

LAND USE FRAMEWORK

Fenland SOIL & NFU Workshop Summary Report

Commissioned by Defra | April 2025





INTRODUCTION

Fenland SOIL, in partnership with the National Farmers' Union (NFU), was commissioned by Defra to host two LUF workshops in the Cambridgeshire Fens with farmers and key farming stakeholders, including NGOs and local organisations.

These workshops were designed to gather insight into how the proposed Land Use Framework is perceived on the ground with farmers and to explore local challenges and opportunities regarding land use change in the Fens.

The first workshop took place on 9th April in the northern Fens, near Thorney, with 28 attendees – approximately 40% of whom were direct farmers.

The second was held on 16th April near Ely, in the southern Fens, and saw a significantly larger turnout of 51 attendees, around 70% of whom were direct farmers.

Each session lasted two hours and represented a cross-section of the Fenland SOIL membership base.



1. UNDERSTANDING OF THE LAND USE FRAMEWORK

Participants expressed mixed levels of awareness and understanding of the proposed Land Use Framework. Many felt the consultation documents were overly technical, with difficult language and that did not align with the lived experience of growers. Several farmers reported struggling to interpret the materials independently, leading to a perception that the process was top-down rather than bottom-up.

There was also scepticism about the spatial modelling used to underpin the Framework, with concerns that it lacked the field-level resolution needed for meaningful application in the diverse Fens environment.

Farmers emphasised the importance of ensuring the Framework is evidence-based, locally relevant, and informed by practical farming knowledge.

Despite concerns, participants agreed that farming and nature can and should co-exist in the Fens, with the Framework seen as an opportunity to create a “mosaic” approach to land use rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

Generally, the concept of a Land Use Framework to cut through red tape was viewed as a positive measure.



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2. LOCAL PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES

A recurring theme was the need for **locally specific policies**, as opposed to **broad-brush national strategies**. The unique conditions and field-by-field variability of the Fens were highlighted as incompatible with generic satellite mapping or uniform guidance.

Participants stressed that:

- Spatial modelling detail needs to be improved and clearly explained.
- Policy decisions must be based on comprehensive, field-level data.
- Existing peat maps are out of date and fundamentally flawed.
- Long-term planning and funding certainty are essential to incentivise investment in land use change.
- Farmers must be treated as partners, not passive recipients of policy decisions.

There was a notable lack of trust in policymakers, attributed to recent political decisions and inconsistent strategies.

Farmers also voiced concern over the lack of alignment across neighbouring farms and sectors, highlighting the need for better coordination and cohesion.



Farmers must be treated as partners, not passive recipients of policy decisions.



3. FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Growers were clear that the assumption of continued productivity growth—mirroring the past 50 years—is unrealistic. Any proposed changes must be backed by serious investment in **water infrastructure**, including reservoirs, field drainage and Internal Drainage Board (IDB) systems, which were seen as essential to delivering both environmental and productivity benefits.

Other concerns included:

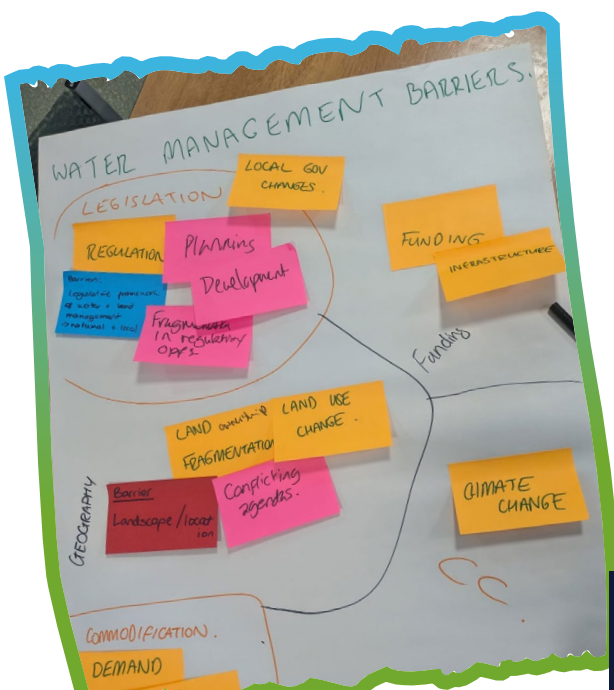
- Legal and financial complications around private business investment.
- The risk of increased administrative burden from schemes like SFI (Sustainable Farming Incentive).
- A need for locally tailored schemes that address Fenland-specific issues.
- The importance of trusted, knowledgeable advisers to support decision-making.

Early adopters of change expressed concerns about being penalised or excluded from future incentives.

There was strong support for **results-based payment mechanisms** that reward outcomes, not just compliance.



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4. VIEWS ON ENFORCED LAND USE CHANGE

The prospect of **enforced land use change** raised significant concerns. Farmers highlighted the need for:

- Transparent communication of changes and implications for individual landowners.
- Micro-level understanding of land value, especially where borrowing is tied to land assets.
- Not all land is equal – some farms will have the same land type on paper but could have significant infrastructure investment to supply production of high value crops.
- Fair and evidence-based compensation, particularly for higher-grade, more productive land.
- Incentivised, voluntary schemes that support integration with nature rather than forced reallocation.

There was widespread scepticism about Natural England's role, with many growers arguing that farmers are better placed to manage land for both production and nature.

Fears of **compulsory purchase** and long-term uncertainty reduced growers' willingness to invest in their land.

Participants were particularly concerned about the risk of **Grade 1 land** being included in the "30x30" target (30% of land for nature by 2030), stressing that this land is vital for horticulture and food security.



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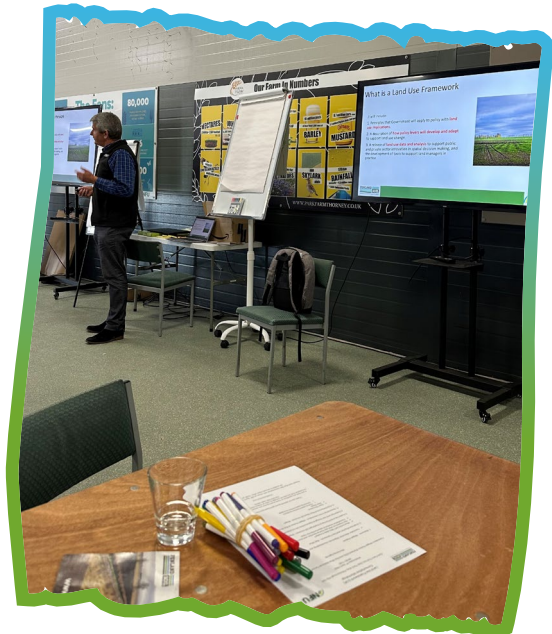
5. RISK OF DISPLACING FOOD PRODUCTION OVERSEAS

Participants were united in their concern that poorly designed land use changes could lead to the **offshoring of food production**, repeating the mistakes made in heavy industry.

The group called for:

- **True cost accounting** of imported food to capture environmental and social costs.
- A **statutory UK food production target**, similar to targets set in statute for nature recovery and carbon reduction.
- A **national food strategy** aligned with the Land Use Framework.
- Level playing fields with EU and global competitors on environmental regulation, access to labour, and innovation funding.

There was strong support for public education initiatives to help consumers understand the UK's food production story, especially through schools and local engagement.



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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Localise the Land Use Framework

Ensure field-scale resolution, use local data, and avoid blanket national assumptions.

Increase Transparency and Trust

Communicate clearly, involve farmers in the process, and address recent declines in confidence.

Invest in Infrastructure

Prioritise water management systems and long-term funding commitments.

Protect High-Value Agricultural Land

Especially Grade 1 land critical to UK horticulture and food security.

Avoid Displacing Food Production

Introduce statutory food targets and ensure imports meet UK standards.

Educate the Public

Promote awareness of domestic food production and its environmental benefits.

Together, we're shaping a greener, more resilient future for lowland agricultural peat. Let's grow better, together.

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