

City-Region Land Systems

A New Framework for Regional Prosperity and Resilience

Thursday 7th – Friday 8th May 2026

**A St George's House Consultation
Summary**



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Executive Summary

Cities depend on land.

Food, water, housing, energy, infrastructure, recreation and environmental resilience all depend on landscapes and resources that cross the urban-rural boundary. Yet the systems through which these essential functions are governed, financed and managed remain fragmented; divided between sectors, institutions and administrative geographies that rarely reflect how places actually function.

This Consultation explored whether a new organising principle is emerging: the **City-Region Land System**. At its simplest, this is the proposition that cities and their surrounding rural and peri-urban landscapes should be understood and managed as interconnected systems, capable of delivering both economic prosperity and long-term resilience.

The discussion revealed growing interest in city-regions as a practical scale for coordinating food systems, water resources, housing, health, nature recovery and economic development. Rather than creating new layers of bureaucracy, the opportunity lies in better aligning the institutions, markets and civic relationships that already shape these outcomes.

Three conclusions stood out.

- 1. Resilience is becoming an economic imperative.** Climate impacts, water stress, food-system fragility, demographic change and geopolitical uncertainty increasingly affect prosperity, investment and public wellbeing. The capacity of places to absorb and adapt to these pressures may become as important as their ability to generate growth.
- 2. Many of the building blocks already exist.** Emerging examples in places such as Sheffield and The Marches demonstrate how regions can begin to reconnect economic development, land stewardship and community wellbeing through new forms of collaboration and investment.
- 3. Success will depend as much on culture and civic identity as on policy or finance.** One of the most compelling visions presented during the Consultation was not solely of technical integration, but of renewed relationships between people, places and the landscapes that sustain them.

The Consultation did not advocate a single institutional model. However, it identified a significant opportunity to develop regional collaboration mechanisms capable of aligning public policy, commercial investment and civic action around a shared set of priorities. If successful, such approaches could strengthen resilience, unlock investment, support healthier communities and create a more intentional relationship between regional prosperity and the land systems on which it ultimately depends.



1. Why Now?

The Consultation began with a simple observation: many of society's most pressing challenges are ultimately land-use challenges.

Food security, water management, housing delivery, public health, nature recovery, climate adaptation, economic development and infrastructure planning all depend upon the way land is managed. Yet responsibility for these outcomes is dispersed across multiple institutions, sectors and administrative boundaries.

At the same time, new opportunities are emerging. The growth of mayoral combined authorities, increasing recognition of the value of natural capital, growing concern over resilience and security, and the search for more place-based approaches to economic development all create favourable conditions for new forms of regional collaboration. The question is no longer whether cities and landscapes are interconnected. The question is how those relationships can be organised more intentionally.

2. The City and its Hinterland

One of the most powerful reference points for the discussion came from Carolyn Steel's reflection on Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fourteenth-century *Allegory of Good Government*.



Ambrogio Lorenzetti – *Allegory of the Effects of Good Government*, Siena | 1338

The fresco depicts a city not as a self-contained entity but as part of a wider landscape of farms, markets, roads, trade routes and settlements. Food, animals, goods and people move continuously through the city walls. Prosperity emerges not from the city alone, but from the health of the relationships between city and countryside.

This historical depiction of Siena provided a powerful lens through which to view contemporary challenges.

Modern cities remain utterly dependent on the landscapes around them. They rely on surrounding land for food production, water supply, flood management, energy generation, recreation, biodiversity and, increasingly, climate resilience. Yet these relationships are often hidden from view, managed through fragmented systems that fail to recognise their interdependence.

The Consultation repeatedly returned to the idea that cities and their hinterlands should be understood as a single functional system rather than separate domains of urban and rural policy.



Food proved an especially useful way of understanding this challenge. Food is not merely an agricultural output; it sits at the intersection of health, culture, commerce, identity, logistics, land management and public life. As several contributors observed, discussions about food quickly become discussions about the kind of society we want to create.

3. Towards a New Regional Operating System

The concept of a City-Region Land System is not primarily about geography. It is about coordination.

Across a wide range of sectors, the same pattern emerged. Housing is planned separately from food systems. Water management is often disconnected from economic development. Health policy rarely engages directly with land management. Environmental initiatives struggle to connect with investment strategies. Valuable local innovation frequently remains isolated and difficult to replicate.

The result is a landscape of disconnected interventions rather than integrated systems. The Consultation explored whether city-regions could provide a practical scale at which these relationships might be brought together. Mayoral Combined Authorities were seen as particularly promising because they possess growing strategic responsibilities, democratic legitimacy and convening power. They are large enough to operate at meaningful scale, yet close enough to place to understand local assets, identities and priorities.

Rather than creating additional layers of governance, the ambition would be to align existing institutions around a shared set of outcomes and a shared understanding of place.

Several contributors described this as creating a vehicle capable of "catching the ball"—a mechanism able to coordinate activity, attract investment, connect stakeholders and maintain momentum over time.

4. Learning from Place

The discussion was grounded in practical examples.

Sheffield illustrated the opportunities emerging around combined authorities and regional leadership. The efforts of businesses and institutions within the city-region to connect economic development, water catchment systems, environmental stewardship and community wellbeing demonstrated how a broader conception of prosperity might begin to influence decision-making, patterns of commercial activity, and investment.

The Marches offered a complementary perspective. Unlike a conventional city-region, the area is characterised by a network of market towns, rural communities and productive landscapes spanning multiple administrative boundaries. Yet many of the same coordination challenges arise: how to connect economic activity, land management, infrastructure, natural resources and community wellbeing across a functional geography that is not well reflected in existing governance arrangements.



Taken together, these examples highlighted a central proposition of the Consultation: the material, economic and civic landscapes through which people live their lives rarely correspond neatly to administrative boundaries.

This suggests that the challenge is not to identify a single "correct" geography. Rather, it is to develop governance, investment and collaboration mechanisms capable of working at the scale of the systems that matter—whether those systems are organised around a major city, a cluster of towns, a catchment, a landscape or a regional economy. Combined Authorities may represent the most significant near-term opportunity for putting these ideas into practice, but the underlying principle has wider application.

5. What Should We Be Measuring?

A recurring theme was the need to broaden the way regional success is understood.

Economic growth remains essential. However, growth alone does not adequately describe the health or resilience of a place.

The Consultation therefore explored a wider set of regional "vital signs", including:

- Food and nutritional security
- Water resilience
- Housing and shelter
- Health and wellbeing
- Nature and environmental quality
- Livelihoods and employment
- Culture, identity and belonging
- Resilience and preparedness

The purpose of these measures is not to replace economic indicators but to complement and underpin them, creating a more complete and reliable picture of regional prosperity.

Particular attention was given to culture and identity. While sometimes absent from discussions of land use and economic development, these factors were recognised as essential foundations of civic legitimacy, community participation and long-term stewardship.

The question repeatedly returned to what people actually value in a good life, and how regional systems can support those outcomes.

6. Commerce, Investment and Delivery

If the concept is to move beyond theory, new delivery mechanisms will be required.

Many contributors expressed frustration with the prevalence of short-term pilot projects and fragmented funding streams. While innovation remains important, there was widespread recognition that long-term change requires durable institutions, reliable revenue streams and investable propositions.



Discussion focused on opportunities to:

- Align public and private funding and transactions around shared regional outcomes.
- Create stronger incentives for water security, flood resilience and ecosystem recovery.
- Use public procurement more strategically.
- Develop models capable of translating public value into investable opportunities.
- Reduce fragmentation by pooling resources and coordinating delivery.

The emphasis was not simply on attracting capital, but on creating the conditions in which commercial activity, across an evolving land economy, can support multiple regional objectives simultaneously.

A recurring theme was that resilience should be understood not as a cost, but as a productive economic asset.

7. The Importance of Story

Perhaps the strongest consensus of the Consultation concerned language.

There was broad agreement that discussions framed solely around sustainability, natural capital or environmental policy are unlikely to generate sufficient public or political support. The opportunity is to connect these ideas to issues that people experience directly: jobs, housing, food affordability, water security, health, economic opportunity and pride in place.

In this sense, storytelling is not a communications exercise added at the end of a project. It is a core part of building the coalition required to deliver change. The challenge is to develop a shared narrative capable of resonating with policymakers, investors, businesses, communities and civic leaders alike.

8. Opportunities for Impact

The Consultation identified seven opportunities for future development:

1. Develop practical city-region demonstration projects

Real-world examples will be essential to testing, refining and demonstrating the concept.

2. Unlock new commercial models

Further work is needed to develop regional commercial mechanisms capable of rewarding resilience, environmental stewardship and long-term public value.

3. Establish regional frameworks based on shared outcomes

A broader set of regional vital signs could help align decision-making across sectors and institutions.



4. Create space for regional planning and regulatory innovation

Regional 'regulatory sandboxes' were posited as means to unpick planning and (in particular) water regulation blockers to commercial and civic initiatives. This was as much about interpretation as rewriting the rules.

5. Support combined authorities as convening institutions

Combined authorities provide one of the most promising platforms for leading the integration of economic, environmental and social priorities at regional scale.

6. Strengthen knowledge exchange

Many innovative initiatives already exist. Greater impact may come from connecting and learning from these efforts rather than creating new standalone structures.

7. Build a compelling public narrative

The development of a clear, practical and politically resonant story will be critical to wider adoption.

Conclusion

The Consultation did not produce a blueprint, nor was that its intention.

What emerged instead was a growing sense that the relationship between cities, landscapes and prosperity needs to be reconsidered. The systems that provide food, water, housing, health, livelihoods and resilience are deeply interconnected, yet the institutions through which they are managed remain fragmented.

City-Region Land Systems offer one possible response.

Not a new bureaucracy, but a new way of seeing: one that recognises that economic prosperity, environmental resilience and civic wellbeing are ultimately products of the same place-based system.

The opportunity now is to translate that insight into practical mechanisms capable of shaping investment, policy and action. If successful, City-Region Land Systems could become an important organising framework for the next generation of regional development and stewardship.



Participants

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