

Food & Farming

Defra caps SFI option areas

To reaffirm that food production remains the primary purpose of farming, Defra has announced the area of a farm that can be entered into six Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) options will be capped at a total of 25% of the farm area. With effect from 26 March it will not accept any applications where the total area entered into any combination of the options exceeds 25%. There has been limited evidence of farmers entering large amounts of their land into actions that take land away from food production, but Defra says some of these options are being used more than intended and it wishes to protect food security. The six are:

- Flower-rich grass margins (IPM2)
- Pollen and nectar flower mix (AHL1)
- Winter bird food on arable and horticultural land (AHL2)
- Grassy field corners and blocks (AHL3)
- Improved grassland field corners or blocks out of management (IGL1)
- Winter bird food on improved grassland (IGL2).

The legume fallow (NUM3) option which is intended for whole-field rotational use is unaffected as Defra recognises it can play a valuable role in rebuilding soil fertility and cultural blackgrass control.

AHDB forecasts considerable falls in cropping

The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board has taken the rare step of re-running its Early Bird Survey in light of the continued wet weather. Unsurprisingly, the survey shows considerable falls in winter crop areas. The November survey had already pointed to reduced crop areas, however the sustained wet weather has sharply exacerbated the problem. Crop condition has also been affected, likely impacting yields. More information on crop conditions will be obtained by a late March survey. There is a clear intention to plant more spring crops, though the intended areas are lower than in 2020. Grain and oilseed prices have fallen more than input costs for the 2024 crop, which is likely deterring farmers from maximising their spring crop areas. The year-on-year changes in harvest areas include:

- 15% decrease in the wheat area
- 22% decrease in the winter barley area
- 29% increase in the spring barley area
- Arable fallow has nearly doubled (+79%).

Claim window for 2024 farm payments open

The claim window for existing Countryside Stewardship revenue and Environmental Stewardship agreements has opened in England. Farmers must submit an annual declaration or claim form for Countryside Stewardship or Environmental Stewardship before 15 May to receive payment for works carried out through the schemes in 2024. Any claims submitted after 15 May up to the final deadline of 2 September will receive a reduced payment.

Separately, those who wish to transfer some or all their 'reference amount' for delinked payments to another business must do so by 10 May 2024. Farmers may wish to do this if their business has split, merged with another business or been given a new Single Business Identifier number since they were paid the Basic Payment Scheme payment in 2020.

Consultation on food labelling

A consultation has opened on plans to improve UK food labelling by giving shoppers more information about how and where their food was produced. Possible interventions that may improve consumer understanding of the origin of certain foods include how and where origin information is displayed, and on which products origin information should be mandatory. The consultation is also seeking views on proposals to provide clearer information to consumers about the production system in which animals were reared. This includes a mandatory label covering pork, chicken and eggs for both domestic and imported products. It would feature five tiers primarily based on the method of production and how the chosen method of production compares with baseline UK welfare regulations. The [consultation](#) runs until 7 May 2024.

New advisor for food procurement

Will Quince MP has been appointed by Defra as an independent advisor to help improve food procurement in the public sector. His review will investigate:

- How to make the system more accessible to farmers and other smaller businesses
- How to promote high standards for food and catering services
- The opportunities to extend the reach of the existing framework
- How to ensure more compliance with the framework.

Mr Quince worked in the food and drink industry before becoming an MP, and has since held ministerial roles at the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care. The environment secretary hopes the review will increase demand for sustainable and high-welfare food produced by Britain's farmers.

Policy

Scotland: Land Reform Bill

The Scottish government has introduced the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill to parliament. The provisions within the Bill would oblige larger land holdings (over 3,000 hectares or 1,000 hectares for inhabited islands) to engage with communities to produce and review publicly available management plans for their land which will share their objectives and vision. It also provides a greater opportunity for community bodies to register an interest in buying land holdings through the community right-to-buy process. Once such an interest has been registered, the land cannot be sold until the registered body has been given notice, whereupon it can activate its right to buy, if so required. This essentially puts an end to off-market sales. The Bill has a measured aim to diversify land ownership too, meaning properties over 1,000 hectares cannot be sold until a lotting decision has been made by the government.

The Bill would also revise agricultural tenancy law, including rent review, compensation for improvements and resumption and end of tenancy (waygo) procedures as well as the introduction of model terms for environmental leases. Separately the Scottish government has announced that a review of community right-to-buy powers will start this summer and report at the end of 2025.

Protecting the poultry industry from bird flu

Following the UK's worst-ever outbreak of avian influenza, there will be new requirements for all bird keepers to officially register their birds. Currently, only those who keep 50 or more poultry must do so. The new rules cover owners of backyard flocks, birds of prey and pigeon fanciers, but do not affect caged pet birds kept entirely inside a domestic dwelling. Keepers will have to update their information on an annual basis and an online portal is planned to help with this. The mandatory registration requirements will be introduced in late summer or early autumn 2024 and the mandatory annual updates will follow 12 months later.

Next steps in bovine TB control

It is proposed that badger culling will remain an option in targeted areas. The government's latest consultation on bovine tuberculosis control says such areas will be those with both a high level of infection and evidence suggesting badgers are part of the local disease problem. In these targeted areas, culling would continue until the disease situation has improved, based on an annual review by the UK's chief veterinary officer. After that, badger vaccinations would be used to ensure results are maintained. The [consultation](#) also seeks views on Defra assuming the licensing authority role for licences issued under the policy.

Environment & Natural Capital

Woodland creation payments improved

New England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) payments have been announced, while others are being increased. The intention is to bring the current offer in line with the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Countryside Stewardship grants. New payment options include:

- A payment to encourage EWCO applications on low-sensitivity land (£1,100 per hectare)
- A 'Nature Recovery – premium' payment option (£3,300 per hectare)

Some of the other existing additional contributions have been increased:

- Payments for flood risk management have doubled from £500 to £1,000 per hectare
- Payments for recreational access has increased from £2,200 to £3,700 per hectare
- Annual maintenance payments have been raised from £350 to £400 per hectare, per year, for 15 years.

The current maximum rate per hectare available from additional contributions will increase to £11,600, a 45% increase. That will increase to £12,700 in stackable payments if the land is also eligible for the new low-sensitivity

land payment. Standard cost payments remain at a maximum of £10,200 per hectare. If you would like to discuss woodland creation projects please contact [Mark Townsend](#).

Land Use Framework latest

The Land Use Framework was expected to be published in 2023 but did not materialise, the succession of environment secretaries and ministers since the intention was announced in 2022 is thought to be partly responsible. It was expected to help reconcile the competing demands on land use from food production, nature recovery, development and renewable energy, as well as steering the development of Environmental Land Management and Local Nature Recovery Strategies. The latest news is that the framework will be published in the Summer of 2024 and will provide guidance rather than being prescriptive. It is expected to back a 'land sharing' approach rather than 'land sparing' where land is focused on one outcome only.

Small site BNG begins soon

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) will become mandatory for small sites from 2 April. This follows it becoming mandatory for major developments from 12 February this year. BNG means developers in England will be required to deliver a 10% improvement in biodiversity. The final part of the rollout of BNG will apply it to Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, this is planned for November 2025.

What is a small site? For residential developments, they are defined as developments between 1 - 9 dwellings, on a site of less than one hectare, or any site less than 0.5 hectares. For commercial development the floor space created must be under 1,000 square metres or the site area must be less than one hectare.

Nature markets quality standards progress

To help create consistency and integrity within nature markets and minimise instances of greenwashing, Defra has been working with the British Standards Institution (BSI) to develop standards. The BSI has now published the first iteration of its overarching nature markets principles standard for consultation. It centres around a series of principles, including:

- The avoidance of unintended negative consequences
- The intention to create lasting benefit
- Stacking is permitted where there is robust measurement and verification of additionality in place.

The overarching standard is expected to be followed by further standards focusing on the priority areas of biodiversity, nutrients and carbon.

Scotland: Deer management portal launches

NatureScot has launched a new online portal for deer managers to use to apply for or renew licences for controlling deer. It replaces a manual process and should speed up the approval of applications.

Property & Development

Decarbonising home heating is still slow-going

The introduction of the Clean Heat Market Mechanism (CHMM) is expected to be delayed until April 2025, 12 months later than planned. The CHMM is a government proposal to increase competition and reduce prices for clean heat technologies. It involves introducing a rising market standard for heat pumps as a proportion of fossil fuel boiler sales.

The overall journey towards decarbonising heat has been criticised by a National Audit Office report. [Decarbonising home heating](#) concluded aspects of the Department for Energy Security & Net Zero's (DESNZ) overall pathway remain unclear, particularly as DESNZ works towards determining the role of hydrogen in home heating. According to the NAO, DESNZ also needs to get to grips with other longer-term challenges, such as the future of the gas network and plans for reaching harder-to-decarbonise homes. Finally, the report says DESNZ's progress with encouraging households to install heat pumps has been slower than planned because costs remain high and awareness remains low.

Business & Economy

Exemptions from council tax altered

A 100% council tax premium on long-term empty homes in England and Wales comes into force on 1 April, with councils able to spend the money from the next financial year. The rules will apply when a property has been empty for 12 months, rather than the current two years. Councils will be given new powers to introduce the tax premium on second homes in their area from next year. A very limited number of exemptions have also been

announced following a consultation. These will apply to empty properties that are uninhabitable due to extensive renovation, second homes that are not available for use year-round due to planning restrictions or for up to a year on homes that have been inherited to prevent families who are grieving from having to pay.

Other Rural News

And finally... Happiness in history hotspots

The closer you live to heritage sites, the happier you are likely to be. However, a study by Historic England and the culture department found that it's not grand mansions or national symbols that have the greatest impact. Instead, it's our treasured local landmarks, like a disused water mill, a traditional pub or even an old taxi rank that bring us the biggest boost. The biggest impacts are also found in unexpected locations. Stoke-on-Trent's old potteries make it one of the happier heritage sites in the country, while the nation's highest scorer is the southwest London borough of Wandsworth which is home to sites including Battersea Power Station. Economists mapped out heritage sites and then looked at the connection between households and the heritage sites within a one-kilometre radius. A strong correlation between local heritage sites and the life satisfaction of those who live around them was clear.

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

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