

Food & Farming

Government plans to tackle the ongoing pig crisis

Following calls from processors and retailers to provide more support to pig producers, Defra intends to launch a review of supply chain fairness in the pig sector, to tackle the ongoing crisis that has led to large numbers of pigs becoming backlogged on farms. Farming Minister Victoria Prentis said Defra intend to use the provisions within the Agriculture Act to address the unfairness apparent within contractual arrangements in the pig sector. Sector organisations are asking for more supermarket promotions to drive the purchase of backlogged British pork, and for processors to loosen specifications on overweight pigs. A key issue perpetuating the pig supply chain crisis is a labour shortage of butchers, combined with a ban by China on European pork, which has flooded the domestic market and driven down pig prices. Waitrose has announced that it will extend the short-term support package it launched for hard hit pig farmers in November, pledging a minimum price for pork to their farmers, even if prices continue to fall.

UK organic market worth a record £3 billion

The UK's organic market is now worth a record of over £3 billion after sales grew 5.2% in 2021, according to the Soil Association's Organic Market Report 2022. In the UK, £60 million is spent on organic products each week. The growth in the sector is partly due to a strong performance for online sales and box schemes during successive lockdowns. Online purchases of organic food and drink have grown 54% since 2019, and the report explains that many customers who started buying organic produce online following the pandemic have continued these new shopping habits. In supermarkets, the top four organic categories are growing ahead of their non-organic equivalents, including dairy, fish and poultry.

Policy

Detail released on Defra's Lump Sum Exit Scheme

After a significant delay Defra has published the outcome of its consultation on the Farmers' Lump Sum Exit Scheme (LSES) and announced how the proposed scheme will operate in England. The scheme's eligibility dates and reference periods have been moved forwards slightly and rules that would have prevented other partners or directors claiming further direct payments have been amended. Crucially, clarity has been provided on the tax treatment of the lump sum payments. We have summarised Defra's decisions and scheme guidance in our briefing note along with our analysis of the potential implications for current tenants, landlords and owner occupiers.

Countryside Stewardship scheme opens for 2023

The Countryside Stewardship (CS) scheme application window has opened for 2023 agreements. CS pays farmers and land managers in England for actions such as habitat restoration, tree planting and flood mitigation. Since January this year, Defra has increased Countryside Stewardship rates by an average of 30% and has made changes to broaden the scheme and make it easier to apply. Farmers and land managers who are not already in a CS scheme are being encouraged to apply, as CS is described by Defra as a key source of income for land managers looking to bridge the gap between declining BPS payments and the arrival of new government support streams. Farmers in CS will be well placed to enter the new Local Nature Recovery scheme – one of the three new Environmental Land Management schemes, which will be fully introduced by 2024, as Local Nature Recovery will include certain elements of CS. To discuss the Countryside Stewardship scheme further please contact [Georgina Sweeting](#).

Environment & Natural Capital

UK land can and must switch from a net source of GHG emissions to a net sink by 2040

A new report from WWF, [Land of Plenty](#), sets out a 'nature positive way to decarbonise UK agriculture and land use'. Agriculture and rural land use account for 12% of the UK's territorial greenhouse gases, and despite the UK's 2050 net zero target and strategy, and the Climate Change Committee's recommendations that around 25% of UK land use will have to change to reach net zero, there is no clear shared vision across the UK for what landscapes will look like in 2050. This report seeks to change that, providing targets and actions for the role of agriculture and

land use within the context of net zero. WWF believe direct emissions from UK agriculture can and must be reduced by at least 35% by 2030 and 51% by 2050 (based on 2018 levels). To switch UK land use from a net source of emissions to a net sink by 2040, the report sets out 10 recommendations, focused on reducing nitrogen waste, creating new environmental standards and common baselines, restoring nature, delivering land use frameworks, promoting dietary shifts and reducing the UK's global food footprint. Suggested changes to agricultural practice include reducing fertiliser, improving livestock management, reducing the sector's reliance on soya beans, and adopting more regenerative farming techniques. WWF believe that the model of high input, high waste, low welfare intensification is 'broken' and the report sets out its vision for fixing it.

New, bigger nature reserve partnerships possible

Natural England is considering a new partnership of National Nature Reserves (NNR) across areas of the UK. The creation of a 'major' partnership of NNRs in the Somerset Wetlands, and extensions to Ingleborough, Ruislip Woods and the Wyre Forest NNRs are possibilities. This is according to Natural England's latest list of NNRs and Sites of Special Scientific Interest which are under consideration for formal designations. Environment Secretary George Eustice has suggested that the government is open to the idea of creating a 'new generation' of NNRs, because the designation process is quicker compared to other protected designations. There are currently 225 NNRs in England, covering approximately 0.7% of the country's land surface. Land can be declared an NNR if it is deemed to be 'of national importance' and is either being managed as a nature reserve under an agreement with Natural England, or if it is held by another approved body such as the National Trust, RSPB or local authority. Defra is currently running a consultation on new policies for managing protected national landscapes, following the government's response to Julian Glover's 2019 landscapes review.

Property & Development

How will the biodiversity offsetting market work?

The government's recently launched consultation on Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) provides more detail on proposals for how BNG will operate once it becomes mandatory in England. For rural land managers, BNG offers an opportunity to monetise habitat creation, through generating biodiversity units for developers to purchase as offsite credits. Eftc (2021) estimate that the market for offsite biodiversity units in England will be worth between £135 million to £274 million per year. The unit price will be negotiated through the private market. It will be dependent on the type and cost of habitat creation, and will have to take account of maintenance costs for at least 30 years. The government wants to incentivise the creation of habitat banks, in order to develop larger scale strategic sites for nature and to smooth out the supply and demand within the biodiversity unit market. One site may provide biodiversity units to more than one development, enabling land managers to set up their own private or collaborative habitat bank and sell BNG units reactively. For more information on the proposals within the BNG consultation and what they mean for rural land managers, see our briefing note.

Business & Economy

Companies accused of climate pledge exaggeration

New analysis of climate pledges by 25 of the world's largest companies has revealed that the majority 'exaggerate their actions' and that headline pledges are often ambiguous and lacking in commitment. All of the 25 companies assessed pledged a type of zero-emission, net-zero or carbon-neutral target, however only three of the companies – Maersk, Vodafone and Deutsche Telekom – demonstrably commit to deep decarbonisation of over 90% of their full value chain emissions. Net zero targets across all the companies will in reality result in an emissions reduction of 40% at most, not 100% as suggested by the term 'net zero'. The research concluded that, despite some positive leadership, companies' uptake of readily-available emission reduction measures shows little sense of urgency, and that companies will have to step up to play a central role in finding and scaling up legitimate solutions for deep carbonisation.

Digital connectivity key to levelling up

Digital connectivity is a key element of the government's drive to 'level-up'. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has a minimum target of achieving 85% gigabit-capable coverage by 2025 and to get as close to 100% as possible. The £5 billion 'Project Gigabit' programme is intended to ensure premises in hard-to-reach areas are not left behind in being able to access gigabit-capable networks. The government is aiming to ensure that 95% of the UK's geographic landmass has 4G coverage from at least one mobile network operator by 2025 and that the majority of the UK population has 5G coverage by 2027. However, the government is also aware of the demand, benefits and barriers involved in connecting the 100,000 premises likely to be very hard to reach with gigabit-capable broadband, where the costs and challenges of roll out are prohibitively high. Evidence on this issue has been

submitted to the government, and is being used to assess policy options to address these issues, the outcomes of which will be announced later this year.

Other Rural News

Deadline to register forgotten paths repealed

The deadline to register forgotten historical paths in England by 2026 is set to be scrapped by the government. The 1 January 2026 deadline to apply to record paths was introduced in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 by the then Labour government, as a cut-off to apply to record rights of way through private land which existed before 1949 but did not appear on official maps. The government has repealed the deadline saying it is introducing measures 'to enhance the way rights of way are recorded and managed'. People are able to apply for rights of way which have existed in the past to be added to official maps, with legal protection. Campaigners such as the Ramblers and The Open Spaces Society have welcomed the news. This is part of a move from Defra to promote public access as a key way of connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing. Alongside repealing the 2026 deadline, the government also plans to introduce a 'right to apply' for landowners to divert or extinguish rights of way in certain circumstances.

And finally...

A bumper year for cranes

The UK crane population is at its highest level since the species returned in the 1970s. Cranes were once a favourite dish at medieval feasts, but became extinct in the 1600s as a result of overhunting and the loss of wetland habitats. In 1979, a small number returned to the Norfolk Broads from Europe. The UK population is now estimated to be over 200 birds, and last year was its most successful year for breeding – 72 pairs of adults were recorded, of which 65 pairs bred, fledging 40 chicks, up from 23 in 2020. The common crane is Britain's tallest bird and can grow up to four feet tall.

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