

Land Use Decision Making in the UK and Ireland

What can countries learn from each other?

Food, Farming & Countryside Commission High-Level Round Table

Edinburgh, March 28th, 2024

Headline Summary

The work of the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission spans the UK and Ireland, with Commissioners, Board Members and Directors reflecting all parts of the UK. Building on that resource, a high-level Round Table of 40 government, academic and civil society leaders from the five nations met in Edinburgh on March 28th, 2024, to explore the question of land use:

What can these countries learn from each other, what good practice could be shared from one jurisdiction to others, and what do we need to make this happen?

The Context – Land use pressures everywhere, a range of approaches and solutions

Each of the five jurisdictions experience land use pressures from a range of factors including housing, energy infrastructure and the drive to meet environmental and ecological goals. The political sensitivity around land use has been illustrated by farmers' protests about shifts in agricultural policy, at home and internationally. One Round Table participant commented that elected politicians seemed schizophrenic: very wary of entering the political minefield of land use policy, whilst also intervening in individual planning decisions where they felt the need.

Highlights and Strengths: What's working in each country and why?

Working under the Chatham House rule to ensure a free-ranging debate, Round Table participants – described by the chair as “an extraordinary group of people” - gathered together in country groupings, led by FFCC Directors, to take an appreciative inquiry view of the 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 offer to the other four countries?

The island of **Ireland** (a joint effort from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) 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

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.

Scotland's team, on their home turf, felt they had a long track record of land use decision making since devolution, naming 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

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 woodland planting and setting up regional land use partnerships.

Every country was able to frame a distinctive contribution: **Wales** came up with their 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 cross-cutting goals.

England summed up their top three strengths:

- Quantified targets in legislation that are well informed by scientific advice
- The Environment Act and Local Nature Recovery Strategies placing responsibilities on local authorities
- 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 is still problematic, and reliance on the market to distribute 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.

Four themes emerging

By this stage, the Round Table had identified twelve strengths, several obstructions to progress, and four gifts from country to country. The chair picked out 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 (such as agricultural payments) 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 shape better land use decisions and create land use frameworks, 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 found 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 systems policy domain, to get them think beyond their value chains to broader landscape solutions. The importance of integrated land use decision making – working across all government departments – was also discussed, with multifunctionality highlighted as a vital principle of land use decision making.

Levers of change are many and varied. Consistent and persistent long-term policy and funding are 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 the decisions that facilitate lasting change. The reframing of purely financial considerations to include acting in the public interest or for the public good was recommended. We heard that in Northern Ireland the public interest is defined to include economic growth, sustainability and wellbeing, while in Wales the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act requires a long-term view of policy outcomes. Quality, impartial advice was a key lever of change – one Scottish organisation funds Good Practice Advisers to provide this.

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 in adaptation conversations on how to deal with flood, fire and climate change. These create a lot of involvement with farmers and other stakeholders because they are issues that people see as immediate concerns and easily understand their relevance. This led to agreement that land use decisions need to work at multiple scales – with special focus on the national and ‘larger than local’ levels.

We heard that the **process** of effective land use decision-making was a delicate balance of proscription and freedom, central and local controls, 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. 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. Not to search always for the optimal outcome, as that might never be found – “sub-optimal but better than the present” might be a key to unblock the change process.

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

Creating better land use decisions in each country

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

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 working group to bring proposals to Government.

Scotland reported **leadership** already in place, as the country is 13 years into its Land use Strategy. Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs) are in pilot stage and building confidence, 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” and local authorities stepping up; and regional land use partnerships beyond the pilot stage will need to access resources and expertise.

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 through mechanisms like 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.

In **England** success would come if **leadership** tried to be less proscriptive and short term, promoting the Land Use Framework as a tool for collaborative working, linking top-down and bottom-up approaches. A culture of devolved decision making 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.

A sentinel issue

Bringing the Round Table to a close, land use was recognised as critical to cohesion and a major issue for governments in all jurisdictions. Land use was a “sentinel issue” for the greater community involvement that was needed in the future.

Drawing together 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; Lessons Learned; Wellbeing of Future Generations; and Local Nature Recovery) there was clearly much to be gained from further exchanges of experience and insights. The Round Table had created the seed crystal of a wider community of practice which participants were keen to continue, populating the map of learning with examples of effective landscape governance and good practice, and taking up the challenge to help implement the most promising practices and country-to-country gifts.