewed research and innovation for long-term resilience. The natural capital approach to evidence-based land use decision-making is a valuable resource for the proposed land use framework.	
Scope and scale	
While the proposed framework applies to all levels of land use decision-making, there is merit in focusing on a scale that people understand and identify with. Consideration should be given to resourcing Community Planning Partnerships to implement the proposed land use framework at appropriate levels within their local council areas.	
Oversight	
If the proposed framework is to be effective in delivering the best possible use of our limited land, it is essential that there is some form of oversight that ensures it is being implemented correctly and in the public interest. A Land Use Commission would be an appropriate way of providing this oversight.	

Table 1 : Proposal for a Land Use Framework

1. Vision

Addressing the challenge that we have more uses for land than we have land available requires societal consensus as to what we need from the land. This can most usefully be expressed as a number of ‘outcomes’ many of which are likely to be complementary but may also be perceived to be in conflict. The Working Group felt it important that these outcomes are guided by a shared vision of the role of land in society. The vision should recognise the role of land as a life support system, in providing livelihoods and wellbeing for people living in communities, all within ecological limits and respecting the needs of future generations. It must emphasise the fundamental need for the multifunctional use of land.

RECOMMENDATION

That the proposed Land Use Framework is guided by this vision for Northern Ireland’s land: *Land that supports life in all its diversity; that provides livelihoods in thriving communities and wellbeing for all citizens; that is cared for within ecological limits and for future generations; and that is nurtured to provide multiple functions.*

2. Outcomes

The Working Group was asked to ‘review objectives, targets and outcomes of existing government policies, strategies and plans for their impacts on land, alongside emerging pressures, to agree what outcomes are wanted from land’ (see Annex A). The group reviewed a report compiled by FFCC and heard evidence from a range of organisations, including the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), during its deliberations. The evidence is clear that we have considerably more uses for land than we have land available and that the pressures on land are growing. The answer to this challenge lies in the multifunctional use of land: ‘the notion that land is a dynamic resource offering multiple simultaneous benefits which can work in harmony with each other when utilised effectively’⁴⁵.

Examples might be a public park managed to maximise biodiversity, a housing development with solar panels on every roof, or farmland that produces food while storing carbon and improving biodiversity in soil, hedgerows and trees. On the other hand, a poorly planned retail park with car parking as the dominant land use, covering prime agricultural land in solar panels with no other use, or planting trees on peat bogs, would all undermine the multifunctional approach.

We therefore need to understand what outcomes are needed from land. Having reviewed existing legislation, policies and strategies the group does not consider that it is adequate simply to list all the economic, environmental and social outcomes required from land. Rather, it is important to help guide decision-makers by describing those outcomes in a way that maximises the opportunity for delivering a shared vision for Northern Ireland’s land. And, as a means of helping to cope with the many pressures and myriad outcomes, the focus should be on what we, as a society, *need* from our land rather than on what we want.

An early insight for the Working Group was that it would be a mistake to take an entirely human-centred view of land use outcomes. This is partly based on the view that nature has an intrinsic value regardless of human needs but, more pragmatically, that if land is unable to maintain its capacity to support life, whether a soil microbe, a bee, a plant or a tree, then human life will not be viable; at its most basic, no soil means no people. We might also choose to think in terms of ‘ecosystem services’: all those things that land can provide us with that have an economic value – clean water, pollination and flood control, for example. Without those services functioning well, humanity cannot thrive. Thus, in considering what outcomes we need from land, the first is that land must have the capacity to support life. Clearly some land uses will have rather more potential for this than others, but it is almost always the case that biodiversity,

for example, can be included in any land use, whether in growing food, in a housing development or along a road margin.

The group noted that these planetary needs are recognised in legislation and policy, specifically through the Climate Change Act and the Environmental Improvement Plan and through statutory advice provided by the Committee on Climate Change.

Human needs were then considered and, based loosely on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the group concluded that what we need from land is first, water, food and shelter; secondly, employment, energy and space to build communities and the economy; thirdly, recreation, physical health and mental health; and fourthly, raw materials for a thriving economy.

These human needs are recognised in legislation such as those on water and planning and they also feature strongly in the Programme for Government with its three missions of People, Planet and Prosperity, and more specifically in the outcomes of Cleaner Environment, Healthier Lives, Stronger Economy and Better Homes.

Taking all the above into consideration, the Working Group drew up a list of outcomes that the proposed land use framework will require decision makers to prioritise, while actively considering the need to achieve the multifunctional use of land, and these are set out in the table below. The table can be put into practice as part of the proposed framework by considering three questions for any proposed or existing land use:

- i. **Does it support the vision for Northern Ireland's land?**
- ii. **Which of the outcomes does it contribute to?**
- iii. **Does it deliver outcomes through multifunctional land use?**

(Critical to the successful application of a multifunctional approach is the role of synergies, trade-offs and conflicts between outcomes; this issue is addressed in Section 4 of this report.)

Outcomes
Outcomes for a healthy ecosystem
SOIL: Soils are restored to optimal chemical, biological and physical health. Soil is one of the fundamental and essential components of life on earth; we could not exist without it. It provides the medium and nutrients for plant growth, stores vast amounts of carbon, regulates water flows, impacts water quality, and is the base for all ecosystems. The advent of artificial fertilisers and agricultural intensification have led us to take our soils increasingly for granted and treat them merely as a growing medium for our crops, with a subsequent decline in soil health. To maintain our nutrition and health and to address the carbon, water and biodiversity crises, we urgently need to restore the health of our soils.
CARBON: Our land sequesters and stores sufficient carbon to meet legal requirements and our share of national and international obligations. The International Panel on Climate Change and the UK's Climate Change Committee have made clear that reducing greenhouse gas emissions will not be enough to halt the climate crisis. We will also need to remove significant amounts of carbon from the atmosphere. Various technological solutions have been put forward, but these are all expensive, energy intensive and probably have unforeseen consequences. Natural solutions, based on photosynthesis and soil health offer much greater opportunities for carbon sequestration and subsequent storage.

BIODIVERSITY: Our land supports all forms of biodiversity, particularly those that are recognised as being under increased threat or pressure.

The 2023 State of Nature Report describes NI as ‘one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world,’ where 12% of species are now threatened with extinction⁴⁶. It is clear that we are experiencing a biodiversity crisis, and it is critical that this reality and the need for restoration is recognised in land-use decision making. Biodiversity influences both human and planetary health in myriad ways and, ultimately, more diverse ecosystems are more resilient. Our growing understanding of the importance of landscape-scale conservation indicates that protection of biodiversity should not be confined only to designated areas (though these remain essential in protecting our most at-risk species and habitats) but should be mainstreamed across land-use decision-making and integrated with other land uses. In this regard, the development of nature-based solutions, sustainable solutions and nature recovery networks could be extremely useful in implementing a land use framework.

Outcomes for basic human needs

WATER: There is a secure and stable supply of clean water for public, commercial and environmental needs, while ensuring pollution and flood risks are minimised.

By providing space for floodwater, natural resilience will protect property, people and wildlife, working with the environment rather than against it. Land use, including industry, agriculture and management of run-off, has a major impact on water quality. Much of what goes onto the land invariably ends up in surface and groundwater, requiring more complex treatment, energy, and higher costs to supply the drinking water needs of our population and to reduce the impacts of pollution on the water environment. An integrated catchment-based approach using appropriate nature-based solutions and other protection measures to identify pollution sources and improve water quality must also recognise the potential impact of freshwater quality on marine and coastal ecosystems. This can be coupled with policy and other sustainable protection measures aiming to ensure good to high status in our water bodies and protect our vital raw water resources for this and future generations.

FOOD: Food production is sufficiently diverse and resilient to meet the nutritional needs of our population in the face of climate and geopolitical supply chain shocks.

This outcome envisages a food system that is resilient in the face of our increasing vulnerability to external shocks from climate change, inflation and energy costs, and geopolitical impacts on supply chains. It sees land, in both rural and urban contexts, as being capable of providing a high proportion of the population's food needs. This is not to suggest that Northern Ireland can or should be self-sufficient, rather that greater diversity in food production, particularly vegetables and fruit, is essential to local resilience, in the context of a food system that is likely to be more bio-regionally based in the future.

HOUSING: Sufficient and affordable housing is available to meet the needs of the population.

The NI Housing Supply Strategy vision is ‘Everybody has access to a good quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate for their needs and is located within a thriving and inclusive community’⁴⁷. The impacts can be best managed by optimising density, choosing locations with existing infrastructure and services thus reducing the need to travel, prioritising the reuse of brownfield or previously developed land and avoiding natural hazards.

ENERGY: A sufficient, secure, affordable and clean supply of renewable energy meets society's needs in a net zero future. Northern Ireland's energy strategy, ‘The Path to Net Zero’ commits to at least 80% of electricity consumption from a diverse mix of renewable sources by 2030 and biofuels including biomethane are expected to provide a significant part of the energy mix. Renewable energy (solar, wind, tidal, hydro, geothermal, biofuels) will not only assist in meeting Northern Ireland's commitments under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 but also provide resilience, reduce dependence on external energy sources and provide for future demand for EV charging. To achieve this requires consideration of where the sources are, how electricity is generated and its transmission to the point of use. Electrical and biofuel infrastructure, energy

storage and all the renewable technologies above require land both for site-specific use and for growing grass and crops.

Outcomes for economic and social needs

INFRASTRUCTURE: Communities benefit from the infrastructure they need to thrive.

Infrastructure is the essential facilities necessary to support communities and a successful economy, enabling, sustaining and enhancing our society. In addition to water, energy and housing infrastructure (addressed above) there is a need for a range of other infrastructure including active travel, road, rail, ports, airports, communications, flood defences, wastewater, health and education, all of which have an impact on land to a greater or lesser extent. Technological advances may change working practices, including home working, decentralisation of business (and related employment) and reinforcement of communities. Infrastructure will play a major role in facilitating these changes and land use could play an important role in transformation towards a sustainable and resilient future.

LIVELIHOODS: Landowners have a range of options to earn a living from the land and citizens have opportunities to benefit from land-based economic and social activities.

Sustainable economic opportunities from land include food production for local consumption and for export, timber and fibre production, renewable energy, minerals and aggregates, carbon sequestration, biodiversity investment, tourism, recreation and groundwater. Use of non-renewable resources such as minerals and aggregates should be safeguarded to meet the essential needs of Northern Ireland.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING: Everyone has good and equitable access to green and blue spaces for recreation.

The NI Environmental Improvement Plan sets a target of 84% of households to have publicly accessible quality natural space >2ha within 400m and at least one site >20ha in size within 2km⁴⁸. By ensuring access to green spaces, both urban and rural, mental and physical health is improved; people living in areas with greater access to green space tend to have higher life expectancy. This involves the creation and expansion of green infrastructure (parks, green corridors, trails) in urban and peri-urban areas where most people live, and improved access to the countryside, noting that people living in small towns and villages have significantly less access to green space. Health and wellbeing are also highly dependent on outcomes for a healthy ecosystem and for basic human needs.

Table 2: Proposed Land Use Framework Outcomes

The proposed Land Use Framework is focused on achieving the following outcomes:

- **SOIL:** Soils are restored to optimal chemical, biological and physical health
- **CARBON:** Our land sequesters and stores sufficient carbon to meet legal requirements and our share of national and international obligations.
- **BIODIVERSITY:** Our land supports all forms of biodiversity, particularly those that are recognised as being under increased threat or pressure.
- **WATER:** There is a secure and stable supply of clean water for public, commercial and environmental needs, while ensuring pollution and flood risks are minimised
- **FOOD:** Food production is sufficiently diverse and resilient to meet the nutritional needs of our population in the face of climate and geopolitical supply chain shocks
- **HOUSING:** Sufficient and affordable housing is available to meet the needs of the population.
- **ENERGY:** A sufficient, secure, affordable and clean supply of renewable energy meets society's needs in a net zero future.
- **INFRASTRUCTURE:** Communities benefit from the infrastructure they need to thrive.
- **LIVELIHOODS:** Landowners have a range of options to earn a living from the land and citizens have opportunities to benefit from land-based economic and social activities.
- **HEALTH AND WELLBEING:** Everyone has good and equitable access to green and blue spaces for recreation.

3. Principles

The Working Group was asked to ‘consider, discuss and agree principles that could be applied at every level in the land use decision making process’ (See Annex A). The role of principles in the proposed framework is fundamental. The concept of the framework is to guide decision making without being prescriptive about specific land uses in particular places. A dictionary definition of a principle is ‘a moral rule or standard of good behaviour or fair dealing’⁴⁹, and this is very much how the Working Group sees the role of principles. These are the rules of the process. We know that how different people approach decisions about land can be based as much on emotion as on reason and these are both valid perspectives. The use of a common set of principles can ensure fair and trusted decisions. The intention is that all land use decisions comply with all the principles – at minimum a decision should not contravene any of the principles.

In order to arrive at a set of principles the Working Group considered a report from FFCC (Annex C) that drew on examples of frameworks and strategies from different parts of the UK and at different scales alongside reports such as the Royal Society’s ‘Multifunctional Landscapes’⁵⁰.

It is critical that all the principles in the framework are carefully considered when a land use decision is being made. They have not been prioritised although we do feel that the multifunctional principle must always be an indispensable consideration.

Principles
Land use decision makers consider and apply the principles below to all land use decisions
Multifunctional: <i>Land is recognised as multifunctional and opportunities for deriving multiple benefits are realised.</i> Multifunctionality is “the notion that land is a dynamic resource offering multiple simultaneous benefits which can work in harmony with each other when utilised effectively”⁵¹. Decision makers should apply this principle in order to contribute effectively to the framework’s vision and outcomes.
Land attributes: <i>Land use decisions are based on the qualities, properties and characteristics of the land in question and the most suitable and beneficial functions recognised, valued and prioritised.</i> Decisions about how land is used should be based on the specific characteristics and capabilities of the land itself so that land is used for what it is best suited. This means considering the optimal use of land given its location, geology, morphology, soil types and prevailing weather, as well as its natural and cultural significance.
Locally responsive: <i>local stakeholders and citizens are genuinely included in decision-making informed by broad public engagement, with local needs, aspirations and the sense of place, culture and history respected.</i> Land use decisions should include those who own, manage or farm the land and draw on their knowledge and experience. The views of both owners and non-owners should be incorporated in decision-making processes, and there should be meaningful mechanisms for gathering these views from rural communities, local towns and villages and urban settlements affected by land use change. Decisions should be compatible with the ‘Aligned’ principle.
Stewardship for prosperity: <i>the economic, social and environmental value of land is unlocked in a way that supports sustainable livelihoods, preserves its natural capital and supports a just transition to a net zero society.</i>

Land use decisions should recognise the need to sustain or increase local wellbeing, livelihoods and jobs. This may involve strengthening local supply chains, ensuring profits from the proposed land can be retained/invested locally rather than extracted elsewhere. Decisions should be informed by fairness and equity and consider how a just transition can be advanced⁵².

Long term, resilient and adaptive: *land is used in a way that both mitigates and adapts to climate change, achieves soil, biodiversity and water quality targets, and builds long term resilience.*

Land use decisions should enable it to be adaptive and resilient to future climate and biodiversity impacts such as uncertainties and risks brought by increased flooding and drought as well as climate and geopolitical threats to food supplies. They should realise opportunities for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Aligned: *Land use decisions align with commitments and targets at different spatial and administrative levels and across boundaries, and with relevant policy and legislation.*

Societal expectations of land are enshrined in international agreements, UK and NI law and policy, and at local government level. Land use decisions made at a local level should contribute appropriately to commitments and targets at higher levels while those made at national and devolved level should respect local characteristics and capabilities. Decisions should also be compatible across administrative boundaries, including between both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. All land use decisions and outcomes must be compliant with planning, environmental protection and other policy and legislation.

Evidence-based and precautionary: *Land use decisions are informed by appropriate and reliable data and governed by the precautionary principle.*

Land use decision makers should have access to and utilise a range of data sets and tools (including mapping tools and scientific and qualitative data) to evaluate risks, costs and benefits at several spatial scales and over time. Data should be accessible to and usable by all stakeholders. Evidence should draw on the best available research for long-term resilience and to enable the application of the precautionary principle.

Table 3: Proposed Land Use Framework Principles

RECOMMENDATION

The proposed Land Use Framework adopts the following principles:

- **MULTIFUNCTIONAL:** Land is recognised as multifunctional and opportunities for deriving multiple benefits are realised.
- **LAND ATTRIBUTES:** Land use decisions are based on the qualities, properties and characteristics of the land in question and the most suitable and beneficial functions recognised, valued and prioritised.
- **LOCALLY RESPONSIVE:** Local stakeholders and citizens are genuinely included in decision-making informed by broad public engagement, with local needs, aspirations and the sense of place, culture and history respected.
- **STEWARDSHIP FOR PROSPERITY:** the economic, social and environmental value of land is unlocked in a way that supports sustainable livelihoods, preserves its natural capital and supports a just transition to a net zero society.
- **LONG TERM, RESILIENT AND ADAPTIVE:** land is used in a way that both mitigates and adapts to climate change, achieves soil, biodiversity and water quality targets, and builds long term resilience.
- **ALIGNED:** Land use decisions align with commitments and targets at different spatial and administrative levels and across boundaries, and with relevant policy and legislation.

- **EVIDENCE-BASED AND PRECAUTIONARY: Land use decisions are informed by appropriate and reliable data and governed by the precautionary principle.**

4. Data, Evidence and Tools

The Land Use Working Group was asked to consider the role of relevant science and land use models in its deliberations on future decision making, and to build on land modelling work being done by the LUNZ Hub and the Climate+ Programme along with JNCC Northern Ireland land use data sets (See Annex A). In considering the role of data, evidence and tools, the group received presentations from JNCC and AFBI. The latter stimulated interest in the Natural Capital approach (described below) and considered it to be a potentially valuable resource in the decision-making process.

CONTEXT

Recent technological advances in high-resolution satellite imagery, improved data collection techniques, and artificial intelligence among others, have significantly expanded available evidence on land use change and can help anticipate future trajectories. This wealth of information is increasingly accessible to policymakers to inform choices, clarify trade-offs, and identify winners and losers with respect to alternative land uses.

TOWARDS A RENEWED APPROACH TO LAND USE POLICY

For many decades, land uses changes have prioritised economic growth, with less consideration of policies and practices that protect and promote environmental goods provided by or linked to land. This trend has resulted in environmental (and sometimes social) pressures, including degraded habitats, water pollution, loss of biodiversity, and rising GHG emissions. These conditions threaten the land's capacity to continue supplying market goods (e.g. food, timber, fibre, energy) alongside other beneficial non-market goods (e.g. biodiversity, recreation, flood management) that impact communities' capacity to be resilient. In response, scientists have developed various tools and techniques to quantify the impacts of land use on the environment. Recognition of the magnitude of these impacts by policymakers has led to a search for new approaches in land use planning to address the ever-growing complexity in land management and promote decision-making processes that consider its social and environmental consequences.

ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

The Working Group discussed the concept of 'Doughnut Economics'⁵³ as a way of thinking about some of the key constraints around land use decision making. The 'Doughnut' seeks to show that 'the safe and just space for humanity' to thrive is between a 'social foundation' providing, amongst other things, sufficient food, water, energy, housing and social equity and an 'ecological ceiling' placing a limit on e.g. climate change, biodiversity loss and land conversion. This appears to provide a potentially useful perspective on the economic and social challenge, providing a comprehensive view of how changes in land use threaten or disrupt the delicate balance between ecological boundaries and social sustainability, complementary to the Natural Capital approach described below.

NATURAL CAPITAL APPROACH AS A FRAME FOR LAND USE DECISION MAKING

Public, private and third sector organisations are increasingly adopting a natural capital approach to promote a holistic and sustainable use of land. Natural capital refers to ‘certain stocks of the elements of nature that have value to society, such as forests, fisheries, rivers, biodiversity, land and minerals’⁵⁴. It ‘forms part of our natural wealth, alongside traditional assets such as infrastructure, skills, buildings and technology’⁵⁵. The natural capital approach helps make land use decisions clearer by showing how society’s different demands are connected – highlighting both conflicts and synergies – and making the trade-offs between options easier to understand. The UK government was the first country globally to attempt a national-scale assessment of the benefits provided by nature to society and the economy⁵⁶. More recently, government has reiterated its commitment to natural capital approaches and is encouraging efforts to incorporate them into long-term policy making⁵⁷. For example, the water industry regulator for England and Wales, Ofwat, expects water companies’ business plans to embed natural capital approaches at catchment scale⁵⁸. Using this framework promotes understanding of the connection between land and human well-being to be assessed in a systematic and comprehensive manner.

Building on this, the Working Group discussed the role of spatial analysis and coordination of evidence as part of developing a clearer understanding of land use pressures and potential responses. It was noted that a range of analytical approaches could contribute to understanding the scale of the challenge and informing future decision-making.

ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Ecosystem services describe the flow of benefits which we gain from the stocks of natural capital. These include ‘provisioning’ ecosystem services (such as food, timber, fibre, and fresh water), ‘regulating’ ecosystem services (such as air, climate, and soil regulation), ‘cultural’ ecosystem services (such as recreation opportunities and bequest values) and ‘supporting’ ecosystems services (such as nutrient cycling, soil formation and photosynthesis). Where the benefits are reflected in market prices, e.g. agricultural produce or timber, these are referred to as market benefits, whereas non-market benefits are those which are not reflected in market prices, for example, biodiversity, landscape amenity, and flood control. Figure 2 illustrates the natural capital framework.

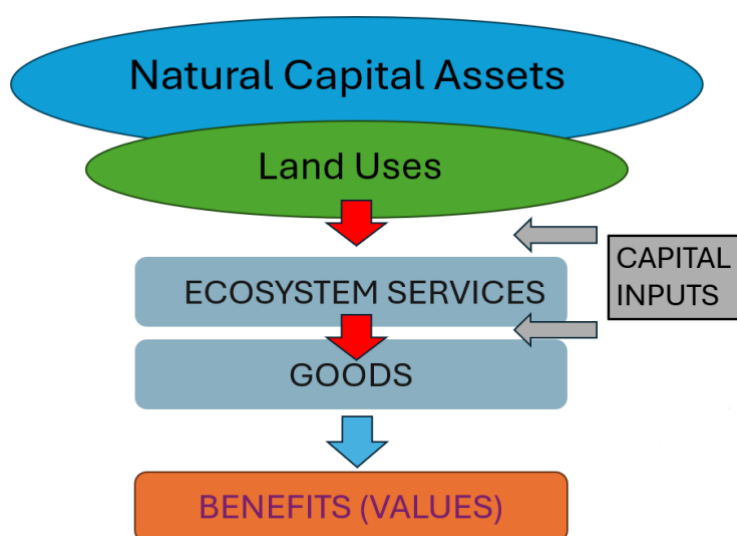


Figure 2 - The Natural Capital Framework (Adapted from Natural Capital Committee, 2014⁵⁹)

DATA REQUIREMENTS

Implementing natural capital approaches requires integrating comprehensive, spatially explicit datasets from various sources. For instance, ecological and socio-economic data can be combined to inform land use decisions by highlighting which types of land uses are likely to produce an undersupply or oversupply of ecosystem services (Figure 3). Land use mapping can help assess the impact of human activity by visualising the distribution of natural assets and their benefits. This helps inform policy decision-making by identifying where pressures and risk might be higher, e.g. those industries and populations more likely to be disadvantaged by current trajectories.

CORINE land cover type:	Regulating services										Provisioning services										Cultural services									
	Local climate regulation	Global climate regulation	Flood protection	Groundwater recharge	Air Quality Regulation	Erosion Regulation	Nutrient regulation	Water purification	Pollination		Crops	Livestock	Fodder	Capture Fisheries	Aquaculture	Wild Foods	Timber	Wood Fuel	Energy	Biochemicals / Medicine	Freshwater		Recreation & Aesthetic Values	Intrinsic Value of Biodiversity						
Continuous urban fabric	-5	-3	-4	-5	-5	-1	-1	-1	-3		-5	-5	-1	-5	-5	-5	-3	-2	-4	-5	-5		-4	-2						
Discontinuous urban fabric	-5	-3	-5	-5	-5	-1	-2	-2	-4		-3	-4	-1	-4	-4	-3	-3	-3	-3	-5	-5		-4	-3						
Industrial or commercial units	-1	-5	-4	-5	-5	-1	-3	-3	-4		-5	-5	-5	-4	-4	-4	-5	-5	-4	-5	-5		-1	-1						
Road and rail networks	-2	-4	-4	-1	-4	-3			-1								-2		-4		-1		-2							
Port areas	-2	-3	-2	-2	-2	-4		-3	-1		-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-1	-5	-2	-5	-1	-3		-1	-1						
Airports	-2	-5	-1	-1	-4	-1	-1	-2			-2	-2	1	-1	-1	-1	-1		-5	-1	-3		-1							
Mineral extraction sites			-2	-4		-4											-2		2		-2									
Dump sites	-2	-2		-2	-3			-2										0		-2										
Construction sites	-2		-2		-1	-2	-2	-2									-4		-4		-2									
Green urban areas	0	1		1	0	2	1	1	-1		-1	-1				1		1	-1		-2		-1	-1						
Sport and leisure facilities	-1	1		0	-2	1	1	0	1		-2	-2	-1	-2	-2	-2	-1	-1	-3	-3	-3		2							
Non-irrigated arable land	0	-1	-1	1	-1	-2	-3		-3		4	5	5						1	0			1							
Permanently irrigated land	1	-1	-1	-5	-1	-2	-3	-5	-3		4	5	2						-1	0	-5		1							
Ricefields	-1	-4	-5	-3	-1	-5	-3	-5	-1		4		2						-2	-1	-5		1							
Vineyards	-4	-1		-2	-1	-5	-3	-4	-2		3						-1	1	-1	-2	-4		5							
Fruit trees and berries	0	1	2	-1	1	1	-2	-1	0		4						3	4	-1	-2	-3		5							
Olive groves	-1	0		0	0	1	-1	-1	-2		3						4	4	0	-2	-1		5							
Pastures	0	-2	0	1		4	-1	-2				4	2				-1		0	-1	-2		3							
Annual and permanent crops	1	0	0	0	0	0	-5	-2	-2		4	5	5						-1	0	-1		1							
Complex cultivation patterns	1	0	0	0	-1	-1	-5	-2	-3		3		3						-1	1	-1		2							
Agriculture& natural vegetation	2	0	1	1	0	2	-3	-1	-2		2	3	2			3	3	3	0	0	-2		2	3						
Agro-forestry areas	1	0	1	0	0	2	-2	-1	1		2	3	2				3	3	1	-1	-2		3							
Broad-leaved forest	5	4	3	2	5	5	5	5	5			1					4	4	4	1	5		5	5						
Coniferous forest	5	4	3	2	5	5	5	5	5			1					4	4	4	1	5		5	5						

Figure 3 – Excerpt from Burkhard et al. (2012) illustrating the land cover types that produce an oversupply of ecosystem services (supply exceeds demand) and land cover types that produce an undersupply of ecosystem services (demand exceeds supply)⁶⁰.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES

For effective decision making, facilitating collaborative information-sharing among various levels of decision-making is essential. For instance, assessing the impact of nature-based solutions on farmland should be done at the appropriate spatial level, considering factors such as technical feasibility and effectiveness, uncertainties in environmental impacts, landholders' willingness to engage, and the economic implications. Social scientists have an important role to play in understanding how social systems interact with the environment. Public participation processes are particularly beneficial, as they incorporate local knowledge and expertise while fostering trust-building among stakeholders. Evidence gathered from natural capital approaches can inform and interact with more specialised decision tools, such as cost-benefit and multi-criteria analysis. These approaches can be used at different stages of the decision-making process, depending on the complexity of the issue, available resources, and public actors' preferences.

INFORMING POLICY

A natural capital approach facilitates land use outcomes that offer diverse benefits and can improve resilience to external shocks such as climate and political crises. It is an approach that can accommodate cross-cutting decision-making aimed at addressing multifaceted issues, such as that of climate change, urban and rural development, and biodiversity loss. For example, a natural capital framing can take pathway type analysis that determines a set of desired outcomes on issues such as habitat creation, carbon sequestration, water quality improvement, etc. and superimpose this on a landscape at a variety of scales. Furthermore, these outcomes can also be aggregated, which is beneficial as it illustrates how objectives and timescales impact outcomes differentially across a landscape.

RECOMMENDATION

Land use decisions are informed by appropriate and reliable data (including the use of mapping tools, and scientific and qualitative data) to evaluate risks, costs and benefits at several spatial and temporal scales, drawing on peer-reviewed research and innovation for long-term resilience. The natural capital approach to evidence-based land use decision-making is a potentially valuable resource for the proposed Land Use Framework.

5. Scope and scale

Decisions about land are taken in a wide variety of situations and at radically different scales. The UK's net zero targets and 30 by 30 biodiversity commitments are legally binding international agreements and both have profound implications for land use.

Such obligations cascade downwards through the devolved administrations and local government until the decisions made by communities, businesses and landowners are expected to collectively achieve the national target. In Northern Ireland we have targets for tree planting, peatland restoration, housing, and renewable energy, for example. On the one hand it would be both impractical and undesirable for central government to dictate where, for example, trees should be planted to achieve a collective target. On the other hand, leaving decisions to be made at a local level may result in targets being missed if aggregated local decisions fail to add up to what is needed.

Thus, the scale at which decisions are made matters. The Working Group considered current practice including:

- The need for a common thread of evidence to enable consistent decision-making at different scales
- The role of the land use planning system through regional planning policy, Local Development Plans and determining planning applications
- The role of landowners including Forest Service, NI Water, National Trust, Ministry of Defence, other large NGOs, large estates, NI Government Departments and agencies, local councils and farmers

While the Working Group believes that the proposed Land Use Framework must be applied in all land use decision making, it is important to consider how it can align with the statutory planning system which has at its heart the objective of furthering sustainable development as per the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011⁶¹. While many decisions on land use are outside the remit of the planning system, the framework may play a useful role in supporting and strengthening the relationship between planning strategy, regional strategic planning policy and Local Development Plans. It could also provide a common point of reference helping to align policies in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement that have their origins in different government departments. A land use framework, therefore, creates the opportunity to support the actions of central and local government in a way that delivers an agreed set of outcomes.

Experience from the FFCC pilot projects in England, the Regional Land Use Partnerships in Scotland and research on innovative place-based initiatives in Ireland (see section: Experience from other jurisdictions) suggests that it is important to focus on a scale that is human, that people understand and where genuine citizen engagement can be achieved. This implies more local levels of decision making, probably more local than that of local councils which cover relatively large and diverse geographies. Pragmatically, however, it makes sense to make use of existing administrative arrangements rather than invent new ones, at least in the short term.

Physical characteristics of land can also help determine where to focus attention. For example, there is a logic to taking decisions at catchment level. Availability of data is also critical, and this varies considerably for different scales.

Taking all the above into account, the Working Group believes that consideration should be given to using the structures of Community Planning as a means of implementing the proposed Land Use Framework. This has the advantages of:

- being a well-established system that includes key statutory and non-statutory partners under the leadership of local councils,
- functioning at the same scale as a Local Development Plan which is the spatial expression of the Community Plan,
- enjoying a degree of democratic accountability, and
- being in a good position to engage communities more locally and in places with which people more readily identify, possibly at DEA level or similar.

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

While local council level can be a good place from which to plan community engagement, it is important that the proposed Framework is seen to be working in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland, and that the views of the widest possible public are taken into account. There should be clear guidelines to include standards, processes and methodologies for doing this in a meaningful and transparent way. There are several useful frameworks to draw on to ensure this is embedded within the implementation of the proposed Framework, including the IAP2 Spectrum of Participation⁶², Involve's Nine Principles⁶³, Scotland's Participation Handbook⁶⁴ which includes its National Standards for Community Engagement as well as practical guidelines for good practice; and to draw on as legal bases for involvement, the Gunning Principles and the Aarhus Convention.

RECOMMENDATION

Consideration is given to resourcing Community Planning Partnerships to implement the proposed Land Use Framework at appropriate levels within their local authority areas with effective local and citizen engagement.

6. Land Use Framework Oversight

RATIONALE

The proposed Land Use Framework is relevant to the work of all Government Departments and Agencies, to all Local Authorities and to land-owning NGOs, as a vital tool in making decisions. If it is to be effective in delivering the best possible use of our limited land it is essential that there is some form of oversight that ensures it is being implemented correctly and in the public interest. In addition, the framework will need to be reviewed and updated based on its effectiveness and the availability of new data. Finally, instruction, training and advice for potential users of the framework will be necessary.

Experience with other cross-departmental strategies and policies (e.g. Sustainable Development Strategy and successive Biodiversity Strategies) demonstrates that without guidance, oversight, monitoring and reporting, these frameworks can be largely ignored or, at best, only partially implemented. The significant amount of thought and work that goes into producing such strategies can therefore be wasted and the intended outcomes are lost.

Models of this type of oversight already exist, including the Office for Environmental Protection, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland. These all have a range of clearly defined responsibilities and are generally considered to be effective. Establishing an oversight body would go a long way towards giving status and legitimacy to the proposed Framework, ensuring that it would be used to deliver outcomes that served the public interest. Important aspects of this would be the clarification of how decisions are taken at a range of levels, transparency on how decisions are made, the meaningful involvement of the public, greater accountability and improved public confidence.

STATUS

The Working Group considered a number of options, as outlined by the House of Lords Select Committee on Land Use in England⁶⁵:

1. Responsibility residing within an existing body – there is no obviously suitable body in Northern Ireland.
2. Responsibility residing within DAERA or another government Department – given that this is intended to cover the whole public sector this might prove problematic.
3. A cross-departmental Leadership Group – we are not aware of a viable model within the public sector.
4. An independent Land Use Commission.

The Working Group is firmly of the opinion that to be effective, an oversight body needs to be independent of government and therefore recommends option 4. This is also the preferred choice of the House of Lords Select Committee.

The Public Bodies Handbook⁶⁶ gives detailed guidance on how to reach the right category of public body. This should be used to determine the appropriate decision for delivery of the proposed oversight role.

REMIT

The scope of the proposed Commission could include the following roles:

- Oversight of how the framework is used by different bodies
- Regular reporting of the results
- Encouragement to the users of the Framework
- Revision and updating of the Framework and development of measurement indicators
- Engagement with the wider public
- Advice to Government on opportunities for public participation
- Advice to Government on policies and legislation related to land use.

WHAT A COMMISSION COULD NOT DO

There are a number of actions that are likely to be excluded from a Commission's remit:

- Intervening in planning decisions
- Overturning decisions
- Commenting on use of the Framework outside of the regular reporting cycle
- Conducting formal reviews.

These are powers that should be within the remit of other clearly identified bodies.

POWERS

Given the likely non-statutory status of the proposed Framework, it is unlikely that a Commission would have any powers of enforcement or of imposing financial penalties. Through its reporting system, however, it should have the ability to identify bodies that have failed to use the Framework in decision making and have subsequently made decisions that contravene its principles.

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

A Commission should include a citizens' panel to provide additional advice, insight and oversight. There are several options for how this could be implemented, and citizen involvement in advice, scrutiny and oversight is an area of significant innovation. Relevant examples to draw on include the Citizens' Panel model used by Scotland's Digital Ethics Expert Panel⁶⁷, UK Government's Sciencewise programme for public dialogues on science and technology⁶⁸, and Northern Ireland's Public Data Panel⁶⁹.

RECOMMENDATION

A governance body, such as a Land Use Commission, is established to provide oversight for the proposed Land Use Framework.

Conclusion

From its cross-sectoral and cross-departmental discussions over several months, the Land Use Working Group concludes that a multifunctional Land Use Framework can deliver for a wide range of different interests, concurring with the findings of pilot projects carried out in England⁷⁰:

For decision makers, including statutory planning bodies, the proposed Framework enables them to base decisions on fully cross-sectoral evidence and priorities to try to ensure optimal decisions both for themselves and for society.

For policy developers, the proposed Framework provides benefits in policy delivery, by encouraging proper debate over land use, saving time and money. Collaborative approaches help align and pool resources, share data, knowledge and skills, leading to more sustainable decisions being made.

For strategic infrastructure planners, the proposed Framework offers the prospect of considering all aspects of the project at an early stage, aligning stakeholder interests and avoiding the late emergence of issues at the implementation stage.

For communities, early engagement in the proposed Framework is more likely to direct their energies and local knowledge into creative, practical ideas and solutions. It should reduce objections, optimise trade-offs and help avoid unintended or unforeseen consequences.

For farmers and land managers, the proposed Framework offers a more certain planning horizon, enabling them to integrate critical questions of food security and resilience in land use decisions.

For developers, the proposed Framework includes them in a balanced decision process with other stakeholders which leads to the right housing in the right locations for sustainability, community, jobs and public services.

For the finance sector, the proposed Framework offers insurers and finance providers a more strategic, long-term opportunity for risk assessments, asset values and return on investment calculations.

It is important to highlight the potential risks of not adopting the proposed Land Use Framework. These include continued policy fragmentation, missed climate and biodiversity targets, and land use decisions that fail to support the outcomes expected from land.

The Working Group believes that with careful design and wide stakeholder engagement, the multifunctional approach taken by the proposed Land Use Framework can resolve the dilemma that we have more uses for land than we have land available, while benefitting a wide range of interests, supporting the whole of society and sustaining the land itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **A Land Use Framework is adopted for Northern Ireland and this report is used as a basis for wider stakeholder and public consultation.**
2. **VISION:** The proposed Land Use Framework is guided by this vision for Northern Ireland's land: *Land that supports life in all its diversity, that provides livelihoods in thriving communities and wellbeing for all citizens; that is cared for within ecological limits and for future generations; and that is nurtured to provide multiple functions.*
3. **OUTCOMES:** The proposed Land Use Framework is focused on achieving the following outcomes:
 - **SOIL:** Soils are restored to optimal chemical, biological and physical health
 - **CARBON:** Our land sequesters and stores sufficient carbon to meet legal requirements and our share of national and international obligations.
 - **BIODIVERSITY:** Our land supports all forms of biodiversity, particularly those that are recognised as being under increased threat or pressure.
 - **WATER:** There is a secure and stable supply of clean water for public, commercial and environmental needs, while ensuring pollution and flood risks are minimised
 - **FOOD:** Food production is sufficiently diverse and resilient to meet the nutritional needs of our population in the face of climate and geopolitical supply chain shocks
 - **HOUSING:** Sufficient and affordable housing is available to meet the needs of the population.
 - **ENERGY:** A sufficient, secure, affordable and clean supply of renewable energy meets society's needs in a net zero future.
 - **INFRASTRUCTURE:** Communities benefit from the infrastructure they need to thrive.
 - **LIVELIHOODS:** Landowners have a range of options to earn a living from the land and citizens have opportunities to benefit from land-based economic and social activities.
 - **HEALTH AND WELLBEING:** Everyone has good and equitable access to green and blue spaces for recreation.
4. **PRINCIPLES:** The proposed Land Use Framework adopts the following principles:
 - **MULTIFUNCTIONAL:** Land is recognised as multifunctional and opportunities for deriving multiple benefits are realised.
 - **LAND ATTRIBUTES:** Land use decisions are based on the qualities, properties and characteristics of the land in question and the most suitable and beneficial functions recognised, valued and prioritised.
 - **LOCALLY RESPONSIVE:** Local stakeholders and citizens are genuinely included in decision-making informed by broad public engagement, with local needs, aspirations and the sense of place, culture and history respected.
 - **STEWARDSHIP FOR PROSPERITY:** The economic, social and environmental value of land is unlocked in a way that supports sustainable livelihoods, preserves its natural capital and supports a just transition to a net zero society.
 - **LONG TERM, RESILIENT AND ADAPTIVE:** Land is used in a way that both mitigates and adapts to climate change, achieves soil, biodiversity and water quality targets, and builds long term resilience.

- **ALIGNED:** Land use decisions align with commitments and targets at different spatial and administrative levels and across boundaries, and with relevant policy and legislation.
- **EVIDENCE-BASED AND PRECAUTIONARY:** Land use decisions are informed by appropriate and reliable data and governed by the precautionary principle.

5. DATA, EVIDENCE AND TOOLS

- Land use decisions are informed by appropriate and reliable data (including the use of mapping tools, and scientific and qualitative data) to evaluate risks, costs and benefits at several spatial and temporal scales, drawing on peer-reviewed research and innovation for long-term resilience. The natural capital approach to evidence-based land use decision-making is a valuable resource for the proposed Land Use Framework.

6. SCOPE AND SCALE

- Consideration is given to resourcing Community Planning Partnerships to implement the proposed Land Use Framework at appropriate levels within their local authority areas with effective local and citizen engagement.

7. OVERSIGHT

- A governance body, such as a Land Use Commission, is established to provide oversight for the proposed Land Use Framework.

Glossary

AFBI	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
DEA	District Electoral Area
ISRAF	Independent Strategic Review of NI Agri-Food
JNCC	Joint Nature Conservation Committee
FFCC	Food, Farming and Countryside Commission
LUF	Land Use Framework
LUNZ Hub	Land Use for Net Zero, Nature and People Hub
MLUF	Multifunctional Land Use Framework
RLUP	Regional Land Use Partnership

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Annexes

Annex A

Land Use Working Group

Terms of Reference

Introduction

The increasing and changing demands on land use in Northern Ireland requires a policy process that enables the most effective use of land in the face of this pressure and against the background of climate change and societal demands. The establishment of and report from an expert working group is seen as a crucial starting point in the development of that policy.

Reconciling the finite supply of land with the increasing demands on its use, including agriculture, forestry, peatland restoration, energy, residential development, and infrastructure, is a challenge for many advanced economies and Northern Ireland is no exception.

Managing those sometimes-conflicting land uses, requires a policy process that enables any given piece of land to deliver effective and, where possible, multiple benefits, including economic development, climate change mitigation, biodiversity value, social and cultural opportunities. This working group is seen as a crucial starting point for the development of an effective future land use policy, strategy, and framework.

Policy context and background

- Northern Ireland has multiple strategies, policies and commitments relating to land use that are the responsibility of a number of different government departments.
- Future Agriculture Policy Decisions (March 2022) ^[ii] includes a commitment to progress with developing a land use policy. Work has been underway in DAERA to scope the development of a future land use policy for Northern Ireland, which will be underpinned by science and evidence. The establishment of the Land Use Working Group is a continuation of this scoping work.
- The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 sets a target of at least 100% reduction in net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. It requires cuts in emissions in the land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) sector and in other sectors that impact on land use including agriculture, energy, buildings, industry and infrastructure.
- Climate change, biodiversity and land use are also closely linked. The UK Government (including the Devolved Administrations) has formally committed to protecting and conserving a minimum of 30% of land and sea for biodiversity by 2030, known as 30x30.
- In early 2022 the Independent Review of the Agri-Food Sector (ISRAF - the Kendall Review) recommended a 'land use strategy for Northern Ireland' ^[iii], acknowledging that theirs was the latest in a line of such recommendations going back to 2013 ^{[iii] [iv]}.
- In its June 2022 recommendations for the NI Executive, the Committee on Climate Change included a 'Net Zero delivery strategy for the agriculture and land use sectors that brings together how land can deliver its multiple functions' ^[v].

- Northern Ireland is not alone in taking steps to tackle the issue of how we make decisions on how land can deliver its multiple functions. The UK Government is shortly expected to publish a Land Use Framework for England informed by the report of the House of Lords Land Use in England Committee^[vi], the Royal Society report, Multifunctional Landscapes and FFCC's land use pilots in Devon and Cambridgeshire^[vii]. Scotland has had a Land Use Strategy since 2011^[viii] and the Irish Government is currently engaged in the second phase of its Land Use Review.^[ix]
- In 2023 the FFCC convened a roundtable in Belfast with policy makers, stakeholders and experts to discuss how a land use framework might help reconcile the finite availability of land with the multiple demands on its use.^[x]
- UKRI Land Use Net Zero Hub (LUNZH) is supporting the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) by appointing the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) in partnership with the Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to establish a Land Use Working Group (LUWG).

Task and objectives

The task of the working group is to produce a report and agree recommendations that will support the future development of a land use strategy/framework for Northern Ireland. The group will:

- review objectives, targets and outcomes of existing government policies, strategies and plans for their impacts on land, alongside emerging pressures, to agree what outcomes are wanted from land,
- consider land use decision making approaches taken by England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland,
- consider the role of relevant science and land use models in future decision making,
- consider, discuss and agree principles that could be applied at every level in the land use decision making process.

The principal output will be a report outlining an agreed set of principles and outcomes that will help to guide land use policy making in Northern Ireland and form the basis of a future land use strategy/framework, supported by on-going stakeholder engagement.

Approach

The Working Group will:

- bring together stakeholders, experts and government officials in Northern Ireland from a variety of backgrounds offering their knowledge, experience and expertise to consider the how to reconcile the finite availability of land with the increasing and competing demands on its use, and in the spirit of co-creation.
- share information and seek views from group members on land use principles and outcomes that may help to guide land use policy making in Northern Ireland.
- play a role in promoting effective engagement through knowledge exchange, cooperation and collaboration in areas of shared interest.

- limit its remit to land use and will not extend into specifics around land management or land designation.
- be a forum for discussion and consultation and will not have formal decision making powers.
- be a time bound group with the specific task of considering land use and decision making. It is expected that it will complement existing inter-departmental and stakeholder arrangements in relation to climate and the environment.

The group will build on previous work particularly:

- a round table discussion hosted in March 2023 on land use in Northern Ireland. [\[xi\]](#)
- the outcome of the recent roundtable in Edinburgh ‘Land Use Decision Making in the UK and Ireland’ developed with the support of the LUNZ Hub.
- current land modelling work being done by the LUNZ Hub Work Package 3 and the Climate+ Programme.
- JNCC Northern Ireland land use data sets.

Membership

It is not practicable to have all those with an interest in land represented in a working group of this nature. Members are therefore invited to participate in the group, not on the basis of representing any particular interest or group, but rather to bring their knowledge, experience and expertise to the task in a spirit of co-creation.

The working group will comprise experts, stakeholders, and government departments.

The following areas of interest and expertise will be included amongst the membership: farming, environment, community, local government, energy, water, planning, land profession, data and land use modelling, land law. Membership from government will comprise senior staff (Director level) from DAERA, the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for the Economy.

The working group will invite participation from other experts, stakeholders and officials when a need is identified.

Members are expected to:

- Attend all four plenary meetings of the working group
- Participate in any sub-group work between plenary meetings
- Approach the task in a spirit of co-creation
- Declare any relevant interests

In the event that a member cannot attend a meeting, they should nominate a deputy to attend in their place. If a deputy attends any meeting, they must have sufficient authority and relevant knowledge to participate in the meeting.

Protocol for meetings

The Land Use Working Group has been set up as a time bound project from February to May 2025.

Chairing and secretariat

- The group will be chaired by John Woods, NI Director of the FFCC. Neelia Lloyd, Director of Natural Environment Policy, DAERA will be vice-chair.
- Secretariat will be provided by the FFCC with support from DAERA and AFBI.
 - The secretariat will issue the invitations and agenda. The agenda and papers will be circulated at least one week in advance of the meeting, where possible.
 - The secretariat will aim to circulate draft meeting notes within one week of the meeting taking place, to be reviewed by all parties, for internal use only and not for publication.
 - Meeting records and the final report of the working group will be provided by FFCC staff.

Meeting frequency

- Meetings will be held in person on the following dates:

	Date	Time	Theme (provisional)	Location
1	Thu, 20 th Feb	1100-1700	The land use challenge	Ulster Museum, Belfast
2	Thu 3 rd Apr	1300-1630	Models and outcomes	Clare House, 303 Airport Road West, Belfast BT3 9ED
3	Thu 1 st May	1300-1630	Data, processes and principles	Clare House, 303 Airport Road West, Belfast BT3 9ED
4	Thu 29 th May	1300-1630	Governance, draft final report	Venue tbc

Reading and resources

GENERAL

[Multifunctional Landscapes Policy Report](#), The Royal Society (2023)

[Land Use Framework: information hub](#), FFCC

[Shaping UK land use: priorities for food, nature and climate](#), Green Alliance (2023)

[Green expectations: engaging people on changing land use for climate and nature](#), Green Alliance (2023)

NORTHERN IRELAND

[A Land Use Framework for Northern Ireland: reflections from our roundtable discussion](#), FFCC (Mar 2023)

[Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland](#), Land Matters Taskforce and James Hutton Institute (2015).

[Independent Strategic Review of NI Agri-Food Sector](#), DAERA (2021)

ENGLAND

[House of Lords Land Use in England Committee: Making the most out of England's land. Report of Session 2022-23, HL Paper 105](#), House of Lords (Dec 2022)

[A new way to make decisions about land: briefing for policymakers on the Land Use Framework for England](#), FFCC (2023)

SCOTLAND

[Land use - getting the best from our land: strategy 2021 to 2026](#), The Scottish Government (2021)
[A New Vision for Land Use in Scotland - 6 Conversations](#), SEDA (2021)

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

[Land Use Review – Phase 1 Report](#), Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (2023)
[Phase 2 of Land Use Review commences](#), Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Dec 2023)

References:

[i] Decision 37 on page 9 of [Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland](#), DAERA (March 2022).

[ii] 'DAERA should lead on a co-designed cross departmental land use strategy for Northern Ireland that complements and informs its Future Agricultural Policy Framework, future environmental schemes and the NI Peatland, Green Growth and Circular Economy strategies.' Recommendation 5a of [ISRAF](#), (2021)

[iii] Recommendation 22 of [Going for Growth](#), Agri-Food Strategy Board (2013).

[iv] [Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland](#), Land Matters Taskforce & James Hutton Institute (2015).

[v] 'Set out a Net Zero delivery strategy for the agriculture and land use sectors that brings together how land can deliver its multiple functions including: reducing emissions and sequestering carbon, adapting to climate change, food security, biodiversity, domestic biomass production and wider environmental goals. The strategy must clearly outline the relationships and interactions between the multiple action plans in development (e.g. including those for peat, trees, nature, plant biosecurity and biomass), be spatially and temporally targeted, and aligned with action in the devolved administrations.' P614 of [2022 Progress Report to Parliament](#), Committee on Climate Change (2022)

[vi] [House of Lords Land Use in England Committee: Making the most out of England's land. Report of Session 2022-23, HL Paper 105](#), House of Lords (Dec 2022)

[vii] [Multifunctional Land Use Framework](#), FFCC (Dec 2023)

[viii] [Land use - getting the best from our land: strategy 2021 to 2026](#), The Scottish Government (2021)

[ix] [Phase 2 of Land Use Review commences](#), Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Dec 2023)

^[xi] [A Land Use Framework for Northern Ireland: reflections from our roundtable discussion](#) FFCC (Mar 2023)

^[xii] *ibid.*

Annex B



Outcomes and target data from published legislation and Government policies, strategies and plans

Department for Communities		
Document	Year	Targets
Housing Supply Strategy 2024-2039	2024	Strategy ambition: 100,000 homes from 2024-2039

Department for the Economy				
Document	Year	Targets		
10x Economy – an economic vision, Delivery Plan 2023/24	2023	Double the size of NI's low carbon and renewable energy economy to more than £2bn turnover	80% electricity consumption from renewable sources	Greenhouse gas emissions 48% lower than baseline
Energy Strategy 'Path to Net Zero Energy'	2021	Renewables: Meet at least 80% of electricity consumption from a diverse mix of renewable sources by 2030		

Department for Infrastructure					
Document	Year	Targets			
Strategic Planning Policy Statement	2015	Continue to work towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025			
Regional Development Strategy 2035	2012	Provide new gas infrastructure	Ensure that environmental quality in urban areas is improved and maintained, particularly with adequate provision of	Minimise development in areas at risk from flooding from rivers, the sea and surface water run-off	Target of 60% of new housing to be located in appropriate 'brownfield' sites within the urban footprints of settlements greater than

			green infrastructure		5,000 population
RDS (continued)	2012	Protect designated areas of countryside from inappropriate development		Promote more sustainable housing development within existing urban areas	
Prioritisation of Major Roads Programme	2023	Total of at least 135.2km development			

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs					
Document	Year	Targets			
Environmental Improvement Plan	2024	110 international-ly awarded Blue and Green sites by 2025	By 2050, 84% of households have publicly accessible quality natural space >2ha within 400m and at least one site >20ha in size within 2km	Increase NI woodland cover to at least 9% (124,000 hectares) by 2030, and 12% woodland cover by 2050	All semi-natural peatlands are conserved or restored to healthy, functioning ecosystems by 2040
Environmental Improvement Plan (continued)	2024	9,000 hectares of new woodland as part of ‘Forests for our Future’ Programme	By 2030: At least 30% of land and freshwater protected, connected and managed for nature	By 2030: Create or commence restoration of 20,000 ha of wildlife rich habitat outside the protected site network	
Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland (Draft)	2022	Create or restore 75,000ha of wildlife rich habitat outside the protected site network		Restore 75% of 150,000 hectares of terrestrial and freshwater protected sites to favourable condition	
Green Growth Strategy (Draft)	2021	82% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050 compared to 1990 levels; at least a 48% reduction in all emissions by 2030 and 69% by 2040			
Biodiversity Strategy	2015	By 2050: Expand a wide range of forest types and area of broadleaf trees from 8% to 12% of Northern Ireland land area			
Northern Ireland Forestry Policy	2006	“Within NI we should aim over the next 50 years to double the area of forest largely through transfer from agricultural use to forestry”		The sustainable management of existing woods and forests, and a steady expansion of tree cover	
Peatlands Strategy	2022	By 2040, Northern Ireland’s peatland habitats are	Identify and declare new peatland ASSIs	In line with the recommendations of the Climate Change Committee, success will be measured by bringing 150,000 hectares of	

		conserved and restored		peatland under restoration/sustainable management by 2050
River Basin Management Plan 2021-2027 (Draft)	2020	Objective that all water bodies achieve a status of 'good or better' by 2027 apart from where exemptions apply		
Ammonia Strategy (Draft)	2023	2030 target: Reduce total NI agricultural ammonia emissions by at least 30% from 2020 levels	2030 Target: Reduce ammonia at internationally designated sites by 40% or less than Critical Level from 2020 levels	
Sustainable Land Management Strategy	2016	5,000 hectares of Agroforestry across Northern Ireland; 1,000 hectares of biosecure woody corridors, targeted in areas of high risk for livestock disease; 1,000 hectares of trees sited around intensive livestock units	Target water quality interventions on at least 4,000 ha of land	
Waste Management Plan	2018	CEP Waste Framework Directive obligation to recycle 65% of municipal waste by 2035	Obligation of at least 50% by weight of waste from households is prepared for re-use or recycled; measures to be taken to ensure that by 2020, at least 70% by weight of construction and demolition waste is recycled	

Climate Change Committee					
Document	Year	Targets			
The Path to a Net Zero Northern Ireland (Balanced Pathway)	2023	A reduction in Northern Irish livestock numbers of almost a third and the widespread adoption of low-carbon farming practices by 2050	By 2050, woodland cover to increase from the current 9% of the country's land area to around 14%	More than half of Northern Ireland's peatland to be restored by 2050	Decarbonising electricity generation in Northern Ireland whilst meeting rising demand
The Path to a Net Zero Northern Ireland (Stretch Ambition)	2023	Numbers of livestock fall by 12% by 2030, with a rapid uptake in low-	Increasing annual afforestation rates to reach 3,100 hectares by	Develop CCS in form of biomethane and anaerobic digestion,	Average annual emissions will need to be 16% lower than 2019

		carbon farming	2035 and 4,100 hectares by 2039 remaining at this level until 2050	plus carbon capture and transport infrastructure	levels by 2025 and 35% lower by 2030
The Path to a Net Zero Northern Ireland (Speculative)	2023	Speculative pathway no.1: Balance the residual emissions with further engineered removals using direct air capture of CO ₂ (DAC) technologies and transporting the CO ₂ to be stored elsewhere	Speculative pathway no.2: livestock numbers to approximately halve by 2050, accompanied by technological and efficiency improvements in the sector		Major behavioural shifts in diet across the UK; meat and dairy consumption falling by 47%, compared to the 34% for meat and 20% for dairy assumed in the Balanced Pathway

Annex C

NI Land Use Working Group: Principles Research

A thematic review of principles for land use decision making processes considered/adopted in NI and elsewhere in the UK

Review Process

Relevant land use related policies and publications were researched, and their principles categorised into themes, which were condensed into the following list of principles. The principles are listed in order of the frequency of their appearance in publications, from most popular to least.

Compiled Set of Principles

1. **Land should be actively stewarded to unlock economic, social, and environmental value** - prioritising the reuse of derelict or underused land, supporting sustainable local prosperity, and encouraging investment that benefits communities and respects the land's inherent worth, including in its undeveloped nature.
2. **Land use and management decisions should be inclusive, locally responsive, and informed by genuine and broad public engagement** - encouraging co-design, political deliberation, and communities taking ownership of their land to support fair, sustainable, and connected futures.
3. **Land use and landscape change should be managed with long-term, place-sensitive thinking**, that respects cultural and environmental values, integrates all sectors of land use, respects the vulnerability of landscapes to change, and considers broader spatial and temporal impacts and resilience.
4. **Land should be recognised and used in a multifunctional way**, to deliver benefits, meet needs and targets, and manage pressures.
5. **Land use decisions should be land-led**, where the most suitable and beneficial functions of the land are recognised and valued.
6. **Land use decisions should be conscious of the impacts of climate change**, contributing effectively to adaptation and mitigation.

Principles featured in minimum 2 publications:

7. Land use policies should be influential and align across regional, local and national divides, encouraging stakeholder collaboration.
8. Responsible public access to land and provision of accessible green spaces should be encouraged.
9. Land use decisions should be backed up by robust data, analytics, and knowledge of ecosystems and their services.
10. Land use policy should be responsive and adaptable.

ANNEX

Complete List of Principles

Land Matters Taskforce & James Hutton Institute: Towards a Land Strategy For Northern Ireland (2015)

[Towards-a-Land-Strategy-for-NI_2015-Main-Report.pdf](#)

This report urges that “a Land Strategy should contain a number of high-level principles...” and should “...accord with the three tenets of sustainability (society, economy and environment), and provide an overall context for decision making on the use of land, irrespective of the level at which decisions are made.” The following principles are included:

Principles

1. Land should be recognised as multi-functional and opportunities for deriving multiple benefits should be encouraged and incentivised.
2. Regulation should protect essential public interests whilst avoiding placing an onerous burden on businesses and landowners.
3. Where land is highly suitable for a key primary function (for example food production, flood management, tourism and recreation, carbon storage), this function should be recognised in decision-making.
4. Different ecosystems provide different benefits, though it should be recognised that they are not discrete entities existing in isolation from each other. It is important to recognise that decisions by individual land managers can have implications at a broader scale which can affect the delivery of those benefits.
5. Decisions regarding land use and management can have dramatic impacts on landscape quality and character, including its cultural history and endowment; decisions must therefore respect the vulnerability of landscapes to change and the deep cultural sensitivities around land.
6. The opportunities and threats posed by climate change must be central to decisions about how land is used in order to contribute effectively to climate change adaptation and mitigation.
7. Derelict, vacant or underused land represents a missed economic, social and environmental opportunity, and in some cases an environmental hazard; its utilisation and/ or stewardship should be prioritised and incentivised whilst respecting that some land has an inherent value in its undeveloped nature.
8. Where agreed, responsible access to land and provision of green and historic spaces and places for outdoor recreation should be encouraged to deliver improved health and well-being and opportunities for tourism.
9. There is a need for greater awareness of, and engagement from, wider civil society in Northern Ireland in land-related matters; over time this will promote a more broadly based and inclusive approach to policy and decision-making.

10. Adequate designations, management arrangements and resources to protect and enhance Northern Ireland's most precious landscapes and sustainably develop their potential to deliver economic and social benefit.

Scottish Government - Scotland's Land Use Strategy (2011)

Getting the best from our land - A land use strategy for Scotland

The Scottish Government is required by law to produce an updated Land Use Strategy every 5 years, with the principles listed below introduced in the first Land Use Strategy (2011) remaining present in subsequent publications.

Principles

1. Opportunities for land use to deliver multiple benefits should be encouraged.
2. Regulation should continue to protect essential public interests whilst placing as light a burden on businesses as is consistent with achieving its purpose. Incentives should be efficient and cost-effective.
3. Where land is highly suitable for a primary use (for example food production, flood management, water catchment management and carbon storage) this value should be recognised in decision-making.
4. Land use decisions should be informed by an understanding of the functioning of the ecosystems which they affect in order to maintain the benefits of the ecosystem services which they provide.
5. Landscape change should be managed positively and sympathetically, considering the implications of change at a scale appropriate to the landscape in question, given that all Scotland's landscapes are important to our sense of identity and to our individual and social wellbeing.
6. Land-use decisions should be informed by an understanding of the opportunities and threats brought about by the changing climate. Greenhouse gas emissions associated with land use should be reduced and land should continue to contribute to delivering climate change adaptation and mitigation objectives.
7. Where land has ceased to fulfil a useful function because it is derelict or vacant, this represents a significant loss of economic potential and amenity for the community concerned. It should be a priority to examine options for restoring all such land to economically, socially or environmentally productive uses.
8. Outdoor recreation opportunities and public access to land should be encouraged, along with the provision of accessible green space close to where people live, given their importance for health and well-being.
9. People should have opportunities to contribute to debates and decisions about land use and management decisions which affect their lives and their future.
10. Opportunities to broaden our understanding of the links between land use and daily living should be encouraged.

FFCC - Multifunctional Land Use Framework (2023)

[FFCC The Multifunctional Land Use Framework December 2023 final.pdf](#)

The six principles (grouped together around Place, People, and Public Value) were developed from the FFCC's Land Use Framework pilot projects which took place in Devon and Cambridgeshire in 2020. The pilots brought together land use stakeholders to adapt their own version of a framework and test it out in practice through action research. The value of the Framework was cemented during the pilot projects:

Principles

1. Land use decisions should be land-led to ensure that land is used for what it is best suited – ensuring that the best agricultural land is used to produce food and not afforested, for example.
2. Being land-led will ensure that land is managed to be adaptive and resilient to future climate impacts.
3. Must be locally responsive, ensuring that local stakeholders and citizens can be genuinely included in decision-making.
4. Land use decisions should strongly relate to their connections with other places and future generations.
5. Land must be used to encourage multifunctionality to meet the challenges of the country.
6. Land must contribute prosperity to local communities.

The framework also incorporated the following 'Ways of Working' which in some interpretations might also be described as principles.

- Transparent and Inclusive
- Strategic and Granular
- Learning What Works
- Integrative
- Leadership Commitment
- Evidence Based

The Royal Society – Multifunctional Landscapes (2023)

[des7483_multifunctional-landscapes_policy-report-web.pdf](#)

The report sets out the case for adopting a multifunctional approach to landscape analysis and decision-making. It outlines some key principles that could "underpin national land use frameworks, enabling the coordination and reconciliation of land use decisions across multiple policy areas and geographical scales and informing policy which is spatially targeted to encourage land managers to use land most efficiently for the purposes to which it is best suited."

Principles

1. Supported by robust data and analytics
2. Built on trust and transparency
3. Enable policy coherence
4. Maximise returns on public investment
5. Allow space for political deliberation

6. Facilitate decision-making at appropriate spatial scales
7. Integrate housing and infrastructure with wider land use decisions
8. Has ability to evolve and improve
9. In place for the long-term
10. Help crowd-in private investment
11. Should be sufficiently influential to make a difference
12. Mesh with other land use frameworks within the UK
13. Engage with different publics

UK Government - Land Use Consultation (2025)

[Land Use Consultation.pdf](#)

Principles developed to support strategic spatial planning and the targeting of land use incentives, which will be updated after reviewing consultation responses and applied to future policy on land use.

Principles

1. Co-design: Support for participation and leadership at the local and regional scale to develop and align spatial strategies and assess the fairness of changes in land use.
2. Multifunctional land: Enable multiple benefits on land, targeted according to opportunity, societal needs (such as the health benefits of co-locating new homes and nature), and environmental pressures (such as reducing pollution).
3. Playing to the strengths of the land: Support and spatially target land use change to locations where benefits are greater and trade-offs are lower. Give priority to land uses that are more scarce or spatially sensitive (for example grid capacity places restrictions on new renewable generation sites or protecting land that is best suited for food production).
4. Decisions fit for the long-term: Take a long-term view of changing land suitability, prioritising resilience (including to the impacts of climate change). This could include planning for new homes that are resilient to climate impacts, such as flooding and overheating.
5. Responsive by design: Land use policy, including spatial prioritisation and targeting, needs to be responsive to new data, opportunities and pressures.

Regional Economic Partnership (REP) South of Scotland - Regional Land Use Framework (2024)

https://www.southofscotlandrep.com/media/kpsbxf2b/rluf_v1_240919.pdf

To assist RLUF development, the Scottish Government has produced a set of draft RLUF Guiding Principles, drawing upon the approach, ambitions and principles of the Scottish Government in previous policies and publications.

Approach:

- Evidence-based
- Transparent
- Democratic

- Inclusive
- Locally led
- Shared Understanding

Principles

1. Natural Capital Approach: Approach our land as an asset that we need to protect and enhance so that it can continue to deliver ecosystem benefits. Use appropriate data to identify regional natural capital assets to address climate change and biodiversity loss. Mitigate against a changing climate through nature-based solutions.
2. Regional and National Alignment: Combine national policy with local knowledge to understand complex ecologies and improve resilience. Regional land use plays an active role in supporting Scotland to deliver a wellbeing economy and just transition to Net Zero.
3. Stakeholder Collaboration: Collaborate with diverse stakeholders and strive to seek alignment where competing interests are at play. Maintain a democratic and inclusive approach to decision-making with clear routes for resolving conflict.
4. Social Focus: Communities that are connected to the land, and each other, to support a healthier and happier Scotland. Growing opportunities for communities to take ownership of land and land use.
5. Growth and Prosperity: Ensuring that Scotland's people are able to live and work sustainably on our land. Strengthen our rural and island communities and businesses by supporting and empowering them to become sustainable and vibrant places to live work and study.
6. Economically Sustainable: Identify opportunities for green investment that delivers mutual benefits for communities and businesses. Understanding the economic behaviours and incentives underpinning regional land use and encourage mutual prosperity for all.

Annex D

Experts consulted by Working Group

Name	Position	Organisation
Georgie Barber	Programme Lead: Land Use and Countryside	Food, Farming and Countryside Commission
Hamish Trench	Chief Executive	Scottish Land Commission
Niamh Garvey	Senior Policy Analyst	National, Economic and Social Council
Dr Marios Zachariou	Agricultural Economist, Environmental Economics	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
Amy Arnott	Northern Ireland Science and Evidence Liaison	Joint Nature Conservation Committee

Annex E

Competing land use needs assessment methods performed by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee

JNCC conducted an analysis of land use demands in Northern Ireland in June 2026 using publicly available policy targets, as well as the Committee on Climate Change Net Zero pathways to inform the 4th Carbon budget. The following documents were included:

- Climate Change Committee (2025). Northern Ireland's Fourth Carbon Budget².
- Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2024). Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland³.
- Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2025). Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy to 2040⁴.
- Department for Communities (2024). Housing Supply Strategy 2024 - 2039⁵.

References to any area-based targets (e.g. 12% woodland cover by 2050; EIP) were taken from the above strategic documents and brought together to give a total figure for the number of hectares of land required in order to meet all the respective targets. Woodland and peatland area values were taken directly from policy targets. Habitat creation also, but note this target only goes to 2030, no additional assumptions have been made for further habitat creation between 2030 and 2050. The CCC recommendation for bio energy was a target planting rate for 2050. To get a total area, we have assumed a linear increase from a baseline of 0 ha yr⁻¹ in 2026 to the target rate of 1,300 ha yr⁻¹ in 2037, with the planting rate remaining consistent at this level up to and including 2050. The housing target relates to number of houses, and we have assumed an average of 44 dwellings per hectare⁶.

² Northern Ireland's Fourth Carbon Budget (2025). Link: <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/northern-irelands-fourth-carbon-budget/>

³ Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland. Link: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/environmental-improvement-plan-northern-ireland>

⁴ Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy to 2040. Link: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-peatland-strategy-2040>

⁵ Housing Supply Strategy 2024 – 2039. Link: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/housing-supply-strategy-2024-2039>

⁶ Residential densities. A Comparative Study (2017). Link: https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/getmedia/9cff4aea-fdfe-42c5-b59d-9c655c31b2e9/DPS027_Evi-04.pdf

Type of target	Woodland		Peatland	Habitat creation	Bio energy	Housing
Source of target	EIP	CCC pathways to net zero to inform NI 4th Carbon Budget	NI Peatland Strategy	EIP	CCC pathways to net zero to inform NI 4th Carbon Budget	Housing Supply Strategy 2024-2039
Original target	12% woodland cover by 2050	Northern Ireland's Fourth Carbon Budget (2025)¹ "Woodland creation rates rise from around 400 hectares per year in 2023 to reach peak annual rates of 2,800 hectares by 2036, with an 80:20 planting split between new broadleaf and conifer woodlands. The proportion of woodland cover rises from the current 8% to 12% in 2040, and 15% by 2050" Note there are other estimates of woodland cover in NI that range from 8.5-9%^{7,8}	Following CCC recommendations, bring 150,000 hectares of peatland under restoration/sustainable management by 2050.	By 2030: Create or commence restoration of 20,000 ha of wildlife rich habitat outside the protected site network (to support nature recovery networks and nature-based solutions).	Northern Ireland's Fourth Carbon Budget (2025)¹ "Current rates of planting are unknown for Northern Ireland. We assume levels rise from 2027, reaching annual rates of 1,300 hectares in 2037, which is then maintained."	Create 100,000+ homes over 2024-2039
Target (Ha) for 2050	54,120	40,590 (additional to EIP)	150,000	20,000 (by 2030)	24,700	2,273

⁷ Woodland Trust: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/about-us/where-we-work/northern-ireland/>

⁸ Forest Research: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/climate-change/advice/official-country-guidance/northern-ireland/>