

CHEFFINS

# RURAL

ISSUE 29

SCENE

SUMMER 2026

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A photograph of a man with curly brown hair, wearing a blue and white checkered button-down shirt and blue jeans, standing in a field of tall yellow flowers. The background shows rolling green hills under a bright sky.

## HOW ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF GOOD ADVICE ALLOWED THIS CAMBRIDGESHIRE FARM TO FLOURISH

James Wombwell, of Rectory Farm in Ickleton, Cambridgeshire, reflects on his family's longstanding relationship with Cheffins, and how the firm has supported the farm through each phase of its growth over the past century.

This year marks a major milestone for our family – 100 harvests at Rectory Farm – and it seems an appropriate time to look back on the progress the business has made while also considering the collaborations which have

helped shape our journey. Principal among them is Cheffins, which celebrated its own 200th anniversary last year.

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Eli Wombwell, my great-great-grandfather bought Rectory Farm in the spring of 1927 for £9,500 from the Dean and Canons of Windsor. At 613 acres, Rectory Farm would become the foundation of our farming business and the deal, brokered by Cheffins, marked the beginning of a relationship that has endured for 100 years.

The farm itself was already ahead of its time. Built in 1829 by the Deans of Canterbury as a 'Model Farm', it saw three stockyards for cattle, horses and pigs, a granary with a loft, a substantial flint barn and a row of flint cottages, all set on a chalky ridge at the end of the Chiltern Hills. A harvest was already in the ground in 1926, and the farm was operating as a traditional mixed enterprise powered by horses and threshing machines with a 10-person strong workforce. At this time, wildlife was plentiful. The crops were packed with insects and broadleaved

weeds, heaps of tail corn fed lapwings, turtle doves and partridges, while brown hares were in abundance.

However, this was an uncertain time for UK agriculture. The repeal of the Agriculture Act in 1921 had removed guaranteed crop prices, leaving British farmers exposed to volatile markets and growing foreign competition. It was a period of uncertainty, with mechanisation emerging but not yet dominant and only a couple of years before the Great Depression which would characterise much of the 1920s and 1930s.

Many farms were struggling to adapt, but Eli Wombwell was on an expansion drive. Together with his sons Albert and Lew, he embarked on an ambitious programme of modernisation. Within two years, an additional 50 acres had been secured through Cheffins, and Rectory Farm was producing a mix of arable crops alongside sheep, cattle and pigs, with hay regularly supplied to Newmarket's horseracing industry.

Rectory Farm sat alongside two other farms owned in Fulbourn and saw the beginning of the family's drive to combine traditional farming with new technology and opportunity.

#### The start of agricultural mechanisation

By the early 1930s, Rectory Farm was already setting the pace. Albert Wombwell, who would later take over the business, was relentless in his pursuit of efficiency. At the Royal Show in 1934, he purchased a TD40 International crawler – the first diesel crawler in the country, which is still on the farm today and was used to pull a Clayton Shuttleworth combine. This was the start of major investment in machinery, and by 1943, Albert had imported a Massey Harris 20 self-propelled combine from Canada – one of the first to arrive in England.

Albert installed one of the UK's earliest grain dressing plants and coke-fired driers, opening the door to contract drying

for neighbouring farms, which was a forward-thinking move long before it became commonplace. The business also moved into sugar beet production, supplying the newly established British Sugar factory at Felsted.

At this point, Rectory Farm employed eight people and produced sheep, pigs, cattle, malting barley and a variety of arable crops, however, as the mechanisation of agriculture would continue to evolve, the workforce dwindled in line with the growth of production.

Throughout this period of rapid development, Cheffins remained a constant – advising, facilitating land purchases, providing a marketplace through its auctioneering division from which to sell livestock.

#### Between the Wars – Dig for Britain and a focus on arable production

The next chapter fell to my grandfather, Dick Wombwell, who took over during one of the most transformative periods in British agriculture. Between the wars, the "Dig for Britain" campaign accelerated the importance of domestic food production.

Rectory Farm adapted decisively, transitioning from a mixed system to a fully arable enterprise. Like many farmers, Dick removed hedgerows and merged fields to improve efficiency and output.

Fast forward to the 1950s and 1960s, UK agriculture was quickly evolving. It saw an industry focused on maximising production, improved stability for prices and the end of rationing, this was a time which allowed Rectory Farm to embrace change and, with support from Cheffins, prioritise expansion. Dick was passionate about arable farming and steered Rectory Farm through the development of agrochemicals and fertilisers, which allowed for a smaller workforce and greater efficiency. In 1977 he entered a series of national awards for his malting barley and would go on to be the runner-up in the National Championships.

Mechanisation and productivity were the priorities of the era, but Dick's passion for machinery also became a defining feature of his time on the farm. A regular at early Cheffins machinery sales – then trading as Grain & Chalk – he built an extensive collection of vintage tractors and equipment over four decades, including a rare Massey Harris 21 combine and a McCormick-Deering WD40.

In 2021, following his passing, Cheffins hosted an auction for part of his collection. This saw hundreds of vintage tractor collectors pass through the farm gates, with pieces selling as far as Scotland, bringing the story of the collection full circle.

#### Diversification becomes the next driver

When my father, Peter Wombwell, took the reins, the focus shifted once again – this time towards diversification and strategic land use.

Working closely with Cheffins, he identified opportunities beyond traditional agriculture. A landmark moment came in 2001 with the development and sale of land for the Imperial War Museum at Duxford, a project brokered by Cheffins that demonstrated the value of long-term strategic advice. Peter worked closely with Paul Gooderham, a Chairman of Cheffins for some 15 years who has been succeeded by his son Simon – now Managing Partner at the firm. Peter would go on to buy a further 136 acres to add to Rectory Farm, including



The Baulks, 96 acres of grassland which now underpins a major biodiversity net gain (BNG) project. It was also Peter who introduced an active approach to environmental schemes, including collaborations with the RSPB.

Peter was responsible for setting up the contracting side of Rectory Farm, something which is now an essential part of our day-to-day business. He set up a series of contracting agreements across thousands of acres of farms locally, ensuring that the Wombwell family would continue to be one of the go-to agricultural businesses in the region.

Cheffins' role evolved alongside the business, providing guidance on everything from the Basic Payment Scheme to land agency, succession planning and also as an outlet to buy and sell machinery. One of the major inputs from Cheffins during this period was the collaborative project set up with neighbouring farmers, which has run for 20 years and allowed for Rectory Farm to be the location for RAGT Seeds, the European leader in the development of cereals and protein-rich species. This project, which was spearheaded by Simon Gooderham, has become a profitable and successful joint venture between three different farms.

#### Rectory Farm today

Today, Rectory Farm is a substantial and highly diversified business, spanning 730 acres of owned land, 220 acres rented and a further 1,500 acres under contract farming agreements.

As the profitability of arable farming comes under question, diversification is now central to our business. A 12-acre pick-your-own pumpkin patch attracts around 10,000 visitors each October, while new ventures also include plans for a pop-up restaurant showcasing beef and venison produced on the farm.

Across the traditional farmyard, buildings have been sensitively converted to provide additional income streams. Cheffins has supported us in the ongoing property management, the sales and letting of residential and commercial properties, as well as providing planning advice.

#### Farming with the environment in mind

Environmental delivery is now a key pillar of the business, with The Baulks being the flagship project. Situated on archaeologically sensitive land featuring rare strip lynchets and adjacent to Coploe Pit – a local wildlife site – the area has been transformed from marginal farmland into a rich habitat.

Grassland restoration, wildflower establishment, pond creation and targeted habitat management have created a site capable of delivering up to 250 BNG units – a major project which was suggested by Cheffins. Two years in the making, we are now ready to sell these BNG units directly into the marketplace through Cheffins – a strategy which we hope will be profitable considering the significant development centred on Cambridge and the surrounding area.

Sustainability also underpins the wider farming system. We invested heavily in a digestate lagoon 10 years ago, which has changed our farming process. This has reduced our artificial fertiliser use by around 50 per cent, while not impacting yields.

In addition, with the support of Cheffins, Rectory Farm has been in Higher Level Countryside Stewardship and Sustainable Farming Incentive schemes since 2019. This has included prioritising soil health through cover cropping and integrated livestock rotations.

#### Integrated systems and long-term partnerships

Modern-day Rectory Farm has seen a return to livestock, which was so integral to the business in the early 20th century. It now forms a key part of the rotation, with 3,500 store lambs reared annually and a 60-head suckler beef herd integrated into the arable system. Sheep graze stubble turnips undersown in standing crops, improving soil fertility and reducing reliance on artificial fertiliser.

The arable rotation is equally diverse, including wheat, malting barley, sugar beet, oilseed rape, peas, beans and seed crops, alongside collaborative ventures such as potato production with local growers.

Beyond its own boundary, Rectory Farm delivers a comprehensive range of contracting services. Many agreements have been in place for over 40 years, reflecting a strong emphasis on trust and long-term collaboration. Services range from full farm management to individual tasks, including establishment, harvesting, fencing, hedge planting and environmental work. We take pride in working closely with landowners to achieve the highest yield for their land, while keeping up with new technology or funding opportunities.

Cheffins continues to support these activities, helping structure agreements and ensuring access to grants and evolving support schemes.


#### A partnership for the future

From a single land purchase in 1926 to a modern, diversified farming business, the story of Rectory Farm is one of continuous change. For a century, Cheffins has been a constant partner in that journey.

As agriculture faces rising input costs, policy uncertainty and market volatility, the need for resilience has never been greater. I believe that by working closely with our advisors and by making the most of opportunities in technology, the future of farming is an exciting one. We now need to concentrate on building resilient farming businesses, as diverse as possible, but with the ability to pivot quickly to make the most of opportunities on offer.

Now entering its second century, Rectory Farm is actively seeking new contract farming and shared farming opportunities – continuing a legacy built on progressive thinking and trusted advice.

**James Wombwell**  
Rectory Farm, Ickleton



“Modern day Rectory Farm has seen a return to livestock, which was so integral to the business in the early 20th century.”

# An update on the revised National Planning Policy Framework

## Everything you need to know about the proposed changes and what they could mean for rural landowners

In December 2025, the Government launched a consultation on a revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), signalling the next stage in its wider planning reforms. The draft is not yet adopted policy, and some changes may still be refined before the final version is published. Even so, the direction of travel is becoming increasingly clear: the Government wants a planning system that is faster, more certain and more rules-based than the current Framework. The consultation opened on 16 December 2025, closed on 10 March 2026, and Government guidance says it expects to publish its response and update the Framework in summer 2026.

The existing NPPF already contains helpful policy support in a number of rural areas, including farm diversification, rural business growth, building re-use, renewable energy and some forms of rural housing. But much of that support is currently spread across different parts of the document and often has to be pieced together. The draft NPPF seeks to recast national policy into a clearer structure, separating plan-making policies from decision-making policies and expressing more directly what kinds of development should, in principle, be supported. The opportunity is not simply that some policies may become more positive. It is that they may become clearer to apply and harder to resist where the proposal falls within a defined category.

That distinction is important, because not everything in the draft is genuinely new. Some of the headlines are, in reality,

existing policy repackaged in a new style. The current NPPF already supports the sustainable growth and expansion of rural businesses, the diversification of agricultural and other land-based businesses, rural tourism and leisure, rural exception sites and renewable or low-carbon energy. It also already allows isolated countryside homes in a tightly defined set of circumstances. So landowners should be wary of assuming that every apparently new rural provision represents a major shift in substance. In several areas, the draft is less a revolution than a clearer and more directive restatement of policy that already exists.

Where the draft does look genuinely significant is in its attempt to create a more explicit rulebook on the principle of development. The consultation paper says the aim is to build a clearer, more rules-based set of national policies into the Framework, including making policy more certain and more directive in decision-making. That is a notable shift in tone from the more interpretive style of the current NPPF. For rural landowners, the key question is therefore not simply whether policy is more supportive overall, but whether the draft creates a clearer route for countryside sites that would previously have been viewed as marginal or policy-sensitive.

That more rules-based approach is reinforced by the draft transitional provisions in Annex A. This is potentially one of the most important practical changes for landowners. Under the current NPPF, existing Local Plan policies are not treated as out-of-date simply because they were adopted before a revised Framework, and they continue

to attract weight according to how closely they align with national policy. The December 2025 draft takes a much firmer approach. It says the revised Framework would be a material consideration from the day of publication, and that development plan policies which are in any way inconsistent with the new national decision-making policies should be given very limited weight, unless they have been examined and adopted against the new Framework. The consultation paper makes clear that this is intended to make the new national policies bear on the system from day one by ensuring inconsistent local policies are immediately given very limited weight.

In practical terms, that means the revised NPPF could take effect immediately. If adopted this summer, no existing Local Plan will have been examined and adopted against it on day one. The result is that where an adopted Local Plan policy conflicts with the new national decision-making policies, that local policy would be left carrying very limited weight. The development plan would still remain the formal starting point for decisions, because planning legislation requires applications to be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. But in real-world decision-taking, the new NPPF would in effect take primacy wherever there is conflict. For landowners, that could be highly significant. In places where older countryside policies have historically been used to resist otherwise sensible development, the revised Framework could materially weaken that line of objection long before a full Local Plan review takes place.

"...the final NPPF is likely to leave rural landowners with a clearer and more opportunity-led framework than the one in place today."

Against that background, the most important provision for many rural landowners is draft Policy S5, which deals with development outside settlements. This is one of the clearest examples of the new rules-based approach. Rather than relying on a collection of separate policies scattered across the Framework, S5 sets out a list of development types that should be approved outside settlements unless the adverse effects substantially outweigh the benefits. In effect, it creates a more direct national policy route for certain forms of countryside development. For landowners, that could be a material change. The debate may increasingly become less about whether development outside a settlement is acceptable in principle at all, and more about whether a proposal falls within one of the categories that national policy now supports.

That is where the draft may unlock real opportunities. S5 includes limited infilling within groups of houses, rural exception sites, certain housing or mixed-use schemes close to railway stations, rural businesses and services where an out-of-settlement location is necessary, the re-use, extension, alteration or replacement of substantial existing buildings, and redevelopment of previously developed land. It also allows room for development responding to evidenced unmet need where there is a sound policy basis for it eg a shortfall in the delivery of self-build homes. For many landowners, those categories will immediately raise obvious possibilities: underused yards, redundant agricultural buildings, previously developed parts of a holding, and land adjoining existing villages or being bounded by existing groups of homes.

Farm diversification is another area where the draft should be read positively, albeit with some care. The existing NPPF already supports diversification, but the draft expresses that support in more practical, real-world terms. Draft Policy E4 refers more directly to development that helps maintain and enhance farm viability and sustainability, and gives examples that will resonate with rural businesses: livestock accommodation, on-farm reservoirs, greenhouses, polytunnels, farm shops and seasonal workers' accommodation ancillary to the agricultural use. That does not amount to a blank cheque for development in the countryside, but it does suggest a more pragmatic national policy stance towards the working needs of modern farming and rural enterprise.

One area likely to be of particular interest to rural landowners is renewable energy. The current NPPF is already broadly supportive of solar and other renewable schemes, requiring decision-makers to give significant weight to their benefits and saying applicants should not have to demonstrate overall need. The draft, however, goes further and does so in a more rules-based way. It creates a dedicated clean energy chapter, says substantial weight should be given to the benefits of renewable and low-carbon energy development for energy security, economic development and net zero, and makes clear that proposals coming forward outside areas identified as suitable should still be assessed against the national decision-making policies as a whole, rather than being tested solely against local criteria for those areas. For landowners considering diversification into solar, that could make the policy route more straightforward; and for battery storage, the draft is more helpful still, because it expressly refers to electricity network infrastructure and updates the glossary so that the storage of renewable and low-carbon energy, including Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS), is clearly recognised within the national policy framework.

For landowners, that policy shift could be genuinely valuable. The draft does not just continue existing support for clean energy; it strengthens it in a way that should make solar and battery proposals easier to justify in principle. The move from significant weight to substantial weight, the clearer support for schemes outside identified suitable areas, and the express recognition of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) within the national policy framework all point in the same direction. For many rural holdings, that should mean a firmer platform for promoting well-sited solar and storage schemes and a stronger national policy answer to local resistance.

Equally, it is important not to overstate what the draft does not do. It does not open the floodgates to one-off market housing in the countryside. The current NPPF already allows isolated homes only in limited circumstances, such as essential rural worker need, heritage-led enabling development, the re-use of redundant buildings, subdivision of existing homes, or truly exceptional design. The draft broadly carries that position forward. Nor does it sweep away the familiar constraints that so often decide rural planning outcomes in practice: flood risk, Green Belt, heritage, ecology, landscape impact, access and agricultural land quality all remain central considerations. A more positive policy route is helpful, but it will not save a fundamentally poor site.

That is why the draft should be seen as creating opportunity with conditions, rather than easy development. The strongest prospects are likely to be holdings with existing buildings of substance, previously developed land, clear relationships with settlements, realistic business needs, or a persuasive case for diversification. In other words, the draft is most useful where

it can reinforce a sensible landowner strategy, not where it is being asked to justify development that is poorly located or heavily constrained. For many landowners, the immediate value lies in reviewing holdings now and identifying which sites may sit comfortably within the categories that the draft is trying to support.

The wider message is that the Government appears serious about moving away from a looser and more discretionary national policy style towards a clearer set of rules. The consultation paper says as much, and current Government guidance already tells plan-makers to have regard to the consultation draft in the early stages of preparing plans under the new system. That does not mean every proposal will suddenly become easier. But it does mean the policy ground is shifting, and in some cases shifting in ways that may benefit rural landowners who are ready to move early.

Our view is that this is a wait-and-see moment, but with genuine cause for optimism. The draft may yet be amended before adoption, and some elements could still be tightened. But a wholesale reversal now looks unlikely. If the Government follows through on its current approach, the final NPPF is likely to leave rural landowners with a clearer and more opportunity-led framework than the one in place today. The sensible next step is not to sit back, but to take advice, review holdings strategically and be ready to act when the final policy position lands.

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**"...substantial weight should be given to the benefits of renewable and low-carbon energy development."**

## Auction Calendar



**Cambridge Machinery Sales**  
Monday 8th June  
Monday 6th July  
The Saleground, Sutton, CB6 2QT



**The Cambridge Vintage Sale**  
Friday 17th & Saturday 18th July  
The Saleground, Sutton, CB6 2QT

**The Harrogate Vintage Sale**  
Saturday 15th August  
Great Yorkshire Events Centre,  
Harrogate, HG2 8NZ



**Property Auctions**  
Wednesday 10th June  
Cheffins, Clifton House, 1-2 Clifton Road,  
Cambridge, CB1 7EA



**Fine Art Auctions**  
**The Interiors Sale**  
Saturday 6th June

**The Fine Sale**  
Wednesday 24th & Thursday 25th June  
Cheffins, Clifton House, 1-2 Clifton Road,  
Cambridge, CB1 7EA

# Given the numerous changes currently affecting the agricultural industry, we put the most pressing questions of the day to some of our farming clients

## Introducing our panellists:

**Ron Davison**  
High Elms Farm, Cowlinge, Suffolk.

Ron has recently stepped back from in-hand farming operations, moving over to a contract farming agreement on his 355-acre arable enterprise. The land is medium to heavy clay soils farmed on a plough-based system, with a typical rotation of wheat, barley and oilseed rape together with agri-environment schemes.

**Tom Mead**  
Meads Farm, Foxton, Cambridgeshire.

Tom farms 540 acres of arable land alongside his father, Peter. Together they grow a wide range of crops including wheat, barley, oats, sugar beet and oilseed rape. With a key focus on soil health, the environment and farming efficiencies, they maintain a flexible combination of ploughing and minimum tillage cultivation alongside the use of technology and innovation.

**Kier Petherick**  
Stowbridge Farm, Stretham, Cambridgeshire

A partner in the family farming business F C Palmer & Son, Kier fulfils a key role across their 3,400 acres of diversified enterprises from renewable energy to waterparks. Fertile black soils provide ideal conditions for a varied, quality-focused rotation including cereals, potatoes, celery, lettuce, beetroot, sugar beet, maize and turf.

**James Peck**  
PX Farms Limited, Dry Drayton, Cambridgeshire.

From his base at Scotland Farm, James operates a well-diversified agri-business which spans 7,000 acres of farming, crop storage, crop laboratory testing, haulage and business and residential lettings. An enthusiastic advocate for the future of British farming, James is notable for his popular YouTube channel, @PX\_Farms.

**Tom Jackson**  
Orwell Pit Farm, Ely, Cambridgeshire

Across a 3,000-acre farming enterprise and soils ranging from clay to fen peat, Tom heads up the family partnership and its diversified cropping rotation which includes cereals, potatoes, sugar beet, peas, beans and borage. Grass leys provide grazing and silage for the farm's South Devon suckler cow herd.

Our five panellists can be relied upon for their expertise, candour and sharp insights. Their responses reflect a sector that is working hard to retain food production as its central pillar whilst making wider business decisions to counter the current challenges.

**Q: What are your key drivers for decision making around this year's cropping, and are you making any significant changes to crops planted?**

**R Davison** – With our new contract farming arrangement in place for its second harvest, we are not making any real changes for this year as the new arrangement is still bedding in. If the high diesel and fertiliser prices continue into the year we may take out up to 25% of the cropped area and put this in to the SFI 2026 scheme for the next harvest year.

**T Mead** – Crop profitability and end market demand are our main drivers. Going forward for 2026 our focus will be on growing crops for seed where possible and growing anything we can add a premium to. The market volatility in terms of fertiliser, fuel and sales prices will obviously play a part as well, although trying to predict these elements is pretty difficult.

**K Petherick** – Cropping has remained consistent to our normal rotation for 2026. We are lucky enough to have a broad mix of cropping through our own crops and via third parties for specialty cropping which helps us spread risk circa 60% owned, 40% specialist third parties, who we will provide services to such as cultivations, spraying and irrigation.

**J Peck** – We forward purchased the nitrogen requirement for this year's cropping in June 2025, with phosphorous being delivered on a fixed price contract as bio solids through Severn Trent. This means our rotation is generally fixed two years in advance.

Next year's crop has phosphorous bio solids fixed but not nitrogen. Our rotation is intended to be kept the same as we planned last year for the 2027 harvest. Our fertiliser, which we purchase from Trinidad, has a big influence due to price fluctuations. This year we might have to hold off purchasing fertiliser in June as we fear it will become too expensive. We have begun infrastructure to build 20 x50 tonne tanks for fertiliser storage which should make us more agile in the face of price fluctuations.

**T Jackson** – In the current challenging agricultural climate, our primary considerations when planning rotations are profitability, alignment with specific market demands, and risk reduction, while maintaining a diverse rotation to effectively manage injurious weeds, pests, and diseases.

**Q: Have you introduced more diversity into your rotation (e.g. livestock or cover crops) and if so, are you seeing the agronomic benefits?**

**R Davison** – No; we have stayed with a tried and tested combinable crop rotation which we know is suitable for our soil type, and we continue to focus on drilling and application dates to get the best out of the land.



**T Mead** – Yes, we have introduced diversity where we can. It works in the rotation and we think we will see a benefit. We have a small sheep flock that has grazed winter covers on land that has recently gone into sugar beet so we will wait and see if there is any benefit on the yield! We also have some Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) actions including winter bird food on some of our smaller, less productive fields which work well.

**K Petherick** – We have quite a broad mix of crops split over summer and winter planting which spreads work throughout the year. This year we have started to graze the triticale in early spring to help tillering in the crop.

**J Peck** – We have an eight-course cropping rotation, continually trialling less and more but we struggle with the limitations we have on Hanslope series clay soil. For example, the list of break crops we can grow on this soil type, such as beans, limit its profitability. As a large cash crop, wheat is the main driving force of our rotation.

**T Jackson** – We are growing marrowfat peas for human consumption, borage for its oil which is used in the pharmaceutical industry for its anti-inflammatory and skin health properties, and short-term grass leys for high quality grass silage for the farm's suckler herd.

With the borage, we have introduced bees which will also help winter bean and pea yields. Agronomically, the peas and borage have the added benefit of being drilled in the spring so we can spread workload and have better control of blackgrass. The grass silage allows us to harvest the blackgrass before seeds become viable and remove them from the field.

This year, we have started to buy in calves to fatten for Anglia Quality Meat. This complements our 70-cow suckler herd and allows us to extend the use of buildings and machinery, whilst adding more valuable farmyard manure to the arable side of the business.

**Q: How important has diversification been to your farm business? Are there more opportunities for you to create value from your rural assets?**

**R Davison** – Diversification is fairly important. We invested in property and on-farm solar during our more profitable years, but the high cost of investing in diversification has become off-putting. The recent switch from farming in-hand to contractors means we have some vacant building space which we are considering using for alternative income streams.

**T Mead** – Diversification is becoming increasingly important to spread our risk and income and improve our business resilience. Farming will always be the core and it continues to provide the majority of our income. However, looking at all the assets we have and seeing where we can add value over and above agricultural uses is key. We have business and housing lets on the farm and a campsite. All of these work well and come with different benefits and challenges.

**K Petherick** – It's very important to us. We have installed over 250 acres of solar and 55 acres of greenhouse with a further 50 acres due to be built in late 2026. We also have a water sports company operating from one of our reservoirs. All of these diversifications bring additional income into the business.

**J Peck** – We intend to grow the diversification side of the business as well as the farming side. Modern day agriculture requires unrecognisable buildings for today's requirements which make '70s and '80s buildings obsolete. This makes for an ideal opportunity for diversification with these buildings and allows us to reinvest the profit in modern-day agriculture. I suspect diversification will have to play a minimum of 50% of farming in the future. It's not all bad and can include all kinds of peculiarities, not just shops and cafes. There are plenty of requirements for yards and buildings too.

**T Jackson** – Our diversification strategy has been to renovate or add property to the business to maximise rental income. Other than this, we have typically stayed within the realms of farming the land and growing crops. However, we are now producing a wide range of products for agreed prices. While this has brought challenges with achieving specifications, it allows us to grow at an agreed sales price, removing some of the lottery around pricing and enabling us to concentrate on efficiency and reducing costs. The benefits of this approach include better use of buildings, machinery and staff already on farm, without needing to seek planning permission or make heavy investments.

Yes, there are plenty of other opportunities. As a business, we would like to explore possibilities within the renewable energy sector on both land and buildings. We would also like to assess whether some of the farm buildings are best used for storing agricultural products produced on farm or rented out for storage.

**Q: What do you see as the main barrier to rural entrepreneurship right now?**

**R Davison** – For us, I would say a lack of potential profit from different enterprises because of start-up and maintenance costs. Planning policy, regulations and reliable labour also make it harder to set up new enterprises.

**T Mead** – Planning!! So far, most projects we have worked on have achieved planning permission in the end. However, obtaining this has cost a huge amount of money and time. In many cases this is due to unnecessary and over-the-top planning conditions for simple projects which would have benefitted the local community and the local economy.

**K Petherick** – I think the planning system needs to be reformed as the cost of obtaining planning can become a barrier before you even start. Also, borrowing funds to start new projects can be challenging and expensive compared to traditional routes of funding.

**J Peck** – Planning, mindset, finances. Also, the local market has become flooded and with a squeezed economy, consumer demand reduces.

**T Jackson** – The main barriers to rural entrepreneurship currently are limited access to capital and finance, which restricts the ability to invest in new ventures or expand existing ones. Additionally, rural entrepreneurs often face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, including broadband internet, limited access to affordable skilled labour, difficulties accessing markets, and increased costs in these volatile times. Addressing these barriers is crucial to fostering growth and sustainability in rural businesses.

**Q: For your business, how effective is diversification in smoothing out the current volatility of the farming industry?**

**R Davison** – Fairly important but we have always relied on food production as the main source of income and focused our knowledge and resources on trying to maximise the returns from farming.

**T Mead** – Very important. Having diverse and different income streams dependent on different externalities helps spread our risk. Diversifications themselves can of course still be volatile so it's important to do everything well.

**K Petherick** – It's been very helpful over the years and continues to be.

**J Peck** – It's like another crop. It is, by definition, part of the rotation and it is generational in our family to embrace diversification. My grandfather and father started building units in 1983, then in 2000 building offices and from 2000-2003+ utilising agricultural assets for alternative uses.

The main driving force for this was to reinvest the profits into the farm to construct modern future-proof buildings.

**T Jackson** – The changes to our farming business have been vital to its sustainability. Whilst growing for specific markets, we have also reduced fuel use per hectare and the growing of crops that rely heavily on man-made fertilisers. However, with recent fuel and energy volatility, there is more work to be done to reduce the need for power from the national grid and further improve fuel efficiency. In addition to the farming side of the business, it has been important for us to renovate and expand our residential property in order to increase an income stream that is not reliant on agriculture.

**Q: Farm rents have been relatively static for many years, underpinned by area payments (BPS). Do you anticipate a shift in the rental market, and if so, what will the main triggers be?**

**T Mead** – No, not really. I think SFI underpins some unproductive land. Good land will still be worth a reasonable rent whereas smaller parcels and poor land will not be as sought after.

**K Petherick** – My view is that rents will come down due to affordability, as a result of commodity prices and the removal of the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS). The mechanics of contract farming agreements will also need to change to reflect the current market.

**J Peck** – Potentially, though I think unlikely because demand is still strong so this outstrips supply. As businesses become more efficient, landowners will benefit from renting land to

cash rich and efficient tenants who will pay higher rent due to the diversified income.

**T Jackson** – If farm rents were linked to the profitability of food production they should reduce, however I suspect they will continue to remain static (in Cambridgeshire) as a strong renewable energy sector underpins the market.

**Q: Given the recent reforms to agricultural property relief and business property relief and bearing in mind the threshold increase announced just before Christmas, what strategies do you recommend for business planning and succession?**

**R Davison** – Take a proactive approach and talk to your accountant, lawyer and family to make sure there is a joined up strategy which avoids the pitfalls and any surprises.

**T Mead** – Have a plan. Any situation can be managed provided all generations know the plan. Take advice early and keep it under review.

**K Petherick** – Thankfully I am of a young age that dying while the current government are in their parliament is unlikely. Therefore, my hope is that this government will be voted out and a new one will have some sense to change the tax reform. However, if this is not the case then we will begin planning transfers, strategies and gifts ensuring we keep assets within the family. We will need to seek professional advice and deal with the situation as it comes when children and family get older. However, my hope is that future governments see the error of their ways and reverse the tax reforms.

**J Peck** – Personally, I think this is single handedly the worst government intervention into farming businesses. Unfortunately, there will be horror stories the industry has to face and when it comes to the surface, we will only then realise how damaging this truly is. I'm fortunate enough that I've bought my family out of the main farm holding and I am young and healthy enough to take out life insurance. However, as of today this has taken 11 months and is still not complete, so the insurance in itself has been a very gruelling process.

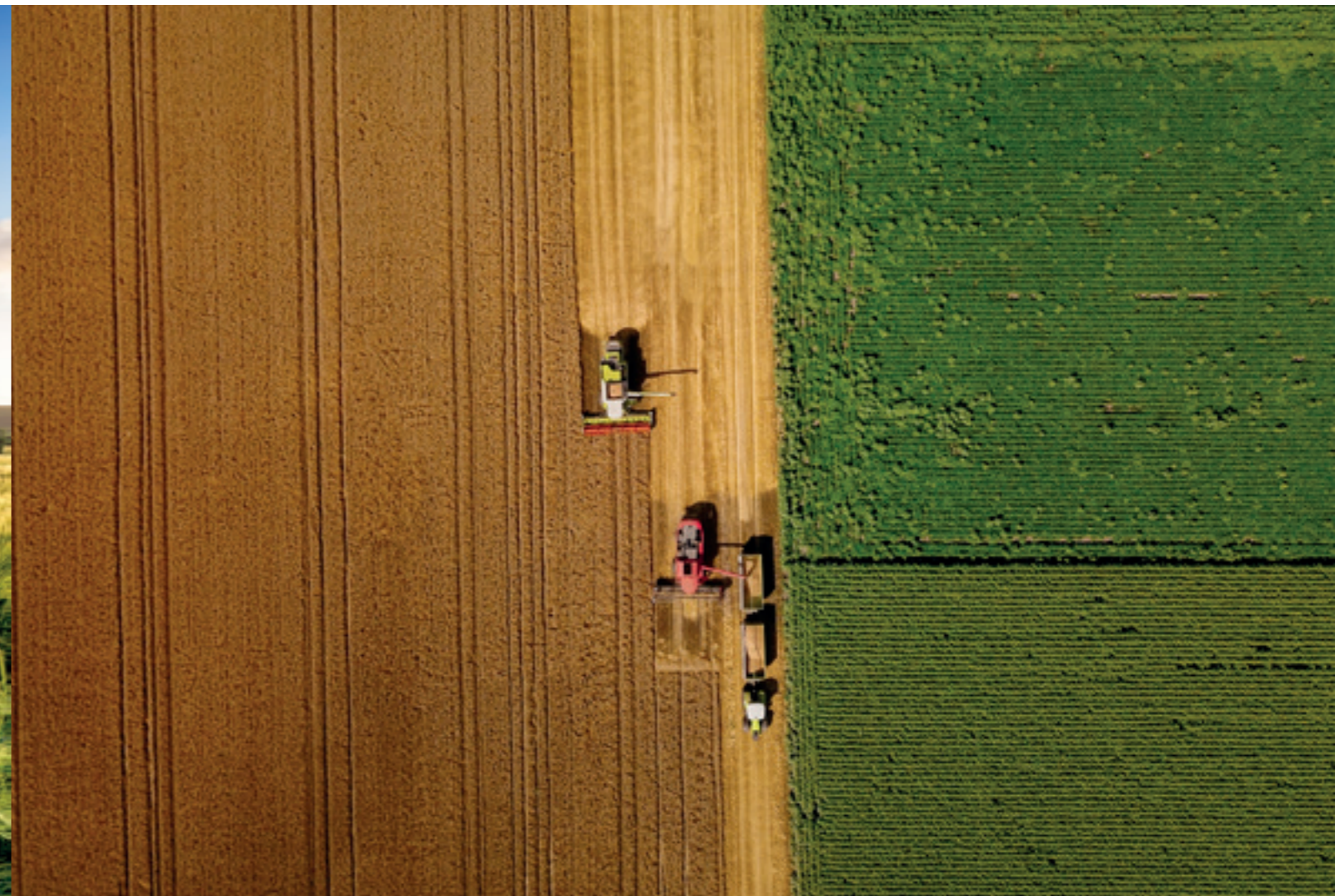
It is likely that over the next 10 years, there will be 50% fewer farmers than there are today. The tax reforms will change the industry and the people we know in the industry. It may also be destructive towards the family farm model. Carefully chosen advice and planning will be critical because each family and setup will be different and one cap won't fit all. Having said all that, we are by definition tremendously resilient as a group.

**T Jackson** – Review and value all qualifying agricultural and business assets to understand the impact of the new thresholds.

Consider the timing of transfers and gifts to optimise relief usage.

Plan succession to ensure assets remain within the family while maximising tax efficiency.

Seek professional advice to navigate the complexities of the rules and to tailor strategies to individual circumstances.





## Restructuring farm finances

The current economic climate and loss of farm subsidies in agriculture is putting many farming businesses under pressure. This is causing lenders to review existing loan facilities and possibly increase rates, reduce facilities or a combination of both.

In addition to overdraft facilities which are often subject to an annual review, many longer-term loans now include periodic reviews and loan covenants. If longer term loans have been taken out in the last few years, then a review this year could come at a very difficult time.

**“We are encouraging farmers and landowners to review existing facilities and consider consolidating existing borrowing...”**

However, there are a number of options which borrowers could consider in order to make loan repayments more manageable. These include re-financing the hardcore part of an overdraft facility, extending the term of a capital repayment loan or requesting a capital repayment holiday.

Cheffins are Agricultural Mortgage Corporation (AMC) Agents and Valuers and have significant experience in assisting farmers with restructuring their borrowings. The key benefit of an AMC loan is that there are no reviews during the term of the loan, leaving farmers free to get on with running their businesses without any unwelcome surprises when profitability is under pressure.

We are able to assist with securing loans from £25,001 for a period of between 5 – 30 years, with the ability to extend and even pass through generations, subject to approval.

AMC support sustainable business opportunities via the Clean Growth Financing Initiative (CGFI) which is a product which offers ‘fee-free’ lending for specific sustainable projects such as;

- Renewable energy
- Waste and water improvements
- Agricultural machinery
- Sustainable diversification

We also provide advice on Hire Purchase and Leasing facilities which AMC offer, enabling farmers to spread the cost of an asset such as equipment, vehicles or machinery over a fixed period of time. The income the asset generates can then facilitate the purchase of the asset over a fixed period, without the need for an upfront cash injection of the full value.

We are encouraging farmers and landowners to review existing facilities and consider consolidating existing borrowing, rural diversification or growth plans for the business.

If you would like to discuss your funding requirements in confidence, please contact us.

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### We're delighted to announce that Henry Lankfer joined Cheffins' Rural team earlier this year.

A qualified Chartered Surveyor and Fellow of the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers, Henry previously worked as a consultant to national utility companies providing advice on land acquisition, compensation and the consenting process for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects across the UK. This included guiding clients through the complexities of negotiating with landowners and navigating statutory procedures for major infrastructure schemes.

Henry brings firsthand experience of practical farm management – having grown up on an arable farm in the Cambridgeshire Fens. He is currently working on a broad range of rural professional work across Cambridgeshire and the surrounding counties.



“...forecasts predict an increase in both supply and demand, with land values expected to hold firm.”

## Farmland is still a viable investment

**The farmland market and wider agricultural sector have quietly remained a dependable source of income and opportunity within the UK. Recently there has been significant strain on the industry due to aggressive Inheritance Tax changes, geopolitical risks, climate change, financial shocks and the evolving supply chain however the land market continues to show resilience even under the weight of these pressures.**

Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East have triggered a sharp rise in energy prices and in particular, fuel and fertiliser costs. These increased costs have directly impacted input costs, squeezing farmers profits.

Agricultural land remains a scarce and finite resource within the UK however it continues to act as a haven for farmers and investors alike. During 2025, there was a noticeable reduction in the supply of agricultural land being offered to the open market within the Eastern region which was also reflected in the wider UK market.

Demand for agricultural land nationally saw the price-per-acre soften over the last 12 months. However, the market has demonstrated stability within the East of England and remains balanced.

Several specialised agricultural lenders, including the Agricultural Mortgage Corporation (AMC) possess extensive experience in dealing with the unique funding requirements of farming businesses. These lenders maintain an optimistic outlook and are proactively looking to assist rural businesses by providing competitive interest rates and favourable terms.

Over the past twelve months, Cheffins has successfully supported clients in both the sale and acquisition of agricultural land in the region. Looking ahead, forecasts predict an increase in both supply and demand, with land values expected to hold firm. Q1 2026 has already shown very promising signs with increased market activity with numerous land deals having been agreed.

Our rural agency team would welcome the opportunity to discuss your requirements, whether you are considering disposing of or acquiring land within the Eastern region.

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# Rural grants round-up



“Early preparation will be key for those who wish to apply given that last year’s £150 million allocation ran out within a month.”

## SFI26: The Sustainable Farming Incentive is set for a relaunch.

With details now confirmed, we give an insight into what’s coming, what’s changed and how to weigh up the pros and cons for your business.

This relaunch feels like a long time coming. Farms which missed the opportunity to take up SFI24 have been locked out of new funding for over 12 months and, with this in mind, we’re encouraging all our farmer clients who fell into this category to plan in good time so they can apply at the first opportunity.

### What’s changed....

In terms of what’s changed, the new offer will include fewer actions, reduced by roughly a third from 102 down to 71. Defra’s rationale for this streamlined offer is to remove those actions which had low uptake or those which delivered less towards environmental targets.

There are reductions to some payment rates and a new annual agreement cap of £100k, designed to reach more farmers and allow Defra to manage the budget more efficiently.

Additionally, there will be area caps placed on ten actions where these involve taking land out of production. This limit will mean that a maximum of 25 per cent of the total agricultural area of the farm can be placed under these actions, either individually or in combination.

The first application window opens in June for two groups:

- Small farms with up to 50ha of agricultural land
- Farms without any form of existing agri-environment agreement

This window should remain open for around two months, although previous experience suggests high uptake may force an earlier close.

The second SFI26 application window will open in September for all farms.

### Weighing up the pros and cons...

So, what should farmers be looking for when weighing up the new SFI26 offer?

With assessment-based actions gone, including the soil management plans, nutrient management reviews and integrated pest management plans, enhanced focus will be on the remaining 71 actions.

In the first instance, farmers will need to assess whether SFI26 makes sense for them. A good starting point is to look at existing on-the-ground features. For example, is there a network of grass buffer strips that could fit easily into ‘CAHL4 4m-12m grass buffer strips’ action at £515/ha? Would your hedgerow management regime suit the requirements of ‘CHRW2 Manage hedgerows’ at £13/100m? Are there any areas lying fallow where land is prone to waterlogging that would suit a payment under SFI26?

Other existing on-farm features that might also attract funding are meadows, ponds and historic buildings.

This first step can form the basis for an SFI agreement, with other payments built on top. Among the 71 available actions there is plenty of scope for integrating payments into the cropping rotation, for example, with winter cover crops, companion crops, legume fallows, low-input cereals, no-till farming and no-insecticide use.

In some cases, it’s possible to stack payments but this requires careful interpretation of the rules.

### Caveat....

Whilst it’s clear that Defra are taking an opportunity to reset expectations and attempt to avoid a repeat of the abrupt SFI scheme closure in March 2025, the pent-up demand created by an unreliable support system means there are still uncertainties around how far the budget will stretch.

Those who take the opportunity will need to plan carefully, knowing that there are tighter limits and scope for only one agreement per year, removing the ability to bolt-on SFI actions on a rolling basis as before.

Farmers and landowners will no doubt feel they are chasing support mechanisms that are becoming ever elusive, but those who are both well-informed and well-prepared can still secure funds that are a worthwhile boost to farm incomes.

### The 2026 Capital Grants Offer

Defra will reopen the Capital Grants programme in July with an increased budget of £225 million, up from £150 million the previous year.

The wide range of one-off grants for capital expenditure are designed to support farmers to deliver environmental improvements, from hedgerow planting and livestock fencing, through to measures for improving water quality.

There are six main groups that make up the Capital Grant:

- Boundaries, trees and orchards
- Water quality

- Air quality
- Natural flood management
- Assessments
- Improvements

Applicants can expect funding limits of £25,000 for the water quality, air quality and natural flood management groups and £35,000 for the boundaries, trees and orchards group.

Businesses will be limited to one application per year.

Whilst the Capital Grants scheme presents an attractive proposition for aiding farm investment, farmers are encouraged to carefully examine their business strategies, look at cash flows and be confident that the level of funding they will receive is sufficient to make the investment worthwhile.

Early preparation will be key for those who wish to apply given that last year’s £150 million allocation ran out within a month. This will include making sure that Rural Payments system business details and land mapping are up to date, checking in detail through the list of eligible grant items and having supporting evidence ready where applicable.

For more information or if you would like help applying for these grants and payments, please get in touch.

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For over 30 years, the LEAF Marque farm assurance system has had industry-wide recognition for promoting more sustainable farming and food systems among its members.

LEAF is based on the sustainable farming principles of Integrated Farm Management (IFM), providing its members with the tools and services needed to make meaningful changes that improve their farm practices for both environmental and commercial benefits.

The system has been proven to provide added value to certified farmers in terms of retailer engagement and market opportunities, with LEAF being an instantly recognisable symbol of sustainably produced food on our supermarket shelves.

Major UK supermarkets including Tesco, Waitrose and Asda offer LEAF Marque certified produce, with Co-op now requiring all its UK-grown products to be LEAF Marque certified by January 2027.

The role of LEAF Advisors lies in helping growers to optimise their use of IFM across the different standards including in soil and water management, conserving energy, protecting crops and enhancing wildlife habitats.

This includes the more complex areas of LEAF compliance such as producing the farm-scale Landscape and Nature Conservation Plan and offering ongoing support to businesses to help ensure audit standards are met.

Most of the LEAF Marque growers we work with are Fenland based, and over the years the results these businesses have achieved in boosting their farm biodiversity and wider environmental credentials are impressive. Growers can use funding tools such as Countryside Stewardship and SFI to

support their efforts, with LEAF Marque Standards providing a structured framework.

There is also a strong network among LEAF farmers designed to promote learning and sharing of ideas, including access to events including technical farm tours and seminars. A major element of the work LEAF does is around public education to embed an appreciation of farming into everyday life.

The impact of LEAF is wide-ranging, from addressing climate change, healthier soils and biodiversity to community engagement and livestock welfare. Its unique role in championing sustainability and building deeper connections between farmers and consumers gives it a valuable place in our industry.

**"...the results these businesses have achieved in boosting their farm biodiversity and wider environmental credentials are impressive."**

Cheffins' Director, Katie Hilton who is based in the Rural Professionals Department in Cambridge, is a LEAF Advisor Member with over ten years' experience working with farmers and growers in the Eastern region to optimise the value of their farm assurance schemes.

For advice and information on the LEAF Marque farm assurance system, contact:

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