

Land Business Update

Week commencing 24th October 2022

Farming

More land let under Farm Business Tenancies but overall let area falls

The area of land let under Farm Business Tenancies (FBTs) grew by 2% in 2021 and the area let under Agricultural Holdings Act (AHA) tenancies fell by a similar amount (2% or 28,000 ha), according to Defra's June Census. The changes means that FBTs now cover more land than AHA tenancies for the first time, although the overall area of land that is let fell by 0.4%.

The Rock Review of the tenant farming sector in England

The Tenancy Working Group, set up to ensure representation of tenant farmers in future farming policies, has published its [report](#). It found that the average term of FBTs is less than four years, which it says gives little certainty for tenants or opportunity to invest. It also says that Defra should consider more fully how tenants can access grants and environmental schemes. The Group has made a large number of recommendations which it says are needed for the sector to play a full part in farming in the future.

Seasonal agricultural workers

The government intends to raise the cap on seasonal agricultural workers from its current level of 40,000 workers a year and also make changes to the shortage occupations list, which will allow key sectors to recruit more overseas staff, according to the Times.

Air and water quality advice now available to all farmers in England

Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) has been expanded to cover the whole of England, so all farmers can benefit from free-of-charge, confidential advice on how to reduce pollution caused by farming practices. Previously, CSF advice had only been available to farmers located in specific catchment areas. The government says that since 2006, CSF has contributed to a decrease of 8% and 12% respectively in phosphorus and sediment levels. CSF support is required for some options under Countryside Stewardship, and CSF officers can provide help in designing a scheme suited to a farm and the priorities in its locality. To benefit from this support, you can contact your CSF officer directly by email – more information is available [here](#).

Save bees & farmers!

More than one million people across Europe have called on the European Commission to come up with firm plans to reduce the use of synthetic pesticides by 80% by 2030, phase them out altogether by 2035 and to restore biodiversity, while supporting farmers in the transition. This is an interesting example of the will of citizens driving policy across a large number of countries. It is the seventh 'European Citizens' Initiative' to have reached the required threshold of numbers of votes. It is also the second relating to pesticides.

Energy

Government considering banning solar farms from most agricultural land

The Guardian has reported that the government is considering changing the definition of 'Best and Most Versatile' agricultural land to include grade 3b, as well as the currently included 1, 2 and 3a. This would effectively ban the development of solar farms on 41% of all land in England and 58% of farmland. The changes appear to have emanated from Defra but are supported by the Prime Minister, who said that farmland should be used to produce 'our fantastic produce'. S&P comment: the UK desperately needs to decarbonise the energy it uses and solar PV is one of the lowest carbon, highest 'energy density' per square meter forms of energy. There is also a large amount of farmland that does not produce much food and could be used for other purposes, such as energy generation (or both food and energy). This said, new solar farms should be of appropriate scale and be developed with proper, open consultation with local communities. Separately, the Prime Minister is reported to have ignored the government's climate advisers, the Climate Change Committee, in opposing an energy-saving campaign this winter.



Environment

Butterfly sightings fall to lowest level in Big Butterfly Count

Sightings of butterflies fell to the lowest level since the start of this major citizen science project in 2010. Butterfly Conservation, which organises the count, says it is the latest sign of a decline driven by habitat loss and intensive farming. The average number of butterflies in each count that is recorded fell to nine, well below the average of 14 since 2010. Another factor affecting butterfly numbers and distribution is climate change, which is driving some species northwards.

Forestry

Government to pay for replanting costs of trees killed due to the drought in England

A new support package has been announced for land managers who have lost a high proportion of trees planted in winter 2021/22. The Extraordinary Payments for Replanting in Exceptional Circumstances (EPREC) will pay a standard rate to replace trees planted under Countryside Stewardship, England Woodland Creation Offer and the Woodland Carbon Fund. It also covers the Urban Tree Challenge Fund, Local Authority Treescapes Fund, Tree Health Pilot and the HS2 Woodland Fund. For further details, please contact [Hugh Williams](#).

Land managers' opinions on trees in the landscape

Forest Research is surveying land managers to understand their opinions on trees as part of the farming landscape. You can take part in their survey [here](#).

Property

Renters avoid EPC homes rated at D or below

More than half of renters say that they are less likely to consider a property with an energy rating of D or below, according to research commissioned by the bank Shawbrook. 1,000 UK landlords and 1,000 private sector tenants were surveyed in June. The significance of the finding is that energy efficiency is becoming more important to tenants – mainly due to cost – and so will start to affect demand for housing and the rent tenants are willing to pay. This trend is independent of the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard requirement for all newly-rented properties in England and Wales to have a C or better EPC by April 2025.

Rural economy

Government failing to properly rural proof its policies

Defra has published its second report on how well the government is rural proofing all policies that affect rural places. It is not happy reading. The report does not show that the government assessed the effect of many of its national initiatives on rural places, according to the Rural Services Network, an independent organisation that lobbies for rural places. The RSN says that the report does not read like an annual review, rather a list of initiatives, and that there is no explanation of if and how new policies will be rural proofed. One of the aims of rural proofing is to show that the nuances of rural places, such as isolation and poor broadband and communication links, have been considered in the design of policies.