

Rural Report

A monthly newsletter focusing on issues of rural life and farming of relevance to the work of the Church of England in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich.

Information is drawn from organisations connected with the countryside (in its widest sense) within Suffolk and beyond.

The newsletter will produce brief reports giving factual information on a range of issues. Items may be of general interest or provide opportunity for prayer.

If more details are needed on any of the topics mentioned, please contact Brian Chester at bc@bcnewslink.com or call 01572 757600



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■ **The NFU reports** that it has secured energy support for horticulture businesses under the Industrial Energy Transformation Fund. But continued calls for poultry production to be included have so far been unheeded. Glasshouses will be eligible for a higher tier of government support targeted at high energy use industries. Some £185 million is available under the Fund's third round.

■ **Thérèse Coffey**, MP for Suffolk Coastal and former Environment Secretary, is planning to introduce measures she said would make it easier for the police to catch irresponsible dog owners whose pets attack farm livestock and secure more prosecutions. The move follows the government's decision earlier this year to pause plans for a raft of new animal welfare protections, including measures to strengthen and expand laws on livestock worrying. *Eastern Daily Press*

■ **The Suffolk Young Farmers Club's** Christmas Charity Tractor Run raised more than £3000 for East Anglia's Children's Hospices. A convoy of 130 vintage and modern tractors travelled along 30 miles of Suffolk's country roads.

■ **NFU Education** is now reaching at least 500,000 students across the country. More than 250 ambassadors lead the NFU's *Farmers for Schools* programme which helps schoolchildren learn about the work of British farmers and growers - and how this goes hand-in-hand with caring for the land and the environment.

■ **After a much publicised** dispute, British Sugar and NFU Sugar have agreed a deal for the 2024/25 sugar beet contract which offers growers a choice of options around a basic price per tonne. NFU Sugar Board chair Michael Sly described the negotiations as 'very difficult'.

■ **Operation Turtle Dove**, a partnership including the Norfolk-based Pensthorpe Conservation Trust, the RSPB and Natural England, is aiming to help reverse a decline in numbers of this migratory bird. Working with 260 farms and another 107 land managers to create nesting and feeding grounds in the birds' remaining strongholds across eastern and southern England, the project created more than 360 turtle dove feeding plots in 2023 - 100 more than last year.

■ **TV chefs** and food writers joined the Soil Association in sending an open letter to the Prime Minister, warning that ultra-processed foods are 'blinding' children to the flavours and textures of whole foods and posing long-term risks to their health. The letter urged Rishi Sunak to deliver five-a-day to a million children using the association's *Food for Life* 'whole school approach' to good food with sensory education and better school meals.

<https://www.soilassociation.org/blogs/2023/december/12/ultra-processed-foods-are-robbing-children-of-the-experience-of-learning-to-eat/>

■ **Rising demand** for sustainable fibres and the ability of crops such as flax and hemp to capture carbon from the air could see their return in arable rotations, offering farmers an alternative income. They are also attractive in being true break crops for cereals that do not need heavy chemical use. *Farmers Weekly*

■ **The UK cattle** breeding herd (both dairy and beef) reported in December at 3.24 million head, was 1.9% down on the same point in 2022. The suckler herd shrank 3.8% to 1.4 million head, while the dairy herd was stable at 1.8 million head. Despite higher beef prices, inflationary pressure on costs, together with reducing farm support, is likely to cause beef cow numbers to continue to fall.

■ **Optimism** about farming prospects for the near future is proving hard to come by, with farmers particularly concerned about the state of their output markets and the continued dismantling of old-style EU farm supports according to *Farmers Weekly's Sentiment Survey*. Up to 31% said 2023 had been a 'bad' or 'terrible' year, compared with just 17% who said it had been a 'good or 'great' year. Extreme weather and rising input costs were cited as the main challenges. When asked how they felt about prospects for their farming businesses in the coming months, 37% are now 'pessimistic' or 'very pessimistic', compared with 28% in last year's survey. More than 650 farmers and farm managers took part.

This newsletter was initiated under the guidance of the Diocesan Rural Affairs Group set up as a means of identifying current rural issues and considering how the church should respond.