# Agri-food for Net Zero Network+ Land Use Framework Consultation response: A just transition

Online workshop
Monday, April 14, 2025

On Monday, April 14, 2025, The Agri-food for Net Zero Network+ team held a workshop with network members to discuss key points within the Defra Land Use Framework consultation document, through the lens of delivering a just transition. Participants were given the following five points to discuss in online breakout rooms:

1. What evidence exists and what evidence is needed to support a fair and effective land strategy
2. How land use principles should be shaped and delivered in practice (particularly the co-design principle and who participates in this; also, are there missing principles)
3. What support is needed to make these changes possible – and fair (What policy levers have most evidence behind them- what are the implications for fair transition)
4. The scale and speed of land use change
5. What gaps in land management capacity or skills do you anticipate? What are the implications for a fair transition?

The following is a summary of participant input, given in seven online breakout rooms. The draft document was shared with participants, for further opportunity to add to the document, with subsequent comments incorporated.

## What evidence exists and what evidence is needed to support a fair and effective land strategy

There is a strong consensus across participants that the Land Use Framework (LUF) is not underpinned by sufficient, transparent, or up-to-date evidence, including assumptions (and derived calculations). Stakeholders highlighted the need for better farmland classification systems that take into account climate change impacts—such as shifting land grades. Equally important is the need for accessible land ownership data to support transparency and fair governance of land resources. Participants stressed the challenge of misalignment between UK-wide policy (e.g., the Climate Change Committee's carbon budgets) and England-specific initiatives (e.g., Defra's strategies), noting that this creates confusion and policy fragmentation.

Evidence needs to be considered through the lens of systems thinking and intergenerational fairness. Participants repeatedly referenced the Dasgupta Review and similar frameworks, emphasising the urgency of combining economic, environmental, and social considerations over the long term. Many raised concerns that current modelling fails to account for the risks of ecological collapse, collapse of the farming system(e.g. Too few farms leading to insufficient demand for allied services and system collapse or loss of experience because people leave farming) or the unequal concentration of economic power in the agri-food sector. Agroecological approaches were widely supported, but the current ambitions for agroforestry and peatland restoration were viewed as too low. Calls were made for investment in data-driven land sharing models to increase resilience and support biodiversity connectivity.

Valuable (but localised) datasets already exist through farm clusters, test-and-trial projects, and landscape recovery schemes, but participants noted that this data is often underutilised or siloed. Many were unsure whether data from Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) or other existing frameworks was being integrated effectively into the LUF consultation. Overall, participants urged greater transparency, alignment, and utilisation of available evidence to support multi-functional, locally appropriate land use decisions.

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## How land use principles should be shaped and delivered in practice (particularly the co-design principle and who participates in this; also, are there missing principles)

There was widespread frustration that the co-design process is not functioning effectively. Many participants felt that the LUF was being rushed through without adequate time, training, or support to implement genuine co-design. Several noted that stakeholders, including farmers and land managers, are often treated as sources of information rather than as equal partners in shaping policy. Despite ongoing efforts such as ELMS test-and-trials, there is little understanding of what meaningful co-design looks like in practice, and many felt unequipped to participate in such processes.

Inclusion and equity were recurring themes. Stakeholders urged that co-design must broaden to include underrepresented voices—such as young people, marginalised communities, and the non-human environment. Participants warned that failing to do so risks perpetuating existing inequalities in access to land, decision-making, and

benefits from land use change. At the same time, business viability was flagged as a critical issue, particularly in upland areas where land is often less productive. Participants stressed the need to balance environmental goals with viable economic futures for land-based communities.

A systems approach was consistently advocated as a way to prevent unintended consequences. The designation of land for specific purposes—such as housing or conservation—was seen as potentially disruptive if broader supply chain and ecological implications are not considered. Given the competing demands for land and limited availability, an explicit centering of multifunctional land uses is necessary, identifying opportunities for synergies between different land uses and outcomes. Concerns were also raised about how land values might be distorted by new classifications. Overall, participants called for more deliberate, interdepartmental planning and slower, more reflective policy implementation that prioritises long-term resilience over short-term gains. An inter-departmental approach requires a sea change in how the government operates today. Imagine the Dept. for Education (DFE) working with the Dept. of Health (DHSC) and both working with DEFRA to build interrelated educational material for their respective industry partners. There are indications of this approach being initiated within the development of the current National Food Strategy. It remains to be seen if this approach can be followed through successfully.

This can lead the way for cross-sector action. For teachers, medical practitioners and land managers, and food system operators from canneries to supermarket workers, all working to a common goal: reducing pollution and ill health right across a food system that has until now wrought an almost uncontrolled and seismic level of degradation across the UK landscape.

The importance of considering production or self-sufficiency targets are missing, which risks farming/farmers being pushed out as urban areas expand and we use land to achieve legally binding targets like net zero.

If we are aiming to inform a strategic approach to land-use decisions, we must consider population. Purely as a number (i.e. rather than a judgement of what is the “right” number), it is probably the biggest factor that will affect land-use change, i.e. determining the amount of land that needs to be built on, the amount of food we need, the emissions we need to balance, the price of land, etc. In short, we know our land-use will look very different if we have a UK population of 75 million, or 100 million people by the end of the century. We should be honest about that, and understand the constraints these scenarios impose on what can be achieved with land-use change.

## What support is needed to make these changes possible – and fair (What policy levers have most evidence behind them – what are the implications for fair transition)

Participants agreed that farmers and land managers require much more technical, financial, and institutional support to enable a fair and effective transition. Green finance will be critical to driving positive land use, enabling access to land, development of land for sustainable food production, effective data collection and use, and deploying of renewable energy technologies, but support is needed to help farmers to access this support. Extension services and advisory support were repeatedly flagged as essential, particularly for small-scale and tenant farmers who cannot afford consultancy services. There is a clear need for more accessible tools, training, and business support that can help farmers adapt their enterprises to include climate and biodiversity outcomes alongside food production.

Many stakeholders expressed frustration with the inconsistency and volatility of policy levers like ELMS, SFI, and the Landscape Recovery programme. While these schemes have potential, delays, administrative complexity, and frequent changes have undermined trust and participation. There were calls for more flexible, locally scaled schemes—such as a "mini" Landscape Recovery option for smaller landholdings. Participants also advocated for sustained public-private partnerships, but warned that private finance must not worsen inequality or steer land use towards purely financial goals.

Support must also address the unequal distribution of risk across the land ownership spectrum. Tenants and smallholders are particularly vulnerable to poorly planned transitions, and participants stressed the importance of long-term financial guarantees and clearer guidance. Public institutions, including local authorities and large landowners like the National Trust or the MoD, were encouraged to lead by example and support tenant-led transitions.

There is a need to renew and reshape the contract between people, nature and society, especially fairly linking people in the countryside with urban populations who benefit from them, vesting support in those in marginal lands, such as baseline regulations and support, e.g agri-environment schemes, regulating land rights, and incentives. Such a contract has to work both ways.

A number of stakeholders also flagged the need to resist the influence of large agri-

food corporations that shape unhealthy diets and farming practices. We must recognise the imbalance of power in our food system is shortening lives, is worsening end-of-life for many, and this situation didn't happen overnight, it didn't come about because we didn't know this. It has happened in the full glare of public scrutiny for many decades and still very little meaningful change has been effected. Obesity rates are still climbing (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/update-to-the-obesity-profile-on-fingertips/obesity-profile-short-statistical-commentary-may-2024#main-findings) in the UK and in other countries. According to the WHO, 'no state is on track to meet the target of halting the increase in the prevalence of obesity by 2025' (https://www.bmj.com/content/377/bmj.o1107).

The reason this is happening is because of a shift in diet, the shift in diet is almost entirely driven by the profit motivations of ever larger conglomerates who themselves have no moral compass, no real ethical rudders, and a continuing trend of deregulation, be that in advertising, in supply chain inequality of power, in water treatment, has had a combined negative and highly damaging effect on our health, and on the health of our environment (https://ffcc.co.uk/publications/the-false-economy-of-big-food). To have a land use strategy that does not address all of these points can only make the situation worse.

Government leadership and regulation were seen as crucial in levelling the playing field and ensuring that land use policy serves public health, food equity, and environmental sustainability. Education, procurement, and cross-departmental strategies were all cited as critical enablers of a fairer system. This change should not be only top-down operation, but the top must make room for this change to happen. To clarify, government regulation on food and farming is not addressing the problems we face, indeed elements of those regulations are forcing us to ever narrower and more dystopian views of where this is all heading. Instead of the continuation of dwindling resources (in real terms, so taking inflation and cost increases into account, along with salary distribution) from central and local government to support across food and health, the government could have a real, and realistic, co-creative design approach to supporting land managers.

It is not possible to turn the juggernaut of our food system around without really changing how we steer the ship. If, however, we do acknowledge the breadth of the problem, then we can take action. But that means taking action on many levels, at many points, and all in some form of cohesive, collective ambition. Simply relying on the government to affect meaningful change, even to lead on such, without a willing industry, without a well-informed population, is naive, at best (https://www.thelancet.com/commissions-do/global-syndemic).

Government would also need to support supply chain operators to value food with more knowledge of poor and positive outcomes, to recognise the value of the produce that comes from an ethically-sound and ecologically-sensible approach to food production.

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## The scale and speed of land use change

While there was agreement that land use reform is urgently needed, participants were divided on the pace of change. Some emphasised that the process has been far too slow, with the UK falling behind on emissions, biodiversity, and food resilience targets. Others warned that the current speed of implementation risks making irreversible decisions without sufficient evidence, analysis, or engagement. Both perspectives agreed that greater flexibility, transparency, and trust-building are required to move forward effectively.

A significant source of instability has been policy inconsistency—particularly around SFI and related schemes. The stop-start nature of these programmes has discouraged participation and heightened scepticism among land managers. Long-term payment guarantees and stable regulatory frameworks were seen as foundational to a successful transition. Several participants called for a “reset” of government engagement, including more honest communication and follow-through on announcements.

The conversation around food security revealed tensions between production-focused and systems-focused approaches. While many recognised that food waste, nutrition, and poverty are the true challenges, others feared that reducing production could jeopardise national resilience. Participants called for food system reform to be integrated with land use policy and not treated as a separate issue. Concerns about housing targets and infrastructure development on agricultural land were also raised, with a call for clearer safeguards and oversight. The UK has had a policy to protect the “best and most versatile (BMV)” land (ALC grades 1 to 3a) from urban development and sealing in one form or another, for a century (formally since the 60s). Typically BMV land is prime farmland and originally the policy was mainly for food security, which remains important. However, we now know that these soils also provide the highest degree of almost EVERY kind of ecosystem service, e.g. carbon storage, flood mitigation, GHG absorption, water filtration, etc. Counter-intuitively, even when farmed intensively, these soils can have higher levels of below-ground biodiversity than natural ecosystems, as well as providing buffer zones for conservation. It is disappointing to hear this government echoing the previous one

with calls to overhaul the planning system to allow more land conversion for house building. In fact, since the BMV policy was relaxed and devolved to local authority discretion in the 80s, England has gone from having one of the lowest rates of greenfield conversion in Europe, to one of the highest. Sealed soil is lost forever. We need creative ways to provide high-density housing that is socially and environmentally benign (as in Denmark). Meanwhile, the BMV policy should be strengthened.

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## What gaps in land management capacity or skills do you anticipate – what are the implications for fair transition

Participants identified substantial gaps in the skills and capacities needed to manage land through a fair transition. Key areas include agroecology, horticulture, mixed farming, sustainable soil use and management, and climate adaptation. Current education and training systems were seen as outdated, siloed, and poorly suited to preparing land managers for the complexity of modern challenges. Participants advocated for revised further learning curricula and expanded vocational training that integrates ecology, business planning, and whole-system thinking.

With respect to ecological training, our landscapes are not linear, nature doesn't recognise societal borders, ecologies are system-wide and systemically operational. However, most colleges and universities running courses for land managers fail to include this in curricula. Bioregional development could help re-calibrate their educational compassess. However, colleges and universities are generally reliant on funding, increasingly much of that funding comes from an industry that views land use as linear, farms are seen as bordered and simply a set of generally unconnected functional elements. Therefore, educational institutions may need a change in funding structure to help achieve changes in curricula.

There was also a strong call for expanded, better-coordinated advisory services that are experienced across the different demands on land. Many farmers are struggling to access guidance on adapting their operations to deliver nature-friendly, climate-resilient outcomes. Extension models that combine peer-to-peer learning, demonstration farms, and regional support hubs were viewed as promising solutions. Stakeholders also stressed the importance of supporting allied professions—such as veterinary services, local abattoirs, and rural finance experts—whose viability depends on a vibrant farming sector.

Soil and carbon literacy emerged as another area needing urgent attention. Participants want co-designed toolkits that reflect real-world farming conditions and provide reliable, actionable guidance. Soil health in particular was seen as under-addressed in current programmes, despite its central role in ecosystem function and climate resilience. More generally, land-based careers were seen as undervalued, and there is a need to attract and retain skilled workers in rural communities through investment, recognition, and opportunity.

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## About the AFN Network+

The AFN Network+ (UKRI Agri-food for Net Zero Network+) brings together more than 3,000 research leaders and stakeholders to drive the UK agri-food sector's transition towards net zero, while benefiting livelihoods, biodiversity, and ecosystems.

Through multidisciplinary collaborations, we identify research gaps and work across the sector to shape and support a sustainable, low-emission future for UK food and farming.

Alongside our core mission, we run networking and knowledge-exchange events and seed fund new research, giving out £1 million over the life of the project.

Find out more: www.agrifood4netzero.net