

# New measures to allow proxy voting in local elections for those self-isolating with coronavirus

Individuals who need to self-isolate because of coronavirus will still be able to vote in the local elections, following a planned amendment to emergency proxy voting rules published in Parliament.

The move is one of a number of measures the government is putting in place to allow for fair and COVID-secure participation in the upcoming council and mayoral elections in England, and the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales.

The legislation, which has been [laid before Parliament](#), will allow anyone who is self-isolating due to COVID-19 to access an emergency proxy vote, up to 17:00 on election day.

Minister of State for the Constitution & Devolution, Chloe Smith, said:

These elections can and will be delivered in a COVID-secure way and the extended proxy voting rules are a key part of this.

The new rules will mean that voters who have tested positive for COVID-19, or are self-isolating, can still have their say in these elections without having to leave their home.

The new legislation allows:

- All those who are unable to attend a polling station as a result of COVID-19, including those who are shielding, to appoint a proxy beyond the usual deadline.
- All those with an existing proxy arrangement to appoint a new proxy up until 17:00 on polling day if their proxy is affected by COVID-19 and are unable to act as a proxy.

On Friday 5 February, the government confirmed that the polls scheduled for 6 May 2021, including council and mayoral elections in England and Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) in England and Wales, will go ahead as planned.

The government has also published a [Delivery Plan](#) setting out guidance on how the polls will be delivered in a COVID-19 secure and effective way, which included preliminary changes to proxy voting rules. As usual, anyone can also secure a postal vote in advance of the May elections. The deadline for all

postal voting applications is 17:00 on Tuesday 20 April. Anyone who wants to vote by post is encouraged to apply to do so as early as possible and not wait until the deadline.

Now more than ever, people deserve to have their say as we build back better, on issues ranging from local health provisions, to safer streets, to the level of council tax, and the pandemic calls for a more flexible approach to voting.

The government continues to work closely with the electoral community and public health bodies to resolve challenges and ensure that everyone who is entitled to vote is able to do so in a COVID-secure way. The government will be engaging with political parties on wider election guidance. This includes the additional new measures on the nominations procedure, published on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

These measures will support the holding of important elections in a way that minimises the risk to public health and instills confidence amongst electors that every effort is being made to ensure the polls remain COVID-secure.

We will also be amending the coronavirus regulations to enable a broader range of campaign-related activity from 8 March, but it is essential that this still takes place in a COVID-secure way, in line with the guidance and the law. The Government will be publishing further guidance for candidates, their agents and political parties on campaigning in the elections in due course, and is engaging with the Parliamentary Parties Panel on this guidance to ensure the views of political parties are taken into account.

## Notes to editors

- This [legislation](#) is expected to be debated in the House of Commons and House of Lords next month and if approved is likely to come into force in early April.
  - The Scottish Government has amended legislation to allow those who are following Government advice or the advice of a medical professional in relation to Covid-19 to apply for emergency proxies when voting in Scottish Local Government and Parliamentary Elections.
  - The Welsh Government has enacted similar emergency proxy voting measures in relation to Senedd elections.
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# Climate emergency impacts hitting “worst case scenario” levels

The UK is seeing the impacts of the climate emergency hitting “worst case scenario” levels with more extreme weather and flooding, Environment Agency chief executive Sir James Bevan has warned today (Tuesday 23 February) as he urged action to reduce emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change ahead of COP26.

Sir James has set out the increasing challenge that the Environment Agency and the nation are facing in tackling the extreme weather brought by climate change. Speaking at the annual conference of the Association of British Insurers, Sir James has said:

The reasonable worst case scenario for climate sounds like this:

- Much higher sea levels will take out most of the world’s cities, displace millions, and make much of the rest of our land surface uninhabitable or unusable.
- Much more extreme weather will kill more people through drought, flooding, wildfires and heatwaves than most wars have.
- The net effects will collapse ecosystems, slash crop yields, take out the infrastructure that our civilisation depends on, and destroy the basis of the modern economy and modern society.

If that sounds like science fiction let me tell you something you need to know. This is that over the last few years the Reasonable Worst Case for several of the flood incidents the EA has responded to has actually happened, and it’s getting larger.

That is why our thinking needs to change faster than the climate. And why our response needs to match the scale of the challenge.

Sir James’ comments come nine months ahead of the COP26 climate change conference in Glasgow, where the UK will host delegates and climate experts from around the world, aiming to drive action on adapting to the inevitable effects of climate change around the world, as well as reducing emissions, protecting and restoring nature, and accelerating the green transformation of the financial system.

With the Prime Minister having set out a roadmap to ease Covid lockdown restrictions and move back towards normality, Sir James called on governments and the public to put the same effort into tackling the “unseen pandemic” of the climate emergency as we have tackling Covid:

The climate emergency is the unseen pandemic, because left unchecked it will kill more people, and do much more harm, than

Covid-19.

In the same way we have to work together to tackle Covid-19, it follows that we will get the environment we pay for, we will get the climate we work for.

That is why the government is right to be putting so much effort into securing the right outcome at COP26 later this year.

The Environment Agency is already driving efforts to protect and prepare the nation for the effects of climate change, delivering on its commitment to better protect 300,000 homes from flooding since 2015. It is preparing to deliver the Government's record £5.2 billion investment in new flood and coastal defences up to 2027 and implementing the Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy to protect and prepare homes and businesses from flooding and coastal change and create climate resilient places.

Alongside this, Sir James highlighted the action of the Environment Agency to reduce emissions, emphasising the need for us all to lead by example to drive climate action:

We know exactly what we have to do. We need to mitigate the extent of climate change. We need to adapt to its effects. And we all need to lead by example.

The Environment Agency is doing those things. We are reducing the speed and extent of climate change by regulating down greenhouse gas emissions from industry, and by running the UK's new Emissions Trading Scheme.

We are helping communities become more resilient to the effects of the changing climate by building new flood defences and our role in planning and placemaking. And we are trying to walk-the-walk ourselves, with a commitment to become a Net Zero organisation by 2030.

Sir James was speaking on a panel at the Association of British Insurers annual conference on Tuesday 23 February.

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**EUSTICE SETS OUT APPROACH FOR FUTURE**

# AGRICULTURE POLICY

Environment Secretary George Eustice has said farmers can face the future with confidence now that we have left the EU as many sectors continue to see strong market prices and the UK's self-sufficiency in food production has increased for the first time since 2014.

[Speaking at the National Farmers' Union's \(NFU\) annual conference today \(Tuesday 23 February\)](#), he said while there were challenges in some areas, many farming sectors have seen a welcome boost to profitability, despite a challenging year due to the coronavirus pandemic. Lamb and beef prices have been running at ten-year highs and profits in many sectors had increased.

He also signalled plans to use powers in the Agriculture Act to strengthen the position of farmers in the supply chain and to bring transparency and fairness and signalled the intention to support new entrepreneurs seeking to get access to land and set up their own farming business.

The Environment Secretary also invited farmers across England to take part in the next crucial stage of the Government's flagship green farming policy. He announced that hundreds of farmers around the country will pilot the Sustainable Farming Incentive. After nearly 50 years of being tied to burdensome outdated EU rules, we have an opportunity to build back greener. The Sustainable Farming Incentive is a new scheme which will reward farmers for taking actions that benefit the wider environment to create greener landscapes, promote cleaner air and water, and guard against environmental risks such as climate change and flooding.

Farmers will be able to shape the design of the scheme by taking part in the pilot, which will welcome expressions of interest from March before it begins in the autumn.

**In his speech at the NFU Conference, Environment Secretary George Eustice said:**

Now that we have left the EU, new payments and incentives will reward farmers for farming more sustainably, creating space for nature on their land, enhancing animal welfare and reducing carbon emissions. The era of top down EU rules is over. Our future policy is about supporting the choices farmers make for their own holdings.

The pilot will allow farmers to choose from a range of standards based on specific features of the natural environment such as grassland, hedgerows, water bodies or woodland. Each standard brings clear environmental benefits and contains several actions which farmers can apply to their own farms in order to receive payment.

An early version of the Sustainable Farming Incentive will be launched in

mid-2022 and expanded over time. It will start with a core set of sustainable farming actions, which will build incrementally as we apply our learning and more funding becomes available.

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## [‘Space Bridge’ across the world will help UK and Australia get ahead in global space race](#)

The world’s first Space Bridge will unlock improved access to trade, investment and academic research opportunities, better advice to businesses and innovative bilateral collaborations. The UK and Australia share future ambitions for space and have similar plans to increase the size and job creation potential of the sector. This agreement will further develop the longstanding relationship between the two countries which dates back to the 1970s when the Prospero satellite built in Farnborough, UK, launched from Woomera, South Australia.

The arrangement enhances cooperation between the UK Space Agency, UK Department for International Trade, Australian Trade & Investment Commission, and the Australian Space Agency, coordinating opportunities for the UK and Australian governments and companies to work on space-related activities, including sharing Earth Observation data to collaborating on robotic and artificial intelligence.

UK Science Minister Amanda Solloway said:

The signing of today’s Space Bridge partnership, a world’s first, with one of our closest international allies, is another step forward in our ambition for the UK to become a globally-competitive space power.

The bond will allow our most innovative space businesses and universities to collaborate and share best practice more effectively than ever. I’m excited to see how this partnership will unlock new space jobs in both countries while driving forward new ideas that could enrich all of our lives.

Minister for Exports, Graham Stuart MP said:

Space exports hit £5.5 billion in 2017 and it is this international demand for our space goods and services which is driving the development of the UK’s vibrant and innovative space industry.

Like the UK, Australia recognises the enormous potential of space science and recognises that closer partnership and alignment between our two sectors can boost progress and jobs in both countries. I believe that UK exports to Australia could grow by £900 million as a result of a Free-Trade Agreement and the Space Bridge programme can play a critical role in space contributing to this growth, and further strengthening our UK-Australia relationship.

The UK boasts strong Foreign Direct Investment levels into its space sector and the Australian space sector reports a strong appetite to expand operations into the UK. Leaders for Australia and UK's space agencies recognise the importance of stronger space ties between both countries, as the UK ramps up plans to become a leading global player in space.

The announcement comes as the UK and Australia begin the fourth round of negotiations on the Free Trade Agreement this week. We have already made good progress in several chapter areas including digital, telecommunications, customs, rules of origin, and procurement in previous rounds.

Australia is influential in the Indo-Pacific and a Free-Trade Agreement will help us pivot towards this dynamic area of the world. This will help diversify our trade, make our supply chains more resilient, and make the UK less vulnerable to political and economic shocks.

Dr Graham Turnock, Chief Executive Officer of the UK Space Agency, said:

As the UK extends its ambitions in space, it's only right that we forge new and stronger alliances with new and existing partners all across the globe.

This agreement has the potential to unleash innovation, promote knowledge exchange and build relationships that will help both the UK and Australia maximise the vast economic and scientific potential that the space sector offers. It will help create better opportunities and greater security for people in both nations.

Enrico Palermo, Head of the Australian Space Agency.

The Space Bridge Framework Arrangement will help propel the Australian civil space industry into its next phase of growth, opening doors to build local capability, as well as significantly boost our collaboration with the UK Space Agency.

The space sector is one of the fastest-growing UK sectors with 30,000 new jobs expected by 2030. The Australian space sector is also growing with up to

20,000 new Australian jobs expected by 2030.

The Space Bridge Framework Arrangement was signed on Tuesday, 23 February 2021 at the British High Commissioner's residence in Canberra, Australia, and at Westminster, in London, United Kingdom.

The arrangement was signed by the Australian Minister for Industry, Science and Technology Karen Andrews, UK Minister for Science, Research and Innovation Amanda Solloway, in the presence of British High Commissioner to Australia Vicki Treadell CMG MVO, High Commissioner to the UK The Hon George Brandis QC, Australian Space Agency Head Enrico Palermo, UK Space Agency Chief Executive Officer Dr Graham Turnock, UK Space Agency International Director Alice Bunn, Chair of UKSpace Nick Shave and Space Industry Association of Australia Chief Executive Officer James Brown, who joined the signing virtually.

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## [Environment Secretary, George Eustice, speech at NFU Conference 2021](#)

Thank you very much Minette and I would like to begin by thanking you and your team at the NFU for all of the advice and engagement that you have offered Defra over the last twelve months. In particular, the NFU has worked closely with us as we dealt with an episode of panic buying at the start of the coronavirus pandemic and Terry Jones has been closely involved in the detailed work we did to ensure a smooth end to the Transition Period as our 2016 referendum result was finally delivered at the end of last year.

In many ways, this has been a uniquely challenging year as the whole of the world has wrestled with the greatest public health challenge since the influenza pandemic of 1918. At home, as the Prime Minister has just said, it has been a reminder that domestic food production makes up a critical component of our nation's food security. It has also been a year of some uncertainty as the UK re-established itself as a truly independent, self-governing nation for the first time in almost 50 years. The negotiations on a future trading relationship with the EU were fraught, but we secured the tariff free trade agreement we always sought, but with the freedom to make our own laws again and to chart a new direction for agriculture policy.

Now for agriculture, there have been the familiar challenges with the weather. I started my tenure as Secretary of State a year ago as arable farmers assessed the losses to flood damage of over-wintered arable crops and wondered whether they would ever be able to get on the land to sow spring crops. This was followed by dry conditions in many parts of the country creating major challenges for yields on wheat and barley in particular. And also after some good years, the pig sector also currently faces major challenges exacerbated by severe disruption to the market in China.



However, despite these challenges in some sectors, many others continue to see very strong market prices and a welcome boost to profitability.

Lamb prices have been running at ten-year highs, while the price of beef has also made a very strong recovery over the past year. The average income on livestock farms in less favoured areas actually increased by almost 50 percent.

Despite a blip at the start of the pandemic milk prices have also remained stable, and in the year to February 2020 the average income on dairy farms rose by 6 percent. The UK's self-sufficiency in food production, which Minette referenced is also increasing, it has increased for the first time since 2014 as imports from the European Union start to fall and our domestic production starts to increase.

Although farm gate prices in many sectors have remained strong, food prices to consumers are also stable. In fact, the proportion of household income spent on food by the poorest 20 percent of households is now the lowest on record thanks to policies that have increased the National Living Wage for the lowest paid.

### **Looking to the future**

So, now that we have left the European Union, we can now face the future with some confidence. We are living through a moment of great change. At Defra, we're thinking through from first principles, what a coherent policy actually looks like, and we are charting an orderly course towards it. We are not wasting time. I am a great believer that whatever you want to achieve in life, you should begin it now.

We have already switched off the so-called greening requirements which achieved nothing for the environment but caused huge bureaucracy. The three-crop rule is gone along with all those rules about what you were allowed to grow over the hedge and the maximum width of a gateway. Endless guidance about whether land is fallow for the EFA or fallow for the three-crop rule are also scrapped and arcane considerations about whether a cabbage is the same as a cauliflower for the purposes of the three crop rule won't be bothering us again.

We have loosened the draconian deadlines and penalties in the legacy scheme and given farmers more time for documents to be submitted and more time for amendments to be made to their application. And we also, this year, will rely more on warnings and improvement notices rather than penalties for every minor, trivial, error. All these changes mean that the guidance accompanying this year's BPS scheme has been slashed from 120 pages to just 50 pages.

Meanwhile, our European neighbours are struggling to get agreement on the legal frameworks of the Common Agricultural Policy in future, with plans having to be submitted to the European Commission for approval. The new CAP continues to pay out the majority of support as area-based payments, with little or no direct link to public goods, and few restrictions on the bulk of such payments going to the largest landowners.

Steps to address the causes of poor profitability and strengthening the role of farmers in the supply chain.

We recognise that there is currently a dependency on Direct Payments for some businesses and that many would lose money if those were taken away overnight. That is why we will phase out subsidies for land tenure or ownership over a seven-year period giving businesses and land rents time to adjust to the market.

Rather than masking poor profitability with a subsidy we should address the causes of poor profitability. Too many farmers find themselves in the position of being price takers with powerful processors or other purchasers pushing all of the risk down to the farmer. The Agriculture Act gives us new powers to create statutory codes and introduce other regulation to bring transparency and fairness in the supply chain. Now we will start with a statutory code in the dairy sector but also intend to use these powers to bring fairness and market transparency in other sectors too.

Last year, we asked for views from dairy farmers and processors around the UK about how contracts and relationships could be improved. It is clear that imbalances of power within the dairy supply chain have caused instability for dairy farmers in the past, with instances where milk buyers could set and then modify the terms of a contract at short notice – which I think is unacceptable.

We also plan to introduce exit schemes to help farmers to retire with dignity and schemes to support new entrants with measures to make more holdings available to those who want to start out on their own.

I think that a vibrant farming industry needs to attract new talent and fresh thinking. We understand that new entrants can find it difficult to start a new business, in part because of strong competition and high prices for land. So we will work with councils with 'county farms' estates as well as other landowners to create a scheme that will foster new opportunities and offer business mentoring to the next generation of farming entrepreneurs.

Now that we have left the EU, new payments and incentives will reward farmers for farming more sustainably, creating space for nature on their land, enhancing animal health and welfare, and reducing carbon emissions.

And the centrepiece of our future policy will be made up of three parts; the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery, and Landscape Recovery. The first step will be the Sustainable Farming Incentive.

### **Sustainable Farming Incentive**

Since 2018, we have been working with farmers to build up the ideas, gain the insights and experience that are essential to making sure that the new schemes we roll out are ambitious, innovative and effective on farms. That includes more than three thousand farmers helping us so far develop aspects of our new approach through 72 tests and trials.

The Sustainable Farming Incentive will support approaches to farm husbandry

that help the environment. That might include promoting integrated pest management, and actions to improve soil health or water quality.

Today, I am pleased to announce that this year we will be working with hundreds of farmers across the country to pilot the Sustainable Farming Incentive, and that we will be inviting expressions of interest in the coming weeks.

The ethos at the heart of our future policy is to support the choices of individual farm enterprises. The era of top down EU rules is over. Some assets that were previously dubbed “ineligible features” under the Common Agricultural Policy, will start to have their value recognised and rewarded.

Take hedgerows – an important ecological building block in our landscapes, and something that farmers have often been under pressure to grub up. We want to reward the work Farmers do to manage every metre of hedgerows on their holdings sustainably – so we can maintain the distinctive character of our countryside, improve local air quality, and provide shelter, nests, flowers, and berries for a wide range of wildlife.

Pilot participants will be able to select from an initial set of eight standards to build their own agreements and create greener landscapes and improve biodiversity in a way that is right for their own holding.

The standards will be focused on natural assets, which means they will be based on specific features such as soils, grassland, hedgerows, water bodies, or woodland. Farmers will be able to choose which standards they want to apply for and where they want to apply them on their farms, and what level which is right for them.

We will expand the scheme in the years ahead – adding more standards over time as well as taking the first steps of a new animal health and welfare pathway standard; and we will also develop more innovative approaches like payment by results, greater rewards for ambitious actions, and partnership working with conservation organisations or accreditation schemes to help assist in delivery.

We are going to make the early version of the Sustainable Farming Incentive open to all farms from next year but the work this year to pilot delivery will help us with implementation. We will be setting out more detail of the pilot in the coming weeks and by the end of June we will make sure that farmers have the details they need to prepare – so they can take a fresh look at the land they farm, the natural assets that they have and decide what will work best for their own individual holding.

We also want the Sustainable Farming Incentive to reflect a fundamental reset in our approach to checking compliance and monitoring agreements. We want to focus on outcomes and improvement, rather than penalising shortcomings in the way that has been the case under the Common Agricultural Policy.

I know that farmers also need to be able to plan their investments and get their businesses ready. So later this year, we will be opening a new round of

grants to support investment to help farmers reduce costs and improve profitability. We want farmers to manage their whole business in a way that achieves profitable food production and the recovery of nature – combining the best modern technology available today with the rediscovery of the traditional art of good farm husbandry.

We will also be working up plans for the Local Nature Recovery schemes this year, ahead of launching the pilot for that in 2022. We will explore how best to bring together groups of farmers to achieve large-scale environmental benefits that complement Local Nature Recovery strategies. We expect to release more details later this year, as well as details of how we will invite nominations for Landscape Recovery – with around 10 large land use change projects, starting next year.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my family have farmed in West Cornwall for six generations. The names of fields were passed from one generation to the next. Like all farmers, we knew our land and so I understand the responsibility that farmers feel to the hard work of previous generations and also their commitment to the future and future generations. That is why I want to get our future policy right, not just for the farmers of today but the farmers of tomorrow.

We want farmers to be able to access the money and the advice they need to help them contribute to our net zero target, protect and restore the environment, and improve animal health and welfare on the land they manage – as well as helping their businesses become more profitable and sustainable.

We want to support confidence in UK food internationally, prevent environmental harm, and protect biosecurity and animal health and welfare.

And we want to support the choices that farmers and land managers take on their holdings.

Thank you.