

DRONES OVER THE FARM

A Guide to Help Farmers Understand the Rules

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A Guide for Farmers, Growers and Landowners on Unmanned Aircraft Law in England & Wales

1. WHY THIS MATTERS: DRONES AS A WARNING SIGN

Rural crime is increasingly organised. Groups that steal machinery, quad bikes, GPS units and livestock rarely arrive on impulse — they plan. Police forces have separately confirmed that burglars have used drones to identify properties with weak security before returning to commit crime, and the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) has warned landowners directly that drones “can be used to gather intelligence for serious criminality.” The National Farmers' Union (NFU) has documented cases of individuals caught on CCTV scouting a site before returning to steal, and claims to compensate farmers for rural crime is reported to have cost the NFU Mutual around £41.5 million in 2025 alone.

An unauthorised drone loitering over your farmyard — as opposed to one simply passing overhead in transit — should therefore be treated as a trigger for increased vigilance, not dismissed as a curiosity.

Respond: the farmyard ‘lockdown walk’

If you notice a drone hovering, circling, or repeatedly returning to your yard, consider a short walk around the farmyard to:

- Check cameras, alarms, and lights are switched on, working, and recording imagery
- Close and lock the workshop, equipment barn, and tack room doors, fuel pumps, and close the farmyard gates
- Lock vehicle cabs, remove keys from machinery, and secure quad bikes/ATVs and livestock handling areas
- Note the time, direction of travel, drone colour/markings and, if safe to do so, any nearby vehicle
- Alert neighbours and any local Farm Watch / Countryside Watch group that a drone has been active
- Report the sighting — see ‘Who to Contact’ on page 7



Use your phone to record a voice message whilst watching the drone – ‘say what you see’.

If the same drone returns repeatedly, treat this as a pattern worth reporting rather than a series of isolated incidents — a short log of each occurrence (date, time, duration, direction) helps police officers see the bigger picture.

This guide is about raising awareness of a possible motive for a drone's presence — it is not a suggestion that every drone overhead is hostile. Most drone flights near farms are entirely innocent: surveyors, utility companies, hobbyists, the emergency services, or a neighbour's photography project!

2. FARMYARD OR FARMLAND?

WHY THE DIFFERENCE MATTERS

This guide draws a deliberate distinction between:

- The farmyard — the cluster of buildings, stores, workshops, chemical or feed stores, livestock handling areas, fuel tanks, vehicles and equipment that make up the working heart of the holding; and
- Farmland — the open fields, pasture, cropped land, or forestry beyond it.

A drone passing over open farmland at height is common and, in most cases, unremarkable — it may be surveying, mapping, or simply in transit, and causes no realistic security concern.

A drone that loiters, circles, or repeatedly returns low over the farmyard itself, where vehicles, machinery and valuable equipment are concentrated, is a materially different situation, and is the primary focus of the vigilance measures in this guide.

3. WHO REGULATES DRONES?

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The use of unmanned aircraft (drones) in the UK is regulated primarily by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), acting under powers set out in the Air Navigation Order 2016 (SI 2016/765), as amended; retained UK Regulation (EU) 2019/947 (operational rules) and (EU) 2019/945 (product and class-marking requirements); and the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021. These retained regulations were updated by the Unmanned Aircraft (Amendment) Regulations 2025 (SI 2025/1106), which from 1 January 2026 replace the former 'C' class markings (C0, C1, C2...) with 'UK' class markings (UK0, UK1, UK2...).

Registration

Anyone flying a drone weighing 250g or more (or 100g or more if fitted with a camera) must hold a CAA Operator ID. Anyone flying a drone weighing 100g or more must also hold a Flyer ID, obtained by passing the CAA's online theory test. Flying without the required ID, where one is needed, is a criminal offence.

Height limit and which category applies

Under the CAA's Drone and Model Aircraft Code (CAP2320), the Open Category — most farm-related, hobby and small commercial flying — has a maximum height of 120 metres (400 ft) above the ground, and is split into three subcategories based on the aircraft's weight, class marking and proximity to people:

A1 – Over People: small or appropriately class-marked aircraft (broadly under 250g) may fly close to, and in some cases directly over, uninvolved people, though never over a crowd.

A2 – Near People: with an A2 Certificate of Competency (A2 CofC), suitably class-marked aircraft may operate down to 30 metres (98 ft) from uninvolved people, reducing to 5 metres (16 ft) in low-speed mode, but may not fly directly over them.

A3 – Far from People: larger or non-class-marked aircraft must stay at least 50 metres (164 ft) from uninvolved people and 150 metres (492 ft) from residential, commercial, industrial or recreational areas, reducing to 50 metres (164 ft) for an isolated building.



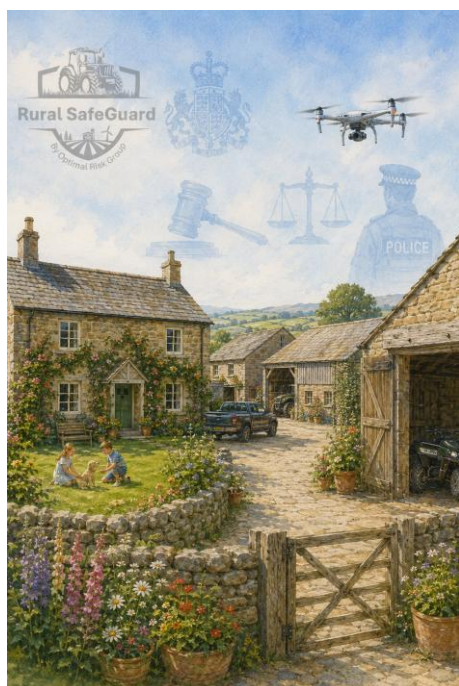
In short, there is no single distance that applies to every drone — a small A1 aircraft may lawfully operate much closer to your farmyard than a larger A3 aircraft, which is why a drone's behaviour and apparent purpose matter as much as how close it appears.

Endangering safety

Under Article 241 of the Air Navigation Order 2016, it is an offence to recklessly or negligently cause or permit an aircraft to endanger any person or property. Endangering the safety of an aircraft is a serious offence carrying a maximum sentence of five years' imprisonment.

Police powers

Schedule 8 to the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021 gives constables powers to require a drone to be grounded, to stop and search a person, vehicle or premises where they reasonably suspect a drone has been used to commit an offence, and to seize a drone and related equipment as evidence.



4. PROPERTY, PRIVACY AND TRESPASS

Airspace above your land

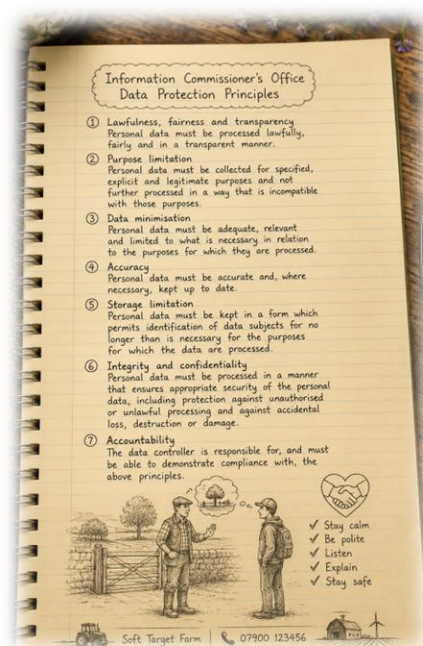
English and Welsh law does not automatically treat every overflight as trespass. Section 76(1) of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 provides that flight at a 'reasonable' height causes no trespass or nuisance, provided the flight complies with aviation law.

The leading case, *Bernstein of Leigh v Skyviews & General Ltd [1978]*, held that a landowner's rights extend only to the height reasonably necessary for the ordinary use and enjoyment of the land and buildings on it — not to an unlimited column of airspace above.

In practice, a drone flying at a sensible height that does not interfere with your use of your land is unlikely, on its own, to amount to legal trespass — though a drone flown low, repeatedly, or in a way that interferes with your enjoyment of your property may support a claim in nuisance or harassment, or, where it causes loss or damage, a claim under section 76(2) of the 1982 Act.

Take-off and landing

Permission to overfly your land is a separate question from permission to use it. A drone operator does not generally need your consent simply to fly through the airspace above your farm, but physically taking off or landing a drone from your land without permission may itself amount to trespass to land under ordinary property law.



Privacy, cameras and harassment

The CAA's own Drone and Model Aircraft Code is explicit on this point: a pilot using a camera or listening device “must respect other people's privacy,” and using one “where people can expect privacy, such as inside their home or garden” is likely to breach data protection law.

It is also unlawful to record photographs, video, or sound **“for criminal or terrorist purposes.”**

Repeated, targeted drone activity that causes alarm or distress may separately amount to an offence under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, and footage of identifiable people may engage the Data Protection Act 2018 and UK GDPR, on which the Information

Commissioner's Office (ICO) can advise.

OVERFLIGHT ≠ LAND USE

Permission to fly above land and permission to take off or land are separate questions.

5. COMMON QUESTIONS FROM FARMERS

Q. Can someone fly a drone over my farmyard without my permission?

A. In general, yes — provided the flight complies with CAA rules on height, distance and airspace restrictions, a drone does not need the landowner's permission simply to overfly land at a reasonable height (see 'Property, Privacy and Trespass', page 4). Permission is a separate question from whether the flight is otherwise lawful.

Q. How low and how close can a drone fly to my farmyard buildings?

A. There is no single distance that applies to every drone. A larger A3-category aircraft must generally stay at least 150 metres (492 ft) from residential, commercial, industrial or recreational areas, reducing to 50 metres (164 ft) where your farmyard buildings are isolated from other properties. A small A1-category drone (broadly under 250g), however, may lawfully operate much closer — and in some cases directly over an individual — though never over a crowd (see 'Which category applies?', page 3).

Q. Does a drone flying near my farm have to be registered?

A. Any drone weighing 250g or more (or 100g or more with a camera) must be flown by someone holding a CAA Operator ID, and the person flying it must hold a Flyer ID. It is a criminal offence to fly without these where required.

Q. What should I do if I see a drone hovering over my yard?

A. Treat it as a prompt for increased vigilance rather than panic. Follow the 'lockdown walk' set out on page 2 — check CCTV, lock up, alert neighbours — note details, and report the sighting (see 'Who to Contact', page 7).

Q. Can I use a signal jammer or 'drone gun' to bring it down electronically?

A. No. Jamming a drone's radio or GPS signal is itself a criminal offence under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006, regardless of your intentions.

DO NOT INTERFERE WITH THE AIRCRAFT

Report suspicious or unsafe activity. Do not use jammers or attempt to shoot a drone down.

Q. Can I shoot down a drone if it flies between my farmyard barns?

A. No. Shooting at a drone — even over your own land — is likely to expose you to multiple criminal offences, including causing damage to property belonging to another (Criminal Damage Act 1971), unsafe discharge of a firearm, and potentially endangering the safety of an aircraft under Article 240/241 of the Air Navigation Order 2016 (maximum sentence: five years' imprisonment). It also creates a serious risk of injury from stray shot or falling debris in a working farmyard. This guide is intended to raise awareness of why a drone might be present — not to suggest self-help enforcement of any kind. If you are concerned about a drone, report it and seek independent legal advice.





COMMON QUESTIONS FROM FARMERS

Q. I fly my own drone for spraying, mapping or stock-checking — does any of this apply to me?

A. Yes — the same registration, height and distance rules apply to farmers using drones for agricultural purposes as to anyone else, alongside any additional permissions needed for heavier aircraft or operations beyond visual line of sight (the CAA's 'Specific' category).

Q. Who is responsible if a drone films my farmyard?

A. The drone operator is responsible for how footage is captured and used, and must comply with data protection law if identifiable people are filmed. If you believe you have been filmed inappropriately, the ICO can advise on making a complaint.

Q. Can a drone fly over me while I'm working in a field?

A. Possibly. A small A1-category drone may lawfully fly over an individual uninvolved person, though pilots are expected to minimise unnecessary overflight. A2 and A3 aircraft have stricter separation requirements and should not be flown directly over you, and no Open Category drone may fly over a crowd of any size.

Q. Can I insist that the pilot lands the drone or leaves?

A. You can make your objection known if it is safe to do so, but as a private landowner you do not gain police or CAA enforcement powers simply because a drone is above your property. Avoid confrontation, record what you see, and report dangerous, threatening or persistently suspicious activity to the police.

Q. What if the drone belongs to the police, a utility company or a contractor?

A. Police and emergency services use drones legitimately for public safety and crime reduction, and utility companies or contractors may use them for pipeline, powerline or building inspections.

A genuine operator should normally be able to explain their purpose. If you're unsure, note the details, and if it reoccurs without explanation, report it so it can be checked.

Q. Can I use my phone to take a photograph of the drone pilot if they are on my land?

A. Yes, in general. There is no law against photographing someone, and if a pilot is standing on your land without permission, taking a photograph for your own security or as evidence is a reasonable, lawful response — it will normally fall within the 'personal or household' exemption in UK GDPR (Article 2(2)(c)), so data protection law is unlikely to be engaged. A pilot on your land without consent is also likely to be trespassing, and your photograph may help support a report to the police or, if needed, independent legal advice. As with any encounter, prioritise your own safety over getting the photo, and avoid confrontation.

Q. Is a certified and qualified drone pilot obliged to give me their details? If so, what regulation states this?

A. Not to you directly. There is no general legal duty on a drone pilot to hand their name or contact details to a landowner or member of the public simply because they're asked. The Operator ID displayed on the aircraft (see 'Registration', page 2) is a registration reference, not published contact information, and only the police or CAA can look behind it. What the law does provide is a police power: under Schedule 9 to the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021, a constable can require a remote pilot to identify the operator (and vice versa) and to produce evidence of the required competency and any necessary permissions. If a pilot won't identify themselves and their conduct is suspicious, dangerous or unwelcome, don't press the point yourself — record what you can safely observe and report it to the police (see 'Who to Contact', page 7).

6. A PRACTICAL RESPONSE FOR YOUR FARM

Just as many farms already display 'Private Property', 'CCTV in Operation' and 'Beware of the Dog' signage at gates and entrances, consider adding a clear notice that unauthorised drone flights over the yard are monitored and will be reported — for example:



Such a sign has no independent legal force, but it signals awareness, may act as a deterrent, and supports a record that you treat drone activity as a security matter — it should not claim more legal power than you actually have.

7. WHO TO CONTACT

- A crime in progress, or immediate danger to people, livestock or property: 999
- Drone flying illegally now — e.g. very close to an airport/prison, over a crowd, above 120m (400 ft), or in restricted airspace — or to report after the event: 101, or your police force's online reporting tool
- Rural or wildlife crime team: many forces have a dedicated rural crime officer — ask for them by name via 101
- Anonymous reporting: Crimestoppers, 0800 555 111
- Privacy or data protection concerns (e.g. footage of identifiable people): Information Commissioner's Office, ico.org.uk
- Drone safety occurrence reporting and registration checks: Civil Aviation Authority, caa.co.uk/drones (the CAA directs individual illegal-flying and privacy reports to the police)
- Local intelligence-sharing: Farm Watch / Countryside Watch schemes / WhatsApp Groups, and your local NFU, CLA, or community rural crime consultant

Guidance checked against publicly available sources as of August 2026. Sources: UK Civil Aviation Authority (caa.co.uk/drones) — Drone and Model Aircraft Code (CAP2320, March 2026), Open Category and privacy guidance; legislation.gov.uk — Air Navigation Order 2016 (SI 2016/765), UK Regulation (EU) 2019/947 and (EU) 2019/945 (retained, as amended), Unmanned Aircraft (Amendment) Regulations 2025 (SI 2025/1106), Civil Aviation Act 1982, Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021; National Police Chiefs' Council; National Farmers' Union (NFU); Country Land and Business Association (CLA); Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

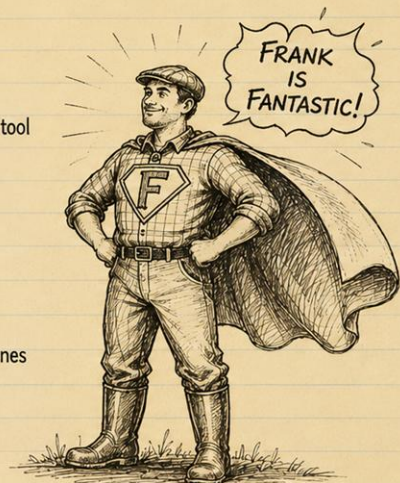
IMPORTANT NOTICE

This guide is produced by Rural SafeGuard for general information purposes only. It is not intended to be, and should not be relied upon, as, a definitive or complete statement of the law, and it is not a substitute for independent legal advice. Rural SafeGuard **does not** accept any liability for any action taken, or not taken, in reliance on the information contained in this guide. Farmers, growers and landowners should seek independent legal advice before taking any action in response to unauthorised drone activity over their property. Legislation and CAA guidance referred to in this document may change after publication; readers should check current requirements at caa.co.uk and legislation.gov.uk.

DRONE SIGHTING RESPONSE PLAN

Who to Contact:

- A crime in progress, or immediate danger to people, livestock or property: 999
- Drone flying illegally is over - report via 101 or our police force's online reporting tool
- Rural or wildlife crime team: John on his mobile – 0666 999 101
- Anonymous reporting: Crimestoppers, 0800 555 111 (if fearful)
- Privacy or data protection concerns (e.g. footage of identifiable people): Information Commissioner's Office, email – help@ico.org.uk
- Safety occurrence reporting and registration checks: CAA email help@caa.uk/drones
- Farm Watch / Countryside Watch schemes / WhatsApp Groups.
John at NFU. Julie at CLA. Frank at Rural SafeGuard – frank.cannon@ruralsafeguard.com



Soft Target Farm

☎ 07900 123456





OUR MISSION

“The UK's national programme to stop rural crime before it starts — for farmers, estates, insurers and retailers alike.”

Rural SafeGuard is the UK's first, commercially available, national programme designed to reduce rural crime before it happens — helping to protect livelihoods, strengthen food security, and make the countryside safer for all.

OUR PURPOSE

Rural SafeGuard exists to introduce farmers, landowners, insurers and rural communities to the security sector, and to share the best practices already on offer to other industrial sectors — building safer rural communities, together.

GET IN TOUCH

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RURAL SAFEGUARD

ruralsafeguard.com

OPTIMAL RISK GROUP

optimalrisk.com

