



Land Use in England Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Land use in England

Wednesday 20 July 2022

10 am

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Members present: Lord Cameron of Dillington (The Chair); Lord Curry of Kirkharle; The Earl of Leicester; Baroness Redfern; Lord Watts; Baroness Young of Old Scone.

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Questions 243 - 253

Witness

I: Professor Mark Scott, Planning and Dean of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Planning & Environmental Policy, University College Dublin.

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Examination of Witness

Professor Mark Scott.

Q243 **The Chair:** Welcome to this 23rd evidence session of the Land Use in England Committee. We are fortunate to have Mr Mark Scott, professor of planning and dean of architecture and landscape architecture at University College Dublin, with us this morning. You have in front of you, Mark, a list of interests that have been declared by members of the committee, or at least you have seen those. The meeting is being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the committee website, but you will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary.

That that deals with the formal introductions. I will ask the first question, if I may. Bear in mind that we as a committee are not looking at the planning system per se but at land use, which is slightly different. We are not looking at a planning system that deals only with development. Nearly 90% of the land in England is not really covered by the planning system. Could you briefly describe for the committee the overarching frameworks for land use and planning in Ireland, and how they are devised, agreed, integrated, delivered and monitored?

Professor Mark Scott: First of all, thank you for the invitation to talk this morning about the Irish land use system. Ireland is certainly not a best-practice example. We are on a very steep learning curve. We are doing quite a lot of experimentation on land use governance at the moment, which will, I hope, generate some interest and reflections for the work of this committee.

At the moment, there is a high level of policy interest in rethinking land use and how we maximise the potential of how we use land in a much more effective way. The kind of issues that you talked about—that fragmentation, perhaps, between the planning system and other wider land use concerns—are also replicated in an Irish context, and we are at the moment going through a process of preparing a new national land use strategy, which should be going for public consultation in the autumn.

Just to set the context, we have very similar concerns to the UK about land use drivers of change, but urbanisation, agricultural intensification, climate change and biodiversity loss in particular are all really high up in the public agenda.

In terms of the planning and development system, we really copied the UK's 1947 Town and Country Planning Act when we established our planning system in 1963. Planning was primarily a local concern, so statutory regulation of land use and development control was primarily a function of local government.

Since 2000 and Ireland's steep economic growth since that period, we have had a complete overhaul of the planning system, with a series of legislative and institutional changes. We now have a multilevel planning

policy framework. At the national level, we have a national planning framework, and we have a growing range and number of ministerial guidelines on specific planning topics. We have a new regional tier of planning governance with regional, spatial and economic strategies, and we have three of those across the country.

At local authority level, we still have the main regulation of land use through the statutory development plan, and then we have a system of development control and management, which also includes a first and third-party appeals system. There is quite a strict timeline for preparing all those plans set out in legislation.

At a more strategic level, which I guess is an interest of this committee, the national planning framework is our second attempt at a national-level spatial strategy. We published our first national spatial strategy in 2002, aimed at trying to counterbalance some of the development pressures around Dublin and to direct that to other regional cities.

The key deficiency with that plan was a lack of implementation measures. That is part of the steep learning curve that I talked about earlier. Half a plan is not enough to affect change, and those delivery and implementation measures were really lacking, so the plan did not have enough enforcement behind it to try to effect local and regional action. There is also a very keen tension between local interests and national priorities, which was not really resolved.

With the more recent national planning framework published in 2018, there is less emphasis on maps and more on targets and planning objectives. Since then, we have had a series of legislative changes and new institutional arrangements to ensure its effective implementation. For example, we have a new Office of the Planning Regulator, which monitors the performance of every county development plan and ensures compliance between different tiers of the spatial planning system.

The national planning framework is also aligned with funding streams, which is another new development. We will probably come on to that in more detail later, but, essentially, it ensures that funding helps give effect to some of the planning objectives. There is also Cabinet-level monitoring of the plan. It is very much an ongoing process. The system is much more compliant and more evidence-based, and has become more centralised, probably at the expense of local democratic input.

Without a doubt, the key critical political issue in Ireland is housing, and that dominates the whole planning agenda. It goes through a whole host of issues from housing affordability, housing supply, delivery, the speculative developer-led approach versus a more evidence-based approach, and build to rent. We are also now getting large overseas investment funds buying up large housing developments, so there is a lot of concern about how housing is delivered and financed at the moment. We had a real streamlining of some decision-making on strategic infrastructure, but probably at the expense of local community engagement.

When you look at broader land use issues, it is very fragmented between different policy streams, and I guess that we can talk about that in more detail if there are any questions about the general planning system.

Q244 **Baroness Young of Old Scone:** We were particularly interested in hearing from you today, because our Royal Town Planning Institute thought you were an ace example of how to integrate land use planning into wider government policies and programmes. You have described some of that today, but can I just press you on what the system that you have just described covers? Does it deal with issues of the use of agricultural land for food production or with things like land-based climate change and biodiversity measures?

Professor Mark Scott: The planning system that I have described to you is very much the planning and development system, and it does not cover the whole range of land use that your committee is covering. Climate change is a mandatory objective of the planning system, as set out in legislation, so from national down to local level there will always be a climate action strategy that aligns with the national climate action goals.

Planners have often moved away from thinking about land as a fundamental resource and focused on place, space and development, and there is a direction of travel to rethink land as a more fundamental resource that we should be managing in a more effective way. Where that is coming into play is in the Government's commitment to producing a new national land use strategy. I have been part of the evidential review for that strategy over the last year. As I mentioned, it will go out to public consultation in the autumn.

I do not think the Government have a clear idea what that strategy will look like. Will it be almost an extension of the planning system to integrate agricultural and other land into that system, or will it be more of a standalone, visionary statement on how land should be used?

At the moment, it is a very fragmented terrain. Biodiversity would have its own action plans. There are separate agri-environmental schemes that are fairly closely aligned with the common agricultural policy. There is a separate national landscape strategy that looks more at cultural heritage aspects of land use. Much more effort to tie those dimensions together and to start with land as that fundamental resource needs to be taken care of.

Baroness Young of Old Scone: From what you know about from your background generally in the planning field and from the work that you are doing on the evidence base, do you think they will pull this off? Will they manage to find a way forward and, if so, what might the bones be? If you were running the country, how would you do it?

Professor Mark Scott: The task is much more complex than they anticipated when they started the process. The review of evidence has been a little about unpicking something, and the whole thing is unravelled to see how complex our land use relationships are. That is probably one

of the first things. Once they started to look at land use as a fundamental resource, they realised that it seems to underpin so many areas of activity that it is becoming increasingly complex to get a clear message of what should be achieved. That means that I do not really have a clear idea. I do not know how much they will go down the path of having a regulatory system around land use or whether it may be more like the Scottish example, where it is a 20 to 30-page strategy outlining how other policies should feed into this.

In Ireland, we have a coalition Government, and the Green Party is a member of that coalition, so it has been very much part of its agenda to get this on to the programme for government. It has been pushing this a little bit, but I am of unclear how it will go. The big issue for me is how planners stop at the urban edge and do not really look at agricultural change.

I would like to see a much wider integration of how we manage agricultural land with the wider planning system. Agriculture is now much more intensive, but you do not need planning permission for any landscape modification or anything to do with hedgerows or new agricultural buildings. We are appreciative now of a much more intensive impact of agriculture on our environment. That would be one measure.

I would very much like to see climate measures mainstreamed, because, in terms of land use, we are doing some interesting things around carbon sequestration, but we are not really thinking about how land can be used for adaptation as well as mitigation measures.

Baroness Young of Old Scone: We have strayed into the climate change stuff, but is there any focus at all on issues of food security, or is Ireland happy that it can feed itself if necessary?

Professor Mark Scott: Food security is an issue. What has probably been a more prominent issue is the expansion of agriculture more generally. Since the financial crisis of 2008-09, the Government put a big play in to pushing agriculture as a much more export-orientated market, particularly with the ending of milk quotas, so there has been a significant expansion of dairy production in Ireland and what was often referred to by the agricultural sector as the national herd, which is a growing herd size across the country.

You can really chart very clearly the environmental impacts of this. There is a very direct correlation between the growth of the national herd and impact on water quality and biodiversity loss. Agriculture is the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases in Ireland. It is responsible for around 32% of greenhouse gas emissions, so there is a big debate about the environmental dimensions of farming.

Q245 **Baroness Young of Old Scone:** Will the discussions on the revised land use strategy bring all those issues together and tackle them, or will it be much narrower in its focus?

Professor Mark Scott: I hope that it does, but probably the key conflict point is on agriculture and a resistance from the farming sector to reduce emissions. In parallel to this, as part of our climate action legislation we have carbon budgets. At the moment, we are trying to reach an agreement on the levels of carbon emission reductions that should be put on top of the agricultural sector, and that has been quite a fierce debate in the media over the summer.

Saying that, farmers are the key landowners and land managers in the country, so if we do not have farmers on our side, it is really going to miss a significant element of the strategy. There is an opportunity to engage with farmers and to look at less intensive farming practice, how we can farm with nature and incorporate biodiversity and how we can maybe adopt just transition principles to the farming sector.

If we are looking at the farming sector transitioning to a different model, how do we help and support farmers in that regard? How do we ensure that their livelihoods are protected and that they can stay on and farm the land, which is really what most farmers wish to do?

Baroness Young of Old Scone: Are you seeing in Ireland the thing that we are beginning to see here, which is investors buying land for carbon and biodiversity offsetting, sometimes in inappropriately good agricultural places?

Professor Mark Scott: We are not seeing that to the extent that I know Scotland has. We have a very deconcentrated model of land ownership, so most land is owned by small family farmers. We do not really have the large landowners that you would see in Scotland or England, and farmland rarely comes up in the open market. Most farm families will try to keep it within the family, so it is very difficult for that type of investors to get significant purchase of a coherent parcel of land to do things like that. That has been much less of an issue in Ireland to date than in other countries, but that is something that we are expecting to change and to happen more frequently into the future.

Q246 **Baroness Young of Old Scone:** Should some of these difficult challenges that you have outlined be handed over to the planning system to resolve, or does it need something completely different?

Professor Mark Scott: I am a planner, so why not, in some ways? Either we go in the light-touch direction, where we have a vision for land use in Ireland, and some targets and goals, and we mainstream that across different policy domains, or we do something much more regulatory-focused, which is probably the direction that I would like to move into, but I am not sure whether the planning system has the capacity for that at present or whether there is the political will to do that.

It might be something more visionary or aspirational, with targets and so on, but now that it is on this agenda it is mapped out that we want to have a land use strategy, which could evolve fairly quickly. Certainly, we have these different sectors—forestry, minerals, farming and cultural

heritage—all doing their own thing. Quite interestingly, one of the parts of the evidential review has been looking at land that has been allocated for different uses across different policy streams to see if we are overcommitting land.

We do not have enough land to do these things that different policy streams are suggesting, so one of the tasks has been to review across different policy domains the different commitments to how land is used for forestry, for agricultural use or for ecosystem services, and to see whether that ties in together. Auditing our commitments has been an interesting part of the research agenda.

Q247 **Lord Watts:** Mark, you have dealt with a lot of the issues that I was going to raise, but the fact is that there is not a great deal of interlocked policy between the different priorities for land use at the moment in Ireland. I think that is what you are indicating. If there is a conflict between different uses for the land, how is that resolved in your system?

Professor Mark Scott: The planning and development system would certainly be a key arena for resolving some of those conflicts on planning on biodiversity, particularly around protected sites. Generally, they are dealt with on a sector-by-sector basis. Forestry has its own application and licensing process, and there is a huge review of forestry at the moment in Ireland, particularly in relation to community engagement, in order to try to get more communities to be open. We have quite a lot of objections to forestry in Ireland from community groups, so we are looking at how to change those. It is fairly fragmented.

Where we have done better is in aligning the national planning framework with our national development plan, which is really about capital investment. That has been really important to achieve with the most recent national planning framework. We have a good tradition of producing national development plans for infrastructure development and capital spending, and for the first time this is now aligned with a spatial strategy that gives a more spatial effect to that investment. Some of those are nationally defined and some allow more bottom-up development around some environmental projects, local town regeneration and so on.

That has allowed more of an investment-led approach to decision-making as opposed to having a plan and then hoping that the private sector comes on board. That interface between planning and development, capital and infrastructure projects has improved, but in relation to those different environmental streams or land use sectors, it is very fragmented terrain.

We are seeing something really interesting where, for example, planners have embraced ecosystem services as a critical concept. We are starting to see planners working with colleges to try to produce much more green infrastructure-led planning and to incorporate nature into urban development. There are piecemeal things like that, but a very coherent land use framework is lacking at the moment.

Lord Watts: How dependent are farmers in Ireland on subsidy from government? If there is a subsidy, is it being used to direct land use?

Professor Mark Scott: The common agricultural policy and the EU subsidies are very important. I am not an expert on agricultural funding and the CAP model, so I will perhaps avoid questions on that. The agri-environmental schemes that are funded by CAP have been important in influencing farmer and farm-level behaviour into experimenting with different, probably less intensive, farming practices.

Something that is done on a national level is coming up with ideas about results-based as opposed to more process-based financial incentives for farmers. Farmers are sometimes paid not to cut their hedges when birds are laying their eggs or nesting. At the moment, there is a direction and a movement towards more results-based incentives, evaluating the positive environmental impacts from farming before funding is released. That is probably a more persuasive model as payment for an ecosystem-type approach. Agriculture has expanded. Farm incomes are fairly healthy at the moment, and the sector is fairly buoyant as well.

Q248 **Baroness Redfern:** Hello, Mark. My question on the carbon and environmental markets and the impact on land use has been covered, but what is the vision for land use in the short and medium term regarding the carbon and environmental markets?

Professor Mark Scott: There are a couple of dimensions to that. The department of agriculture here in Ireland has been working with farmers to try to get them to engage more with carbon markets. As I said, because of relatively small farm sizes, farmers have often lacked the capacity or the knowledge, or have information deficits, to engage with that. There has been more effort to get forest and land managers and farmers to engage with carbon markets just in the last couple of months. That is ongoing work.

Baroness Redfern: Are you getting interest from farmers, or are they apprehensive?

Professor Mark Scott: I could not give you a definitive answer to that. Forest managers are certainly very interested, and some farmers are interested in increasing the forest cover on their land as a result, but I would not have a good answer in relation to farmer attitudes more generally.

There is certainly a very strong cultural attachment to farmers farming the land, which is understandable. People have been handed down the land and they feel that they are custodians not just of the land but of farming practice itself. We are very attached to property rights in Ireland, so farmers are pretty clear that they generally do not like interference in how they farm, but, if the incentives are right, they generally respond.

Baroness Redfern: So it is really a big decision if they go into forestry, is it not?

Professor Mark Scott: Yes. We are seeing quite interesting debates on the extraction of peatland. Bord na Móna is a state-run company that, for 70 years, has been industrially harvesting peat for energy use. It owns quite an extensive network of boglands and peatlands in the Midlands and west of Ireland, and has recently ceased industrial extraction for the purpose of energy use. It is now looking at investing in carbon markets and at carbon storage being one of its commercial avenues. That is a landowner at scale looking at this idea of carbon markets probably more thoroughly than the more piecemeal farmers.

Q249 **Lord Curry of Kirkharle:** My allocated question is on spatial development planning and how that is integrated into wider land use, but, linking that to your earlier comments, you said right at the beginning of the evidence session that you have a developed regional system with three regional tiers, three regions. I am interested in how that links to national and whether the strategy is set at national level and then picked up and targeted on a regional basis, and how that then works at local level.

I am aware that in Ireland in the past you have had lots of sporadic housing development, and the small farm system that you refer to has survived because very often they have sold off a little piece of land for a house somewhere, or for a family member. Is that now threatened by the policies that you are developing?

Are you seeing the development of solar farms, and is that embraced in the planning system? We are seeing good agricultural lands here being peppered with solar panels, and I wondered whether that is also a feature. Sorry, that is quite a long-winded question.

Professor Mark Scott: I will start with solar farms. Yes, we have started to see many more planning applications for solar farms in recent years. Interestingly, farmers seem more comfortable with solar farms on their land than with wind turbines. Sheep and cattle in particular like to walk among the solar farms and take shelter underneath some of the installations, although it does give a very sterile appearance to the landscape.

We have not done much research on public perceptions of solar farms, and solar farms in a rural landscape context in Ireland, so that is certainly an emerging issue. The technology is there, and certainly lots of companies are really pushing that agenda. We have not had the same ferocity of debate on wind turbines as maybe has happened in England, but the more we have of them, the more conflict there is with the public at a very local level.

In terms of rural settlements and the sporadic development of what we call one-off housing in Ireland, about 70% of the rural population live in houses in the open countryside, so we generally do not have a strong village-based rural settlement system. It tends to be this very dispersed rural community.

The new planning system and role of the Office of the Planning Regulator is probably challenging that approach, because the regulator ensures

compliance between different levels. It is really scrutinising local authority planning activity around rural housing and trying to direct more of that housing to villages and rural towns. Local politicians have reacted quite strongly against that, but so far we have seen a probably small but significant shift towards more development in more compact settlements in towns and villages.

The other big issue is land vacancy in rural towns and villages. One of the big issues is land taxation. We zone land for housing that never gets acted upon and people just sit on the land. Looking at some tax reform there, or tax penalties for not using zoned land in towns, villages and cities, is becoming an ongoing debate. Our new housing for all strategy is really starting to look at different tax incentives relating to vacancy or looking to disincentivise vacancy in towns.

Lord Curry of Kirkharle: That is really helpful. Could I just explore the structure between national, regional and local? You said that one of the lessons you had learned from the first national planning framework was that, without enforcement, it does not work. How does enforcement work through that regional and local structure?

Professor Mark Scott: With our first national spatial strategy, the legislation said that local authorities must have regard to the national spatial strategy in developing housing targets and zoning. This went to court and the judge ruled that "have regard" means "be aware of" as opposed to "comply with". This has been significantly tightened up in recent legislative change, and this new institution of the Office of the Planning Regulator reviews each development plan and ensures that it complies with the regional and national level. If it does not, it gets told to revise its development plan. That was a new institution that has been brought in to do this.

Also, there have been much more consistent approaches in the preparation of development plans at a local authority level. The core strategy must be evidence-based, particularly around housing. With the housing bust and the collapse of the housing market after the financial crisis, we found that we were building houses in the wrong place, and it was very speculative and driven by developers.

We have zoned enough land for double our population, but we were perhaps not delivering it very effectively. Land zoning must now be evidence-based, related to demographic need and projections and so on. The legislation has shifted, but also a new institution has been brought in to regulate and ensure compliance.

Q250 **Baroness Redfern:** How does Ireland collate and utilise data in support of developing and implementing land use policies and frameworks? Could you give us some examples of good practice that England might learn from?

Professor Mark Scott: We are very good at collecting environmental data now. We have an independent Environmental Protection Agency, which produces a state-of-the-environment report every two years, and

this is probably the best source of information in relation to habitat loss, water quality and greenhouse gas emissions.

The Central Statistics Office, which produces the census, is also involved in natural capital accounting, which complies with international and European regulations in relation to collecting a whole range of environmental data. This is all publicly available and very transparent. That tends to lack granular detail, so there are some interesting experiments at the moment on natural capital accounting at a regional and local scale. That work is being funded by the Environmental Protection Agency and attempts to collect environmental data in a much more interactive way with the local community and farmers' groups.

Over the last decade, our general spatial data infrastructure has improved significantly. Again, all these mapping tools are widely available to the public in relation to flooding data and heritage. You can search every planning application and so on. Those will become much more transparent and user-friendly, and used by policymakers and practitioners as well as the public.

Climate change data is collated into one web portal, climateireland.ie. Again, it is aimed more at non-scientists. It is produced by environmental scientists, academics and the Environmental Protection Agency, but it is aimed at the public or people like planners who may not be scientists but need to use that data. Again, it is quite good at a national scale, but it lacks granular detail in relation to making climate action decisions maybe at an urban scale or in an urban/rural region. We see that at the moment with things like the heat stress that we are all experiencing. There is not particularly good knowledge around that fine grain.

For land use cover, we tend to rely on CORINE dataset from Europe, which is fine. It allows a charting of land use change from 2000 onwards, but, again, it really lacks the granular details sufficient for making decisions. That is currently emerging from the land use review in Ireland, in that we could probably do with much more effort in mapping land use change at a level appropriate to Ireland and to decision-making.

Land ownership is not particularly well mapped. Certainly, we looked at that as part of the review for land use, and it was one of those things that we started and wished we never had with that process. It was slightly opaque, but work is progressing, and much more work on state-owned land is progressing at pace as well.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the things that we are missing is looking at the audit of different sector commitments to how land is used across the board and bringing that together to see if it adds up into a coherent message. That is ongoing work at the moment.

Baroness Redfern: You mentioned housing, where you have a lot of land zoned for housing, which can hold your decision-making process back, and you are looking at probably taxing land that is held for a long time. I wonder if you could just tell me a bit about that.

Professor Mark Scott: I would say that there are issues of housing supply that are not caused by land not being zoned for housing. There is plentiful land zoned for housing. Developers would argue that the planning system is a barrier to housing delivery, but it is often developers that are sitting on zoned land and not acting on it but essentially speculating on land prices increasing.

One thing that is proposed at the moment is that, if land is zoned for housing and is not acted upon within a certain time, there will be a taxation penalty on that land to try to get land delivered into the housing system. In a rural context, that can be slightly different. You get small villages and rural towns where land is owned by maybe a couple of families who just are not interested in change. You get these strange things where there is a field quite close to the middle of the village that probably should be housing but is not.

There is much more willingness to use compulsory purchase orders than there has been in the past, so compulsory purchase orders, land taxation and taxation of land around vacancy are all tools that are being looked at for that process. Also, a new fund was just announced last week to provide financial incentives to reuse vacant properties in towns.

Baroness Redfern: Is there an increase in compulsory purchase? Are you seeing that happen?

Professor Mark Scott: A sea change in attitude is required. I do not know whether it is changing on the ground as yet, but certainly in policy there is encouragement through the new housing strategy to explore this.

Q251 **The Earl of Leicester:** Professor Scott, how does Ireland ensure that practitioners involved in land use—in other words, those on the ground—are engaged in, informed about and able to influence land use policies? They are, effectively, those who are affected most.

Professor Mark Scott: That is a really interesting question and I really had to think about that. Ireland is a relatively small country, which gives the advantages of quite open policy communities and networks, so people engage fairly freely. There is good communication in policy silos, and there is a coalescence around different policy communities, but less so across different policy domains.

When we work with local authorities, we have been amazed that even when different sections in the local authority do not communicate particularly well together, especially on environmental and town planning issues, there have been interesting experiments, with some local authorities employing ecologists as part of a planning team to try to rethink how the environment is treated in the planning system. That has worked very well, but there are a lot of barriers to practitioners influencing policy. We have had more than a decade of austerity, which has really impacted on local government resourcing. That undermines the capacity to act at a local government level.

Also, we could do a desk-based audit of different land use policies and think, "That looks quite good". In practice, the political reality is that we

have, and maybe always have had, very poor development governance, so when there are planning decisions and we are trying to balance or reconcile climate goals with housing development, housing and the economy will always win out. There is that more political issue of trying to ensure that there is a good balance between different needs.

I certainly hope that the advantage of developing a holistic land use vision is to counter the view that land is simply an economic asset—something that you invest or speculate in—or that planners often see land as just land that is awaiting development. How can we consider different multifunctional benefits of sustainable land use management and try to capture those more effectively in policy? That requires quite a radical rethinking of how we value land and our systems for valuing land, moving it away from just its use value or market value to thinking about its value in terms of cultural, social or natural capital.

The Earl of Leicester: Does that include land value capture, or is that not on the agenda in Ireland?

Professor Mark Scott: Land value capture is very much on the agenda in Ireland at the moment, but it is working its way through thinking about it. The most recent critical government policy is the Housing for All strategy, which is looking at housing delivery, and that is proposing a system of land value capture. For really the first time in many years, that has been on the political agenda, but we do not have the details yet.

The Earl of Leicester: But, equally, you said earlier that there is a very strong sense of importance attached to individual property rights in Ireland.

Professor Mark Scott: Yes.

The Earl of Leicester: So there could be a battle royal there.

Professor Mark Scott: Possibly. The whole planning system was undermined by this cultural attachment to property rights, and how we balance individual property rights with the public interest. There is much more interest from wider society in capturing those public interests in debates more readily. There has been an informal system of developer contributions in place over the last decade or more, where developers are contributing community facilities or green space, for example. That practice is usually variable in and across local authorities, so a more transparent system of land value capture would be very welcome.

The Earl of Leicester: So you are saying that developer contributions in Ireland have come into play really only in the last decade.

Professor Mark Scott: It is probably a less established practice than in England, but with the housing boom this is a practice that was starting to be more established.

Q252 **The Chair:** You mentioned earlier that the EPA and the Central Statistics Office are collecting data on land use—how much land is being used for

food production and for forestry or whatever. Is there a body, either nationally or locally, that is using that information to nudge decision-making processes to more trees or more biodiversity? How is that information being used in a constructive way?

Professor Mark Scott: Where it is being used most at the moment is in relation to climate action policy. We know that we need to increase woodland cover. We have one of the lowest rates of woodland cover in Europe, at about 7%. That is certainly used by the forestry sector to try to lobby for change and for an increase in activity.

The Chair: What are they doing about, say, the woodland cover? What do they start doing? Do they increase the grants for woodland planting, or how do they change that?

Professor Mark Scott: One of the barriers to increasing forestry cover is often community opposition to forestry. We have a cultural opposition to forestry in some rural parts of Ireland. There has been huge investment over the last year in a new licensing process, with much more community engagement and community incentives. It is certainly being used in a proactive way there.

Some of the environmental data on farming has led to a lot of conflict about the debate and to a polarised debate about how farming fits in with wider climate goals. It can work in favour, but evidence creates a transparent debate and really helps to inform different actors.

The Chair: You mentioned that there was a greater interest now in biodiversity, and you touched on the fact that quite a few local councils are beginning to employ environmental officers. I just wonder how they would get more biodiversity in order to satisfy local demand. How does that work?

Professor Mark Scott: The capacity is low. Each local authority will generally have one officer who will cover biodiversity plus heritage, so it is a very low starting point for trying to increase this. However, I have worked with many of these biodiversity officers and they are very committed. They try to integrate themselves with planning teams to try to incorporate nature and biodiversity gain into development plans or proposals.

There is a lot of really interesting grass-roots work, so a lot of community groups are taking a lead with this in biodiversity projects at a very local level. One of the most popular community schemes in Ireland is a best-kept village type of activity. Biodiversity is now a key criteria in this, so you get a lot of communities competing with each other to include new walking trails and biodiversity projects. Encouraging grass-roots community groups is quite a fertile ground for Ireland, because we have a very dense network of community and residents' groups across the country, so encouraging or facilitating that would be really interesting.

Q253 **Baroness Young of Old Scone:** When I was reading the background information that we got for today's session, I stopped with a start when

the description came up of the cross-departmental, Cabinet-level committee at national level, made up of 15 Ministers co-chairing, which struck me as a recipe for something—I am not sure. Does that integrative mechanism work at national level, having all the departments that have policy interests in land brought together? Do they knock the issues out and get some clarity of the way forward?

Professor Mark Scott: I am not sure how that Cabinet-level committee works in practice. However, we have certainly seen with our most recent national planning framework a greater buy-in from different government departments. Our first national spatial strategy was published. About two weeks later, we had several government departments go off and do their own thing completely, very much against the policy grain of the national planning framework.

It is aligned with the national development plan, which is often distributed by different government departments, so there is much more alignment with the various goals. The department for rural community and development, heritage or whatever are all working from the national development plan, which is aligned with the national planning framework, so that investment-led approach or ensuring that funding streams align with the national planning framework that is then delegated to different government departments really helps in that regard. If it was not for the funding alignment, I do not think it would work as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor Scott. It has been very kind of you to come and talk to us today, and a good session. Thank you very much indeed.