

March 2021

# Living Landscapes

Public dialogue on the future of land use  
Executive Summary

**Conducted on behalf of the Royal Society**

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# Executive summary

## Introduction and method

### Background

The Royal Society commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct an **online participatory futures dialogue on the future of the UK's land use** between August and November 2020.

There are multiple potential uses and objectives for rural land in the UK, which can be competing or complementary. The potential for large-scale agriculture and environmental policy changes as a result of Brexit interact with the Government's commitments to reducing carbon emissions under the Paris Agreement and halting biodiversity loss under the Convention on Biological Diversity. This means that land use policy in the UK is at a critical inflection point where the decisions made now will have wide-ranging impacts not only on what land in the UK might be used for, but also what the countryside will look like – potentially for decades.

In this context, the Royal Society have begun their Living Landscapes policy programme,<sup>1</sup> which seeks to inform a long-term vision for how the country manages its land in a way which balances short and long term concerns, and in particular agricultural production with environmental stewardship. This dialogue brings public opinion into the programme, fostering debate between the public, policymakers, landowners, farmers and scientists, among other stakeholders in the land.

### Dialogue objectives

- To **understand public values and priorities** around UK land use, including how land is framed; what people know about land use; and what their priorities are when exposed to information about the benefits, trade-offs and potential “win-wins” of future land use decisions.
- To **explore this in the context of the future forces** which will impact the UK's land use and the future opportunities the UK has in order to meet land use objectives.
- The dialogue also sought to **understand the role of scientific evidence** in informing the public's views and opinions.
- A further objective was to understand public awareness and **perceptions of decision-making** around land use.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/living-landscapes/>

This report on the dialogue gives guidance on how best to engage the public in perceiving the multiple roles and dynamic nature of UK landscapes.

The findings will be used by the Royal Society to inform their own report on multifunctional land use, to contribute to thought leadership for policy, science, and society.

## Method

**Four sets of two deliberative workshops** (reconvened with the same cohort of participants) took place in contrasting regions in the UK: East Anglia and the Fens, Southwest England, North Wales and Western Scotland. Each comprised around 24 members of the public, broadly reflective of age, lifestage, gender and ethnicity, as well as including those living in rural, urban and suburban locations. (Full sample details are included in the appendix). 97 participants in total took part in the workshops along with two to four experts at each session. Each workshop involved seven hours of dialogue discussion in total, made up of two 3.5-hour workshops. Each workshop was divided into sub-groups of four to six based on participants' age. The sessions involved both plenary sessions and discussions within the sub-groups, each with its own facilitator from Ipsos MORI. Before the sessions, participants were sent some materials on land use, including examples of different types of farming and the kinds of locations suitable for different land use in the UK. They were all invited to complete a simple task reflecting on their initial priorities for land use. Then, they came to the workshops:

- **Workshop one:** A three-hour online workshop where participants discussed their opinions about land and built understanding of different land use themes.
- **Workshop two:** A four-hour online workshop occurring 3-4 weeks after the first, where participants explored three future scenarios of land use and their implications for the UK.

Between workshops one and two all participants entered an **online community** where they were given a range of different tasks, including reviewing the films sent by farmers (see below) and taking a first look at our “future world” scenarios showing how the world might be different given different land use policy decisions. The community allowed participants to interact asynchronously with members of their regional cohort, participants from other parts of the country, and farmers from the ethnographic interviews detailed below.

In addition, there were two other strands to the research:

- **Eight farmers** were included in the project as they were asked to complete photo and video diaries on the Ipsos AppLife<sup>2</sup> mobile app, showing and telling us about their experience of landscape and giving us their thoughts on the future pressures and priorities for rural land use.

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<sup>2</sup> Ipsos' proprietary mobile phone app for qualitative research. Further information available from: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/applife>

- **Eight telephone interviews with older or more vulnerable people without digital access** were also included as the online format would have excluded their participation. We carried out one-to-one phone calls during which we covered the same broad topics of land use systems and scenarios as with the rest of the participants.

Views from the farmer and digitally excluded depths were included throughout the analysis, with the material generated by the video diaries being used as stimulus for participants in the online community.

## Themes of land use

Land use is a multifaceted topic which can be explored in many different ways. To help structure conversations with the public, this project used six key themes. These were defined by the Royal Society for the overarching Living landscapes programme based on the Westminster Government's 25-year Environment Plan<sup>3</sup> and the Agriculture Bill 2020. They are referenced throughout the report as a way for the public to discuss potential trade-offs and win-wins within the environment:

1. Food production
2. Combating climate change
3. Biodiversity
4. Heritage, culture and leisure
5. Protection from environmental hazards
6. Clean air and water

## Key findings

### Perspectives of land use

**The public saw land as a backdrop to life, while the small number of farmers we spoke with saw a reciprocal relationship with the land.**

Public interaction with rural land use is generally low. Participants saw the land as a relatively unchanging backdrop to their lives: either from an aesthetic or recreational perspective. They did not know how land is used across the UK, often overestimating how much is built-up and were equally likely to under- or over-estimate how much food consumed in the UK is grown here.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

Participants displayed a very localised perspective, which meant that they found it difficult to deliberate on land use without significant preparation. They tended to view the land from a “consumer” perspective, meaning they saw land as a source of food and recreation and had little interest in what happened on land owned by others unless it had a direct impact on them. Housing and development were out of scope of the dialogue because little rural land is subject to regulation under the planning system. Nevertheless, many participants perceived them as important additional land uses and so wanted to factor them into land use decisions.

Before hearing about systemic approaches to land use, participants did not appreciate how the different land use themes are interconnected, instead viewing “outputs” from the land (e.g. food) independently from other potential uses, ecosystem services and public goods such as habitat enhancement, clean air and water and climate change mitigation and adaptation. This contrasted with the eight farmers interviewed through video diaries, who started from the principle that they can, and should, maintain ecosystem services in order to obtain the yields they need from the land.

### **As the public progressed through the dialogue, their views changed.**

Many realised they did not know as much as they thought about the land, land use and the pressures on land in future. They came to appreciate a systemic interpretation of land use where everyone is a stakeholder, a broader role than being a consumer.

### **The experience of living through COVID-19 in 2020 has informed participants’ views.**

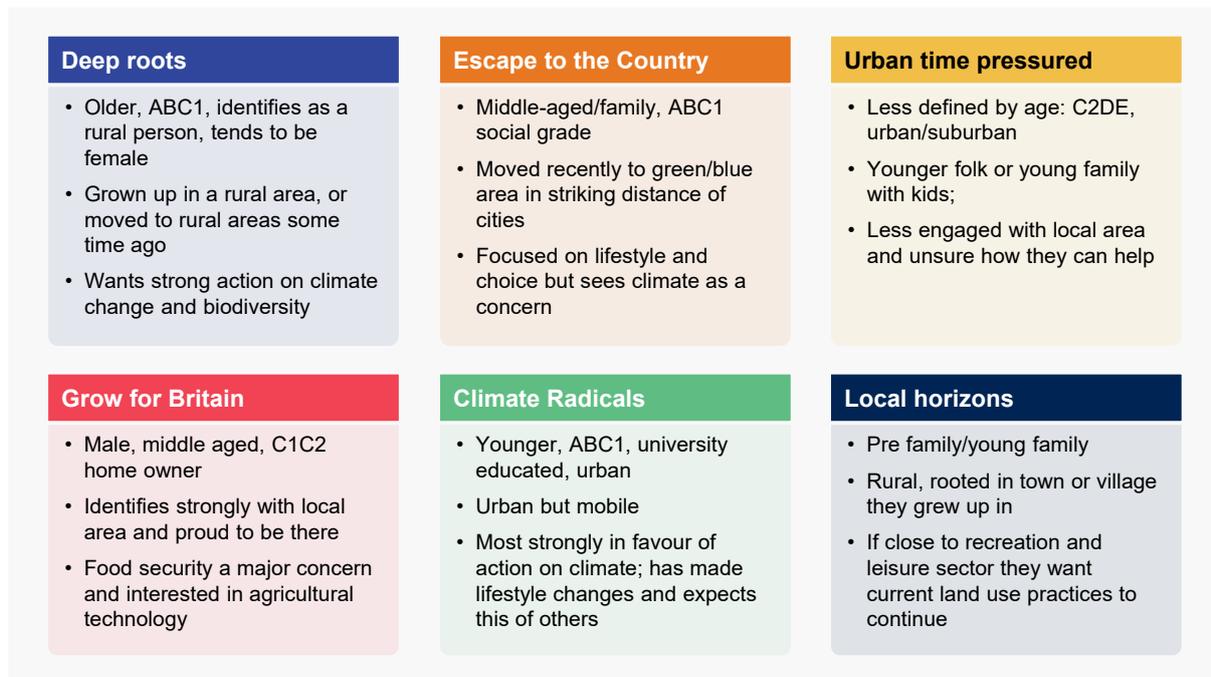
Participants felt they had a greater awareness of the landscape, the role of community, and the inequalities of society as a result of living through 2020. They saw greater potential for both policy-driven and individual-level behavioural change, post-pandemic even in areas (like food and environmental action) where change has been slow to come previously. At the same time, their experiences through the year had given them a sense that unexpected events could happen, meaning systems and infrastructure could be more fragile than they had thought previously (particularly mentioned were food supply chains and flood defence schemes). The public in this dialogue had an appetite for change in the way that food and other land use systems operate, and were keen to understand what policy and other options are open to us as a society. If this mood prevails in the public beyond the participants of our dialogue, it may prove something that policymakers can capitalise upon, to build support for policy that seeks to change individual and collective behaviour in the UK.

## **Land value typologies - demographic patterns in the public’s views**

Analysis of the views of participants across the workshops allows the public at the dialogue to be grouped into **six impressionistic attitudinal typologies** which inform their priorities for land use. These observations imply that the wider public’s attitude to land may not simply be influenced by where a person lives (urban or rural) but by other factors, both extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic factors which made a difference in this dialogue included a person’s social

grade,<sup>4</sup> and the time they had spent in a single area. Intrinsic factors included the person's underlying values, and (self-identified) rural or urban status.

**Figure 1.1: Six “land value typologies” – groups of people with different attitudes to, and priorities for, the land**



Each typology expressed different views on the balance of trade-offs between land use decision-making themes and exhibited varied preferences towards the scenarios of the future.

Uniquely, these typologies bring out the different perspectives that exist *within* the rural population, rather than simply contrasting urban and rural viewpoints and treating rural communities as a homogenous group. This aspect of the dialogue may provide valuable new insights into how best to engage with diverse rural groups on land use change.

## What are the priority uses for land, and what trade-offs are acceptable?

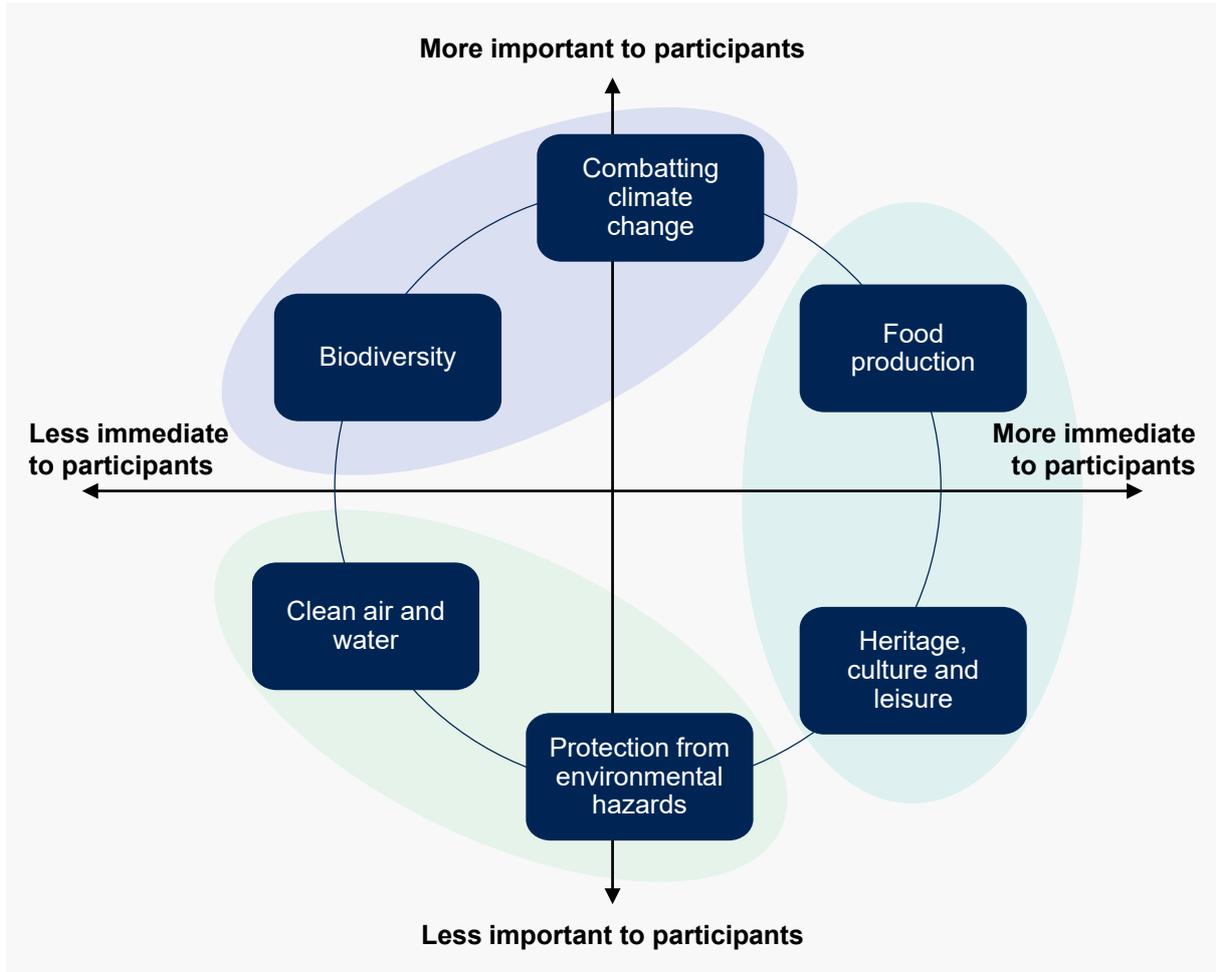
Participants quickly appreciated that the six themes of land use discussed in this project – food production, combating climate change, biodiversity, heritage culture and leisure, protection from environmental hazards, and clean air and water – were strongly linked.

In prioritising within, and between, themes, participants identified two defining factors. The first was the level of long-term importance participants ascribed to each theme. The second was how immediately relevant to their lives participants felt the impacts of these themes to

<sup>4</sup> A social classification system based on occupation. For more information please see the background and methodology chapter, or: <http://www.nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/>

be, a judgement which was based primarily on where participants and their families lived, their lifestyles and values. The urgency and immediacy assigned to the six themes – and the views each of the land value typologies held on them – are detailed in the table and diagram below.

Figure 1.2: Public views of the themes of land use



**Table 1.1: Summary of public priorities for land use**

	Priorities	Which typologies was this most important for? <i>Key trade-offs &amp; red lines</i>
Combating climate change and protecting biodiversity	Greatest long-term importance	<p><b>Deep Roots</b> and <b>Climate Radicals</b> see these as the principal problems for our age, which require systemic solutions</p> <p><i>Most land use decisions will need to incorporate elements designed to help solve these problems</i></p> <p><i>Prioritise biodiversity and fighting climate change, but not at the expense of food supply.</i></p> <p><i>A red line for most was choosing solutions to food supply which would impact the climate more severely than we do now</i></p> <p><i>Participants generally accepted that responding to climate change will require personal changes, but may also bring wider benefits.</i></p>
Food production and culture, heritage and leisure	Greatest immediate urgency	<p><b>Urban and Time-Pressured</b> and <b>Grow for Britain</b> typologies prioritised food supply and affordability. The former were focussed on ensuring they could feed their families affordably, while the latter tended to prioritise the ‘sovereignty’ of national food supply and production.</p> <p><i>Many wished to move away from intensive farming and there was top-level awareness that this might lead to dietary change from the public</i></p> <p><i>A “win-win” would be to make farming more efficient through high-tech methods.</i></p> <p><i>Most had red lines on preserving animal welfare, environmental standards and food safety standards, even if prices rise.</i></p> <p><i>Participants were open to promoting biodiversity tourism (e.g. through reintroductions of large mammals). However, there were concerns about that type of “rewilding” due to its potential to prevent existing access to certain landscapes.</i></p>
Protection from environmental hazards and clean air and water	Need to be addressed, but of less long-term importance	<p>Those closest to poverty and who experience inequality – <b>Escape to the Country</b> and <b>Local Horizons</b> – were most concerned about the need to address hazard protection and clean air and water quality in a fair way so that these things did not impact the poorest the most.</p> <p><i>Because these are seen as having very local impacts, participants turned to planning and infrastructure decisions rather than rural land use for the solutions to these challenges.</i></p> <p><i>Natural solutions such as protecting or restoring peat bogs were seen as win-wins; though there would be a trade-off against food production, which for some was a red line.</i></p>

## The role of evidence in forming views, and appetite for more

- Participants were interested to hear about the role of different land uses in promoting biodiversity and wanted to know more about the potential for urban spaces also to promote biodiversity. The idea of using farmland multifunctionally for carbon sequestration was new to most. The concept of carbon costs of food was new to many (there were many misperceptions about food miles vs carbon cost of meat).
- There was interest in learning that “high-tech” farming involving any technological innovation does not always equate to intensive farming, and that automation and policies that promote the delivery of ecosystem services from land could open up different jobs in the rural economy.
- Participants were surprised and interested to learn about the role of agriculture in flooding, methane production and ammonia pollution of air and water.
- Some land uses were particularly interesting to participants; the peat landscape was used as one example, rather than presented as a solution to carbon sequestration for the whole UK, but nevertheless it captured imagination, as many participants had little knowledge of peatlands prior to the discussion.

## How participants responded to scenarios of the future

Participants reviewed three scenarios which projected how the UK might look in 2035 if different policy goals were pursued from now:

**Follow the Market.** In this world, policy choices are designed to promote economic growth and therefore only land uses which are profitable remain. Uneconomical land uses become rare in the UK, meaning an overall loss of farmland and growth in leisure and housing. Food remains cheap, sustained by an increase in imports from other countries, while UK agriculture becomes higher quality and more expensive.

- **What did people think about this world?** Follow the Market was seen as an acceptable world to live in today, but not a sustainable, fair or appealing world in 2035. Policies promoting economic growth and keeping food prices low felt closest to participants’ current lifestyles and the leisure options and management of this world were also viewed positively, particularly by the **Urban and Time-Pressured** but also the **Escape to the Country** and **Local Horizons** typologies. However, this world prompted concerns about low food standards, income inequality and how far protecting the environment would be prioritised in an economically-driven world.

**Home Front.** Policy decisions made in this scenario aim to significantly increase the proportion of food consumed in the UK which is grown here. As a result, land use changes are designed to drive up UK food production through expanded agriculture and the use of agricultural technology. In this scenario food choices were limited to reflect the fact that the cost of food would rise under this policy. Other land uses such as recreation, biodiversity and controlling climate change are secondary to the overriding objective of food production.

- **What did people think about this world?** Home Front was seen as an acceptable and sometimes desirable way to protect the UK's food supply in a turbulent medium-term, but few felt positive about it and there was awareness that it did not address climate and biodiversity issues over the longer term. The prioritisation of domestic food production above other land uses was broadly unpopular but had strong appeal to the **Grow for Britain** typology who were particularly concerned about the UK's reliance on food imports for geopolitical reasons. While there was positivity about the enhanced role of innovation in agriculture, the scenario's lack of focus on biodiversity, environmental sustainability or rural-based recreation was a major concern. Those who were most likely to see this scenario as an acceptable "end state" viewed it as a suitable response to the environmental and political factors that might make the Follow the Market world unviable (e.g. food produced in other nations with poor animal welfare, environmental, food safety and labour standards).

**Climate Co-ordination.** The rationale behind policy decisions made in this future is to reduce the amount of carbon the UK emits and use land to provide other public goods such as biodiversity, carbon sequestration and clean air and water. To achieve this, land uses which promote these public goods are prioritised and funded. Recreation and leisure uses are curtailed and the cost of food – especially meat – is much higher.

- **What did people think about this world?** This was the most popular scenario over the longer term as participants felt it was best-placed to deal with the overriding imperatives of managing climate change and protecting biodiversity. The types of leisure activity and focus on local and seasonal food were also popular. However, here too there was concern about inequality of access to nature. Younger participants in particular had reservations about the types of leisure activity which might be allowed in this world. Across all ages, participants were concerned about the potentially authoritarian nature of this scenario. A move straight to a climate co-ordination world was generally considered to be too big a change except for **Deep Roots** and **Climate Radicals** who were most worried about the environment.

A finding from across all three scenarios is that **participants need a narrative for how we will reach these new worlds**. Throughout the dialogue, participants wanted to know how government and policy might support people to transition from the way they live their lives now to the very different lifestyles required by some of the scenarios; and in particular how this could be made a "just transition". The public are broadly receptive to making changes to their lifestyles; but require help and advice on how to do this and an awareness of how their efforts contribute to a wider UK endeavour.

## Awareness of decision-making

There was little awareness of decision-making processes around rural land use and an assumption that large scale decisions are made on a UK level only (with some awareness in Wales and Scotland about the devolved nature of policy). Faced with a complex system, participants' general response when asked who *should* be involved was that everyone

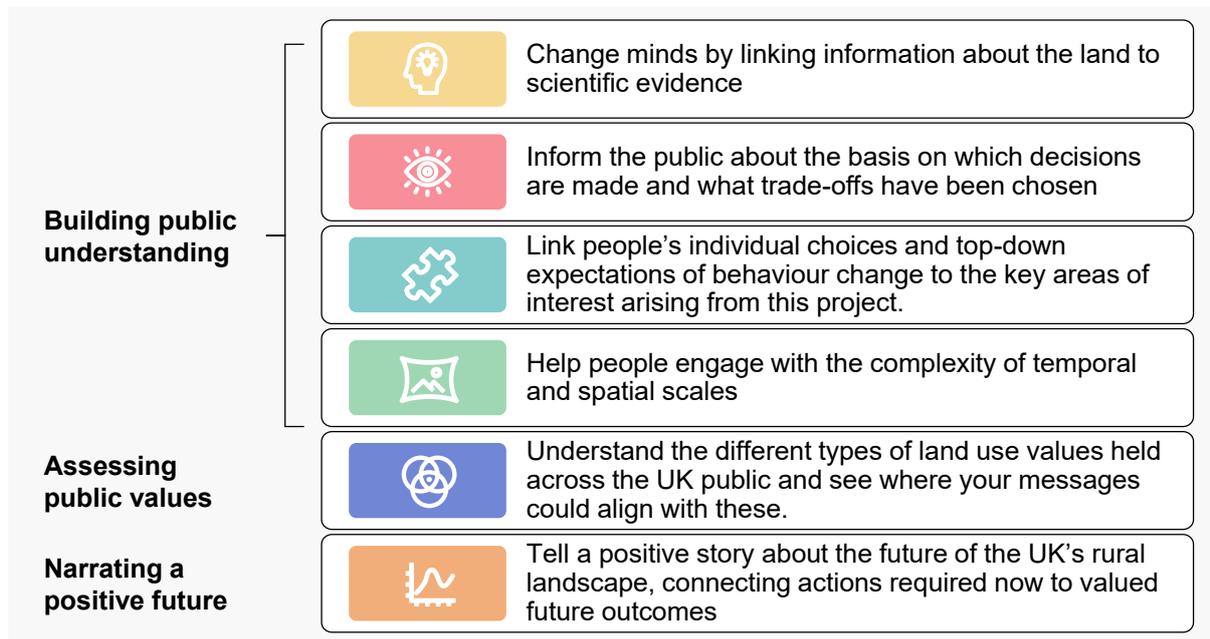
should be consulted because land use change will affect everyone. Within this, participants identified three key tensions:

- **Knowledge** There is a need to balance input from experts who have scientific expertise with input from people living in the area who have local lived experiences
- **Vested interests** Manage the desire of some groups to shape decisions for their own ends
- **Proximity** Balancing local, national and international interests.

## Recommendations for engaging, informing and communicating with the public about land use change

Policymakers and land managers can use insights from this project to design mechanisms for land use decision-making that build on an understanding of the public’s views. Recommendations for such mechanisms emerging from this project fall under three broad headings of building public understanding, assessing public values through further research and narrating a positive future:

Figure 1.3: Potential mechanisms for change



### Build public understanding of land use multifunctionality and the interactions of land use with other complex systems

- **Help to change minds by linking information about the land to scientific evidence:** Despite claims to the contrary, the UK public has always appreciated the role of experts in decision-making and there is a role for scientists to communicate the systemic nature of land use at a local level. One potential approach is on-the-ground signage which can interest the public in their local area by contextualising the local

landscapes they value. Another would be to address the broad lack of awareness about the nature of UK land cover through creating a map that explains what the country looks like now, and how and why some land uses are more appropriate to some areas than others.

- **Inform the public about the basis on which decisions are made and what trade-offs they involve:** The public see decision-making in complex areas like land use and agriculture as an area for expertise, but they are interested in the information underlying the decisions which are made. Talking about food is a fruitful way to inform the public about the decisions and trade-offs in land use.
- **Link people’s individual choices and top-down expectations of behaviour change to the key areas of interest that arise from this project:** it wasn’t clear to participants how issues they care about like food waste and packaging relate to big issues like helping fight climate change or protecting biodiversity. Other areas of interest that could be better tied to the large systemic issues include diet, urban life and transport.
- **Help people engage with the complexity of temporal and spatial scales through gamification:** In a complex topic like land use there is a challenge in ensuring that public engagement reaches beyond those who are already more engaged in the discussion. Gamified solutions are one option; they can appeal to a broader audience and can also take advantage of the processing power of a decision-tree engine in an online game to play out the results of complex policy decisions.

**Assess the different types of land use values held across the UK public and see where messages could align with these**

- **Substantiate the qualitative typology identified in this report through nationally-representative quantitative study.** Additional research could also evidence the elements where this categorisation is currently light – for instance, on the prevalence of these typologies among those living in highly urbanised areas and how they play out across different ethnic groups – as well as helping to overcome the disconnect between the varying size of the groups and their ability to be heard.

**Create a positive story about the future of the UK’s rural landscape**

- **Creating a united and positive vision for what the UK landscape should look like would be a powerful tool for gaining public buy-in to the changes that are required to land use and our diets and lifestyles.** As the public emerge from the challenges of 2020 into a post-COVID and post-Brexit world, a coherent vision for the future of the UK which merges perspectives from different walks of life, including rural and urban, rich and poor, and English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish, has perhaps never been more necessary.

We know from other polling that people in the UK retain a sense of global mission and leadership far ahead of other European nations. Harnessing those elements which are positive and explaining how this contributes towards building a more sustainable world will be important to create a future vision of the UK that people want to work towards.

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