

Land Use Decision Making in the UK & Ireland

What can countries learn from each other for a better future?

Food, Farming & Countryside Commission High-Level Round Table
Edinburgh, March 28th 2024

Land is finite, and demands on it are many and increasing. To meet these demands, we need to make the most effective use of land, ensuring it supports local communities and national objectives.

The UK and the Republic of Ireland have developed a variety of approaches to strategic land use governance, at national and subnational levels. What can these countries learn from each other, what good practice could transfer from one jurisdiction to the others, and what do we need to make this happen?

Convened by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, a high-level Round Table of 40 government, academic and civil society leaders from the five nations – described by the chair as “extraordinary people” – met in Edinburgh in March 2024 to address these questions.

NOMINATING WHAT'S WORKING IN EACH COUNTRY

The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission works across the UK, with Commissioners and Country Directors representing all areas, as well as with colleagues from the Republic of Ireland. The Round Table started by using this deep knowledge of national contexts to identify what aspects of land use planning worked best in each country.

Round Table participants in country groupings were asked to identify top three strengths of their jurisdiction's approach to land use decision making – what was working and why? They were also asked to decide on a gift – what element from their country's land use system would they give to the other four countries?

The island of **Ireland** (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland combined) was first to speak. They nominated as their top three strengths:

- Scale – the jurisdictions are small enough for everyone to know each other, speeding up change
- Climate Change Legislation – in both parts of the island providing the basis for long term targets and climate action plans
- Coalitions in governments (voluntary in the south and obligatory in the north) contributed to policy continuity

The group's facilitator commented that consensus on these strengths was arrived at quickly. Even though these are two different jurisdictions, their shared history and overarching influences like climate change and population size led to common conclusions on these questions.

On the other side of the ledger, they identified problems with tribalism in voting behaviour limiting the political payback for policy innovation, a lack of institutional integration and a lack of social and political trust. When asked what they would give to the other countries they offered **Citizens' Assemblies** (on climate, biodiversity, etc.) as their treasured gift.

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

Citizens' Assemblies are a deliberative democracy tool aimed at giving people who live in Ireland a greater voice in important legal and policy issues facing the country. They have been used extensively over the last 10 years in the Republic and have become increasingly important in informing wider public debate on a range of issues such as gender equality, same sex marriage, climate action, biodiversity loss and drug use. They consist of 99 randomly selected members of the public and an independent chair. The members examine a range of reports, studies, experiences from other countries and presentations from range of experts and stakeholders on the issue. The deliberations and recommendations of the assembly are presented to the Government and the Oireachtas for consideration – the biodiversity loss assembly produced 159 recommendations. Further information on Citizens' Assemblies held to date including final reports and recommendations on the broad range of issues considered over the last 10 years are [available](#). In 2020 the Northern Ireland political parties collectively agreed to hold one Citizens' Assembly a year although this has yet to be implemented.

Scotland's team focused on their long track record of land use decision making since devolution, identifying three strengths in:

- Strong [policy, principles and ambition](#) in land use policy
- A government that, due to [scale, was approachable](#) on land use questions – listening, talking and changing.
- [Effective and accessible data](#) on land use

The team's facilitator felt it was a very positive session, with everybody very confident in the direction Scotland was taking. There was an acknowledgement that the Scottish government was listening and committed to understanding what works and what doesn't. The government's investment in research and freely accessible data was commended – exemplified by the [comprehensive soil maps](#) which were described as an amazing resource.

Less positive was their view on delivering that ambition, an over-centralised tendency in power and resources, and the difficulty of matching finance to ambition. Their gift to the other jurisdictions would be the lessons they had learned from working at scale and at pace, particularly in setting up **Regional Land Use Partnerships**. Shortly after the Round Table, the Scottish Government confirmed that the Regional Land Use Partnerships would continue.

REGIONAL LAND USE PARTNERSHIPS (RLUPS)

Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs) are partnerships facilitating collaboration between local and national government, communities, landowners, land managers, and wider stakeholders. They enable natural capital-led consideration of how to maximise the contribution that land can make to addressing the twin climate and biodiversity crises. They help to optimise land use in a fair and inclusive way – meeting local and national objectives and supporting Scotland's just transition to net-zero. Pilots have been established in five areas - Cairngorms National Park, Highland Council area, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, North East Region (Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Councils) and South of Scotland (Dumfries and Galloway and Scottish Borders Councils.) In April 24, The Scottish Government announced that Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs) will be 'established as an initiative with coverage across Scotland by the end of the next Parliamentary term. This is beginning with the recruitment of up to three new areas over the next year, recognising successful partnership must be driven by communities from the bottom up'. Find out more [here](#).

The Round Table hypothesis that countries would have good practice to transfer to the others was strengthened as each country made its contribution: **Wales** came up with its three strengths as:

- The national [land use framework of Future Wales 2040](#)
- The [Wellbeing of Future Generations Act](#)
- [Scale of the country](#) and its institutions, leading to faster decision making.

They cited the lack of a specific rural vision or strategy as a weakness, alongside the need for age balanced communities against the shortage of young people in rural areas. Their gift to the other countries would be the **Wellbeing of Future Generations Act** with its 7 goals, although they put this forward with caution around the way that the Act was difficult to enforce, even if the intent behind it was honourable and most decisions are improved by taking a long-term view.

The group's facilitator reported a wide-ranging discussion starting with the long-term horizon of Future Wales 2040 and then homing in on near term concerns, including the problems around the implementation of the Sustainable Farming Scheme. After the Round Table, the Welsh Government announced the scheme would be delayed until 2026 to give more time for consultation.

WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS (WALES) ACT

The **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015** is an ambitious and aspirational piece of legislation - the first of its kind in the world. It requires government and public bodies in Wales to consider the long-term impact of their decisions, to work together on sustainable development which will prevent problems for future generations. It established the post of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, and works towards 7 goals: a prosperous Wales; a resilient Wales, a healthier Wales; a more equal Wales; a Wales of cohesive communities; a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language; and a globally responsible Wales.

While farming isn't explicitly mentioned with the Future Generations Act, it is very closely aligned to the Environment (Wales) Act and the sustainable management of natural resources that was brought into legislation the same time. The new Future Generations Commissioner has made food the core element of the seven-year strategy, to ensure food system change for environment and public health is high on the political agenda. In a 2021 Review, the Senedd's Public Accounts Committee urged public bodies to work better to promote the aims of the act, citing inconsistent leadership and slow culture change in the first 5 years of its life.

England summed up their top three strengths as:

- [Quantified targets](#) in legislation that are well informed by scientific advice
- The [Environment Act and Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#) placing responsibilities on local authorities, with an explicit spatial component
- A high level of [public support for the environment](#), indicated by polled voting intentions and FFCC's own Food Conversation results

Although the quantified targets are a strength, implementation remains problematic, and reliance on the market to allocate resources fails when the market is imperfect.

The English gift to the other nations would be its **Local Nature Recovery Strategies**, giving statutory responsibility to local authorities.

The group's facilitator said the discussions mostly focused on the strength of different legislation and relative weakness of the implementation of that legislation. While targets, policies and timelines were often good, the lack of resources to delivery mechanisms and lack of coherence across distinct but related policies meant that on-the-ground

work was difficult to deliver. There were also discussions about the appropriate scale for different strategic land use policies, as England is the largest, most diverse and most densely populated country in the UK.

LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGIES (LNRS)

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) are a distinctive feature of England's approach to nature recovery, placing a statutory responsibility on local authorities to take action. LNRS are a new system of spatial strategies for nature, introduced in the Environment Act 2021 and launched in March 2023. The government intends that LNRS will help map out the actions needed to restore nature, working closely with local stakeholders, especially farmers and land managers. In sum, they will be a key mechanism to meet England-wide nature targets.

LNRS responsible local authorities will lead preparations in their area. They are devising their strategies supported by Natural England, the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission. Each LNRS will agree priorities for nature's recovery; map the most valuable existing areas for nature; and map specific proposals for creating or improving habitat for nature and wider environmental goals.

LNRS will help support nature and nature-based solutions by drawing together and coordinating actions from existing plans and strategies, and proposing what more should be done.

FOUR THEMES EMERGING

By this stage the Round Table had twelve strengths identified, a number of obstructions to progress, and four gifts from country to country. The chair identified four major themes:

- **Integration** – taking a holistic view, with land use planning meshing together multiple objectives through a multifunctional approach
- **Levers of change** – including planning law (as an enabler and preventer), planning policy to guide progress, financial instruments to pay for it, and the provision of trusted advice
- **Governance** – covering the rights, responsibilities and licence to operate of landowners, and mechanisms for community involvement and public engagement
- **Process** – defining the process to effect land use decision making, including reliable data and aggregating national land use targets within local delivery mechanisms.

Round Table participants came up with a wealth of real-life examples of these factors.

In **integration**, smaller population sizes made things easier – Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales all identified this as one of their strengths. In England, the Local Nature Recovery Strategies were an encouragement for local authorities to take a holistic view and register what was happening in neighbouring authorities in shared landscapes. The corporate sector was mentioned as meriting greater integration – corporate demand for land is increasing due to Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) concerns and opportunities for carbon and biodiversity credits. It was suggested that FFCC had a role to play in bringing these corporates into the food policy ecosystem, to get them think beyond their value chains to broader landscape solutions.

Levers of change were many and varied. Consistent and persistent long-term policy and funding were the foundations of sustainable change, we heard. Many schemes have a three- or five-year timeline when thirty years would be a more appropriate period for lasting change. Scenario planning was recommended as a way of extending the time horizon to better accommodate the long-term processes involved.

SCENARIO MODELLING

An RSPB and Natural England-led [study](#) used scenario modelling to evaluate the trade-offs and synergies among climate change mitigation, nature conservation, and food production under alternative land-use futures for the UK. The approach was spatially detailed, with a 25 metre resolution to account for the “finite and heterogeneous nature of land.” Extending out to 2050, the study developed nine exploratory, climate change mitigation-driven land-use scenarios for the UK. The scenario that maximized deployment of nature-based solutions reduced greenhouse gas (CO₂e) emissions from the land sector by >100% by 2050 but resulted in a 21% decline in [food production](#). All mitigation scenarios delivered aggregate increases in habitat availability for 109 [bird species](#) (including 61 [species of conservation concern](#)), although farmland-associated species lost habitat. The authors say the study reiterates the potential of nature-based solutions to address global climate and biodiversity challenges but also highlights risks to farmland wildlife and the importance of food system reform to mitigate potential reductions in primary food production.

The reframing of purely economic considerations to include acting in the public interest or for the public good was recommended. We heard that in the Northern Ireland planning system the public interest includes furthering sustainable development and improving wellbeing, while in Wales the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act requires a long-term view of policy outcomes. Quality, impartial advice for stakeholders was a key lever of change – but it needed to be properly funded.

GOOD PRACTICE PROGRAMME

The Scottish Land Commission operates a **Good Practice Programme** around the Scottish Government’s Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement (LRRS). This sets out principles for good practice in land ownership, management and use. The LRRS applies to everyone who owns, manages or uses land in Scotland – whether they are a private individual, a company, charity, community group, or public body. The **Good Practice Team** provides advice relating to the LRRS – giving guidance on how to apply the principles in practice and helping people to find solutions. In the 3 years to March 2023 they dealt with 263 enquiries, with Community Engagement the top issue, followed by queries about vacant and derelict land, and diversification of ownership and tenure. After 3 years’ experience, the conclusion is that more should be done to build capacity in the land sector so that those in positions of power have the knowledge and confidence to engage, share information, and collaborate. It also seems that goodwill and voluntary approaches alone will not be enough to change behaviour and culture in how land is owned, used and managed. Further measures will be needed to encourage all those with decision-making power over land to act responsibly and follow the good examples already being set by others, and provide backstop measures where necessary.

Governance was an issue mentioned in all countries – the gap that can open up between national government and action on the ground was common to all five. Wales has twenty-five planning authorities for 3.1 million people, which can create dissonance with national policies. On the other hand, local authorities can act as strategic aggregators – bringing local actions in a range of contexts together to contribute to national aspirations. People reported feeling “done to” by national government, with little opportunity for involvement. One way through this is to engage citizens through shifting the conversation to urgent climate adaptation for flood, fire and other climate impacts. Farmers and

other stakeholders are quicker to become involved because these are immediate concerns, and their urgency and relevance are understood.

We heard that the **process** of effective land use decision making was a delicate balance of proscription and freedom, central and local control, backed up by reliable and imaginatively visualised data. One participant said that data on its own will not get us to the right place, it requires a well-defined strategy and carefully articulated trade-offs in a scenario that gives all participants enough of what they need to make progress.

VENTURA

VENTURA is a systems thinking collaborative project which harnesses digital tools to create a shared evidence base for co-designed decision making in land use planning for integrated water management. The project uses a web-based [Virtual Decision Room \(VDR\)](#) featuring a hydrological model, current and alternative governance models, and an interactive user interface to explore how climate change, population growth and development affects water flow and water quality through the Upper Mersey catchment in Manchester.

The VDR was used to show how linkages and feedback loops in current reactive Governance might be reframed to a proactive approach to mitigate risks of both flooding and drought. VENTURA is funded by the UK Government's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, delivered by Imperial College London, University College London, and British Geological Survey with partners from Manchester (Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the Environment Agency, United Utilities), and Enfield, London (Enfield Council).

The Scottish Community Asset Transfer Scheme was praised for putting communities in charge of their own local land use, triggering strong local engagement. This led to a broader discussion on how land use decisions were more effective when they focused on the end uses that communities are looking for, using data to reframe the decision as a positive contribution with multiple benefits.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT (SCOTLAND) ACT

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 gave communities the right to request to purchase, lease or for rights over public land. Launched in January 2017, Forestry and Land Scotland's (FLS) Community Asset Transfer Scheme (CATS) sets out how FLS delivers the asset transfer rights for communities for Scotland's national forests and land. This scheme gives local people the chance to manage or take ownership of land where they can better meet the needs of their local community. Successful applications in recent years included plans to build a waste composting site, a watersports hub, a community hydro power scheme and numerous outdoor recreational and educational facilities. Since the scheme was launched, 22 sales have completed, totalling 593 hectares now in community ownership. Find out more [here](#).

Finally, we were encouraged not to search always for the optimal outcome, as that might never be found – “sub-optimal but better than the present” might unblock the change process. Using approaches that took account of a wider range of benefits than conventional “planning gain” would contribute to this unblocking.

BROWNFIELD REMEDIATION AND REDEVELOPMENT

Remediating brownfield land can reduce the pressure to develop greenfield sites, but narrow cost-benefit analysis may conclude that the cost of remediation is too high. The Environment Agency, Jacobs, and British Geological Survey are working together to develop new digital approaches to measure, monitor and maximise the realisation of the full range of benefits from contaminated brownfield remediation and redevelopment.

The team has created a prototype remediation and sustainable growth tool to capture digitally enabled spatial insights for multiple brownfield sites in regional catchments in England. Early-stage testing of the tool includes incorporating a natural capital approach to help the Environment Agency and partners understand and communicate the social, economic and environmental value of remediating contaminated and geologically unstable brownfield land to optimise its planning, regulation, funding and delivery.

Redeveloped brownfield land helps create connected spaces for living, working and enjoying nature as part of a productive healthy environment. However, the total benefits of remediation are not currently fully understood or utilised in decision making. The new tool aims to reduce the risk of sites remaining derelict for years and create opportunities to optimise value from public and private investment.

The Round Table open discussion heard a call for greater diversity in the sector, to broaden the constituencies behind decisions and encourage innovative approaches away from the mainstream. Whether in terms of gender, age distribution or other distinctive characteristics, land use decisions would be improved by a commitment to greater diversity.

LAND MOBILITY SERVICE

The Land Mobility Service in The Republic of Ireland addresses significant issues with the age structure of farming in ROI where many older farmers have no identified successor. The Land Mobility Service is a generational renewal, facilitation and support service aimed at facilitating collaborative farming arrangements such as long-term leases, share farming and farm partnerships. It is an initiative of the Macra na Feirme (a young farmers representative organisation in Ireland) with the financial support from FBD Trust, with the backing of The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and a range of industry stakeholders. The service provides information on options available and acts as an honest broker. Since 2015, 962 known arrangements have been facilitated covering approximately 30,000 Ha. Further details can be found [here](#).

Having discussed the four themes, the chair called for a concluding nationally-specific session in which the nation groupings were challenged to come up with effective means of implementation in three domains:

- Confident **leadership**, supported by aligned legislation, policies and tools
- Effective **integration** of local and national ambitions, informed by broad public engagement
- The factors to **make this happen** – capacity, trust, aligned data, skills and tools

Each facilitator was then asked to choose which of the “gifts” offered at the start of the day by the other countries they would take for their own country.

Ireland (both sides of the border) identified two levels of **leadership** that needed to be strengthened simultaneously – high-level land use outcomes (in health, jobs, environment) for national politicians to see the benefits to them, and at local level the confidence and resources to implement plans with community backing. **Integration** would be founded on having a clear national strategy with implementation priorities handled at local level, and key to **making it happen** would be long term funding for up to 20 years, supporting local development partnerships championed by the community and, in Northern Ireland, the formation of a cross sectoral and cross departmental Land Use Framework Working Group to make recommendations for the initial steps in the design and development of a multifunctional framework for making land use decisions.

The Ireland facilitator commented that the concluding discussion in the Ireland group focused on the need for better cross-departmental thinking in governments – currently land use policy will sit in just one Ministry but it has impacts in many more, which leads to conflict and delay when a decision made by one department is perceived to have harmed the interests of another. More collaborative working would avoid this and might even ease the funding problem as pots of money could be combined across departments to meet aligned objectives.

For Ireland, the gift of choice was the **Regional Land Use Partnerships** offered by Scotland. These collaborations between local and national government, communities, landowners, land managers, and wider stakeholders would transfer well, it was thought, and would help to optimize land use in a fair and inclusive way.

Scotland reported **leadership** already in place, as the country is 13 years into its Land Use Strategy and a Land Use Commission well established. Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs) in pilot stage are now confirmed to continue, but for true **integration** there is a need to amalgamate national and regional targets in a bottom-up feedback loop. **Making it happen** will depend on national government “letting go” to some degree and local authorities stepping up; regional land use partnerships beyond the pilot stage will need to access resources and expertise.

The Scotland facilitator recognised that there had been real tensions in the Regional Land Use Partnership Pilots, but those involved had a pragmatic “just do it” approach which led to success. Their choice of ‘gift’ was **the equivalent of the Welsh Future Generations Commissioner** which should drive a long-term view in decision-making. This is already being considered by the Scottish Government as part of the upcoming Wellbeing and Sustainable Development Bill, so including considerations of future generations in Scottish policy decisions is in prospect and it was hoped that lessons learned from Wales’ lead (see page 2) would be applied in the Scottish case.

In **Wales**, government **leadership** was urged to take a more enabling and less interventionist approach, forging better links into rural Wales, and strengthened public engagement via FFCC’s Food Conversation. **Integration** should bring together the “plethora of public bodies” that could and should play a part in land use decisions; to **make it happen** long-term consistency of policy and delivery and a culture of openness and transparency was essential.

According to the Wales facilitator, these points were rooted in the complexity and number of bodies involved in land use planning in Wales – 22 local authorities, 3 national parks, one environment agency equivalent, all aiming for the sustainable management of natural resources and the sustainable management of marine resources as defined in the Environment Act Wales. For this reason they chose as the ‘gift’ they would implement the **Regional Land Use Partnerships** from Scotland – it was hoped these, in their Welsh incarnation, could provide a “gathering point” for people and organisations to come together to work on land use planning.

In **England**, success would come if **leadership** was less proscriptive and short term, promoting the Land Use Framework as a tool for collaborative working, linking top-down and bottom-up approaches. A Minister for the Regions would be key to **integration**, ensuring that each decision was taken at the right geographical level in the

system. To **make this happen** the English group felt that access to trusted, reliable data and independent advice would smooth the path to change.

The England facilitator reported that questions of scale were central to discussions of policymaking, as the issue at hand determines the appropriate scale for effective decision-making and democratic engagement. The gift of choice was the **Regional Land Use Partnerships** offered by Scotland. Recognising that England is the largest and most diverse of the jurisdictions, and reflecting on other jurisdictions' suggestions that having smaller constituencies made land use governance more manageable, regional governance was considered essential for strategic integration. However, under existing governance structures, discussion centred on which issues might be governed at the national level (e.g., energy distribution and storage, telecommunications) and which at the local authority level (renewable energy generation, housing, tree planting). This could lead to effective democratic engagement at the local level, while ensuring national targets are met.

TOWARDS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Bringing the Round Table to a close, land use was recognised as critical to cohesion and a major issue for any new government of whatever hue. Land use was a "sentinel issue" for the greater community involvement that was needed in the future.

The common themes of the country-specific implementation plans, and the distinctiveness of the "gifts" offered by countries at the start of the day (Citizens' Assemblies; RLUPs; Wellbeing of Future Generations; and Local Nature Recovery Strategies), were striking. It was also noteworthy that many of the negatives faced by the countries were similar: leadership was too often proscriptive, short-term, top-down and not sensitive to regional or local needs; integration was hampered by a lack of clear strategies and feedback loops to arrive at targets; and making it happen relied on funding certainty that was impossible to achieve.

However sometimes one country had found success in an aspect of land use planning that the other countries recognised, were envious of, and wanted to implement for themselves. The Scottish Regional Land Use Partnerships were the clearest example of this, with every Round Table country wanting to adopt them, but Citizens' Assemblies and the Wellbeing of Future Generations approach also received widespread attention from countries that did not already have them.

Could it be that those countries that have successfully implemented a new approach could guide others that want to follow them? This identification of common routes forward (and common negatives to move away from) would be the foundation of a Community of Practice that would grow out of the Round Table to encompass a wider range of participants, united by the ambition to use improved land use planning as a lever for wider economic, environmental and social change in each country.

Many learning needs and opportunities for knowledge transfer had emerged organically during the day, but a more systematic investigation would no doubt uncover a wider range of topics to cover and find more experts to share their insights. The Round Table had noted many examples of effective landscape governance and good practice, what was needed now was an effective way to share these, discover more, and identify the 'hot spots' where new information and experiences would have the greatest impact on increasing the effective use of our scarce land resource.

As the country-to-country gifts were taken up and moved towards implementation, there was much guidance that could be shared, especially now that Scotland had confirmed the RLUPs would continue and expand. FFCC committed to developing the Community of Practice concept further and reconvening the Round Table group as the seed crystal of the wider community of practice.