

Debate Pack  
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## General debate on farming

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### Summary

There will be general debate on farming on Monday 26 February 2024 in the House of Commons chamber.

# 1

## Farming

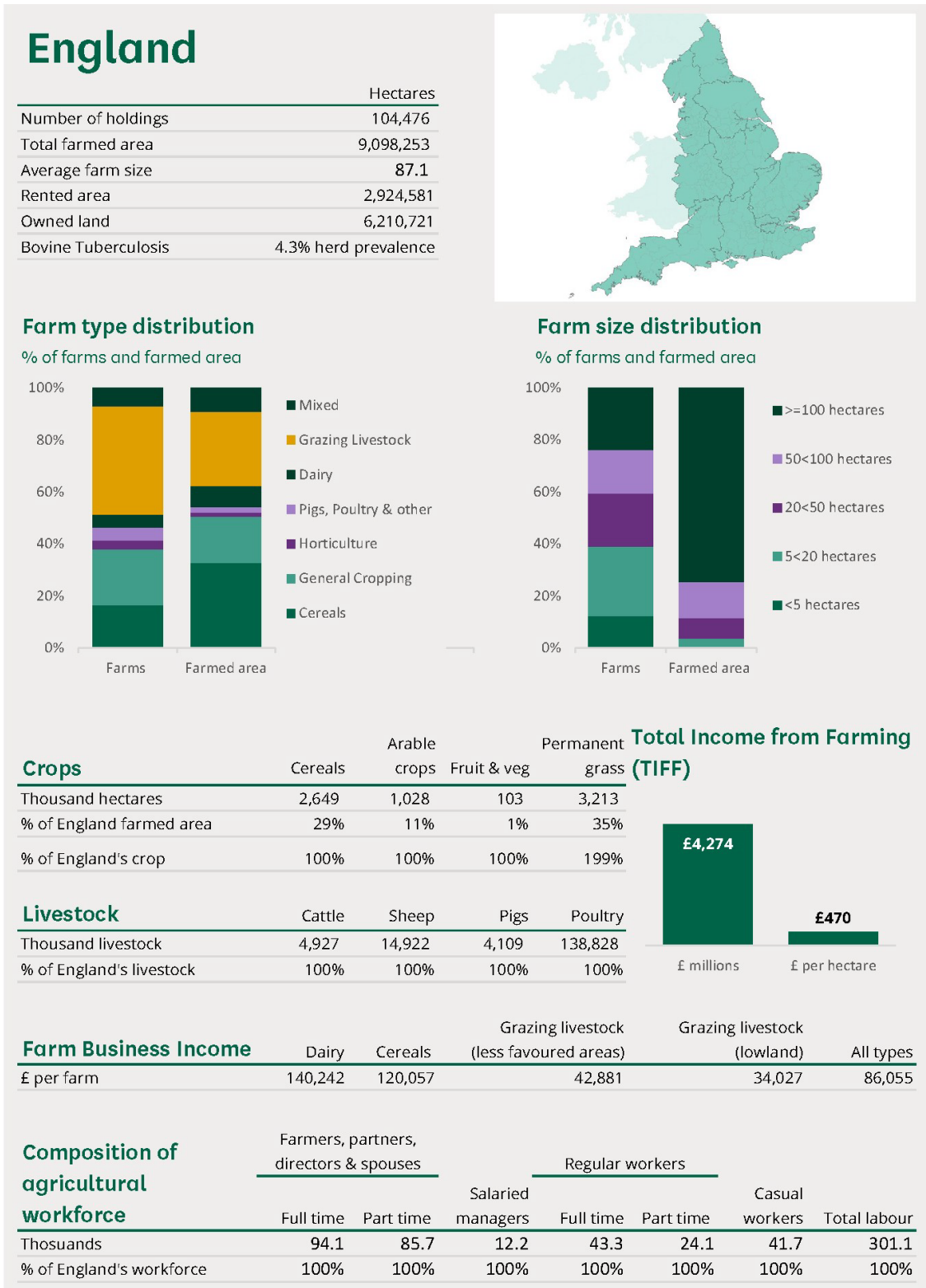
On 20 February 2024, the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak gave a [speech at the annual conference of the National Farmers' Union](#). Agricultural policy is a devolved matter. This briefing provides statistics on farms in England and focuses on some of the Prime Minister's key announcements.

## 1.1

### English farm statistics

There are over 100,000 farms in England covering a total farmed area of 9.1 million hectares. The infographic below shows the latest statistics for farms in England.

For further information, see the Library briefing [English farm statistics: challenges, farm types and regions](#) (September 2023).



Source: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), [Agriculture in the UK](#), July 2023; Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), [Structure of the agricultural industry in England and the UK at June](#), June 2023; Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), [Total income from farming for the regions of England](#), December 2022; Farm Business Survey (FBS), [Farm Business Survey Region Reports](#), Table 4 - Time series Farm Business Income (FBI); TBhub, [Bovine TB Risk Map for Great Britain](#); IbTB, [Bovine TB Interactive](#)

## 1.2

### Farm funding

Farm funding is changing following the UK's exit from the EU. The UK had been part of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) since 1973. CAP provides financial support to farmers in EU member states.

The [Agriculture Act 2020](#) provided a legal framework for the government to develop different approaches to supporting agriculture compared to the EU's CAP. The [Library briefing on the Agriculture Act 2020](#) (December 2020) sets out detailed background and views on the new funding framework.

In England the government is phasing out CAP-style direct payments and is introducing payments for farmers to provide “public goods” such as environmental and animal welfare improvements. These changes are taking place during a seven-year ‘Agricultural Transition’ period which started in 2021. The Library briefing on [Farm funding: implementing new approaches](#) (March 2023) explains the subsequent development and implementation of new payment schemes, such as the [Environmental Land Management \(ELM\) schemes](#) and the [Sustainable Farming Incentive \(SFI\)](#). Funding will also be provided for productivity improvements and innovation on farms.

The government's [Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024](#) (November 2020) described spending place for the first four years of the agricultural transition period. The government committed to “maintain current levels of spending in England, based on 2019 funding levels when the manifesto commitment was made”. This amounts to an average of £2.4 billion a year over that period.<sup>1</sup>

The government published an [Agricultural Transition Plan update](#) in January 2024. [Defra's farming blog](#) also provides regular updates on the government schemes.

### Recent announcements

In his [speech at the NFU conference on 20 February](#), the Prime Minister reiterated [previous commitments that the £2.4 billion annual farming budget would be maintained](#) in this Parliament.

The [government press release on day of the speech](#) said that “around £220 million will be injected into the future-focused technology and productivity schemes”. This funding “doubles investment in productivity schemes, growing the grant offer from £91 million last year to £220 million next year”. The Prime Minister said that [the Improving Farming Productivity scheme](#) would be increased “to invest in things like robotics and barn-top solar” and

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<sup>1</sup> Gov.uk, [Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024](#), 30 November 2020, page 25

that a new round of the [Farming Equipment and Technology fund](#), worth £70 million would open.

He also announced that [the SFI Management Payment](#), which goes towards the administrative costs for farmers participating in SFI agreements, will be doubled to £2,000. Currently, the SFI Management Payment provides £20 per hectare per year, for up to the first 50 hectares entered into an SFI agreement, with a maximum payment of £1,000 per farm business.

Farming organisations such as the Country, Land and Business Association have [welcomed the funding announcements](#), but noted that the money comes out of the existing annual budget of £2.4 billion. In January 2024, the Guardian reported that there had been [“an underspend of £110m in 2021/22 and £117m in 2022/23, meaning £227m of promised funds have not been spent”](#).

## 1.3 Food security

Against a backdrop of increasing food prices, the government organised a [UK Farm to fork summit](#) in May 2023 with representatives from the food supply chain. The government said that the summit would help deliver the ambition in its 2022 [government food strategy](#) to maintain food production at current levels, whereby the UK produces 60% of the food it needs by value. The NFU [welcomed the summit](#). In his speech at the NFU conference on 20 February 2024, the Prime Minister [announced that it would be an annual event](#).

[Section 19 of the Agriculture Act 2020](#) requires the government to produce a report containing an analysis of statistical data relating to food security in the UK, every three years. The first [United Kingdom Food Security Report](#) was published in December 2021, and the next was due by December 2024. The Prime Minister announced on 20 February 2024 that [there would be a new UK-wide annual “Food Security Index”](#), which would be made statutory when Parliamentary time allows. The first draft would be published at the next Farm to fork summit in spring 2024.

Both of these announcements align with the recommendations of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee report on [Food Security](#) (28 July 2023).

## 1.4 Food waste

In 2018, [the government introduced a £15 million pilot scheme](#) to address surplus food from retail and manufacturing. The food redistribution charity FareShare noted that government funding ended in 2020. In 2023, [FareShare](#)

and over 1000 charities called on the government to provide £25 million per year for food redistribution.

The Prime Minister announced on 20 February that “one way to improve food security is to stop millions of tonnes of good, fresh farm food from going to waste”. He announced that the government would provide £15 million “to redirect that surplus into the hands of those who need it”.

Although they had campaigned for £25 million, the Prime Minister’s recent announcement of £15 million was welcomed by FareShare and its partners.

## 1.5 Supply chain fairness

Section 29 of the Agriculture Act 2020 allows the government to impose fair dealing obligations on business purchase of agricultural products. This would require secondary legislation. For further information and views on why section 29 was introduced, see the Library briefing on The Agriculture Act 2020 (December 2020).

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has been reviewing four sectors (dairy, pigs, eggs and fresh produce), including considering whether to use the powers under section 29:

- In February 2021, Defra announced a New Code of Conduct to ensure a fairer dairy supply chain, following a public consultation in 2020. In April 2023, a joint letter from food and farming organisations to Defra urged the government to publish the Code of Conduct. In July 2023, the Farming Minister said that the regulations would come into force later that year. Regulations were laid on 22 February 2024 (see below).
- In July 2022, Defra published its response to the consultation on Contractual practice in the UK pig sector, which was held in early 2022. The response said that the UK government would commence work developing regulations for pig contracts, using section 29. Regulations have not yet been published.
- Between October and December 2023, Defra consulted on Contractual relationships in the UK egg industry. A government response has not yet been published.
- Defra consulted on Contractual relationships in the UK fresh produce industry, between December 2023 and February 2024. A government response has not yet been published.

## Recent announcements

In his speech on 20 February, the Prime Minister said [that regulations would be laid the next day for the dairy sector](#). [The Fair Dealing Obligations \(Milk\) Regulations 2024](#) were laid on 21 February.<sup>2</sup> The [draft explanatory memorandum](#) (PDF) explains that the regulations “impose obligations on business purchasers in relation to the contracts they make for the purchase of cow’s milk, to improve fairness and transparency in the UK dairy sector”.

The Prime Minister also said that a review of the poultry sector would be launched. On 20 February, the [NFU reported that Defra is expected to consult stakeholders](#) on whether the sheep and beef sectors should follow.

Farming groups have also called for the [Groceries Supply Code of Practice](#) to be changed to provide more protections for farmers that supply supermarkets. For further information, see the Library briefing on a [Debate on an e-petition to reform the Groceries Supply Code of Practice to better protect farmers](#) (January 2024).

## 1.6

## Permitted development rights

In his speech to the NFU conference the Prime Minister stated [that the government would lay legislation](#) so farmers “can create bigger farm shops or outdoor sports venues”. The [government press release on the speech](#) (20 February 2024) explained that the government wanted to “cut bureaucratic red tape around permitted development rights so farmers can easily develop buildings and diversify earnings through farm shops”.

The Prime Minister said legislation was expected in April 2024. This is likely to be secondary legislation to amend [The Town and Country Planning \(General Permitted Development\) \(England\) Order 2015](#).

For more information on permitted development rights, see the Library briefing on [Planning in England: Permitted development and change of use](#) (February 2024).

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<sup>2</sup> The statutory instrument is subject to the draft affirmative procedure, meaning it must be approved by both Houses before becoming law.



## 2

## News and press releases

NFU press release

21 February 2024

[New survey shows importance of British farming to voters](#)

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs press release

20 February 2024

[Government underlines commitment to British farmers](#)

Guardian

19 February 2024

[English farmers to be offered 'largest ever' grant scheme amid food security concerns](#)

NFU press release

10 January 2024

[NFU responds to latest changes in roll out of ELM scheme](#)

NFU update

[SFI expansion welcome but deliverability questions remain](#)

FT

4 January 2024

[UK government sets out bigger post-Brexit subsidies for farmers](#)

General debate on farming

NFU press release

17 November 2023

[NFU calls for action six months on from Farm to Fork Summit](#)

Farmers' Weekly

17 July 2023

[Food security threatened by lack of government support, report warns](#)

LSE blog

6 June 2023

[How has UK agricultural policy changed since Brexit?](#)

## 3 Parliamentary material

### 3.1 Debates

Westminster Hall debate - [Support for British Farming](#)

HC Deb 23 November 2023 | Vol 723 c116WH-

Commons debate - [National Food Strategy and Food Security](#)

HC Deb 27 October 2022 | Vol 721 c436-

### 3.2 PQs

[Agriculture: Government Assistance](#)

Asked by: Sobel, Alex

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what steps she is taking to support restorative and regenerative farming and agriculture across the UK.

Answering member: Mark Spencer | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

We are speeding up and refining the rollout of our Environmental Land Management schemes, so they work for farmers, support resilient and sustainable food production and contribute to our ambitious targets including water quality, biodiversity, habitat creation and net zero.

The Countryside Stewardship scheme includes actions that can form part of a regenerative or restorative farming approach; to improve soil quality, enhance biodiversity, decrease water pollution and restore, create and manage habitats. We are expanding the Countryside Stewardship scheme to make around 30 additional actions available to farmers by the end of 2024, as well as targeting our funding towards actions in places where they can have the biggest impacts, in ways that are joined up across larger areas.

Later this year, we will open the next round of Countryside Stewardship Mid Tier, Higher Tier and Wildlife Offers for farmers and land managers wanting to start their agreements in January 2024.

Organic farmers will continue to have access to the Countryside Stewardship organic options, and other actions that may be relevant such as those relating to grassland, arable land, permanent crops, boundaries, waterbodies, and woodland and trees.

The Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme was launched in June 2022. Farmers and land managers can apply for the scheme at any time, through a simple application process. People with a Sustainable Farming Incentive agreement can also have a Countryside or Environmental Stewardship agreement, so long as we are not paying for the same actions twice on the same piece of land, and the actions for which we are paying are compatible.

The Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme contains standards that can support a regenerative approach and are designed so that there are options available for all types of farmer. The three standards available now are:

- arable and horticultural soils
- improved grassland soils
- moorland (introductory level)

The six new standards being rolled out in 2023 are:

- hedgerows standard
- integrated pest management standard
- nutrient management standard
- arable and horticultural land standard
- improved grassland standard
- low input grassland standard

HC Deb 07 February 2023 | PQ 136775

### [Agriculture: Civil Service Agencies](#)

Asked by: Lord Taylor of Warwick

To ask His Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to ensure that agricultural expertise is represented in government agencies.

Answering member: Lord Benyon | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

We recognise that knowledge of agricultural sectors and skills is important to support the sector effectively. We ensure this through the staff we recruit, the appointments we make and how we devise and deliver policy.

Through our reforms to farming policy we have involved over 3,000 farmers in so-called 'tests and trials' and have over 800 farmers helping us pilot the Sustainable Farming Incentive routinely feeding in their insights and experiences. We continue to step up our partnership with the farming community through our co-design groups, which draw on industry knowledge to recommend improvements to Defra schemes. Over 1,000 people in farming volunteered to take part, including beef, sheep and cereal farmers.

Public appointments are promoted to relevant sectors via our social media channels and through stakeholder engagement. Defra works closely with Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) to recruit Board Members with relevant skills and expertise. This has included specifically recruiting from the agriculture sector for the Boards of the Environment Agency; Natural England; Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board; Forestry Commission; and the National Park Authorities.

In accordance with the principles of the Partnerships between Departments and ALBs: Code of Good Practice, Defra has an agreed Framework Document with each of its key Executive Agencies setting out the broad framework in which they will operate. As part of such arrangements, the ALB is responsible for the recruitment, retention and motivation of its people ensuring they are encouraged to acquire the appropriate professional, management and other expertise to achieve their organisational objectives.

The Rural Payments Agency recognises the importance of agricultural expertise in the delivery of its services. For instance, it has a number of activities to capture insight which include: regular engagement with farming bodies and associations; the creation in 2022 of a farmer panel with over 750 members; learning from feedback directly received from farmers in their day to day dealings with the agency; and direct engagement with farmers through a series of face to face events all of which are improving the service and the farmer experience of dealing with government.

The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) has significant areas of expertise related to farming and agriculture: veterinary and animal health officers (livestock health and welfare), plant health, marketing of produce, egg marketing, international trade of plants, livestock and animal by-products, disease outbreak and control, scientific expertise of farm animal diseases. APHA has run recruitment campaigns for veterinary and scientific resource and plant health inspectors, has various apprenticeship schemes and specific learning and development for the various professions. APHA also

collaborates with academia and has an Academic Board to support further scientific education and qualifications.

The Veterinary Medicines Directorate has a range of experienced employees to ensure veterinary medicines for agricultural use are used safely and responsibly. This includes veterinary assessors and inspectors, as well as specific teams (such as the Antimicrobial Resistance and Residues Teams) who engage with stakeholders from across the agricultural sector to ensure compliance with the Veterinary Medicines Regulations and to inform policy decisions.

HL Deb 17 January 2023 | PQ HL4184

### 3.3

## Committee report

House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee inquiry

[Environmental change and food security](#)

Report published 8 December 2023

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