

Oxon LNP Board Paper for Approval

Title:	Towards a Land Use Framework for Oxfordshire
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Summary:

Used well, land can provide multifunctional environmental, economic and social benefits, but it is finite, and has increasing demands placed upon it. This paper presents some information to guide Board members' consideration of the importance of a land use framework for Oxfordshire.

The Board is asked to:

Consider how a land use framework could benefit Oxfordshire
Suggest how it might best be taken forward.

Introduction

We all rely on land for energy, transport, food, recreation, housing and business. Land also has a crucial role to play in helping us to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Resilient connected ecosystems are vital for all human activity. Used well, land can provide multifunctional environmental, economic and social benefits, but it is finite, and has increasing demands placed upon it. Recent government targets include:

- Maintaining our food self-sufficiency at 60%
- Increasing woodland by 1million acres
- Increasing new habitats for nature by 1 million acres
- Enlarging the area of protected landscapes by around 1.8 million acres
- Building 300,000 new homes every year

Clearly, the achievement of all these requires us to make land 'work harder' to deliver multiple benefits, outcomes and objectives from each piece of land. This is sometimes known as land sharing (as opposed to land sparing, for which there is also an important role) and should be a key consideration for land use decision making in the 21st century.

What is a land use framework?

The Royal Society summed up the case for land use framework as follows:

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"A national land use framework would allow for decisions concerning land use to be made in a coherent and consistent manner that recognises the finiteness of land. [A land use framework is] particularly important in operationalising the concept of multifunctionality since different incentives are needed in different places to reflect the varying suitability of landscapes for specific policy outcomes"

The Food Farming and Countryside Commission states:

"A land use framework is a new approach for better decisions about land. It guides local and national decision makers with a clear set of principles and practices. These processes are supported by tools (including existing maps and information) designed to help reconcile conflicting demands and balance different needs."

It's not a prescriptive strategy, nor will it mandate actions or curtail sovereignty of District and City Councils' Local Plans. It is more appropriately considered a process creating and collating a co-designed framework of evidence and principles that can support strategic land-use decisions.

National position

In its food strategy, government committed to publishing a land use framework in 2023, reflecting its objectives for English agriculture, net zero and the environment. Scotland and Wales have both already developed one. On 13th December 2022, the House of Lords select committee published its white paper – *Making the most out of England's land*. This paper urged the government to ensure that the national land use framework covered all areas of land use, not just those under DEFRA's control.

Any approach to framing decisions around land use and land use change needs to consider and align with existing and forthcoming policy and legislation. A significant challenge is the level of uncertainty around key issues like Local Nature Recovery Strategies, Biodiversity Net Gain, Environmental Land Management scheme, planning reform and energy policy. This can also be seen as an opportunity – now is the time to shape a local, joined-up, co-designed and shared approach that can guide priorities in all these areas through a non-siloed framework.

How could it work in Oxfordshire

Any national land use framework will have to be delivered and administered locally, noting this government's support for the devolution agenda. The Food Farming and Countryside Commission are currently supporting creation of LUFs in two pilot areas – Devon and Cambridgeshire.

Early feedback from these approaches shows that wide engagement and co-design with a broad cross section of stakeholders is key, as is the prioritisation of the multifunctionality of land. Data is also central to successful decision making – the graph below shows current land use in Oxfordshire

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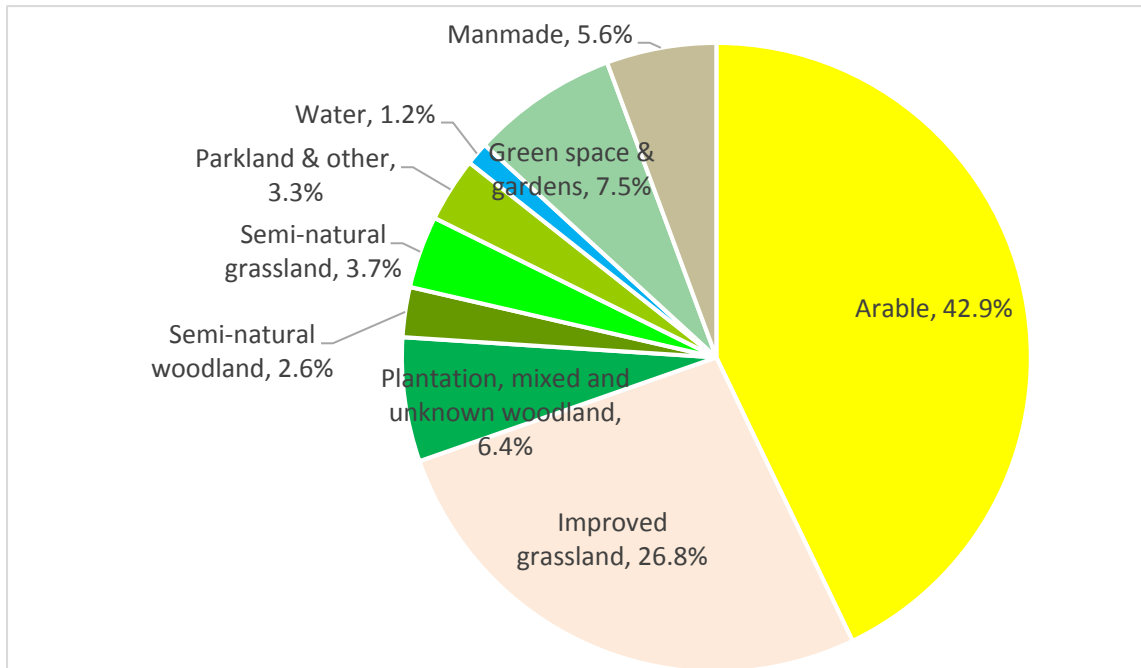


Figure 1 – Current Land Use in Oxfordshire by habitat type (courtesy of Environmental Change Institute)

Oxfordshire is well supplied with local data, with a Natural Capital baseline and Draft Nature Recovery Network already developed. Four key actions relating to data are seen as key:

- enhancing the Nature Recovery Network mapping;
- updating the State of Nature report to provide a more current baseline;
- developing ecosystem service opportunity mapping – showing where demand for environmental benefits (such as flood risk reduction) can be met by changes to land use, or improvements to habitat quality.
- Making the above freely accessible online (perhaps via the Local Nature Partnership website).

This paper recognises there are areas where partners will disagree, including on some elements of spatial distribution of assets and development. However, far from prohibiting the proactive development of a joined-up set of principles to guide land use decision making, rather it exemplifies its importance.

Much work has been undertaken locally to bring Local Authority decision making closer together. For instance, all Local Authority partners have signed up to deliver the Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire. The development of a LUF can be seen as a logical next step, providing a principles and data that can guide all partners in their considerations about future land use decisions.

Optimisation for Nature Recovery

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The Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership is working to understand how Oxfordshire can play its part in halting (and reversing) the decline of species & protecting 30% of England for nature by 2030. This paper proposes this work needs to evaluate how land use can be optimised to contribute as much as possible to this aim, while still delivering homes, energy and healthy food.

Nature's recovery and net zero are likely to require extensive and substantial land use change (e.g. woodland creation & less intensive farming). Green Alliance conducted research¹ which showed using the most productive land for high yield food production, the least productive for seminatural habitat and mixed wildlife friendly farming on the rest (a 'three compartment' model of land use) would result in a doubling of wildlife by 2050. This approach could be accompanied by reducing livestock farming in the UK, achieved by changing people's diets.

¹ <https://green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Shaping-UK-land-use.pdf>