

Food & Farming

Guide for cover crops

The UK's first independent guide to selecting, establishing and terminating cover crops has been published. The [Cover Crops Guide](#) is free to use and was co-designed by farmers with the help of the Yorkshire Agricultural Society's Farmer Scientist Network. It features an interactive plant species selection tool which allows growers to assess the suitability of different brassica, legume, cereal and other varieties of cover crops for their land. Each species is profiled for its winter hardiness, root depth, grazing potential and nitrogen fixing and storing qualities. Alongside this, there is guidance covering the sowing period, seed depth, seed rate and seed size. It also provides the specific benefits of that cover crop, which might include additional soil organic matter and nutrients, reduced soil erosion and leaching, improved biodiversity or pest and disease management.

Diversify cropping to reach net zero

To help farmers reach net zero by diversifying their arable and forage cropping, over 20 farming industry groups have formed the Centre for High Carbon Capture Cropping. The £5.9 million project is Defra funded and will be led by NIAB with backing from organisations including the NFU, British Hemp Alliance, Energy Crops Consultancy, Carbon Farm Hubs and Elsoms Seeds. The Centre's 'Knowledge Hub' will provide resources such as crop guides and apps. It will run until 2027 and encourage farmers to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and increase resilience by adopting cropping options such as:

- Rotational cover crops
- Annual fibre crops like hemp and flax
- Perennial food and feed crops, such as cereals and herbal leys
- Perennial biomass crops, including miscanthus and willow.

Policy

Nutrient mitigation requirements set for update

Nutrient neutrality requirements will become clearer for developers in some areas on 26 January 2024 when the list of wastewater treatment works (WWTWs) which are set to be upgraded will be released. To reduce pollution in waterways the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act created a legal requirement for certain wastewater treatment works to be upgraded by 2030. Once the list is published, Natural England will use it to update its nutrient budget calculator, which may lead to a change in the mitigation requirements for some developments. Due to the imminent update, Natural England has confirmed round four of its nutrient credit sales scheme for the Tees catchment will not open until 19 February 2024.

Scotland: Agri sector requires funding certainty

Scotland's rural affairs secretary Mairi Gougeon has called for EU funds to be replaced. Ms Gougeon made the request in a letter to the UK's new secretary of state for the environment, food and rural affairs Steve Barclay. Ms Gougeon expressed concern at the lack of certainty given the shrinking annual allocation of funding since Brexit. She also pointed out that deals secured with Australia and New Zealand were not in line with Scotland's trade strategy and are likely to impact adversely on Scottish beef and lamb. Ms Gougeon added that she hopes lessons are learned in time for the conclusion of the trade deals with Canada, India and Mexico.

Environment & Natural Capital

Landscape announcements

Thirty-four successful Landscape Recovery projects have been announced. The projects cover almost 200,000 hectares of land across England and provide capital funding for projects to explore nature restoration and attract private finance. The government also announced the start of the search for a new National Park for England, with the Cotswolds being touted as a prime contender, and the rebranding of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) as 'National Landscapes'. This acknowledges the recommendations of the Glover Review to give protected landscapes a stronger identity. Other recommendations of the Glover Review around protected landscapes were adopted in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, which strengthened the duties of relevant

authorities to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of AONBs, and reserved powers to the government to tell relevant authorities how they are to do this.

Further funding was announced to help England's children connect with nature and new rules will be put in place to require local authorities to consult residents before cutting down street trees.

Scotland and England: Forestry announcements

COP28 has resulted in a deluge of policy announcements relating to woodlands in England. This includes a new plan to improve access to existing and new woodland, and a joint policy paper setting out the types of woodland that Natural England and the Forestry Commission wish to support. Funding for forest research to mitigate climate risks to trees, the hunt for a new National Forest, and new protections for England's remaining temperate rainforests have also been announced. The policy documents notably begin to illustrate how local land use decision-making will be influenced by emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the government's new Levelling Up Missions. A helpful guide for Scottish farmers and crofters interested in woodland planting and trees has also been published. We summarise all the announcements in this [briefing note](#).

Detail of 30by30 pledge areas: marine net gain, projects for nature platform...

Nature Day at COP28 has brought another flurry of environmental pledges from the government. New legislation is to be introduced that will ban the use of palm oil, cocoa, beef, leather and soy sourced from land that has been deforested illegally. The legislation will apply to retailers with a global turnover of over £50 million and using over 500 tonnes of regulated commodities and will make existing voluntary commitments on deforestation compulsory. The government has also published a [map](#) showing the areas of England that could potentially contribute to the government's pledge to protect 30% of the UK's land by 2030 (30by30). 8.5% of the land already counts towards the target, with a further 26.8% shown to have the potential to contribute in the future. Also announced were measures on Marine Net Gain, £640,000 of funding to support the restoration of saltmarsh and seagrass habitats, £2 million to promote the adoption of the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures, and a pilot Projects for Nature platform, to attract private sector match funding for nature recovery projects.

Take soil as seriously as air and water

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (EFRA) published a report on soil health to coincide with World Soil Health Day. The report notes the progress the government has made towards developing a soil health map and soil health indicators but suggests it needs to go further in balancing regulations and incentives on soil health. It recommends stakeholders should agree on a definition for sustainable soil management and that this should be embedded in a regulatory framework by 2035, to give time for the government to work with farmers and gather the data needed. Rules will be needed to embed soil protection, whereas incentives, such as those available through Environmental Land Management, should focus on restoration. The framework should protect soils across multiple land uses, including construction. A broader strategy is also recommended to address the supply chain issues driving soil degradation, including low profitability, unsustainable consumer demands, and a lack of alternative inputs. The government is due to respond to the report by 5 February 2024.

Property & Development

Step-by-step BNG guidance

Defra has published a comprehensive guidance pack ahead of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) becoming mandatory for large developments from 1 February 2024. The guidance updates and consolidates the information that has been published so far – [see our latest briefing note for a summary](#).

The detailed step-by-step guidance on BNG for land managers, developers and Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) is a useful new resource. Also newly published are templates and guidance for Biodiversity Gain Plans and Habitat Monitoring and Management Plans, both of which will be required by developers as part of the planning process. Key issues remain outstanding, including a government response following the taxation of environmental land management and ecosystem service markets consultation, and the approach individual LPAs will take on key issues such as local nature recovery strategies, local planning policies, and resourcing their role in the BNG process. To discuss BNG projects and units further please contact [Johnny Campbell](#).

Scotland: Consultation on Heat in Buildings Bill

Domestic and non-domestic fossil fuel heating systems could be banned outright in Scotland from 2045 under a proposed Heat in Buildings Bill. A consultation on the proposals is currently running - they include requiring those purchasing a property to comply with the prohibition on polluting heating within a specified amount of time

following completion of the sale, meaning the removal of fossil fuel heating systems before 2045 in these circumstances. Purchasers of a property will be given a grace period in which to comply.

New minimum energy efficiency standards will be set for homes of all tenures. Private rented homes will be required to meet a minimum energy efficiency standard no later than 2028 and owner-occupied homes from 2033. The exact standard is yet to be finalised, but the government has said homes will meet the standard if they have good loft insulation; cavity wall insulation; draught-proofing; heating controls; floor insulation and hot water cylinder insulation. As such, the government anticipates many will already meet the standard and most of the remainder will only require one or two upgrades. According to the consultation, owner-occupied homes that have ended their use of polluting heating by 2033 will not be required to meet the minimum energy efficiency standard, whereas privately rented homes would still be required to.

The consultation says flexibility in the form of exemptions will be provided where needed, such as to those experiencing fuel poverty or child poverty, as well as the elderly and disabled or those on low incomes. Rural homes are also given specific mention, with the consultation accepting the costs of energy are often higher here and there may be unique pressures and circumstances. The [consultation](#) will run until 8 March 2024. The Bill could then be passed as soon as 2025, with new regulations applying soon after.

Housing crisis threatens rural communities

Rural communities are facing an existential threat from an acute shortage of affordable housing. [CPRE says](#) there are more than 300,000 people on waiting lists for social rented housing in rural England, an increase of over 10% since 2018. With the current rate of construction, it would take 89 years to offer a home to everyone on the list. Purchasing affordable housing has also become more challenging because, under current planning policies, new 'affordable' housing can cost anything up to 80% of market value, but rural property values increased at close to twice the rate of those in urban areas in the five years to 2022 (Statistical Digest of Rural England). Over this period the average cost of a rural home increased 29% and is now £419,000, whilst rural earnings increased by 19% to a total of £25,600. As a result, there is an extreme disparity between rural house prices and rural wages. CPRE has issued several recommendations:

- Redefine 'affordable housing' to directly link to average local incomes
- Increase the minimum amount of affordable housing required by national planning policy
- Support local communities to deliver small-scale developments of affordable housing
- Make it easier for councils to purchase land at reasonable prices
- Introduce a register of second homes and short-term lets
- Introduce new powers for local authorities to levy additional council tax on second homes
- Extend restrictions on the resale of affordable housing to all parishes with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants.

Business & Economy

Scotland: Private rented sector statistics

The average rent for a two-bed property in Scotland increased by 14.3% in the year to end September 2023. Increases ranged from 1.5% in Dumfries and Galloway and 2.3% in West Lothian up to 22.3% in Greater Glasgow. Two-bed properties are the most common size of property in the private rented sector in Scotland but increases were seen across all property sizes.

The Scottish government's [statistics](#) are based on advertised rents so they do not reflect the Cost of Living (Tenants Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022 rent cap restrictions from September 2022 which apply to existing tenants. Advertised rents relate to when properties become available for rent either through tenant turnover or when properties are new to the rental market. They have been increasing due to high tenant demand for properties.

Other Rural News

And finally... Helping nature adapt to climate change

Warmer and earlier spring seasons mean migratory birds return to breeding sites only to find most of their food is already gone because caterpillars have matured into insects, which their chicks cannot eat. Researchers have tried to give the European pied flycatcher a helping hand by driving them 350 miles north from the Netherlands to Sweden, where spring arrives two weeks later and food supplies peak at the right time. The immigrant females bred early and had nearly twice as many chicks as native Swedish flycatchers. Those chicks born in Sweden also flew back to the same northern sites without encouragement, leaving their wintering sites in Africa first, while the

Swedish natives left later. From this study, scientists hope they might be able to help other species adapt to climate change.

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