

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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■ **Average farm business income** rose by 12% to £96,100 last year - despite high costs - for many key East Anglian sectors, according to government figures. Defra says the overall average for all farm types masked significant sector variations during a year of 'exceptional price volatility' from March 2022 to the end of February 2023. On cereal farms, average income rose by 25% to £150,400 with a combination of 'increased yields and firm prices more than offsetting rises across most input costs', says the report. And there was a long-awaited change of fortunes on pig farms, where average incomes leapt by 477% to £67,900 after several months of financial hardship. But average incomes on specialist poultry farms fell by 23% to £105,900, with variable costs rising 11%. *Eastern Daily Press*

■ **Responding to** the Chancellor's Autumn Statement, NFU president Minette Batters said: "While some of the announcements such as cuts to National Insurance Contributions, extensions to business rate reliefs and new 5G innovation regions have the potential to benefit farm businesses, the majority look set to miss out on some of the Chancellor's headline measures." At the CLA, president Victoria Vyvyan said: "From a tax perspective, this was a Statement that failed to recognise the potential of the rural economy, with thousands of rural businesses excluded from what were largely urban-centric measures."

■ "As a nation we need to grow good quality, healthy food, but there needs to be a much better balance across the farmed landscape as well because, as part of the intensification of agriculture since the war, we have lost a lot of priority habitats," Glenn Anderson, one of four neighbouring landowners involved in the Wendling Beck Environment Project (Norfolk) which aims to restore grassland, heathland, woodland and wetlands to improve habitats for rare wildlife including grey partridge, turtle dove and the green-winged orchid. *Eastern Daily Press*

■ **British Sugar** and the NFU have been engaged in a tussle over prices and terms for next year's sugar contract. It began when British Sugar contacted growers with a document said to contain details of a contract offer. The NFU was 'outraged' and said no agreement had been reached. British Sugar then said that a 'significant number' of growers had signed to grow the crop. The NFU called on the company to retract the offer and resume talks. *More to come...*

■ "The rise in homelessness within our rural communities is alarming, with a 24% increase in rural rough sleeping reported in just one year. Contrary to the notion of homelessness as a 'lifestyle choice', research carried out by the Universities of Kent and Southampton indicates that this crisis stems from the unaffordability of housing and a lack of accessible support services, rather than personal preference."

The Rural Homelessness Counts Coalition commenting on legislative proposals to ban the use of tents by the homeless.

■ **The Veterinary Medicines Directorate's** latest UK Veterinary Antimicrobial Resistance and Sales Surveillance report shows sales of antibiotics for use in food-producing animals fell by nearly 10% in 2022 to 25.7mg/kg. The lowest figure yet, representing a 59% reduction on the 2014 figure of 62.5mg/kg.

■ **Farmers, vets,** organisations and industry professionals from the UK sheep industry have joined forces, through Ruminant Health & Welfare to launch a new UK Sheep Welfare Strategy for 2023-2028. The aim is to demonstrate progress in six key areas of sheep welfare over the next five years and beyond.

■ **The Soil Association** is calling for the government to double UK fruit and vegetable production and consumption through nature-friendly farming after the House of Lords described the future of the horticulture sector as 'bleak'. The warning was issued in a report published by the cross-party Horticultural Sector Committee. The *Sowing the Seeds: A Blooming English Horticultural Sector* report found that horticulture, a £5 billion industry that employs over 50,000 people, is under-prioritised by policymakers, leaving the UK's food security vulnerable.

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.