INSIGHT AND ANALYSIS ON RURAL NEWS

Landscope

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Rural – UK – 8 July 2026

Food & Farming

Farming Roadmap is launched

Defra's Farming Roadmap 2050 has been published alongside the Government's response to the Farming Profitability. It sets a 25-year course built around four outcomes: profitable, productive, sustainable, and resilient. Much is already familiar. The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) reopened in June for small farms and those without an existing agreement. It will extend to all farms in September, with Capital Grants following in July. Environmental Land Management (ELM) funding rises to £2 billion a year by 2029, with greater scheme stability promised from 2027 and spatial targeting of selected SFI and Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT) actions.

The more significant shift sits beyond 2030, where Defra has indicated that some practices currently paid for through SFI and grants will move into regulation once established, with ELM narrowing its focus to support public goods that the market will not fund. Sitting behind this is a Law Commission review of environmental regulation, a doubling of the Environment Agency's inspection capacity by 2029, and tighter water and air quality standards. For land managers, the commercial question is which current SFI actions become tomorrow's compliance baseline, and how quickly private markets, supply chains and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) step in to fill the gap.

Welsh farms to access loan scheme for sustainability push

Welsh farming businesses will gain access to low-interest finance under a new £5 million pilot scheme launched on 1 July 2026. The Sustainable Agriculture Loan Scheme will offer loans from £25,000 to £1 million at a fixed rate of 3%, with repayment terms of up to 15 years and an initial repayment holiday. Delivered by the Development Bank of Wales, the scheme is designed to support investment in energy efficiency, renewable energy, waste management, infrastructure and new equipment. It aims to help farm businesses manage rising costs while improving productivity and long-term resilience.

Eligible applicants must undertake agricultural or related activities in Wales, farm at least three hectares of land, or demonstrate more than 550 annual labour hours. Seasonal repayment options are also being explored to reflect farm cash flow. The one-year pilot will assess demand while supporting wider ambitions for sustainable land management, decarbonisation, and the strengthening of rural economies.

UK to ban deforestation-linked ingredients

The UK Government is set to introduce mandatory due diligence rules requiring businesses to eliminate links to illegal deforestation from key supply chains. Everyday items containing palm oil, soy, cocoa and rubber will be subject to stricter scrutiny. The move responds to mounting concern over the UK's global environmental footprint, with domestic consumption linked to an estimated 29,000 hectares of deforestation annually. The Government plans to use powers in the Environment Act to strengthen existing UK Timber Regulations to ensure everyday products sold in the UK do not contribute to illegal deforestation around the world. Retailers have broadly welcomed the shift from voluntary to statutory measures, insisting consistent regulation is essential to drive meaningful change.

Initially, the framework will target illegal land clearance, though ministers are aiming for a longer-term transition to a blanket "deforestation-free" standard. The hope is to align with the EU's equivalent regime to minimise trade friction, particularly for Northern Ireland. Further consultation on implementation across Great Britain is expected later this year.

This shift could create opportunities for UK agriculture. Higher compliance costs for imports may push businesses towards simpler, more transparent supply chains, benefiting home-grown plant proteins and oils. This is relevant to livestock feed, currently dominated by imported soy, which carries deforestation risks, creating some scope for UK legumes and rapeseed meal. Likewise, domestic oilseed production could attract renewed interest.

Public sector catering to maximise use of local produce

In Scotland, the Public Sector Food Procurement Taskforce has been created to help schools, hospitals and government bodies source more Scottish produce by tackling procurement barriers. The taskforce will identify and address current obstacles to boost the use of locally produced food. The first taskforce meeting, due to take place later this summer, will see collaboration between producers, processors and procurement specialists. The initiative aims to support rural communities, boosting farmers and crofters, whilst reducing food miles and increasing access to fresh, nutritious food.

Pig sector survey launched to assess supply chain pressures
The Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator (ASCA) has launched a new survey to assess conditions across the UK pig sector. Open to producers, processors and others in the supply chain, it aims to capture experiences amid ongoing pressures such as volatile prices, rising input costs and wider uncertainty. The survey will also gauge awareness of the Fair Dealing Obligations (Pigs) Regulations 2025, which were designed to improve transparency and confidence in contractual relationships. Finally, it will explore the understanding of ASCA's role. Findings will help inform future guidance and policy discussions with Defra. The survey takes around 10 minutes to complete and closes on 27 July 2026.

Agri-food attachés unlock £80m export boost for UK sector
Britain's network of agri-food attachés has secured £80 million in new export opportunities in 2026 by removing barriers in key global markets. Progress includes exports of genetic material to the US, cheese to Brazil and trout to China, alongside gains for poultry in the UAE, processed animal protein in Indonesia and seafood in Kuwait.

So far, 20 trade barriers have been resolved this year, including a simplified Chinese registration process expected to save businesses £50 million annually. The attachés also engaged directly with UK producers during a national industry week, helping firms explore opportunities linked to new trade deals and improved EU relations.

Policy

Defra widens access to SFI and Higher Tier
Two announcements have widened access to England's flagship agri-environment schemes. For Window 2 of SFI26, opening in September 2026, Defra will allow farmers with existing SFI23, Countryside Stewardship Mid Tier, Legacy CSHT and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements expiring by the end of February 2027 to apply early, with the new SFI26 agreement taking effect once the existing one expires. Allowing them to apply in advance will reduce the likelihood that they miss out on the current SFI26 budget. Defra confirmed on Friday, 3 July, that over 50% of the £60 million budget for SFI26 window 1 has already been allocated. Window 2 is likely to prove similarly popular.

Separately, Defra Secretary Emma Reynolds confirmed at Groundswell on 2 July that CSHT will move away from its invitation-only model. From later this summer, farmers and land managers will be able to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) for woodland, agroforestry and new single-focus agreements covering species-rich grassland and scheduled monument management. At least £50 million has been allocated for new CSHT agreements this year, with an initial 1,200 single-focus agreements available. Trials on common land, and higher payments for moorland and rough grazing actions are also planned. Further details on the EOI process and eligibility are expected from Defra in late summer. If you would like advice please contact our Food and Farming team.

Woodland creation progress
Forest Research's Provisional Woodland Statistics 2026 show that UK woodland creation fell to around 13,500 hectares in the year to March 2026, down from 15,700 hectares the previous year and less than half the UK-wide annual target of 30,000 hectares. Scotland drove the drop, planting 7,220 hectares, its lowest total since 2018, after inflationary pressures and cuts to Scottish Forestry's grant budget. England slipped slightly to 5,250 hectares (down from 5,770), but this was still its second-highest total in 20 years. Wales fell to 680 hectares and Northern Ireland to 330 hectares, with private planting accounting for 11,760 hectares of the UK total.

There is some good news. England's last two planting seasons combined nearly match four years of pre-2022 output, and the Nature for Climate Fund closed in March 2026 after delivering over 27,000 hectares since 2020; the Defra Trees Programme now succeeds it. However, the Environment Act's interim target requires a net increase of 43,000 hectares in canopy cover by 2030 from the 2022 baseline, and current UK-wide rates remain well short of what is needed to meet statutory net zero and biodiversity commitments. For land managers, the England Woodland Creation Offer and the Farming Roadmap's £1 billion tree planting commitment remain the key levers, but Scotland's experience shows how quickly grant volatility can stall momentum.

Woodland carbon sequestration
A world-first peer-reviewed study, led by Imperial College London and the Carbon Community charity and published in Communications Sustainability, has identified two low-cost interventions that materially increase carbon capture in young woodlands. Enhanced rock weathering, spreading crushed basalt on soil, increased above-ground carbon storage in native woodland plots by up to 27% after four years, while microbial enrichment (introducing beneficial soil microorganisms from established forests) boosted above-ground biomass in broadleaf plots by 13%, with the strongest effect in the first year after planting. The trial, run across 72 plots on 11.5 hectares of Welsh hillside at Glandwr Forest in Carmarthenshire, is the largest of its kind globally.

Environment & Natural Capital

Peatland funding
Defra has announced £47 million in new funding for England's peatlands, split across three schemes. The largest is the £36 million Lowland Peat Water Implementation Grant, delivered by the Environment Agency, funding water management infrastructure to raise and stabilise water tables on lowland peat soils. Individual grants range from £100,000 to £2 million, covering up to 100% of eligible costs, with applications open until 18 September 2026 and projects to be completed by March 2030. A second window is planned for summer 2028 for applicants still developing water management plans.

Alongside this, £10 million is available through the Paludiculture and Wetter Farming Fund (delivered by Natural England) to develop supply chains and machinery for wetland crops such as Typha, Phragmites and Sphagnum, and to test food production on higher water tables. A further £1.15 million Peatland Restoration Sector Capacity Grant, delivered directly by Defra, targets training, apprenticeships and equipment to grow the specialist workforce needed to scale restoration. With 80% of England's peatlands currently dry and degraded, releasing rather than storing carbon, the package is a meaningful step and ties in with the £85 million peatland commitment set out in the Farming Roadmap 2050. For land managers on lowland peat, the practical significance is the shift from restoration in principle to a funded approach that combines productive farming with wetter management. If you would like to discuss options for peatland please contact our Natural Capital team.

Biodiversity and the value of nature

Nature's relevance within the Treasury and the national security agenda is building. MPs are pressing the Government to release the full Nature Security Assessment on Global Ecosystems, after the redacted January 2026 version, obtained only through a Freedom of Information request, was reported to have stripped out warnings on mass migration and geopolitical instability. Peers have since pushed for the unabridged version in the Lords, arguing the findings are too material to national resilience planning to remain partially withheld. Meanwhile, a Treasury-commissioned follow-up to the 2021 Dasgupta Review is expected to recommend that the formal pricing of nature is built into economic decision-making, with clear implications for Green Book appraisal, cost-benefit analysis and public spending priorities across departments.

The launch of the UK's first Climate and Nature Security Taskforce sits neatly alongside this. Co-chaired by Climate Minister Katie White and Security Minister Dame Angela Eagle, it will identify gaps in national preparedness and recommend how the UK should respond to climate- and nature-related security risks, building on the 2025 National Security Strategy. Perhaps this growing focus area explains Dame Angela Eagle's move from Food Security Minister at Defra to Security Minister in the Home and Cabinet Offices. The relevance for land managers could be significant: if nature is priced into Treasury appraisal and treated as a security asset, the long-term policy and investment case for natural capital, private finance and ecosystem service markets strengthens considerably, reinforcing the direction of travel already set out in the Farming Roadmap 2050 and its shift towards blended public and private funding.

Consultation on non-domestic EPCs

The Government has published a long-awaited interim response to the 2019 and 2021 consultations on strengthening Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards in the non-domestic private rented sector in England and Wales. From 2031, all privately rented non-domestic buildings over 1,000 square metres will need to achieve an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of B, where it is cost-effective to do so. Buildings below 1,000 square metres will remain subject to the existing EPC E minimum, with no set deadline for further improvement. The previously proposed 2027 EPC C interim milestone has been dropped, and existing flexibility mechanisms, including the seven-year payback test and exemptions, will remain in place. The Government estimates the changes could cut tenant energy bills in larger buildings by up to £360 million a year by 2031, subject to secondary legislation.

The change provides breathing space for those rural landlords with smaller lets and traditional. Dropping the 2027 EPC C milestone removes a significant near-term compliance and capital-planning risk, although the underlying trajectory towards EPC B by 2031 remains unchanged. Landlords with refurbishment, reletting, or lease renewal cycles in the intervening period should factor the standard into their investment appraisal now, rather than treating 2031 as a distant deadline. For more information, see our briefing note.

Environmental funding for Wales

£10 million of investment into the Nature Networks Fund has been announced as part of the Minister for Rural Resilience and Sustainability's action on climate, nature and rural communities across Wales. The fund will support biodiversity restoration, job creation and stronger community engagement with the natural environment.

Alongside this, work is underway on a new Climate and Nature Plan that sets out actions to achieve net zero by 2040 and deliver significant nature recovery by 2050. The plan will embed environmental priorities across government, with measures including tree planting, peatland restoration, and improved coordination on flood resilience. Further proposals include a new rural proofing duty and a rural development strategy aimed at tackling poverty and creating economic opportunities. Efforts are also ongoing to secure a multi-annual budget for the Sustainable Farming Scheme to provide more certainty for farmers.

Government estate nature plan

Plans have been set out to use 577,000 hectares of government-owned land (around 4% of England) more strategically to support nature recovery and climate resilience. The new Government Estate Nature Plan shifts away from disjointed site-by-site initiatives towards a coordinated, whole estate approach, integrating environmental objectives with the delivery of public services. Priority actions include woodland creation, peatland restoration and improved management of natural assets to reduce risks from flooding, water shortages and wildfires. A series of pilot “lighthouse” projects across operational land, such as defence estates and transport corridors, will demonstrate how nature recovery can complement infrastructure and service delivery, guiding future expansions. The plan also applies the national Land Use Framework to government land for the first time and aims to set an example for other major landowners.

EA publishes first agriculture report

The Environment Agency has published its first annual Agriculture Report, which provides a national overview of environmental performance across England's farming sector, focusing on water quality, regulatory compliance and climate resilience. The report highlights signs of progress, with more than 19,000 farm inspections carried out since 2021 and almost 20,000 environmental improvement actions completed, demonstrating strong farmer engagement in protecting the environment. Compliance has improved with non-compliance rates falling from 52% to 43% over the five years.

However, agriculture remains a significant contributor to water pollution, accounting for around 40% of pollution nationally and remaining the largest source of nitrogen and phosphorus entering waterways. Serious pollution incidents have shown little overall reduction over the past five years, with slurry and silage management remaining major causes. The Environment Agency stresses that its approach is to support farmers through advice and guidance before taking enforcement action. Looking ahead, annual inspections are set to increase from 4,000 to 6,000 by 2029, alongside greater use of technologies such as drones, remote sensing and digital mapping to help target environmental risks and improve compliance.

Dartmoor ponies and stocking numbers

Semi-wild ponies roam freely across Dartmoor, and have done so for around 4,500 years. However, Natural England believes that Dartmoor is being overgrazed, contributing to ecological degradation and biodiversity decline. In an effort to combat this, it has been proposed that graziers reduce animal stocking densities, which includes ponies, across the land by an average of around 75% if they are to continue to qualify for ELM funding. This has sparked controversy, given that ponies cannot compete with the commercial income from cattle and sheep, meaning graziers may be forced to reduce the pony numbers to meet the thresholds to continue to qualify for ELM money.

This comes at a time of already declining numbers, with campaigners saying the Dartmoor hill ponies population has fallen from about 6,000 animals 25 years ago to fewer than 1,000 today. These ponies are viewed as a vital element of England's natural heritage needing to be protected, as are the livelihoods of all those who graze livestock on the moor. Natural England has responded to the backlash, confirming that claims of a cull of ponies on Dartmoor are categorically not true, emphasising they do not have the power to order a cull. It has confirmed that it actively encourages the continued presence of ponies as part of a balanced, well-managed landscape. Critics argue that creating conditions that make a cull or significant reduction in pony numbers inevitable is the same as giving the order.

Property & Development

Enhanced private rented sector enforcement powers

Councils in England gained new powers on 22 June 2026 to fine private landlords up to £7,000 for failing to address serious hazards in let properties, under the Renters' Rights Act. The fines cover 21 categories of serious hazard, with damp and mould, cold, fire risk, faulty electrics and structural defects leading the list, all of which are disproportionately common in older, traditionally built rural housing stock. The government estimates that around 10% of privately rented homes are likely to have one of these issues to the extent that it qualifies as "serious". The penalty sits alongside existing powers to force repairs, undertake emergency works and recover costs, and coincides with the first update to the Housing Health and Safety Rating System in 20 years, which recalibrates how hazards are assessed and is likely to bring more properties into scope.

Solid wall construction, limited ventilation, off-grid heating, and older electrical systems make cold- and damp-related hazards materially more likely in properties on farms and rural estates than in modern stock, and the £7,000 ceiling can be applied per property rather than per landlord. This lands at the same time as the continued push on domestic energy standards. Whilst enforcement will be uniform overnight, landlords should be reviewing condition surveys, ventilation and heating specifications now, because the cost of doing nothing has just risen sharply.

Sales packs for homebuyers

The government has published a phased roadmap to reform the homebuying process in England, with mandatory sales packs at the point of listing as the headline change. Sellers and agents will need to provide upfront information on property condition, leasehold costs and chain status, supported by digital property logbooks, earlier binding agreements, a new Code of Practice for agents, and proposals for mandatory agent qualifications. The government estimates the reforms will cut transaction times by around four weeks, save first-time buyers an average of £650, and reduce the one-in-three fall-through rate that currently costs sellers around £400 million a year. Legislation will follow later in the Parliament, with a code of practice and improved listing guidance expected this year and consultation on agent qualifications from 2027.

The obvious comparison is with Home Information Packs, introduced in 2007 and scrapped in 2010, with only the EPC element surviving. The current proposals differ meaningfully: they are tied to digitalisation and earlier legal commitment, and involve process reform rather than a standalone paper document, but the delivery risks are familiar - cost, adoption, and whether buyers genuinely rely on the information provided. The packs also overlap with the tightening obligations on agents to disclose material information under National Trading Standards guidance, and could effectively formalise what is already becoming expected practice.

Business & Economy

Commercial lease reform

The Law Commission has opened two linked consultations on the biggest overhaul of commercial leasehold law in a generation. At the heart of the review is the security of tenure regime under Part II of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, which gives business tenants an automatic right to renew unless the parties contract out. The consultation paper suggests that the regime is no longer fit for purpose: the contracting-out process is slow and expensive, short-term and pop-up tenants are unintentionally drawn in, and renewal disputes can lead to poor outcomes for both landlords and tenants. Alongside this, the tenant protections introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, including the statutory right of first refusal for flat owners, are being reviewed after decades of criticism that they block sensible transactions rather than support them. Both consultations close on 16 September 2026.

For rural estates, the reforms could affect many everyday activities. Farm shops, cafes, workshops, converted farm buildings, holiday let receptions, and rural high street units all fall within the 1954 Act. A simpler, faster regime would reduce professional fees, shorten transaction times and make short-term and pop-up lettings genuinely workable, but the balance struck between tenant security and landlord flexibility will decide who benefits most.

Other Rural News

And finally... The Major Oak has died

After more than a millennium in Sherwood Forest, the Major Oak has died. The site managers at the RSPB confirmed the loss after the tree, thought to be between 800 and 1,200 years old, with an 11-metre trunk and a 28-metre canopy, failed to come into leaf this spring. It is arguably Britain's most famous tree, linked to the legend of Robin Hood and the first ever entered on the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory. Its decline is the product of a slow squeeze rather than a single event: two centuries of visitor footfall compacting the sandy soil until water and oxygen could no longer reach the roots, a run of hot, dry summers culminating in the 40°C July 2022 heatwave, and a century of well-intentioned Victorian and Edwardian bracing that stopped it ageing naturally. The UK is home to more ancient oaks than the rest of Europe combined, with the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory having verified over 233,200 trees and an estimated 2 million ancient, veteran and notable trees still unrecorded across England alone. The Major Oak's death is a prompt to care for the ones still standing.

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