

Food & Farming

National Food Strategy delayed amid farmer protests

The government reportedly shelved its National Food Strategy launch due to fears the recent farming protests would overshadow the proposals. The strategy is expected to revive measures suggested in Henry Dimbleby's 2021 National Food Strategy. Sources have said the plans could still be unveiled before Christmas, depending on how long the protests continue.

Ag-tech strategy needed

Without sustainable agricultural innovation, such as the use of artificial intelligence, the world faces persistent food insecurity and degraded resources. That is the conclusion of new research from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). It says innovations in the agrifood system have been identified as a major economic opportunity for high-income countries. However, finance for agri-food system climate mitigation is lacking, and without public investment, some technologies may not be affordable in lower-income countries.

At the same time, Agri-TechE has called for the publication of a refreshed government agri-tech strategy. The last strategy was set in 2013. The organisation's 'Back to the Future' report saw responses from over 70 contributors who identified challenges, including a changed investment landscape, difficulties in scaling, a lack of secure revenue streams and regulators failing to keep pace with innovation. The report also identifies a wealth of new technologies, from artificial intelligence to sensors and genetic tools.

Policy

Most rural capital grant schemes closed

Defra has confirmed 76 rural capital grants will be temporarily closed to new applications, effective immediately, citing unsustainable spending levels. Just five types of capital grants remain open: woodland health grants, capital grant plans and management plans (to help support the development of new Countryside Stewardship higher tier agreements), protection and infrastructure grants, and higher-tier capital grants. This announcement followed the Central Association for Agricultural Valuers, saying members had been experiencing "significant delays" with applications and offers following the budget. Applicants will be contacted in early 2025 with further information on the future of their application. Applications to any of the grants that remain open will be processed and offered as usual.

Speaking in the House of Lords following the announcement, Defra Secretary Steve Reed said he was "disappointed" the department had to resort to pausing capital grants but overspending on parts of the Defra budget was simply not an option as it would damage other budget areas and cause potential cuts. Defra has also said it will simplify and rationalise grant funding.

Roadmaps and frameworks: announcements galore from Defra

The 2024 CLA conference saw the announcement of the "25-Year Farming Roadmap". It will aim to facilitate a transition toward an environmentally sustainable farming model that remains financially viable for those in the agricultural sector. In an address to the House of Lords' Environment and Climate Change Committee shortly after the announcement, Defra Secretary Steve Reed emphasised the importance of allowing farmers to take the lead in shaping the future of their industry. He remarked, "I don't think it's appropriate for Defra or any government department to dictate how farming should transition. The experts are the farmers, and I am very keen on establishing a farmer-led model for this transition". A consultation will launch soon, inviting members of the agricultural sector to express their views and provide input on what they will need to adapt and transition to new farming models.

A consultation on the Land Use Framework will now be published early in 2025; it was expected last month. The Corry review of Defra's regulators will be published in the spring, and the rapid review of the environmental improvement plan (which was due to be published at the end of 2024) will also be released in the spring.

Wales: outline for the Sustainable Farming Scheme released

Informed by the findings of the “keeping farmers farming” consultation earlier in the year, the Welsh government has published the proposed outline for the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS). Following feedback from the industry, several key changes have been made which include:

- Removing the requirement for a holding to have 10% tree cover
- Merging the three animal health, welfare and biosecurity actions to focus on improved animal health and welfare outcomes
- Allowing Sites of Special Scientific Interest to be eligible for universal payments
- Allowing common land with grazing rights to be eligible for universal payments
- Reducing the overall number of Universal Actions from 17 to 12.

These changes reflect how the Welsh government has considered farmers' perspectives following protests against the scheme earlier in the year. The requirement to achieve tree cover on 10% of a holding's land, which is physically and legally suitable for planting, was particularly controversial, so farmers will welcome the concession. The SFS remains a work in progress, and its budget and payment rates are unknown; more details are expected to be announced next summer.

Environment & Natural Capital

Government lays out “principles” for carbon and nature markets

The UK government has introduced a set of principles to ensure the integrity of voluntary carbon and nature markets, aiming to create credits that effectively achieve intended environmental outcomes. The six principles are as follows:

1. Utilise credits alongside ambitious actions within value chains
2. Use high-integrity credits
3. Measure and disclose the planned use of credits as part of sustainability reporting
4. Plan for the future
5. Make accurate green claims using appropriate terminology
6. Collaborate with others to support the growth of high-integrity markets.

These principles are designed to promote best practices, inspire environmental integrity, enable effective monitoring and reporting, and ensure coherence across voluntary carbon and nature markets. Currently, these principles are voluntary and will be further discussed in a consultation planned for 2025.

Scotland: Biodiversity strategy published

A biodiversity plan for Scotland has been published, outlining more than 100 actions to achieve “restored and regenerated” biodiversity in Scotland by 2045. The government strategy follows six objectives, with the overarching goal of halting biodiversity loss and being nature-positive by 2030. The objectives are:

- Accelerate restoration and regeneration
- Protect nature on land and at sea, across and beyond protected areas
- Embed nature-positive farming, fishing and forestry
- Protect and support the recovery of vulnerable and important species and habitats
- Invest in nature
- Take action on the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss.

Key actions from the [strategy](#) include developing a biodiversity metric for Scotland, which we know from the findings of a recent consultation will be informed by England's biodiversity metric.

English National Parks facing 12% budget cut

England's 10 National Parks are facing a 12% real-terms budget cut, which park leaders warn will lead to redundancies and the closure of visitor facilities. The Autumn Budget confirmed that emergency payments provided to National Parks in the past two years would not be continued, resulting in a 12% real-terms cut. In common with most of the economy, the increase in employer's national insurance contributions will also impact the parks, costing them an additional £1.3 million per year. Since 2010, National Park budgets have been cut by approximately 40%. A Defra spokesperson confirmed that National Park funding will change from 2025 but said the government would invest £400 million in protecting and restoring nature – including in National Parks.

Tree Planting Taskforce launched

A new Tree Planting Taskforce will oversee the planting of trees across the UK. Chaired by the forestry ministers from the four nations, the taskforce also brings together representatives from arms-length bodies and delivery partners across the UK. Its first meeting focused on how to drive forward the UK's tree planting to meet our collective net zero targets. The UK has less tree cover than almost anywhere in Europe, but a target was set in the Environment Act to achieve 16.5% tree cover by 2050. The Autumn Budget committed up to £400 million in England across the next two years for tree planting and peatland restoration.

Property & Development

Heat pump planning conditions eased

Starting next year, it will be possible to install heat pumps within one metre of a neighbouring property in England. A previous rule said heat pumps must be installed at least a metre away from a neighbour's property to avoid noise complaints. Ed Miliband will scrap that rule next year because quieter models have since entered the market. Mr Miliband also cut the potential fines faced by boiler manufacturers to £500. Under the previous government's plans, boiler makers could be fined £5,000 for each missed heat pump sale as part of the Clean Heat Market Mechanism. To avoid the fines, 6% of boiler manufacturer's sales must be heat pumps from April 2025 to April 2026. That percentage will increase each year.

In related news, Ed Miliband confirmed in a letter to Propertymark that while landlords must meet EPC C by 2030, financial support will be limited. Only certain local authorities will be eligible, and it is likely a tenant must live in the property and receive a means-tested benefit or have a household gross annual income of less than £36,000. If that criteria is met, they could receive full funding for the first property capped at £15,000. The landlord would have to contribute 50% of the funding for additional properties. Landlords or their agents would also be expected to sign a declaration saying they will not increase the rent due to the funding.

More rights for leaseholders

The government is planning further leasehold reforms in England and Wales. The last government enacted the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 (LFRA 2024) before its dissolution. Only a select number of the Law Commission's recommendations were taken forward, specifically around enfranchisement and the right to manage. The current government believes the Act does not go far enough and intends to undertake consultations and implement changes on:

- Service charge disputes
- Valuation rates used to calculate enfranchisement premiums
- Greater protections for those who pay estate management charges

Using the LFRA 2024 in January, the government intends to remove the requirement for leaseholders to wait two years after purchasing their property before exercising rights to buy their freehold or extend their lease. By the spring, it intends to give leaseholders in mixed-use buildings improved rights to take over management from their freeholders, meaning no more requirement to pay their freeholder's costs. A new Draft Leasehold and Commonhold Reform Bill is expected in late 2025, focusing on commonhold reform.

Business & Economy

Review of security of tenure for business occupation

The Law Commission has launched a consultation to review the 70-year-old Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, specifically focusing on Part II of the Act, which addresses the security of tenure for business occupation. Under the current rules, the Act automatically grants business tenants the "right to renew" their tenancy. However, this right can be waived through a process known as "contracting out", which must be completed before the lease is signed, either by the landlord serving a warning notice within a prescribed timeline or via a statutory declaration. Contracting out is frequently practised and is beneficial to many landlords, as it can provide certainty that they can regain possession of a property once the lease expires without needing grounds for possession. It is commonly seen that landlords will only let properties on a contracted-out lease, giving the tenant no option of security of tenure.

The Law Commission is seeking views on updating the legal framework surrounding the Act, given so many tenancies are currently contracted out of it. The goal is to modernise the legislation, so it is used as the norm rather than the norm being to contract out of it. The Law Commission has proposed three alternative approaches:

1. Mandatory security of tenure
2. Abolition of security of tenure
3. A "contracting-in model," which is essentially a mirror of the existing contracting-out regime.

The importance of the Act is to provide long-term security for business occupation. The scales of fairness would be tipped either by making security of tenure mandatory or by abolishing it. So, the consultation, which lasts until 19 February 2025, should seek to achieve a balance for both parties on an informed basis. Respondents are invited to share their opinions on the proposed alternative models during this time.

Other Rural News

And finally...

Duct-taped banana hits headlines (again)

A banana duct-taped to a wall has fetched \$6.2 million (£4.9 million) at an auction in Sotheby's, New York. This was four times higher than its pre-sale estimate. It is also many, many times higher than the \$0.35 paid earlier in the day for the banana itself. The buyer, Chinese cryptocurrency entrepreneur Justin Sun, said, "I will personally eat the banana as part of this unique artistic experience". He has since fulfilled his promise, but it is not the first time this piece of artwork, entitled "Comedian", has been eaten. In 2023, a South Korean art student made the same move when the installation was displayed at Seoul's Leeum Museum of Art. Four years earlier, a performance artist pulled the banana from the wall after the artwork had sold for \$120,000 in Miami. In both instances, the artwork was swiftly restored with new bananas.

If you have queries about any of the articles, please contact us.

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