

Rural Performance

Despite the record low offerings of 2019, publicly marketed farmland, according to research from Savills, looks set for another record-breaking low in 2020, as the extent of the pandemic lockdown begins to show in market activity figures.

Across Great Britain, just 74,200 acres were brought to market to 31 August 2020, 23% down on the same period for 2019. Market activity picked up significantly as lockdown restrictions were eased, with 75% of supply launched in June, July and August. Farmland values remain firm with Great Britain's average 'all type' farmland indicator price increasing ever so slightly to £6,690 per acre, a total of 0.5% higher than June 2019.

Chris Spofforth, head of Savills south east farm agency team, said: "For some time now, tight farmland supply has limited price volatility in our analysis of sales. In reality, however there is a wide range of prices achieved either side of the average as quality, location and sale conditions tend to set relative values. Buyer and seller motives further influence the equation, but it is possible we may see a further scarcity premium paid if farmland supply maintains low turnover rates."

Demand for lifestyle and amenity farmland continues to surge. The analysis of buyer applicant numbers during the second quarter of 2020 shows roughly double the number of registrations compared to the same period last year. Furthermore, website traffic searching for farms and estates is 50% above pre-lockdown levels.

Indeed, this pent up demand is evident across the farmland market, with buyers increasingly frustrated by a prolonged period of limited supply. Commercial farms, be it for sale or let, have received strong interest indicating fresh confidence

50%

Increase on pre-lockdown levels of website traffic searching for farms and estates

Savills

in the sector. Those with environmental service delivery potential have seen a similar upturn in demand.

Confidence from commercial farmers is somewhat mixed with some progressive operators looking actively to expand holdings and achieve scale for the future. On the other hand, extremes in weather patterns and COVID-19 related disruption have negatively impacted farm operating profits in some sectors and may act as a catalyst to bring property to market.

Angus Locke, of Savills rural research says, "Overall, the outlook for the farmland market is expected to remain positive in light of significant global uncertainty and a refocus on domestic food security over the coming months. Low supply should continue to hold values firm and scarcity may well encourage premiums to be paid for the best in class."

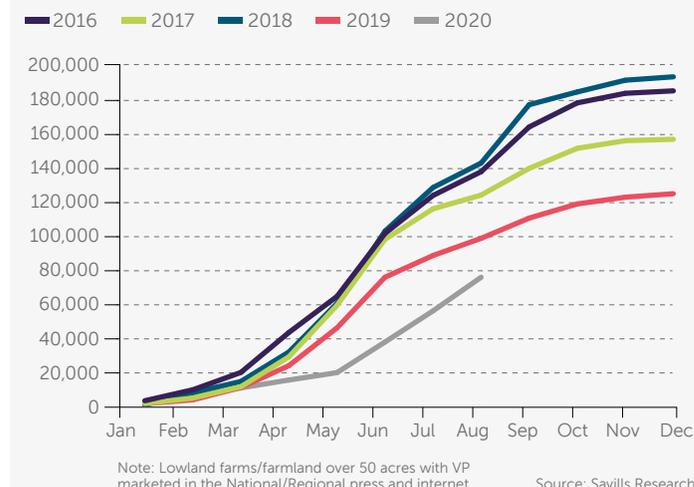
"The sector is however poised for significant change as impending subsidy reform and trade negotiations continue to develop in detail. The government also hasn't ruled out toying with the political football of capital taxation changes, which could impact land buying or selling positions for many."

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Cumulative total of acres marketed in GB



Opposite: Land at Bridge Farm.

CREDIT: Chris Spofforth/Savills



Castle Farm, Shoreham near Sevenoaks, is UK's largest lavender farm.



LEADER Grant Funding in Kent

Kent's LEADER programme is a source of funding for rural businesses, farmers, foresters and communities to help secure a sustainable future for the rural economy. The LEADER Programme is a bottom-up, community-led approach to the delivery of the Rural Development Programme for England funded by Defra and the European Union. The planning, decision-making and implementation is via Local Action Groups made up of private, public and community sector volunteers with a wide range of knowledge and experience of local rural issues.

LEADER in Kent has a budget of £5.25m for 2015-2020 and applications are currently closed. The emphasis is on providing jobs and growth in rural areas. It has a rolling funding mechanism with a minimum grant of £2,500 and a maximum of £50,000 to £100,000 (higher under certain circumstances), at a rate of 40% of eligible costs for commercial projects.

Recent LEADER projects include:



Swarden Community Store and Post Office, Swarden, Ashford.

Swarden Community Store and Post Office

At the request of the Parish Council The Swarden Store Ltd, a Community Benefit Society (CBS) was set up to develop a new build community shop and village social hub in Swarden near Headcorn. The store and post office will be owned and run by the Swarden community for the community. As a not for profit organisation any profit or surplus is reinvested back into the store or can be used for other charitable or community projects in the village. The asset will be owned by the Community Benefit Society on behalf of the community. Residents of the parish can buy £25 shares in the CBS and become members. Shareholders will become part owners of the store but with the primary purpose to achieve a social dividend rather than any financial gain. All management committee members will be volunteers and will not be paid.

The new village hub will help combat isolation, promote social inclusion and support opportunities for learning and interaction through a volunteering programme to run the enterprise. The population of the village is 1,411 with 556 households with a proposed increase of 50 houses planned. The Community Store was developed following an extensive consultation by the Parish Council with the people of Swarden.

The Ferry House Inn, Isle of Sheppey

LEADER has assisted in the construction of a two-storey building adjacent to the current Ferry House Inn as part of an expansion programme for the existing pub, restaurant and wedding business.

The building includes a main structure accommodating six en-suite guest rooms on an upper floor, along with a staff room, laundry room, storage area, plant room, workshop butchery and catering kitchen on the ground floor. The project is being undertaken in response to increasing demand for wedding ceremonies and receptions at the Ferry House Inn.

By expanding the facilities on-site the business can cater for the increase in demand for this wedding venue. The project also involved expanding the kitchen to provide additional room and equipment to cater for larger groups and to establish an external catering business. En-suite guest rooms add to the existing five rooms and suites, and four self-catering properties.



Expansion of the Ferry House Inn, Leysdown-on-Sea, Sheerness.



The Cloth Hall, Swarden, provides high-end self-catering holiday accommodation for Heritage Holiday Lets.

The Cloth Hall, Swarden

LEADER has assisted with the renovation of an existing Timber Framed Barn on the site of a medieval Grade II* Cloth Hall and its conversion into high-end self-catering holiday accommodation for Heritage Holiday Lets. The restored and converted barn provides two bedrooms which will accommodate up to four people with a further two people accommodated on a sofa bed. The conversion and décor has been finished to a very high standard and complements the conversion of other heritage outbuildings at the historic Cloth Hall. Overall, the site can accommodate up to twelve guests in a heritage setting.

CREDIT: LAURA HAWKEN

CREDIT: ALEX BURDEN

CREDIT: SHARON BARTON

Kent County Council Village and Community Hall Grant Scheme

Community buildings are at the heart of community life. They are important components in sustaining inclusive and active communities, particularly in rural areas with fewer venues and services. Such buildings have an increasingly multi-purpose role as a social centre, arts centre, sports centre and, in some cases, providing a space for education, health or retail services – usually all within easy walking distance of home.

The economic contribution of the network of community centres in Kent is significant. They support jobs, either directly (e.g. cleaners, caretakers, grounds maintenance) or indirectly (pre-school staff, shop and post-office staff, fitness instructors, caterers). They also use local building firms, tradesmen and other local suppliers.

In Kent there are around 300 village halls and many more community sports and recreation centres, social clubs, and church halls, and their importance to the health of our communities is growing.

The majority of community buildings are run by small charities and local volunteer trustees and are heavily reliant on fundraising. A leaky roof, poor kitchen or toilet facilities, a cold, damp hall or a lack of room for community activities leads hall management committees to turn to Kent County Council's Village and Community Hall Grant Scheme.

Over the last 20 years, 190 community halls throughout Kent have benefitted from over £4 million in grants from Kent County Council (KCC) to support the building, refurbishment and development of facilities that provide vital space for the communities they serve. Action for Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK) has a major role in the operation of the scheme, as well providing a specialist comprehensive advice and information service to the volunteers who run and manage community halls.

Recent examples of supported projects:

Wye Village Hall – Pavilion Refurbishment near Ashford

KCC supported the refurbishment of a disused pavilion as a community facility. The Pavilion is available for the whole community but will have emphasis on youth provision – allowing the local Youth Club to get back up and running and offering enhanced facilities for local Cubs, Scouts and Brownie groups.

Painters Forstal – New Community Hall in Swale

Residents of Painters Forstal, who were left disappointed at the loss of their meeting place when it was sold several years ago, have devoted much time and effort in a bid to build their very own community hall. A new hall will be completed by 2021, and will provide a modern, flexible space that can be used for both small and larger events. The hall will also be highly energy efficient, making maximum use of natural 'solar gain', keeping energy bills as low as possible.

Newenden Village Hall – New Community Hall near Ashford

A proposal has been made for a new, modern and accessible hall to replace the existing one which was built in 1922 and closed in 2019 due to its deteriorating condition. The new hall will comprise approximately 170m² and will be attached to, and integrated with, the existing sports pavilion. The hall will provide an excellent facility for the whole community, offering a health clinic, meeting rooms and a conference hall for up to 70 people, a playgroup and enhanced catering facilities.

For more information about the grant scheme:
<http://www.kent.gov.uk/leisure-and-community/community-grants-and-funding/village-and-community-hall-grant-scheme>

For more information about the ACRK:
<http://www.ruralkent.org.uk>



Proposal for Painters Forstal Community Hall.

CREDIT: RED HOUSE DESIGN