COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR UPLAND FARMING

Westminster Hall, Ben Maguire MP

Tuesday 24 November 2026

- **Upland farming makes an essential contribution to food production, biodiversity, landscape management and the economic and social sustainability of rural communities. Government support must recognise the especial challenges of farming in these areas and the public benefits which upland farmers provide.**

- **Upland and hill farmers face significant disadvantages compared with those farming more productive lowland areas. Poorer soils, steep terrain, harsher weather, shorter growing seasons and limited opportunities for diversification all contribute to lower productivity and tighter profit margins.**

- **Maintaining viable farming businesses is essential to the conservation of upland landscapes and the habitats and species they support. Farming and conservation should be complementary objectives, rather than treated as competing priorities.**

- **The withdrawal of direct agricultural payments, which will be completed in 2027, makes it particularly important that the replacement system provides sufficient, accessible and reliable support for upland farmers. Environmental payments must not simply transfer the financial burden of delivering public goods onto farmers without appropriate support.**

- **The government has recognised some of the challenges facing upland farming through changes to the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), including increased payments for certain moorland actions. However, further work is needed to ensure that all upland farming systems can access meaningful and appropriate support.**

- **Agricultural policy must recognise the contribution of all those involved in managing upland landscapes, including farmers, commoners, tenants and other land managers. This includes grouse moor managers, whose work can complement that of farmers in maintaining important habitats and supporting rural employment.**

Background

- Upland farming is an integral part of the countryside and the rural communities that depend upon it. Many upland farms have been managed by successive generations and are responsible for maintaining some of our most distinctive and valued landscapes.

- Farmers in upland and other marginal areas are generally limited to low-intensity livestock production, particularly sheep and beef cattle. They face higher production costs, lower yields and greater exposure to weather and market volatility than many lowland farming businesses.

- Despite these constraints, upland farmers provide significant public benefits. Their management helps maintain important grassland and moorland habitats, supports biodiversity, protects landscapes and contributes to water management and carbon storage.

- The skills and experience of farmers are often the best means of achieving positive environmental outcomes. Their understanding of the land, its habitats and the practical consequences of different management approaches is invaluable.

- If farming in upland areas were to become economically unviable, there would be serious consequences for the landscapes and communities which depend upon it. The loss of livestock grazing and active land management could result in the deterioration of important habitats and the loss of traditional farming skills and knowledge.

- Upland farming also supports the wider rural economy, including local businesses, food processors, livestock markets, tourism and hospitality. The loss of farming businesses would have consequences extending well beyond the agricultural sector itself.

Agricultural funding and support

- The transition away from the Common Agricultural Policy has fundamentally changed the way farmers in England receive public support. The Basic Payment Scheme ended in 2023 and was replaced by delinked payments, which are being phased out and will end in 2027.[1]

- This transition has presented especial challenges for upland farmers, whose businesses are often less able to generate sufficient income from agricultural production alone. The historical importance of direct payments to these businesses makes it essential that replacement support reflects their circumstances.

- The Countryside Alliance believes that agricultural policy must recognise the principle that farmers working in more marginal areas require appropriate financial support to maintain viable businesses and deliver the public benefits associated with their management of the land.

- Environmental Land Management schemes have an important role to play, but they must be designed to work for the full range of farming systems. Upland farmers should not be disadvantaged because the environmental actions available to them are less numerous, more difficult to deliver or less financially attractive than those available to farmers elsewhere.

- The introduction of SFI26 and increased payment rates for some moorland actions[2] are welcome developments. However, the government must ensure that these changes translate into meaningful support on the ground. Scheme funding must be sufficient to meet demand, and farmers need confidence that opportunities will remain available over the longer term. In September, Window 2 of SFI 2026 exhausted its budget within six hours of opening to applications.[3]
- The government should also ensure that Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier and other environmental funding opportunities are accessible to upland farmers, including those

[1] Defra, Delinked payments: replacing the Basic Payment Scheme, 08.02.22-04.11.26
[2] House of Lords, Sustainable Farming Incentive: Hill Farming, 18.09.26
[3] Defra, SFI26: Window 2 now closed, 22.09.26

operating on common land and tenanted farms. Owing to limitations in how Rural Payments Agency systems operate, this has not previously been possible although the government maintains that it will be before the end of the year.[4] Scheme design must take account of the practical realities of these different landholding and management arrangements.

- Above all, farmers need stability and certainty. Frequent changes to schemes, eligibility requirements and payment rates make it difficult for businesses to plan, invest and make long-term decisions about the management of their land.

Farming and conservation

- Upland farmers are custodians of some of our most important natural and cultural landscapes. Their work supports a wide range of habitats and species, many of which depend upon continued active management.

- We are concerned by approaches to conservation that regard the removal or substantial reduction of farming activity as inherently beneficial to the natural environment. This overlooks the important role that traditional farming practices and livestock grazing play in maintaining many upland habitats.

- The abandonment of farming in remote areas could lead to the loss of important grassland and moorland habitats, as well as the traditional skills and knowledge needed to manage them. Conservation policy should recognise the benefits of appropriate grazing and active land management.

- Other forms of land management can also make an important contribution. Grouse moor management, for example, can support habitat management, predator control and the maintenance of moorland landscapes, which attract visitors and support rural tourism. Such activities can complement the work of farmers and support employment and economic activity in remote rural communities.

- Agricultural and environmental policy should therefore seek to accommodate and work constructively with the full range of responsible land management practices, rather than creating unnecessary divisions between farming, shooting and conservation.

Countryside Alliance position

- The Agriculture Act 2020 recognised the importance of uplands and other landscapes by explicitly including them within the definition of cultural or natural heritage for which financial assistance can be provided.[5]

- This recognition must be reflected in the government's approach to agricultural funding. Upland farming should not be expected to compete on equal terms with more productive agricultural areas for support without proper recognition of the additional costs and constraints involved.

[4] House of Commons, Environmental Land Management Schemes, 03.11.26
[5] Agriculture Act 2020, S.1 (5)

- The government should ensure that its funding arrangements provide a specific, long-term commitment to upland farming, with appropriate financial recognition of the environmental, economic and social benefits these businesses produce.

- In particular, the delivery mechanism for agricultural support must be accessible to farmers of common land on an equivalent basis to other farmers. It is disappointing that this facility has been overlooked in the design of Rural Payments Agency systems and while it is welcome that the government intends to introduce it shortly, the window for its promised introduction before the end of the year is closing rapidly.

- Environmental schemes should complement viable agricultural production, not become a substitute for it. Supporting food production, protecting biodiversity and maintaining the character of the countryside should be mutually reinforcing objectives. Maintaining domestic livestock production in upland areas is part of a resilient national food system and can and should contribute to UK food security.

- The future of the uplands depends upon maintaining thriving farming businesses and supporting the people who manage these treasured landscapes. Government policy must provide the certainty and financial support needed to make that possible.

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