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Introduction

The 2026 King's Speech, only the second since the last General Election after an extended first session of Parliament, arrives at a difficult time for the government.

The government briefing accompanying the speech¹ identifies a total of 37 Bills to be introduced over the new session, none of which directly concerns rural affairs or communities. We understand that Defra was allocated only a single Bill and chose the Clean Water Bill, a headline environmental measure that stands to benefit the countryside but is largely tangential to the wellbeing of its communities.

During the recent election campaign, the Countryside Alliance published our Rural Charter, outlining our priorities for the new government, as follows:

- Building respect and understanding among policymakers and parliamentarians for the rural way of life and commitment to tackling the challenges facing our communities.
- Tackling the blight of rural crime.
- Championing British farmers and food producers.
- Promoting the importance of wildlife management and the value of trail hunting, fishing and shooting.
- Delivering a connected countryside.

The 2026 King's Speech contains little legislation directly focused on rural communities despite the significant economic, housing, infrastructure and policing challenges facing the countryside.

Within this briefing, we shall summarise those bills most relevant to rural communities. We shall also indicate where there is scope for bills to address other key matters on which the Countryside Alliance has campaigned, within the Rural Charter and otherwise, in the interests of rural Britain.

The Countryside Alliance urges the government to ensure all legislation introduced in this session is properly rural proofed, recognising the distinct economic, geographic and demographic realities of countryside communities.

Small Business Protections (Late Payments) Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Tackle late payments to small businesses and the resulting impact on their operations and viability. Late payments are said to cost the UK economy £11 billion per year and lead to the closure of 38 businesses every day.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Impose maximum payment terms of 60 days, with strictly limited exemptions.
- Enforce mandatory interest for late payments at eight per cent above the Bank of England base rate.
- Introduce a time limit for raising invoice disputes, before payment is due.
- Require boards or audit committees of persistently late-paying large companies to publish commentary on poor payment performance and intended actions to address it.

¹ No. 10, [The King's Speech 2026](#), 13.05.26

- Empower the Small Business Commissioner to investigate poor payment practices, adjudicate disputes and levy fines against persistent late payers.
- Targeted action to ban deducting and withholding retention payments under construction contracts.

Countryside Alliance Position

- Small businesses are lifelines for countless rural communities across the country. The Countryside Alliance celebrates their contribution to local economies and communities each year through our Countryside Alliance Awards.
- While we have no specific data as to the scale or impact of late payments in relation to small rural businesses, given the number of such businesses it is reasonable to suppose late payments will be a significant issue for many.
- The Countryside Alliance supports effective action to tackle late payments to small businesses and would urge the Small Business Commissioner to use the new powers this Bill intends to grant the office to clamp down on late payments to those in rural areas.

Clean Water Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Strengthen confidence in the water sector: restoring public trust, giving investors the stability to back long-term upgrades, and providing clarity to support economic growth. The government intends that the Bill will ensure the water sector plays its full part in delivering clean water and a healthy environment.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Create a new Water Ombudsman to ensure complaints are taken seriously and resolved quickly, strengthen consumer advocacy and provide stronger customer protections.
- Merge relevant functions of Ofwat, the Drinking Water Inspectorate, the Environment Agency and Natural England under a new independent water regulator. Grant it stronger enforcement powers over drinking water standards.
- Deliver cleaner rivers, lakes and seas by providing ensuring targets are ambitious, enabling pre-pipe solutions such as sustainable drainage systems to reduce spills, and consolidating and strengthening agricultural pollution rules.
- Reform processes related to new developments to unlock housing and growth.
- Modernise the economic regulation of the sector to strengthen its financial position.
- Introduce new statutory resilience standards, boost water efficiency, secure future supplies and consolidate industry planning processes.

Countryside Alliance Position

- River, lake and sea health are issues of importance to everyone who cares about the countryside and especially to those who enjoy related recreational pursuits, including walking, canoeing and angling.
- England is blessed with well over three quarters of the world's chalk streams, a true adornment to the British landscape that serve as fantastic, biodiverse ecosystems, prized for their water quality and as spawning grounds for fish.
- The Countryside Alliance supports effective measures to improve river, lake and sea water quality and would urge the new regulator to prioritise the protection of chalk streams as part of an overall effort towards protecting British waters.

Overnight Visitor Levy Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Give mayors and potentially other local leaders of Foundation Strategic Authorities the power to introduce an overnight visitor levy to raise and invest money into projects that improve their areas.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Grant powers to mayors to introduce an overnight visitor levy, with the government to set out its position in relation to Foundation Strategic Authorities in a forthcoming response to its consultation, as announced at the 2025 Budget.
- Enable levy funds to be reinvested in local priorities, support economic growth, strengthen public services and improve the visitor experience.
- Address the broad conditions under which a levy may be introduced, as well as the structure of the tax.

Countryside Alliance Position

- The Countryside Alliance is sceptical as to the merits of an Overnight Visitor Levy, often referred to as a “tourist tax”.
- We are concerned about the risk that a model that works for urban areas may be less suitable for the countryside. While the decision to introduce a levy is proposed to be left to local leadership, many of the Mayoral Combined Authorities across England encompass both urban and rural places. Legislation must ensure that mayors can vary the levy across their authority to ensure places are not inflicted with a tax that does not suit their local character and needs.
- Rural areas do experience challenges from tourism, but these are different from those faced by urban areas, being primarily concerned with second home ownership and the proliferation of holiday lets that tend to price local people out of the market. Tourist density is less often an issue and longstanding and/or purpose-built hotels are generally unproblematic.
- Tourism and the retail, hospitality and leisure sector are vital to the survival of many rural communities and are already under significant pressure from the impact of minimum wage increases, employers’ national insurance and business rates. The government must tread carefully before burdening it with still more taxation, whether direct or indirect.

Social Housing Renewal Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Protect social housing stock, give affordable housing providers clarity and confidence to build more social homes, and better protect tenants who are victims of domestic abuse by providing them with greater security and stability.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Protect existing social housing stock by restricting the Right to Buy. Planned measures include increasing the eligibility requirement to 10 years, amending percentage discounts to better align with new maximum cash discounts and exempting newly built social housing for 35 years.

- Repeal unimplemented provisions from previous legislation that the government maintains would not have worked in the interests of tenants or providers. These include requirements for local authorities to sell high-value homes, grant flexible (fixed-term) tenancies, and to charge higher income tenants higher rents.
- Increase protections for victims of domestic abuse to remain in their property away from their abuser or move to suitable alternative accommodation.

Countryside Alliance Position

- Housing remains a major challenge to the economic potential of rural areas because of the difficulties posed by the lack of adequate, affordable supply to the labour market, which in turn affects the provision of education and healthcare as well as the viability of revenue-generating private businesses.
- Affordable housebuilding lags behind demand with government efforts too often concentrated on the 'lower hanging fruit' of urban areas.
- The Countryside Alliance is unconvinced that the specific measures outlined for inclusion in this Bill will materially contribute to increasing the provision of social or affordable housing in rural areas. We urge concentrated action to do so.

Energy Independence Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Serve as the next step in the government's plan to deliver clean energy: tackle affordability and protect consumers, accelerate the drive for energy security and deliver a fair, managed and prosperous transition to clean energy.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Place the Exchequer funding of 75% cent of the domestic costs of the Renewables Obligation scheme for three years on an enduring legal basis, removing around £90 a year of costs on average from household bills as part of the £150 reduction in costs announced in the autumn 2025 Budget.
- Provide for a Warm Homes Agency, a public body tasked with helping deliver the £15 billion home electrification scheme, the Warm Homes Plan.
- Require landlords to invest in home upgrades to cut bills for tenants.
- Strengthen Ofgem's powers to protect consumers and enable the provision of targeted energy bill support for low-income and vulnerable households.
- Reform market, planning and regulatory frameworks to accelerate the deployment of clean power including offshore wind, hydrogen and smart grid technologies.
- Speed up the build-out of vital grid infrastructure with a package of measures to reduce unnecessary delays, including reforms to land access rules and networks consenting.
- Enable the removal of charges on electricity that consumers export to the grid and allow discounted energy at times of excess generation.
- Manage existing oil and gas fields through their lifetime, issue no new licences to explore new fields, ban fracking and end new coal licences.
- Support the North Sea Transition Authority and place it under a new statutory objective to consider workers, communities and supply chains in its decisions.

Countryside Alliance Position

- The Countryside Alliance supports net zero carbon emissions for the UK as an environmental and economic policy objective. We are conscious, however, that achieving this aim will require the maintenance of public support, including from rural communities.
- Accepting that the drive to net zero involves costs as well as benefits, rural Britain must not be required to bear burdens that are impractical and disproportionate. Other important objectives, principally food security, must not be sacrificed.
- A perception has been allowed to develop that agricultural land has become the default option for solar energy infrastructure because it can be cheaper than alternative sites when deployed at scale, not because it is the right social and environmental option.
- During the last Parliament, the Countryside Alliance supported the amendment to the then Energy Bill tabled by the former MP, Caroline Lucas (Green), that would have required new homes to carry solar panels on their roofs and developments to be planned effectively to maximise solar gain, as well as two amendments tabled by Wera Hobhouse MP (Lib Dem) containing measures to support householders with solar panels.
- Government policy must recognise that the reality of rural housing stock is that these homes are often older, costlier to insulate and harder to heat through alternative means such as heat pumps. Any new requirements to be imposed on landlords must recognise these challenges and avoid making it unfeasible to continue to provide much-needed rural housing.

Police Reform Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Deliver what the government maintains will be the biggest reform to policing in decades, strengthening local policing, improving standards, and equipping the police with the technology and skills to keep pace with criminals and tackle rapidly changing threats.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Create a new national police force, the National Police Service, intended to deliver a unified response to the most serious crime, set stronger national standards and ensure greater consistency. The Service is planned to consolidate the National Crime Agency, Counter Terrorism Policing, regional organised crime capabilities, the College of Policing and other national operational functions and specialist capabilities.
- Abolish Police and Crime Commissioners and put in place successor arrangements.
- Establish a single set of 'National Strategic Policing Priorities' to give policing clarity on core priorities, align policing towards a single vision, and enable the Government to drive progress in halving violence against women and girls and knife crime.
- Establish Local Policing Areas headed by a senior officer in every force, set to form the foundation of fewer, larger police forces.
- Set and enforce new standards for policing, providing for greater oversight.
- Establish a new legal framework to underpin law enforcement use of facial recognition and similar technologies, making it clear when the use of these technologies can be justified, including creating a single, expert regulatory body.

Countryside Alliance Position

- The creation of a National Police Service presents an opportunity for the government to fix our failing firearms licensing system. The Countryside Alliance has been advocating the replacement of the 38 separate firearms licensing units in England and Wales with a single, dedicated national licensing body. The National Police Service would be a logical place for it to sit.
- This was acknowledged by the Minister for Policing and Crime, Sarah Jones MP, during a parliamentary debate on firearms licensing in February 2026. She said:

“Lots of people pointed to something that we are already beginning to think about: calls for centralised licensing. Members will know that we published the White Paper on police reform recently and we are setting up a national police service. That is an opportunity to look at whether we should have a national licensing system.”²

- We have consistently argued that if the government wants a system set up to make the right decisions, structural reform of licensing administration is the logical place to start. The current patchwork system produces inconsistent decision-making as well as widely differing processing times. Centralisation offers the prospect of uniform standards, improved training and better use of specialist expertise – without penalising responsible shotgun owners or diverting police time to unnecessary extra paperwork.
- The Countryside Alliance also advocates for the National Police Service to play a key role in co-ordinating enforcement against waste crime offences. A forthcoming report, to be published by the Alliance in conjunction with the National Rural Crime Network, will recommend that the government:
 - Consider the merits of transferring responsibility for the investigation and prosecution of waste crime incidents above a given severity threshold to the National Police Service.
 - Require the mutual embedding of liaison officers between the National Police Service and the Environment Agency. In the event the above recommendation is adopted the Environment Agency would presumably maintain responsibility for monitoring environmental impacts of illegal waste sites and overseeing clean-up activity; if the recommendation is not adopted this will still be necessary to co-ordinate investigation in relation to organised criminal gangs.
- There should also be a role for the National Police Service to play in disrupting rural crime more broadly, particularly where there is a serious or organised element to offences such as thefts of agricultural machinery that cross police force area boundaries.

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² HC Deb, 23.02.26, [c43WH](#)