

Food & Farming

Companies commit to regenerative agriculture framework

Arla, Dairy Farmers of America, FrieslandCampina and Ocean Spray are some of the 33 industry players to back a global framework for regenerative agriculture. The Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform launched the [Regenerating Together framework](#), which it says is the first globally aligned approach for the transition to regenerative agriculture practices. Alongside the farming cooperatives, founding members of the framework include McDonald's, Bayer, McCain, Unilever, PepsiCo, Syngenta and Yara. The programme identifies four key areas of impact: water, soil, biodiversity and climate. There are four steps through which the framework will be applied: risk screening assessment, outcome selection, the adoption of principles and practices and the monitoring and assessment of progress. The framework is designed for practical on-farm use to drive farmers' transition to regenerative agriculture. Its ten outcomes to monitor performance include soil organic carbon levels and blue water use per unit of production.

The agricultural workforce in England

The number of people working on agricultural holdings in England has decreased by 2.9% since 2022. Farmers, business partners, directors and spouses account for over half (61%) of the total workforce and decreased by 0.6%. The number of casual workers fell the most (11%), though given the statistics are a snapshot in time fluctuations are not unusual. Two-thirds (67%) of the workforce are aged 55 and over.

The Chancellor has committed to accept the Low Pay Commission's recommendations when setting the National Living Wage rate to apply from April 2023. Its recommendation will be announced in November but its latest forecasts would see the rate increased from £10.42 to over £11 per hour. This would increase the earnings of a full-time worker on the National Living Wage by over £1,000 per year and benefit 2.5 million people.

Nutrient management and slurry scheme

Welsh government legislation which capped the amount of nitrogen that could be applied to farmland from livestock manure at 170kg per hectare created controversy last year and a consultation was launched to find a compromise. The government has announced a time-limited approach until 2025 that will allow farm businesses to apply for a licence for a higher annual nitrogen application of up to 250kg per hectare, subject to crop need and additional environmental protection measures being met. Where farmers' nutrient management plans for 2024 indicate that 170kg per hectare of nitrogen from livestock manures is likely to be exceeded, they must notify Natural Resources Wales by 31 March 2024 and undertake additional actions. Further information is available [here](#).

In England the focus is on improving slurry storage and round 2 of Slurry Infrastructure grants will open in November, providing grants of between £25,000 and £250,000. Changes this time include supporting up to eight months of storage for pig farms, allowing landlords to underwrite grant funding agreements and extending support eligibility to include slurry separators, covers for existing stores and new in-situ cast concrete stores. There are priority areas where applicants stand a greater chance of success, but last time around 30% of successful applicants were based outside these areas. If you would like to discuss the scheme please contact [Georgina Sweeting](#).

Genetic editing could solve bird flu

Small tweaks to a single gene can make chickens resistant to an avian influenza infection. The gene informs the production of a protein that flu viruses rely on to successfully hijack chicken cells. By altering the gene, the protein structure is changed, the virus can no longer infect the cell and the infection is halted in its tracks. The study published in Nature Communications showed the treatment was not effective in all cases as some chickens were still infected. In the study, two changes were made to the gene before the birds were monitored for two years. The edit itself did not impact the birds negatively, they were healthy and laid eggs normally just like healthy unedited birds.

Policy

What was said at the Labour party conference?

Shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves plans to tackle the £200 billion backlog of privately funded energy projects. To do so, Labour intends to give local authorities more resources derived from raising stamp duty charges on overseas-based house buyers. The plan will be part of Labour's goal to cut £93 billion from UK energy bills by 2030. Ms Reeves also plans to accelerate the building of critical infrastructure for energy, transport and housing, particularly fast-tracking battery factories, life sciences and 5G infrastructure.

On the same day of the conference, shadow housing minister Matthew Pennycook said the changes do not amount to revolution, but rather targeted tweaks to make the planning system more proactive. He also confirmed the party would stick to its 'brownfield first' approach for housebuilding, but that housing needs could not be met by brownfield development alone. To address the need for land, he said there would be strategic releases of greenbelt land.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer backed Ms Reeves and Mr Pennycook's statements during his speech, pledging to bulldoze through the planning system without tearing up the greenbelt. Mr Starmer went on to pledge a next generation of Labour new towns and the building of an extra 300,000 new homes every year. To do so, Mr Starmer has admitted that local objections could be overridden.

Labour's plans for housing could also include a nature test devised by the Natural History Museum. Alex Sobel, a former shadow Defra minister told an audience at the party conference there were potentially two plans for climate and nature tests to run through Labour policymaking. The tests follow the same principles of the National History Museum's Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII), which measures biodiversity change using a combination of land use, ecosystem, species and population data to give a simple figure for 'intactness'.

PM defends relaxation of net zero policies

Rishi Sunak defended his relaxation of net zero policies at the Conservative party conference in Manchester, attempting to reassure his party and the public that net zero by 2050 was still possible. Net zero secretary Claire Coutinho backed up the Prime Minister's comments and took aim at environmental protest groups such as Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion. Ms Coutinho said the groups failed to understand why net zero targets had been scaled back and that the Conservatives were calling on other nations to do more.

Elsewhere, environment secretary Thérèse Coffey used her speech at the Conservative party conference to shun "fake meat" and reiterated no one will be told to stop eating meat. Ms Coffey also hit out at red tape, saying she would introduce smarter regulations and drop "absurd regulations", such as those determining exactly how bendy bananas should be.

Ms Coffey said the Labour Party had undertaken minimal monitoring of sewage overflows when in government, and its plans would add nearly £1,000 to household bills each year. She added, Liberal Democrat plans to turn off overflows would result in sewage coming back up into people's homes.

Scotland: Agriculture Bill published

The Scottish government's Agriculture and Rural Communities Bill has been published. The Bill will determine how farming and food production is supported by the Scottish government, with a new emphasis on regenerative and sustainable farming. Measures within the Bill are expected to be adopted by summer 2024, including:

- Expanding support to include rural communities, not just farmers
- Integration of support for forestry
- A code of practice for sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

For a full summary of the Bill see our latest Rural Research Briefing Note.

Scotland's Future Energy System

In a statement to Parliament, Scottish Minister for Energy and the Environment Gillian Martin set out the government's intentions for Scotland's future energy system. In her statement, Ms Martin confirmed its final Energy Strategy and Just Transition plans would be published in the summer of 2024, a delay of more than two years over original expectations. Along with this announcement, responses to consultations on the plans were also released. An [independent analysis](#) of the 1,600 responses found no clear consensus on what the future energy mix should look like. Proponents of fossil fuel extraction often noted its value to the Scottish economy, its role in a stable and secure energy system and its necessity for derivative products, including plastics and chemicals. Respondents against new oil and gas production typically pointed to net zero concerns. Ms Martin said any new extraction of fossil fuels must be subject to very strict climate compatibility tests and must consider a range of factors such as energy security needs, reducing emissions and delivering affordable energy supplies.

Environment & Natural Capital

New UK forestry standard released

The [UK Forestry Standard](#) is the technical standard for sustainable forest management in the UK - it guides foresters on how to practice sustainable forest management and also guides the development of grant schemes. It is centred on the concept of 'balanced objectives', where the environmental, social and economic functions of forests interact beneficially to create long-term resilience. The 5th edition of the UK Forestry Standard was published on 3 October 2023 and will come into effect on 1 October 2024. The new edition reflects changes in legislation across the four home nations, plus devolution and our departure from the EU. It has also been updated to take account of new international agreements, implemented in a way that is suitable to the UK. The updated Good Forestry Practice Requirements will be applied to existing woodland plans at the time of their renewal.

New round of the national Nutrient Mitigation Scheme

The third round of credit sales under the national Nutrient Mitigation Scheme in the Tees catchment has been launched by Natural England. Developers in the Tees catchment will be able to purchase credits to offset the nitrate and phosphate pollution associated with the development. Previous rounds of credit sales unlocked the development of 3,500 homes and the body has sourced sufficient credits to unlock a further 4,500 homes. As a result, over 260 hectares of habitat have been created for wildlife. The credits each mitigate for one kilogram of nitrogen pollution and are priced at £2,300. The Nutrient Mitigation Scheme is led by Natural England in partnership with Defra and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. If you would like to discuss private nutrient mitigation credits please contact [Julia Pound](#).

Nature Market Principles

A new set of voluntary high-level principles for the operation of nature markets has been issued by nature finance advocates Finance Earth in partnership with the National Trust, the RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts, the Woodland Trust and Federated Hermes Limited. The government's recent [Nature Markets Framework](#) set out core principles for investments into nature but without practical details of market operation, meaning that markets are at risk of losing integrity. The 'Voluntary Principles for Science-Based Investment to create High Integrity Natural Capital Markets in the UK' are intended as a stopgap until the government has finalised regulatory frameworks and policies for nature markets. The principles cover seven supply-side principles and two demand-side principles. Supply-side principles include the use of science to ensure net gain, embedding additionality, and environmental and social safeguards to avoid negative trade-offs and leakage. Demand-side principles include ensuring buyers have credible net zero transition plans and have committed to best practices in the management and reporting of their environmental and social impacts. The principles will be updated regularly as best practice and policy evolves.

Property & Development

New Boiler Upgrade Scheme rates announced

Following the Prime Minister's net zero speech, the specific new grant rates for the Boiler Upgrade Scheme have been confirmed. Installers will be able to apply for different grants, dependent on the technology type:

- Air source heat pumps: £7,500 (up from £5,000)
- Ground source heat pumps: £7,500 (up from £6,000)
- Biomass boilers: remaining at £5,000

Voucher applications for heat pumps which are submitted on or after 23 October 2023 will receive the increased grant amount. There is £450 million of grant funding available until 2025 to help decarbonise domestic heating.

Statement on rural housing

Homes England, the government's executive non-departmental public body that funds new affordable housing in England, has published a [Rural Housing Statement](#) that seeks to tackle the unique challenges of delivering affordable housing in rural areas. The costs and risks involved in housing development can often be disproportionately high in rural areas due to a lack of development opportunities, smaller sites, limited capacity in the construction industry, and difficulty accessing development finance. Homes England has committed to using all of its levers, including relationships, skills, expertise, statutory powers, land and financial support, to deliver housing and mixed-use schemes in rural areas in partnership with local communities.

Handling calls for heritage asset removal

Guidance has been published to assist custodians in England facing calls for the removal of heritage assets in their care or ownership. It applies to all public memorials, including statues, monuments and commemorations which are a structure or part of a building's structure and are either on public display or in places accessible to the

public. The new guidance follows consideration by the Heritage Advisory Board of how custodians should approach and manage requests for the removal of memorials based on changing views about the people or events they commemorate. Custodians are advised to 'retain and explain', keep assets in situ but complement them with a comprehensive explanation which provides the whole story of the person or event depicted. The [guidance](#) aims to promote a fuller understanding of the historical context around the heritage asset. If custodians decide they would prefer to relocate the asset, the planning process must be followed.

Scotland: lead piping

Residential landlords in Scotland are reminded that changes to the Repairing Standard require them to ensure the water supply in their private rented properties is free of lead from 1 March 2024. Any lead pipes or tanks will require replacing before then. Water testing is essential if a landlord is unsure whether there are any lead pipes present. Further information on water supply requirements is available [here](#).

Business & Economy

Improving rural connectivity

Following on from the recent Unleashing Rural Opportunity paper, the government has announced further measures to support rural communities through improved connectivity. Two consultations have been launched on broadband provision for rural and remote properties. 77% of UK properties already have access to super-fast broadband, and Project Gigabit is supporting the telecoms industry to deliver gigabit-capable broadband to a further 20% of UK premises. However, the government estimates around 100,000 very remote UK properties could fall outside a basic level of service provision and is seeking views on how this is best addressed. A policy paper on supporting rural transport innovation has also been released. Aimed at local authorities, the paper reviews emerging technologies in shared mobility, self-driving vehicles and even drones to assess how these might enhance connectivity across rural areas.

Investment in northern transport

To soften the blow of the cancellation of the Birmingham to Manchester leg of HS2, the government has announced a major programme of transport and infrastructure investment for the North of England. Called Network North, £36 billion is being redirected from HS2 into transport infrastructure in line with three priorities: better connectivity within our towns, suburbs and cities; better connectivity between our towns and cities; and improvements to everyday local journeys for people. It includes investment in road infrastructure, proposals to electrify and improve rail lines across the North, and support for bus service improvements.

Other Rural News

And finally...

Natural genetic modification

Genetically modifying crops by adding specific, potentially foreign, stretches of DNA into a plant's genome is still controversial. Sceptics fear mixing DNA from different species could have unforeseen and undesirable outcomes. Yet it turns out that grasses have been swapping genes between species for some time, without human intervention. Research, led by the University of Sheffield, investigated how often grasses acquire DNA from other species through lateral gene transfer. The process gives the grasses an evolutionary advantage by allowing them to adapt more rapidly to new environments. Researchers also believe the process occurs in the same way that some genetically modified crops are made. It is hoped the findings published in the *New Phytologist* journal could allow scientists to adopt the process in the quest for more productive and resilient crops.

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

Contacts



Andrew Teanby
Associate Director
ateanby@savills.com
+44 (0) 7835 445 458



Joe Lloyd
Associate
joe.lloyd@savills.com
+44 (0) 7790 824 970

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