

Landscape

Rural – UK – 19 August 2026

Food & Farming

Drought support and SFI expansion announced

Analysis by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit indicates grass production during July was 43% below the five-year average, with forage output forecast to finish the season around 20% below average. Arable farms are also reporting reduced crop yields, while the AHDB has described 2026 as the earliest cereal harvest in at least 20 years. Harvest progress at the end of July was reported to be around three weeks ahead of the five-year average, reflecting the prolonged hot and dry conditions experienced across much of England. More than 1,500 irrigation restrictions are now in place in parts of East Anglia, with some water abstractions reduced by 50% due to exceptionally low river flows.

Drought conditions have worsened significantly across England, with 71.3% of the country now officially in drought, up from around half at the end of July. Four additional areas, including the East Midlands, Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire, Kent and East Sussex, and Solent and the South Downs, were moved into drought status on 10 August and no area of England is now considered to be in “normal” conditions.

Wales is also officially in drought, and the government has highlighted that the recently launched Capital Production and Efficiency grant can support farmers with grant funding for boreholes, rainwater harvesting systems, water infrastructure improvements, and ventilation measures designed to improve resilience during hotter, drier conditions. Farmers who have entered the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) or are delivering preparatory scheme contracts have been reminded that they can apply for temporary derogations if they are struggling to meet the scheme requirements.

Scotland has taken a different approach, with the Farm Advisory Service offering funded specialist advice on water management, climate adaptation and livestock welfare. Also, a £3 million fund has been established to help businesses affected by the Cairngorms wildfire that has been burning for more than three weeks. Economy and Tourism Secretary Stephen Flynn said the Highland Council would administer the fund and would provide immediate relief to affected businesses.

On 15 August, during a visit to the South West, the Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, announced a £65 million support package for England. He said “the ability to grow our own food is national security, and I will treat it that way. So we are acting now: more money into farm support, help to get reservoirs built, and easier access to water when it is scarce.”

The package includes:

- Temporary adjustments to Environmental Land Management (ELM) agreements, so farmers affected by drought can take practical steps to protect livestock, crops and land. This includes creating firebreaks and allowing the cutting and grazing of land in ELM agreements to ease shortages of animal feed and bedding. It also gives farmers more time to plant and establish ELM actions where dry conditions have made planting seed mixes impossible.
 - The flexibilities cover the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), current Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT), legacy Countryside Stewardship and Higher Level Stewardship.
 - Payments will be unaffected.
 - Guidance on qualifying requirements and how to apply for the temporary adjustments is available [here](#).
- An extra £50 million for SFI2026 Window 2, taking the total budget for SFI26 to £290 million.
 - This has been achieved by reprioritisation within Defra’s farming budget, so there will be a cut elsewhere.
 - SFI window 2 will open in September; see our [briefing note](#) for more information.
- Action to make it easier to build reservoirs, including reducing unnecessary barriers and updating planning guidance.
 - The government’s response to the National Planning Policy Framework consultation makes it clear that local authorities should support the development of agricultural infrastructure, including reservoirs. It now says that applicants should not be required to demonstrate the need for water infrastructure developments. This should simplify applications and decision-making.
 - Policy support for greenhouses, polytunnels and farm shops will also be boosted – infrastructure that’s essential for modern, productive farming.
 - In September, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) will publish updated planning guidance for on-farm reservoirs to give farmers more clarity and confidence when investing in water resilience.
 - Defra, MHCLG and the National Farmers’ Union are working on an evidence-led review of permitted development rights for on-farm reservoirs.
- £15 million to build on-farm reservoirs, helping farmers store water and become more resilient to future droughts.
 - This will be distributed via the Water Management Grant, which is expected to open in the Autumn.

- If demand exceeds the budget, the government has said it will consider providing additional funding.
- Improved access to water during drought conditions, including that the Environment Agency will prioritise requests for short-term variations to abstraction licence conditions.
 - This will help make it easier to share water between holdings and vary abstraction points, quantities and timings.

Reports of BTV cases grow rapidly

Livestock farmers are being urged to remain alert as bluetongue serotype 3 (BTV-3) continues to spread across the UK, at a faster rate than last year. As of 11 August, 353 confirmed cases had been reported, including 344 in England, eight in Wales and the first case in Scotland. Farmers are also being advised to maintain strong biosecurity, reduce exposure to biting midges where possible, and report any suspected cases promptly to the Animal and Plant Health Agency. Industry bodies and vets are also encouraging farmers to remain vigilant and consider pre-emptive vaccinations rather than waiting for bluetongue to reach their holdings. Vaccination is being promoted as a key tool to protect animals and provide confidence in the marketplace. Experts have highlighted the importance of understanding the facts around bluetongue and vaccinations, amid concerns that misinformation could deter farmers from taking preventative action. Concerns have also been raised about vaccine availability, although the manufacturer, Boehringer Ingelheim, has confirmed that additional supplies of the Bultavo 3 vaccine are expected to arrive in the UK soon.

More productivity but less disease resistance

Decades of selective breeding could have compromised disease resistance by prioritising productivity, according to new research from Aberystwyth University. Researchers warn the genetic base of many cattle populations has narrowed as breeding programmes have focused on output and efficiency. There is still hope, however - the study found traditional populations of breeds such as Ayrshire, Jersey and Hereford remain genetically distinct from modern breeding lines and may retain valuable traits linked to disease resistance, fertility and adaptability to environmental stress. As climate change and disease pressures increase, preserving traditional bloodlines may not simply be a matter of heritage conservation, but a practical tool for improving the long-term resilience of UK cattle herds.

Policy

Date of Andy Burnham's first Budget announced

Chancellor John Healey will deliver the first Budget of Andy Burnham's government on 28 October. It will set out how the government intends to fund early commitments including lower VAT on energy bills, reduced business rates for pubs, further devolution in England and expanded technical training, while also addressing a £5 billion funding gap for defence spending. John Healey has pledged to meet the fiscal rules inherited from the previous government. The Prime Minister has said they will announce further reforms to business rates, but he acknowledged government finances offered limited room for manoeuvre. The Budget comes as the continuing war involving Iran disrupts global energy markets, adding to inflation and government borrowing costs. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research estimates that higher inflation could reduce the real value of planned departmental spending by £24 billion by the end of the decade, potentially forcing the Chancellor to raise taxes, reallocate spending or scale back commitments. This is an independent estimate rather than a confirmed Treasury shortfall; the Office for Budget Responsibility will publish its updated economic and fiscal forecast alongside the Budget.

Rise in fly-tipping fines

The maximum fixed penalty notice for fly-tipping in England will increase from £1,000 to £5,000 on 1 September. The change allows local authorities to impose higher on-the-spot penalties, although they will continue to determine the amount charged based on the circumstances of each offence. It does not mean that every offender will receive a £5,000 fine. The maximum fixed penalty for littering will also rise from £500 to £750. The National Farmers' Union has welcomed the increase but warned stronger penalties will make little difference unless councils have sufficient resources to identify offenders and pursue cases. This remains a significant issue for farms and rural estates because landowners can be left responsible for removing waste dumped on private land, while incidents can disrupt farm operations, damage crops and habitats, endanger livestock and take productive land out of use. The latest government figures show local authorities in England dealt with 1.26 million fly-tipping incidents in 2024/25, although this does not capture the full extent of dumping on private land.

Environment & Natural Capital

Net zero rules scrapped for public contracts

From 1 January 2027, the government's revised Social Value Model will assess central government procurements worth at least £1 million, including VAT, based on the jobs, employment conditions, pay, training and skills offered by suppliers. Environmental outcomes, including support for net zero, will no longer be scored. The narrower model could benefit rural small- and medium-sized businesses that have struggled to meet broad social value requirements. Contractors bidding for qualifying work will instead need to demonstrate good jobs, fair working conditions, training and skills in the communities they serve. This may favour local employment and workforce development while reducing barriers for smaller suppliers. Net zero requirements have not disappeared completely from public procurement. Under Procurement Policy Note 006, suppliers bidding for relevant central government contracts worth more than £5 million a year must still submit a Carbon Reduction Plan confirming their commitment to net zero by 2050. The revised Social Value Model applies to central government departments, executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies; other public-sector organisations may adopt it voluntarily.

New Scottish National Nature Reserve

NatureScot has approved National Nature Reserve status for the National Trust for Scotland's Torridon estate in Wester Ross. The reserve covers around 5,100 hectares, extending from the shore of Loch Torridon to the summits of Beinn Alligin and Liathach. It supports native woodland, rare plants, mosses and lichens, as well as upland species such as ptarmigan and golden eagle. Torridon is the first new National Nature Reserve declared in Scotland since 2017 and the ninth within the National Trust for Scotland's care. National Nature Reserves are managed to conserve important habitats and species while enabling people to experience and understand nature. The Torridon designation applies to land already managed by the National Trust for Scotland and does not extend to the surrounding landscape. The reserve adjoins Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve and sits within the wider Glen Torridon Partnership, through which public bodies, conservation organisations, private estates and local communities are working to restore habitats across more than 30,000 hectares.

£5 million nature recovery push across UK

More than £5 million in National Lottery funding has been awarded to support the development of five large-scale projects across the UK, focusing on habitat restoration, climate resilience and sustainable land management. The investment will help develop plans for peatland and wetland restoration, flood management, species recovery and farming practices aimed at improving soils, habitats and biodiversity. The funding forms part of the £150 million Landscape Connections programme, which seeks to restore nature across working landscapes while strengthening climate resilience and public access. If development work is successful, the projects could unlock a further £42.6 million in funding, with the wider programme expected to support 20 projects over the next 10 years. The initial projects are located in Arnside and Silverdale, Mourne Gullion, Strangford and Lecale, the Shropshire Hills and Cornwall. The scheme aims to keep landscapes productive while improving biodiversity, with farmers, landowners, conservation groups and local communities helping to shape the initiatives.

Property & Development

Affordable homes needed in the countryside

Somerset Council is calling for more affordable homes to be built in rural communities, warning a lack of suitable housing threatens the long-term sustainability of villages and small towns by making it harder for people to remain close to employment, family and support networks, and essential services. Around 12,500 people are currently registered on the council's Homefinder housing service, with one in five living in rural areas. More than 100 affordable homes were completed in rural Somerset last year, while a further 25 developments are expected to deliver around 450 additional properties. Planning permission has also been granted for 1,600 affordable homes across 43 rural sites, with applications for a further 1,700 homes under consideration. The call for greater provision aligns with Prime Minister Andy Burnham's pledge to increase council housebuilding nationally. In the meantime, Somerset Council is continuing its own housebuilding programme while encouraging developers and housing associations to increase the provision of housing in the countryside.

New National Planning Policy Framework for England

Within the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for England, published on 17 August, there are clear signs that the government is changing policy to support the delivery of the 25-year Farming Roadmap's vision for a profitable, productive, sustainable and resilient agricultural industry. The new NPPF directs that planning decisions should give substantial weight to "benefits for domestic food production, animal welfare and/or the environment which can be demonstrated through proposals for development for farm and agricultural modernisation." Like the previous NPPF, it also directs that the sustainable growth of businesses in rural areas should be supported, but this has been expanded to include "development to maintain and enhance farm viability and sustainability and support domestic food production, such as improved accommodation for livestock, on-farm reservoirs, greenhouses, polytunnels, farm shops and temporary accommodation for seasonal workers". Further analysis of the new NPPF is available [here](#).

Scotland: historic buildings for the future

New guidance has been published in Scotland to support the safe conversion of traditional buildings. The Guide to Conversion of Traditional Buildings, the first [guidance](#) of its kind in almost 20 years, applies to almost half a million traditional buildings. It is intended to help owners, developers and professionals adapt historic buildings for modern use while meeting fire safety, accessibility and energy efficiency requirements. The guidance forms part of the response to lessons learned from the 2017 Cameron House Hotel fire and highlights the risks associated with older buildings, including concealed voids and outdated fire protection measures. It also aims to support the sustainable reuse of historic buildings by providing a framework to bring redundant or underused heritage assets back into productive use while retaining their historic character.

Business & Economy

Apply for robotics and automation grant

Applications are now open for Round 2 of the Farming Futures Automation and Robotics competition in England, which is making £20 million available to support the development of innovative technologies for agriculture, horticulture and forestry. Part of the Farming Innovation Programme, the fund is aimed at collaborative projects that can help improve productivity, reduce labour pressures and make day-to-day operations more efficient. Eligible projects may include technologies for planting, crop management, harvesting, woodland monitoring and other practical on-farm applications.

Projects must have a total value of between £500,000 and £2.5 million and demonstrate clear commercial potential and industry benefits. This funding round has also been expanded to include sectors such as ornamental horticulture. The competition closes on 30 September 2026, with webinars and [application guidance](#) available to help prospective applicants develop projects and build partnerships. For advice on grant funding, please contact our [Food and Farming](#) team.

Recruitment pressures persist across farming sector

Recruitment remains a significant challenge for farm businesses, with new research from Arla Foods showing 82% of farmers advertising vacancies receive few or no applicants with the required skills. This figure has remained above 80% for seven consecutive years. While 42% of young people say they would consider a career in food and farming, only 4% ultimately enter the sector. At the same time, the agricultural workforce continues to age; nearly one in five farmers surveyed were over 65, while government figures show only 5% of farm holders in England are under 35. Arla warns that difficulties attracting and retaining skilled staff risk placing additional pressure on farm operations and the wider food supply chain. Almost 65% of farmers surveyed identified improved education and training as the most effective way to attract new entrants to the industry.

Could Kent become a viticulture hotspot?

In 2023, global wine production fell to its lowest level in more than 60 years, yet the UK recorded a bumper harvest, with production up 77% compared with 2022. Kent has emerged as a particular beneficiary, accounting for around 25% of Britain's vineyard plantings and producing 5.08 million bottles of wine in 2025. Producers argue a combination of favourable weather conditions and a growing concentration of vineyards is helping establish the county as a recognised wine-producing region. The trend reflects the continued expansion of UK viticulture, which has become an increasingly prominent diversification opportunity for rural landowners, with viticulture benefiting from increased sunshine and reduced disease pressure. To discuss options for your land, please contact our [viticulture team](#).

Other Rural News

Rural mobile phone coverage improved

More than 150 existing 4G masts have been upgraded through the UK government's Shared Rural Network programme. Mobile operators EE, Virgin Media O2, Vodafone and Three UK have jointly invested to extend coverage across some of Britain's hardest-to-reach rural areas. The upgrades have extended 4G coverage across more than 5,684 square kilometres that previously had only an EE signal or no mobile coverage at all. The programme reached its target of extending 4G coverage to 95% of the UK's landmass a year ahead of schedule, but this still leaves large areas of the country without 4G coverage.

And finally... When is it too hot for coffee?

28.1°C, apparently. There comes a point during a heatwave when Britons abandon hot coffees, and according to one London cafe owner, that temperature is precisely 28.1°C. Analysis of customer orders at a King's Cross coffee shop found once temperatures reach 28.1°C, iced and chilled coffees account for more than half of all sales. While iced drinks remain a niche choice in winter, representing around 6% of orders, demand can exceed 60% during summer heatwaves. Britons consume almost 100 million cups of coffee every day, with nearly one in five people visiting a coffee shop daily, even during the height of summer.

The research also reignites the long-running debate over whether hot drinks help cool the body. While some studies suggest hot drinks can promote cooling through increased perspiration, the effect is thought to be less pronounced in humid conditions. For coffee lovers, however, the science may be secondary once the thermometer reaches 28.1°C.

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