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Farmers face grant delays as advice service hits capacity

By Philip Case

Farmers may struggle to access Defra's £225m Capital Grants scheme after key advisers warned they are already unable to take on new requests as part of the guidance announced.

The Rural Payments Agency (RPA) confirmed last week that the scheme will reopen in July, offering funding for a wide range of environmental improvements. However, land agents have been told that the advisory system underpinning applications is already under pressure, with Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) advisers in some regions saying they cannot process new advice requests.

Defra said CSF advice has been in "exceptionally high demand" as farmers prepare for the 2026 scheme, with a high number of support visits already completed over the past seven months to enable those who require support to apply when the window opens.

Application barrier

CSF advice is an essential gateway for 24 grant items, particularly those linked to water and air quality and on-farm flood risk.

These include RP15: Concrete Yard Renewal; RP28: Roofing (sprayer washdown area, manure storage area, livestock gathering area, slurry stores, silage stores); and RP29: Self-supporting covers for slurry and anaerobic digestate stores. Without this approval, farmers cannot submit applications for these items during what is expected to be a highly competitive funding window.

Tom Cooper, director at Doncaster-based Cooper Rural, works across several catchment areas in northern England. He said the situation raises concerns about a lack of preparation within Defra and the scheme's readiness. "With the RPA only announcing the new round on 19 March, it's concerning that within two working days, CSF advisers are saying they can't take on new requests," he said. "The guidance is very clear – if a CSF adviser does not approve your proposals, the RPA will reject your application."

Concrete yard renewal is eligible for Capital Grants, but access may be limited by advice bottlenecks

Core scheme

The Capital Grants scheme forms a central part of England's post-Brexit farm support framework, sitting alongside schemes such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive.

Funding in 2026 has been increased to £225m, up from £150m, but demand is again expected to exceed the available budget (see "Prepare early to secure Capital Grants funding"). In 2025, the scheme closed within weeks of opening after funds were fully allocated.

Hugh Townsend, director of Devon-based Townsend Chartered Surveyors, said: "It's very difficult to rely on these grants, with the uncertainty over whether Defra might close them, change the terms and conditions, or whether the money will run out.

"My advice to farm businesses is to go after these grants. If you get them, great. If not, move on and explore other options like natural capital markets and biodiversity net gain."

Defra response

Defra told *Farmers Weekly* that where CSF teams have reached capacity, they are prioritising existing requests and will begin taking on new ones later this year. It added that farmers can still apply for a wide range of Capital Grant items that do not require CSF support, and can attend free CSF events in the meantime.

PREPARE EARLY TO SECURE CAPITAL GRANTS FUNDING

Farmers planning to apply for the next round of Capital Grants are being urged to prepare early, with demand expected to exceed the £225m budget.

Advisers at consultancy firm Strutt & Parker say businesses should act now to avoid missing out when the scheme opens in July. Consultant Rob Wilkinson said: "The items available will be broadly similar to previous years, so our advice is to prepare early, so you're ready to submit as soon as the window opens."

Last year, funding was fully allocated within weeks, and a similar level of interest is expected in 2026. Preparation should include checking that business details and land mapping are up to date with the Rural Payments Agency, as errors can delay or prevent applications.

Farmers are also being urged to review cashflow carefully. Capital Grants are paid retrospectively, meaning businesses must fund works upfront. "Businesses need to ensure the figures stack up and that any investment supports their longer-term strategy," Mr Wilkinson said.

CSFO support

Many higher-value items, including slurry infrastructure, yard improvements and water protection measures, require support from the local Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer (CSFO) before making an application.

However, securing these visits may prove difficult in the short term due to high demand. "Booking a visit from a CSFO at this point may be difficult, but it is always worth a try," said Mr Wilkinson. With competition for funding expected to be intense, early preparation could prove critical to securing support, he added.

Duchy sale plan leaves Devon tenants facing uncertainty

Tenant farmers on the Duchy of Cornwall's Bradninch estate in Mid Devon are facing uncertainty after being told the Duchy plans to sell the estate's farmland.

Farmers Weekly understands several tenants are affected, though none are commenting publicly. Details of which properties are for sale have not been disclosed. However, sitting tenants have been offered first refusal to purchase their holdings, according to the Tenant Farmers Association (TFA).

George Dunn, TFA chief executive, said: "We are aware of conversations currently live on the Duchy's Bradninch estate involving the Duchy informing its tenants that it is selling that part of its portfolio and giving the tenants first refusal before doing so.

"Obviously, we are disappointed the Duchy is selling, but it is part of its current plans for rationalisation and, in the world of the second best, we are at least pleased to see that sitting tenants are to be given first refusal on purchasing." Mr Dunn added that the TFA has received no reports of formal notices to quit.

He noted that where tenants hold farm business tenancies granting the Duchy the right to sell with vacant possession, notices could be issued if tenants do not wish to purchase the freehold. "Where the tenant is unable or unwilling to purchase the freehold, there will be a major upheaval for their farm businesses, given their expectation to have been tenants on those farms into the long term," he said.

The Duchy of Cornwall is a private estate of land and property across England and Wales, owned by the Duke of Cornwall, HRH Prince William, and managed to balance financial, environmental and community objectives.

Duchy response

The Duchy says buying and selling property is a routine part of its estate management.

A spokesman said: "We are in the process of aligning and rebalancing our portfolio so that our places and assets deliver the greatest possible social and environmental impact. This means making careful, long-term decisions about where we focus our resources.

"The Duchy of Cornwall regularly buys and sells property, and any sale will, of course, be handled sensitively, with our farming tenants in most cases being offered the opportunity to purchase their property first, ahead of any other third party."

The Duchy of Cornwall is owned by Prince William and managed on his behalf

PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM SCRIVENER, PA IMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Direct payments to form basis of Scots' farm support

Scottish farmers are in line for what is being touted as "the most generous support package in the UK", following publication of the new Rural Support Plan by Holyrood this week.

The document sets out a "four-tier" arrangement, which agriculture minister Jim Fairlie says will deliver for climate, nature and sustainable food production. "By working with the industry, we have avoided any cliff edges in payment support, and we will build on this as the support system evolves," said Mr Fairlie. "Stability does not mean no change. But where we have the powers to protect and support the agricultural industry, we are doing just that."

The Scottish government is planning a phased transition from the old CAP legacy schemes over the next five years. The four tiers are as follows:

- **Base tier** – will provide direct payments to active farmers, starting off with the current Basic Payment Scheme, which will be developed over time.
- **Enhanced tier** – will support farmers who do even more for climate and nature.
- **Elective tier** – will support actions that create/protect habitats or species or improve business sustainability.
- **Complementary tier** – will help to grow skills and capabilities.

In the short term, existing support schemes which are already familiar to the sector will be delivered through the various tiers. That means that 70% of funding will be made through direct payments – though farmers and crofters will need to do more for climate and nature, for example through enhanced greening measures and new calving intervals for suckler beef support. Production-linked supports will continue.

Industry reaction

NFU Scotland president Andrew Connon described the new framework as "an important step forward" which "locks in" commitments to continued direct support. "That provides a level of certainty that is vital for farm businesses as they plan, invest and adapt for the future," he said.

More operational detail was still needed, he added, while a "static" £677m budget over the next five years would amount to a real-terms cut as input costs continued to rise.

The Nature Friendly Farming Network for Scotland said the changes were happening too slowly.

WELSH SCHEME UPDATE

The Welsh government has revealed more details of its post-Brexit farm support, setting out how the Optional and Collaborative layers of the Sustainable Farming Scheme will operate later this year. For example, environmental capital funding will range from £500-£20,000 for works including drainage, tree planting and pond restoration, while £12,000-£50,000 will be available to improve nutrient management, reduce pollution and enhance biosecurity.