

A land use framework for England

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This briefing is on behalf of nature coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)).

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Executive summary

With limited land and currently siloed land use planning in England, strategic planning will be needed to ensure environmental and other important land use objectives are met. **A land use framework could help integrate national and local decision-making across different land uses, to guide greener use decisions and achieve a healthy natural environment.**

However, without the financial and legal levers to create change on the ground, a land use framework could be just another strategy on a shelf. **A land use framework should inform and incentivise national and local policy-making and decision-making about land uses by:**

- 1) **Setting a long-term direction and cross-Government accountability for land use change**, including the level of ambition and scale of change needed across land use in England in order to meet national targets, such as 30x30 and other environmental targets, underpinned by a shared spatial evidence base, and against which Government progress is regularly reported.
- 2) **Informing national policy and decision-making**, for example the design and funding allocations of Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes, planning and development policies and decisions, and the management of the public estate.
- 3) **Guiding local policies and decision-making**, through strengthened Local Nature Recovery Strategies which are assessed to ensure they 'add up' to national environmental objectives.

Introduction

The Government has committed to produce a Land Use Framework for England, covering climate, nature and food. It is intended to be a core mechanism for delivering environmental targets. It should also include access and recreation, energy and other major infrastructure projects and development, as recommended by the House of Lords Select Committee inquiry on Land Use in England.¹

Significant land use change will be needed in England over the coming decades in order to meet nature and climate targets and other national priorities. A land use framework must integrate national and local decision-making to inform and incentivise greener land use decisions. However, without the institutional, financial and legal levers to create change on the ground, a land use framework could be just another strategy on a shelf.

In this briefing, we set out what a land use framework for England should look like and how it should be implemented to inform integrated and cross-Government policy-making, influence land use planning and decision-making, drive change on the ground, and track national progress on land use change. While we recognise that the land use framework must cover a number of interconnected land uses, such as the delivery of major renewables infrastructure to tackle the climate and nature crises, we focus on one particular crucial aspect of the land use framework – nature.

Why is a land use framework needed?

The way we use land in England will need to change if we are to address and meet the challenges of the nature and climate crises. While a land use framework should integrate other land use objectives—including nutritional security, sustainable development, and water management—a thriving natural environment is a prerequisite to all land uses.

In this briefing, we focus on the role of the land use framework in delivering the Environment Act targets and Environmental Improvement Plan commitments.

Much has been promised from England's limited land, so a joined up, strategic approach will be needed to ensure environmental targets and other important objectives are met. Existing

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldland/105/105.pdf>

plans and policies will not be sufficient to meet the Government's legally-binding environmental targets and ambitions. Effective strategic planning could be used to:

- **Avoid and minimise harm to nature and maximize co-benefits** by optimising land use decisions for agriculture, development, water management, access and recreation, climate, and nature.
- **Positively plan for nature recovery** by ensuring that local efforts add up to a coherent national Nature Recovery Network, both in protected sites and the wider landscape.

At the moment, however, there is insufficient strategic integration at and between national and local policy-making and decision-making across different land uses. Land use decisions for purposes such as nature recovery, climate mitigation and adaptation, food and farming, water management, access and recreation, and planning and development are largely dealt with separately. The challenge is legal, practical and institutional.

Different Government departments which plan and manage different land uses, such as Defra, DLUHC, DESNZ and DfT often remain siloed. So too do public bodies (such as Forestry England and Highways England), which are responsible for many practical decisions affecting land use.

Legally, consenting regimes for development and infrastructure (under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and the Planning Act 2008) remain isolated from rules governing other land use choices, and mostly separate from any assessment of the strategic needs of nature (there is now a legal link between Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) and local development plans, but we have yet to see how this will be implemented on the ground and whether it will be effective in influencing land use change to support local nature).

There is independent body scrutiny from the Office for Environmental Improvement (OEP) over the delivery of the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan, but there is no national Government oversight for tracking delivery of critical environmental land use objectives, such as the protection of at least 30% of land in England and the development of a Nature Recovery Network. There is also no tracking of the cumulative impacts of certain land use types and activities on environmental goals, for example, the waste from intensive animal production units on water quality and freshwater biodiversity. Crucially, it is not clear if and how existing national, regional and local plans, policies (such as LNRSs and Biodiversity Net Gain), funding, and actions will add up to achieving national statutory targets and commitments.

What would a good land use framework look like?

The framework should be strategic, spatial, cross-departmental, adaptive and iterative, cover multiple land uses, and directly influence decisions on the ground.

- It should be **strategic** to set out the key environmental objectives and other objectives and to identify a vision for long-term land use and land use changes needed to meet those objectives.
- It should be **spatial** to identify important areas and potentially important areas at a national level that are needed to meet the Government's environmental objectives and other land use objectives. The land use framework should not be a determinative map, but national spatial modelling and mapping will be essential to identify place-constrained national and regional natural assets, such as rivers or peat, and existing infrastructure, such as roads, to create a shared evidence base/understanding and to help inform integrated and holistic decision-making. This will also need to reflect local and regional data and objectives, from a variety of local and regional plans, as detailed below.
- It should be developed and **regularly reviewed and assessed by a cross-Government body**, such as the Cabinet Office, to transparently track progress against the long-term vision for land use in England and ensure the design and delivery of a land use framework adds up to meeting the Government's environmental and other land use objectives.
- It should be **adaptive and iterative**, planning for future scenarios such as impacts of climate change, and being reviewed and improved, in order to achieve environmental objectives.
- It should give holistic and integrated consideration to **multiple land uses and purposes**, including nature recovery, climate mitigation and adaptation, food and farming, water management, access and recreation, development, and other critical natural and built infrastructure. It should include principles that guide land use planning and decision-making, including:
 - 1) protect place-constrained, irreplaceable, and endangered nature assets, including those in poor condition but capable of restoration;
 - 2) maximize co-benefits and multifunctionality;
 - 3) avoid, and where necessary, manage trade-offs and prioritise the achievement of environmental objectives;
 - 4) consider land uses where they join up with the marine environmental and across the intertidal zone, and

- 5) reduce overseas footprint and avoid offshoring impacts.
- It must inform and incentivise decision-making to **create change on the ground** which is strategic and holistic in order to help achieve the environmental objectives and other land use objectives.

To underpin these functions, it should be informed by national, regional and local spatial data, including existing mapping tools, scientific evidence, and engagement with expert bodies, local people, and communities. The land use framework should also be subject to public consultation.

A spatially explicit land use framework could raise concerns amongst some communities and land managers if it were too prescriptive about what specific parcels of land are used for. Although national mapping of potential land uses will be a crucial element of a successful framework, this is a way to support decision making around trade-offs and multifunctionality to influence the design of policies, plans, and incentives, rather than acting as a final assignment of land uses.

The diagram on the next page gives an overview of how a land use framework might work in England to integrate national objectives with national policy frameworks and decision-making and with local policy- and decision-making. Further detail on each element of the diagram is given in the following sections.

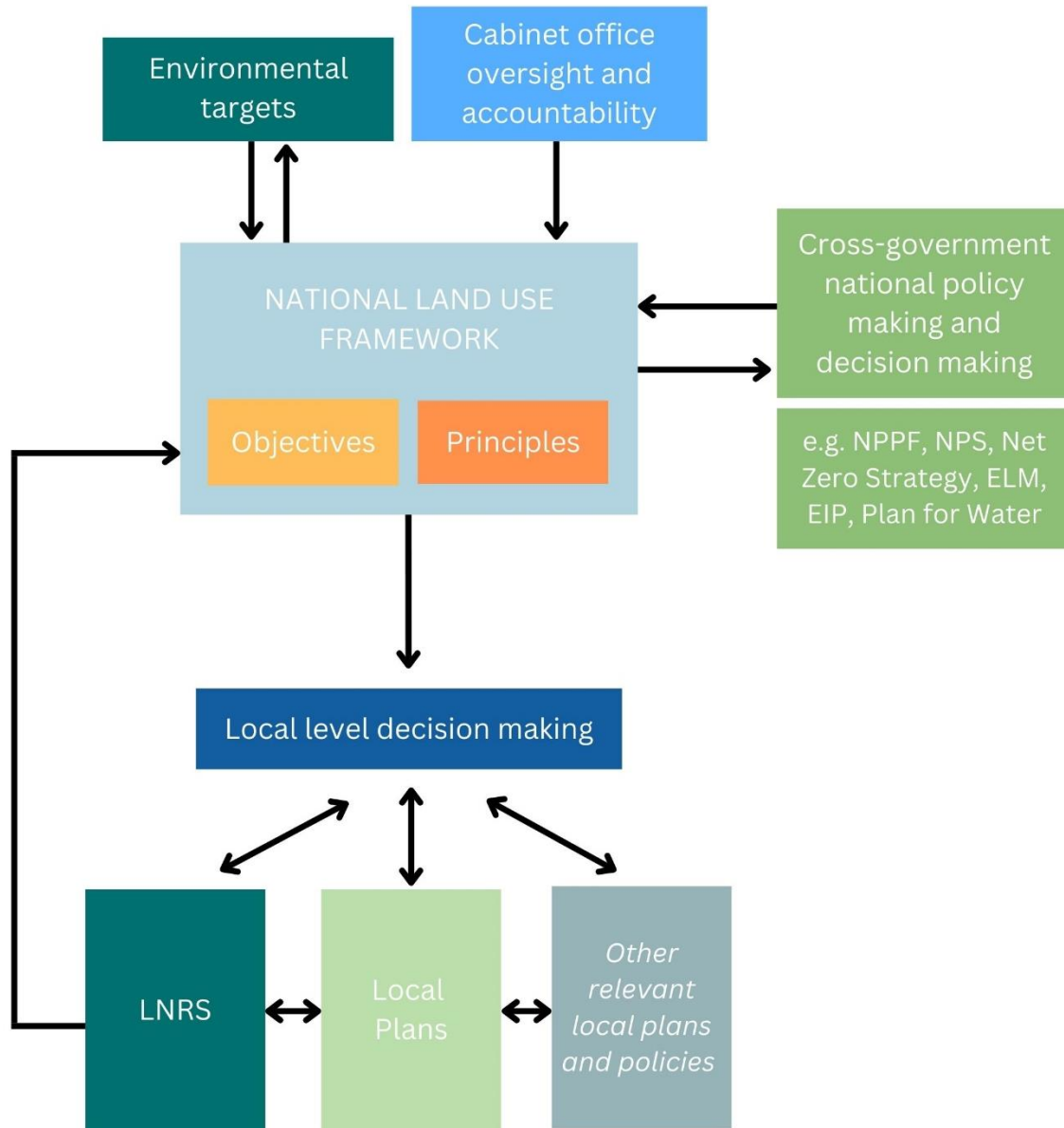


Diagram outlining how a land use framework could work in England. Arrows indicate direction of influence.

The environmental objectives

Below we set out the environmental objectives, including Environment Act targets and Environmental Improvement Plan commitments, that should guide the framework.

While a land use framework should cover other objectives such as nutritional security, sustainable development, including major infrastructure projects to mitigate climate change, and water management, a healthy and resilient natural environment is a prerequisite to all land uses, and so must be central to the framework.

Nature objectives:

- **Halt the decline of species abundance by 2030. (Government target)**
- **Effectively protect and manage at least 30% of England's land for nature recovery by 2030 (Government commitment), by:**
 - o Significantly increasing the protected site network (SSSIs, SACs, SPAs and Ramsar sites) in England's, covering all threatened taxa and species.
 - o ensuring at least 75% of the protected site network is in good ecological condition by 2042, from 36% currently in favourable condition.
 - o increasing the contribution of National Parks and AONBs by expanding semi-natural habitat to cover at least 40% or more of these protected landscapes.
 - o implementing Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measure (OECMs), which may include well-managed National Nature Reserves, Local Wildlife Sites, irreplaceable habitats, and areas of public land.
- **Create a connected Nature Recovery Network across the country**, including the creation of 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside the protected area network by 2042. (Government target)
- **Reduce water pollution** and restore 75% of water bodies to Good Ecological Status in line with targets set out in the 2023 regulations. (Government commitment)

Climate mitigation and adaptation objectives:

- **Achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions in the UK by 2050** (Government target) by
 - o maximizing peatland restoration, with all upland peat is in active restoration by 2045, 60% of lowland peat rewetted and sustainable managed by 2035 ([CCC recommendation](#)).
 - o increasing total woodland cover from 12% to 15% by 2035 and to at least 17.5% by 2050.

- increasing total cover and restoring other habitats to sequester carbon, such as saltmarsh, hedgerows, floodplain meadows, species-rich grasslands from species-poor grassland.
- redirecting subsidies for high-carbon biomass to genuinely non-emitting and renewable energy sources that are at the very least not in competition with nature restoration (and where possible helping to enhance nature and food production).²
- **Adapt to climate change by**
 - ensuring that all land uses maximise resilience to extreme weather.
 - stress testing all land use framework objectives against a 2°C and 4°C increase in global temperature.
 - expanding land uses that provide adaptation benefits, such as saltmarsh, dunes, managed realignment, rewetted peat, urban greenspace, species-rich grassland, 'rewiggled' rivers, hedgerow networks, floodplains and other wetlands, and green and blue corridors.

Human health and access objectives:

- **Ensure all people have access to high quality green and blue spaces** within a 15 minute walk of home. (Government commitment)
 - Expand public access to the countryside and blue spaces including by extending public access rights to waterways, woodland, riversides, and grasslands.
 - Ensure all public rights of way in England are open and useable by the public and create new networks of green routes, especially in urban areas.
- **Reduce air pollution** from all sources to meet 2030 targets under the National Emission Ceilings Regulations. (Government commitment)
- **Reduce exposure to PM2.5** by at least 35% by 2040 compared to 2018 levels, including through sources such as ammonia use in agriculture. (Government commitment)

² Further details in Link's bioenergy position statement here:
[Wildlife and Countryside Link bioenergy position paper.pdf \(wcl.org.uk\)](https://www.wcl.org.uk/Wildlife_and_Countryside_Link_bioenergy_position_paper.pdf)

How would a land use framework be used?

A land use framework in England should inform and incentivise national and local policy-making and decision-making about land uses. It should do this through:

- 1) setting a long-term direction for land use, land-use change and the resulting outcomes, and track cross-Government progress against delivery
- 2) informing national policy and decision-making, and
- 3) guiding local policies and decision-making.

1) Setting a long-term direction, governance and accountability for land use change

A land use framework should establish the level of ambition and scale of change needed across land use in England in order to meet national targets and ambitions. This should be expressed, wherever possible, as an explicit spatial goal with a clear timeframe. For example, the land use framework should explicitly include a target to effectively protect and manage at least 30% of England's land for nature by 2030.

A lot has been promised from England's finite land. A land use framework should consolidate the myriad intentions for England's land with a realistic calculation of how much is needed for each one and where trade-offs will need to be managed and where there are opportunities for multifunctional land use solutions.

This should be underpinned by a shared, spatially explicit evidence base which identifies place- and geographically-constrained national and regional natural assets, and other existing infrastructure, and identifies opportunities for different, and potentially overlapping, land uses. Integration with regional frameworks will be important here, to facilitate join-up with sectors that operate at a supra-local scale, such as water and energy. (Note, as stated above, this is not a determinative map but a tool to help integrate planning and decision-making across land uses and across Departments.) Data should be open-source where possible to ensure the transparency of decision-making and the Government could develop digital tools to help the public interpret the data and inform decisions.

The land use framework, including developing the evidence base and setting out the vision for long-term land use change to meet targets, should be developed and owned by the Cabinet Office, to ensure it is genuinely cross-Government. The Cabinet Office should also report on progress against the land use change to ensure actions across Departments are delivering on the national shared ambition.

With a shared spatial evidence base, shared ambition and understanding of the need for land use change, and transparent national cross-Departmental reporting on progress on land use change needed to meet targets, individual Departments are then responsible for ensuring their policy-making and decision-making is delivering on environmental targets. If not, the Cabinet Office must hold departments accountable for their delivery, ensuring a ratcheting up of Departmental ambition to make up any gaps between ambition and reality to achieve the needed land use change.

The land use framework should be regularly reviewed and updated where necessary to reflect changing uses of land and progress towards meeting targets. With a range of competing land uses to meet national commitments, a land use framework will be necessary not only to identify where best to fulfil different commitments, but also to help direct funding to where it is needed.

A land use framework can also be used to identify landscape-scale nature projects, which should receive priority funding. Importantly, a land use framework could provide a steer for where funding should be directed and a useful overview of where funding is being directed through different policies such as Environmental Land Management, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and others (more detail on how the LUF should inform policy design below), ensuring the efficient use of funding and helping to deal with issues such as the stacking of payments through different schemes.

Crucially, the scale of change required across England's land should be communicated with relevant stakeholders such as farmers, developers, and local authorities, feeding into all relevant land use decisions. The process of integrating objectives, facilitating multifunctionality, and managing trade-offs should be a collaborative approach between decision makers, those who will deliver changes and those who will be affected. At the national level, this should be done through stakeholder engagement and public consultation on the national land use framework, including the objectives, ambition, and guiding principles. At the local level, the land use framework will be implemented through informing existing democratic processes and plans, for example, collaboratively developed Local Nature Recovery Strategies, as detailed below.

The framework should include a mechanism, as suggested below, for guiding delivery of environmental objectives at a relevant spatial scale. For example, through “adding up” responsibilities for habitat creation through Local Nature Recovery Strategies, the framework should assess where there are gaps and where insufficient progress is being made to meet national environmental targets. In turn, this should inform the ratcheting up of ambition of the framework to ensure that the UK is on track to meet environmental objectives.

2) Informing national policy and decision-making

A land use framework should both be aligned with national policy objectives and inform the development of policies needed to deliver those objectives.

Designation of protected sites and protected landscapes

The national land use framework should help to identify potential areas for new protected sites, as well as new or expanded protected landscapes, more of which will be essential to achieving the 30x30 commitment.

Natural England’s data on the location of important habitats and species should be integrated in the land use framework, such as irreplaceable habitats, which can then combine with other important data on other land uses to help identify potential areas for designation of SSSIs, or the extension or creation of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).

National planning and development policy

The National Planning Policy Framework and National Policy Statements should be aligned with the national land use framework, which would follow through in local planning policy. There should be a duty on Ministers to further the objectives in the land use framework when preparing or updating these key planning documents. For example, the objective of the land use framework to expand the protected sites network should result in a policy in the NPPF and NPSs to protect sites with potential to form part of the network.

National planning and development decisions

The land use framework objectives should be a factor in decision-making for proposals both through the Town and Country Planning Act and through the Planning Act (which governs major infrastructure projects). This would require the decision-maker to identify whether a decision on a particular project or application, for example a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP), including type, location, and design, has taken account of the

land use framework, including the shared evidence base, and whether the project will contribute to the achievement of environmental objectives and other land use objectives.

Environment Agency permitting decisions

A land use framework could also be an important tool in effective environmental permitting decision-making. The Environment Agency should have a duty to consult the land use framework when making decisions on permitting, including for waste, installations, abstraction, water quality and quantity, intensive livestock units and industrial emissions. The land use framework can ensure more integrated decision-making across land uses, to ensure permitting decisions are taking into consideration other factors, including the location and condition of wildlife and habitats, and the requirements to achieve environmental targets. To facilitate this, the land use framework should reflect the objectives set out in River Basin Management Plans.

Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes

The land use objectives should inform the design of the Environmental Land Management schemes. The Government should specify numerical goals for the extent to which it expects measures delivered through ELMs to contribute to meeting overall environmental objectives. Individual ELM schemes and the allocation of ELM funding should be designed to support habitats and locations with the highest potential to deliver those outcomes. Importantly, this should recognise the ability of different habitats to be ‘multifunctional’ and deliver on multiple outcomes, for example through adopting agroecological approaches that support nature’s recovery alongside food production and nature-based solutions that creates new habitat for wildlife and boosts water quality.

For example, the Landscape Recovery and Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier components of ELM could be targeted to incentivize projects in locations identified in the relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategy as key nature recovery opportunity areas outside the protected sites network. This would contribute to the Government’s target to create 500,000 hectares of priority habitat outside protected areas as part of the Nature Recovery Network. Landscape-scale nature projects should also be especially encouraged in climate vulnerable areas such as floodplains and coastal areas to improve the resilience of local communities to extreme weather, minimise the impact on food production, and provide refuges for nature to recover, underpinning future nutritional security.

The Countryside Stewardship component of ELM should include access options to create new access routes and funding allocation should be prioritised where there has been a need identified in local Rights of Way Improvement Plans, Green Infrastructure Strategies based on

Natural England's Green Infrastructure Framework mapping, or strengthened Local Nature Recovery Strategies, in order to help deliver the Government's ambition for all people to have access to nature within a 15 minute walk of home.

Management of the public estate

The land use framework should drive land use decisions and management on the Government's own land. For example, the Public Forest estate and land owned by the Ministry of Defence may not be managed primarily for nature. However, with the right management for nature, the land could be improved to better benefit wildlife and, if in good condition, the land could be counted towards 30x30, while retaining other functions. The land use framework should identify where the Government owns land and should inform appropriate land use change on the estate in order to help meet environmental targets.

Catchment planning

The Government's approach to Catchment Planning is currently under development to deliver commitments made in the Plan for Water. The land use framework, catchment planning and Local Nature Recovery Strategies must be integrated and work together to deliver multifunctional solutions to nature recovery and water management across our landscapes.

3) Guiding local policies and decision-making

The national land use framework must inform a more local and spatial assessment of the needs, opportunities, synergies and trade-offs of delivering environmental objectives and other land use objectives, via local plans, such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs), and local decision-making.

Alongside spatial mapping, the framework's guiding principles for integrating land-use decision-making should feed through into the development of local policies and local decision-making.

There should be a mechanism for ensuring local plans add up to delivering national objectives. Through "adding up" responsibilities for habitat creation through Local Nature Recovery Strategies, the framework should assess where there are gaps and where insufficient progress is being made to meet national targets. In turn, this should inform the ratcheting up of ambition of the framework to ensure that the UK is on track to meet environmental objectives.

With an expanded remit, strengthened national accountability, and strengthened links through to other local plans and decisions, LNRs could help deliver the environmental objectives of the land use framework. Currently, LNRs are important documents that will identify local biodiversity priorities and map local habitats and nature recovery opportunities. However, they are not required to consider other land uses or natural capital opportunities to contribute to national environmental objectives (Environment Act targets and Environmental Improvement Plan commitments), such as climate mitigation and adaptation, water quality and management, and public access and recreation.

LNRs do not sit within a national framework and will not necessarily add up to meeting national environmental targets. There is now a legal link for LNRs in the planning system, with a new duty for local planning authorities (LPAs) to ‘take account’ of LNRs, but this could be strengthened. There is no join up currently between LNRs and ELM. This is likely to undermine their effectiveness at influencing land use change.

LNRs should be broadened and strengthened in order to deliver the land use framework by:

- Covering the national environmental (nature, climate, access) objectives and principles set out in the national land use framework and considering regional objectives (for example, those in regional River Basin Management Plans) and integrated with forthcoming catchment plans.
- Conducting a local spatial assessment of environmental needs, opportunities, synergies, and trade-offs to contribute to delivery of national environmental objectives.
- Reviewing LNR plans individually and collectively to ensure they coordinate across boundaries and add up to delivering national environmental objectives (for example, not every LNR will have to deliver 30% - some should deliver more, some may deliver less – but the national picture must add up to at least 30%). This should be an iterative process, requiring the Government to flag to Responsible Authorities if their plans would not deliver sufficient progress.
- Strengthening the existing duty for local planning authorities to ‘take account’ of LNRs, to ‘further the objectives’ identified in LNRs, to give these important plans sufficient weight in plan-making and planning decision-making.

Without LNRs as the local spatially-explicit plan (which is informed by the national land use framework, integrates land uses at a local level, and can help local stakeholders make decisions about land use), the land use framework is not likely to achieve significant change on the ground.

The land use framework objectives and principles, alongside the LNRS, should also guide the development of other sub-national plans by setting ambitious framework and identifying opportunities for multifunctionality and supporting decisions about trade-offs, such as local development plans, spatial development strategies, local Climate Action Plans, local Biodiversity Plans, local Green Infrastructure Strategies, local Rights of Way Improvement Plans, forthcoming catchment plans, and Flood Risk Management Plans.

For example, the Government has a national commitment to provide access to green and blue space for everyone with a 15-minute walk of home, which should be reflected in the national land use framework. The land use framework will be essential to delivering this commitment, by integrating access, nature, and planning decisions, for example, through sustainable drainage systems, to ensure that more nature is delivered closest to the people who need it the most. The national land use framework should set out the national target, which should feed through into local Green Infrastructure Strategies and local Rights of Way Improvement Plans. These local strategies should then map existing access provision against the national target, identify gaps and inequalities in nature access, and then help drive action to rectify those inequalities by driving local authority action, for example on rights of way provision, and by directing new greenspaces provided by developments and other nature-based solutions to the right locations to deliver maximum benefit for people and nature, aligned with Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 80 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

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