Smarter Land Use

Our modelling shows that the UK needs between 1.3 million and 5.1 million hectares of new woodland, space for energy crops and restored peatland. And all this needs to be achieved without undermining food security, while tailoring support for those whose livelihoods depend on the land.

The Vision

UK landscapes will provide multiple benefits through integrated management – sequestering carbon, producing food, enhancing biodiversity and building climate resilience. Forest cover will rise from 14% to around 20% and possibly higher, while restored peatlands shift from carbon sources to sinks. The 2.5 million hectares of UK land transitioning to woodland and energy crops will be carefully planned through community co-design, ensuring food security through greater productivity on remaining farmland.[1] Land management will balance private interests with public goods, creating multifunctional landscapes that serve national priorities.

Co-benefits

Strategic land use transformation creates cascading societal benefits. Nature-based solutions provide critical climate resilience through carbon sequestration to meet net zero targets, as well as natural flood defences for protecting properties.[2] These multifunctional landscapes restore biodiversity, with more appropriately managed grazing enabling wildlife recovery and helping meet the UK's commitment to protect 30% of land by 2030.[3] Rural economic diversification through new land and resource management activities offers alternative livelihoods. Expanded woodlands, rewilded areas and nature-rich farmland deliver proven mental and physical health benefits through increased access to nature.

Priority Actions

The UK is one of Europe's least wooded nations (14% coverage) and faces urgent needs for carbon storage, nature recovery and climate adaptation without clear coordination. The following actions can transform land use:

Financial and transition support:

- Dedicate funding for landscape-scale transformation, tripling tree-planting rates through enhanced grants and streamlined approval processes, particularly on marginal uplands.
- Provide landowners and tenants with long-term certainty through 15–25-year contracts for ecosystem services and carbon sequestration.
- Develop fair transition mechanisms for rural communities, ensuring new economic opportunities from woodland creation and nature recovery.

Policy and market mechanisms:

- Create integrated food and land strategies at national and regional levels balancing production, environmental and social needs.
- Develop carbon and biodiversity markets that benefit land managers and tenant farmers, not just large estates.
- Strengthen planning systems to deliver multifunctional landscapes that combine farming, biodiversity, carbon storage and community benefits.

Knowledge and innovation:

- Accelerate peatland restoration research and implementation to increase restored areas from 9% to 30% by 2040.
- Build comprehensive monitoring systems for all land uses to improve transparency and decision-making.
- Develop spatial planning tools integrating climate, biodiversity, productivity and social data, to support evidence-based decisions on priorities for different needs.

These interventions will enable unprecedented land use change while creating landscapes that deliver multiple benefits for climate, nature and thriving rural communities.

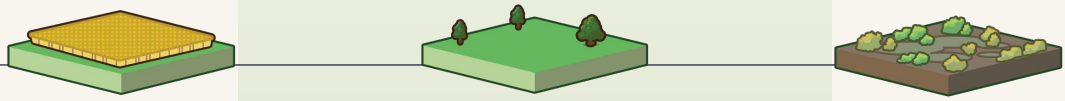
1 This figure comprises around 1.6 MHa of additional woodland and 0.7 MHa of energy crops. See Climate Change Committee (2025) *Seventh Carbon Budget: Advice for the UK Government*. London: Climate Change Committee, pp.191, 196.
2 Environment Agency (2024) *National Assessment of Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk in England 2024*.
3 Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2022) *Climate Adaptation for Nature*. POST Note 679. London: POST.

UK FOOD PLAN FOR 2050

3 essential transformations

Smarter, more integrated land use

2025



SINGLE-PURPOSE LAND

Farming, nature and forestry largely kept separated

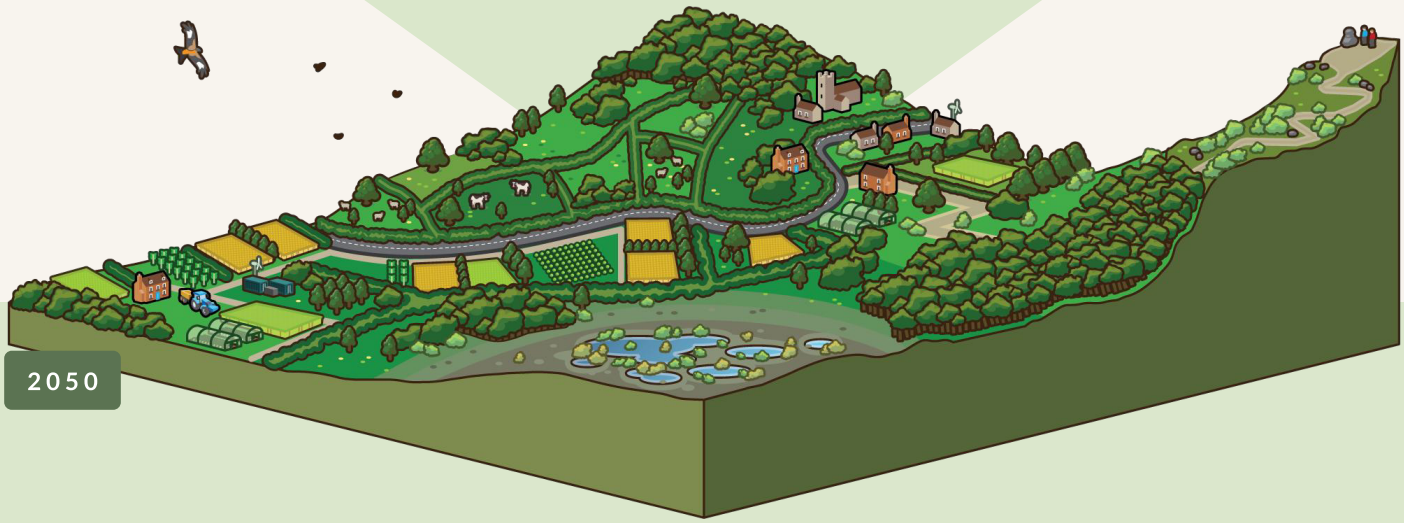
MINIMAL TREE COVER

The UK's 14% woodland cover is much less than Germany's 33% (and 46% across Europe)

DEGRADED PEATLANDS

Too much peatland emitting carbon rather than storing it

proactive planning & coordinated action



2050

MULTIFUNCTIONAL LANDSCAPES

Most land provides diverse types of food and also stores carbon and supports wildlife

ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Harnessing nature to strengthen climate change resilience

EXPANDED WOODLANDS

At least 20% tree cover, integrated with farming

A sustainable, prosperous and secure UK