

Food & Farming

Pesticide emergency authorisation denied

The government has denied emergency authorisation for Cruiser SB in England for 2025. The neonicotinoid pesticide is used on sugar beet crops but is considered highly toxic to bees and other pollinators. The decision marks the first denial in five years, reflecting its commitment to protecting pollinators and finding sustainable alternatives.

The NFU has highlighted the severe impact of Virus Yellows disease on the British sugar beet industry. It emphasised the pesticide would only have been used if an independent forecast indicated high virus pressure. It calls for immediate support for its Virus Yellows Resilience Package to help farmers manage the disease through alternative methods.

Food and health report

The government has responded to the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee's report, "Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system". Key points include:

- A commitment to healthier diets: There is a need for a comprehensive food strategy to promote healthier diets and reduce obesity rates.
- Support for sustainable farming: Sustainable agricultural practices should be supported, and the environmental impact of food production should be reduced.
- A focus on inequalities: The response highlights the importance of tackling health inequalities, noting that obesity rates are higher in more deprived areas.
- Research and innovation: Investment in innovation should be prioritised, focusing on developing healthier food options and improving public health outcomes.
- Collaboration: The government plans to work closely with industry stakeholders, health professionals, and communities to implement the recommendations.

Scotland: New tenant farming commissioner

Robert Black has been confirmed as the new Scottish Tenant Farming Commissioner by the Scottish Land Commission. He succeeds Dr Bob McIntosh. Mr Black arrives with nearly 20 years of experience as a self-employed agricultural adviser and a background in rural science and agricultural business. The Scottish Land Commission also announced the appointment of Dr Lucy Beattie and Dr Calum MacLeod as Land Commissioners.

Policy

Consultation on land use in England

The government has launched a consultation on land use in England, inviting respondents to contribute to a "national conversation about land use". The consultation, which will inform the development of the Land Use Framework, actively encourages the involvement of farmers and landowners, saying they "know their land best, and it is right that they lead this transition with clarity about land use change so they can plan for their businesses".

The consultation lays out evidence that the government has collated regarding the extent of land use change needed in England to deliver a wide range of commitments: both national commitments, like a promise to deliver 1.5 million new homes, longstanding commitments under the Environment Act and Climate Change Act; and international commitments like the Paris Agreement on climate change. To meet all these goals, the government says 9% of agricultural land (equivalent to 1.9 million acres) may need to change use towards alternative management that will deliver environmental and climate benefits by 2050. Despite this, the consultation says the government is still committed to maintaining food production, and based on historical productivity data, the impact of land use changes on food production will be largely offset by increased agricultural productivity.

Also acknowledged in the consultation is the importance of spatial planning, which involves using the right land, for the right purpose, in the right place. It says “the opportunities to produce food, make space for nature, water, and emissions reduction, and deliver new infrastructure and housing, are different in every part of England” and that co-design and multifunctionality will be key for delivering land-use change that is fair to all.

The land use consultation will inform the development of several key policies and strategies, notably, a revised version of the environmental improvement plan, the new 25-year farming roadmap, a food strategy and various infrastructure strategies. The consultation runs until 25 April 2025, with accompanying workshops being held nationwide. The Land Use Framework is expected to be published in July. Please read our [latest blog](#) for more information.

Defra announces £2.65 billion flood defence investment

As part of its “Plan for Change”, the government has committed £2.65 billion towards UK flood defences over the next two years. It claims it inherited flood defences in “the poorest condition on record”, with 3,000 of 38,000 flood protection assets deemed “below required condition”. According to a press release, this was caused by damaging weather conditions and “years of underinvestment”. Funding will be prioritised to repair and maintain existing defences, benefiting approximately 14,500 properties. New flood defences will also be constructed, bringing the total number of properties expected to be protected by this initiative to 66,500.

Environment & Natural Capital

“Record” funding secured from the water sector for environmental outcomes

The Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP), which details over 20,000 actions that all water companies in England must complete by 2030, is set to receive £22.1 billion worth of investment from water companies following the latest price review. WINEP aims to improve water infrastructure and supply, habitats and biodiversity, and drinking water quality. Projects funded through the initiative will include chalk stream restoration and nitrate removal initiatives.

The Environment Agency, which oversees WINEP, said, “this unprecedented level of investment represents a vital step forward towards ensuring we have clean, safe, and abundant water now and for future generations. We will work closely with Defra, Ofwat, and other regulators to monitor water company progress and ensure they deliver what has been promised. If water companies fail to carry out their legal obligations to the environment, we will take action”.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies: preparation is underway

A Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRs) for the west of England was published in November last year, but now the government has said these will be rolled out across the country this year – creating 48 LNRs in total. It says now is the time for responsible authorities (county councils or combined authorities) to start “shaping their local strategies”. LNRs aim to deliver the best nature outcomes in the most suitable locations. They are designed collaboratively through a consultation process involving local farming groups to develop a nature strategy on a tailored, local scale.

The government has published a map of where the LNRs will be and who will lead them. It urges anyone interested to get involved with the proposal design. The map can be found [here](#).

Property & Development

Consultation on Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards

The government is consulting on changes to raise Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) for privately rented homes in England and Wales by 2030. It proposes to set higher MEES against new metrics planned to be introduced following reform in 2026. The proposals in this consultation are likely to require similar improvements as would be required to meet a C classification on current Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs). In addition to raising MEES standards, views are sought on the following proposals:

- Applying the higher standard to new tenancies from 2028 and all tenancies by 2030.
- Requiring investment up to a maximum of £15,000 per property on improvements to meet the standard (known as the cost cap exemption).
- Introducing an affordability exemption that lowers the cost cap to £10,000 for certain properties.
- Privately rented homes that achieve a score of EPC C against existing EPCs would be considered compliant with the higher MEES until their existing EPC expires.
- Whether to increase the scope of the private rented sector regulations to include short-term lets.

The new consultation seeks to build on the proposals from the 2020 consultation released by the previous government. See our Spotlight on [The Future of Rural Homes](#) for more information. The [consultation](#) is open until 2 May.

New reservoirs to be built for the first time since 1992

In a speech focused on the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, the Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced a £7.9 billion investment to enable the building of nine new reservoirs in England. While the reservoirs will be delivered via various projects across the country, not just around Oxford and Cambridge, two specific projects were name-checked and backed by the Chancellor: the Fens Reservoir, which will serve Cambridge and the Abingdon Reservoir near Oxford. It is estimated the latter would provide up to 293 million litres of water per day, enough water for nearly 15 million individuals – if built, it would be the biggest reservoir in Europe.

These reservoirs form part of the Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP), which the government approved in December. The plan found that if no further infrastructure were built, the country would face a water deficit of over 4,000 million litres per day by 2050. WRMP proposed nine new reservoirs to address this deficit, which would deliver 960 million litres of water daily. The plan will address the additional deficit through improving water efficiency via smart meters and other water wastage mitigation strategies. For more information on building resilience in water systems, consult our [Spotlight on Water](#).

Business & Economy

2025 Rural Shop Report

The 2025 Rural Shop [Report](#) has highlighted the crucial role of the UK's nearly 19,000 rural convenience stores. 76% of the rural convenience stores in mainland UK are independently owned. Produced by the Association of Convenience Stores, the report says 40% of rural shops are the only convenience store in their area, serving as essential hubs for isolated communities. Nearly three-quarters (72%) offer bill-paying services, around half (48%) have free-to-use cash machines and a quarter offer food bank donation points. Post Offices are ranked as having both the most positive impact and being the most essential service offered. Banks are the most wanted services. The report underscores the unique challenges faced by rural retailers, such as connectivity issues, delivery costs, and retail crime. It calls for greater support from local and national policymakers to ensure these vital community assets can continue to thrive.

AHDB calculates the impact of inheritance tax changes

According to the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), more than 75% of farms in England and Scotland, each over 50 hectares, will be affected by upcoming inheritance tax changes. From April 2026, the full 100% relief from inheritance tax will be limited to the first £1 million of combined agricultural and business property. The AHDB expects the change to impact 42,204 out of 54,938 farms. More than half of the affected are involved in cereals or general cropping production as their main enterprise, with the rest predominantly livestock producers or mixed farming operations. The study looked at average balance sheet data, mainly sourced from Defra, the Farm Business Survey and the Scottish Government.

Other Rural News

And finally...

Swapping a whip for whisky

Harrison Ford is the star of Star Wars, Blade Runner, and, of course, Indiana Jones, where he wields a whip and fedora with equal mastery. But now, Mr Ford has swapped whip and fedora for whisky and a kilt. Glenmorangie's new advertising campaign, "Once upon a time in Scotland," sees Mr Ford travelling through Scotland, highlighting the Scotch at the heart of the campaign. The series of 12 short films takes viewers behind the scenes of Mr Ford's visit to Glenmorangie's Highland distillery in Tain. While he begins by joking about avoiding the traditional Scottish trappings, he soon embraces the bagpipes and kilts.

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

12 January 2025

Landscape | Issues shaping the future of agriculture, rural estates and land management

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