

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

Queen's Speech 2022

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Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill

- In addition to measures to promote cyber security and consumer product resilience against attacks, this Bill aims to accelerate the rollout of broadband and enhanced mobile connectivity over the coming years. It seeks to do this by reforming the Electronic Communications Code to support more efficient negotiation for the use of private and public land in the deployment of network infrastructure. The Government's current aim is for a minimum of 85% gigabit-capable coverage by 2025.

Countryside Alliance position:

- Delivering full-fibre and gigabit capable broadband to the countryside by 2025, as committed to in the 2019 Conservative General Election Manifesto, was already watered down to 85% of all properties in 2020. Continued poor connectivity in rural areas represents a huge, missed opportunity for economic development and these gaps and weaknesses need to be addressed as a priority.
- A Countryside Alliance survey conducted with Gigaclear found 80% of rural businesses agree that ultrafast fibre connectivity would have the single biggest positive impact on their business recovery post-COVID; 32% estimate it would help them recover twice as fast.

- The current lack of broadband infrastructure serving small firms threatens the expansion of the rural economy currently worth £400bn annually. The business opportunity includes 28 of all UK firms and over one million small businesses.
- COVID-19 has once again highlighted the disparity in broadband connectivity across the country as the networks have struggled to keep up with unprecedented demand which has seen millions of Britons suffering as a result of poor connectivity and outages. Our research also revealed 85% of rural businesses reported their current internet as being either poor but manageable (47%), or unmanageably poor (38%).

Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill

- This Bill will require the Government to set Levelling Up missions and produce an annual report, create 'County Deals' as a new model of combined authority and make some changes to the planning system, including to neighbourhood planning and in relation to empty premises, while further prioritising the environment in planning decisions.

Countryside Alliance position:

- The Government has sought to highlight that if cities in the North and Midlands were as productive as London and South East, UK GDP could be boosted by around £180 billion, but Countryside Alliance research has found that by levelling up the countryside through enhanced broadband connectivity has the potential to grow by up to a further £43bn in England alone.

UK Infrastructure Bank Bill

- This Bill will establish the UK Infrastructure Bank in law. The purpose of the Bank, which has a financial capacity of £22 billion, is to support economic growth, including at a regional and local level, and the delivery of net zero.

Countryside Alliance position:

- The Government refers to 'core infrastructure' as including power, heat and transport networks, but it makes no mention of broadband, which is of such major importance to unlocking the growth potential of rural areas. We believe that broadband should be included in the UK Infrastructure Bank Bill as it will be the cornerstone of economic development.
- Other areas of infrastructure that are key to rural development include housing, transport and accessible public services.

Draft Digital Markets, Competition and Consumer Bill

- This draft Bill is intended to include a range of measures to promote competition and protect consumer rights. The Government's briefing refers to protection from scams and specifically, preventing fake reviews.

Countryside Alliance position:

- It will be interesting to see whether the fake reviews the Government has in mind will include those posted by users on external sites. In relation to the Online Safety Bill, the

Countryside Alliance is campaigning to protect primarily rural businesses from being targeted by fake reviews posted by activists who have not visited the premises but have ideological objections to the businesses' activities or aspects of their owners' personal lives. We hope that the Online Safety Bill will provide a vehicle for tackling this issue, but if further work is needed this Bill may offer such scope.

- Regardless of which legislative vehicle the Government regards as the most appropriate, between them the Government should ensure that the following issues are addressed.
- We welcome efforts to tackle online abuse, in particular through its introduction of the new offences of Harmful communications, False communications and Threatening communications and requiring social media companies to take steps prevent their platforms from being used to spread hatred.
- In addition to tackling fake reviews, the Government must allow action to be taken against those who instigate campaigns of targeted harassment against others, regardless of whether they become active participants in sending harmful, false or threatening communications themselves. There should also be further clarification as to how to tackle harassment under the cloak of anonymity.
- New legislation, whatever its final form, must be enforced rigorously and without fear or favour.

Energy Security Bill

- This Bill aims to secure the energy supply, protect consumers against global price fluctuations and unfair pricing and attract private investment, including in carbon capture technologies and hydrogen, and growing the market for heat pumps.

Countryside Alliance position:

- Soaring energy costs are a major component of the cost of living crisis being felt across the country, and houses off the gas grid, which disproportionately fall in rural areas, have been especially hard-pressed. While this Bill will extend the energy price cap, no cap has yet been applied to the price of heating oil so there has been no benefit to the homes that rely on it.
- Although the latest statistics from 2019 indicate that historically higher levels of fuel poverty in rural areas in England have reversed, with 11.6% of rural households recorded as fuel-poor in 2019 compared with 13.8% in urban areas, the figures also indicated fuel-poor rural households were, on average, worse off than their urban counterparts.
- The 'fuel poverty gap' – the extra annual income that would be needed to bring a fuel-poor household out of fuel poverty – stood at £585 in rural villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings, compared with a national average of £216.

Non-Domestic Rating Bill

- This Bill aims to create a fairer, more accurate business rates system. Measures include shortening the business rates revaluation cycle from five to three years from 2023, and introducing new 12-month rates relief on increases to rateable value arising from improvements made to a property.

Countryside Alliance position:

- The Countryside Alliance welcomed the Government's recognition of the impact of business rates on small businesses, high streets and the retail and hospitality sector, including through measures announced in the October Budget. We remain convinced of the need for a full-scale overhaul to create a system that enables rural businesses to compete fairly with those trading online.
- Business rates are viewed by many as an outdated and archaic system and remain a source of grievance for many rural businesses, particularly with the growth of online retailing, which has increased the need for reform of the current system. The Treasury need to address their growing unfairness and the financial burden they place on businesses with a large footprint, such as garden centres and equestrian businesses.
- Land values are changing at a rapid pace, so even assessing these every three years leaves many businesses paying over (or under) the odds for lengthy periods of time. It also creates cliff-edges for businesses upon each revaluation – ones which are difficult to predict, given the volatility of the multiplier.

Procurement Bill

- Following the UK's exit from the EU and the initial transposal of EU directives into UK law, including on public sector procurement, this Bill would replace this inherited framework with what is intended to be a simpler and more transparent system. The aim is to public procurement more accessible for new entrants such as small businesses and voluntary, charitable and social enterprises, enabling them to compete for public contracts.

Countryside Alliance position:

- Any steps to improve access to public procurement contracts for smaller businesses would be most welcome. In implementing these new arrangements the Government must take care to ensure that rural businesses have access to appropriate advice and guidance, so they can be well positioned to take full advantage.
- A new procurement framework will ideally recognise the value of promoting local food and drink, given its economic and environmental benefits. These include supporting diversification of farms and producer businesses, creating additional demands for skills and training, and reducing food miles and carbon emissions. Promoting local food and drink can also increase cultural identity and community pride, which in turn makes an area a more attractive tourist offer, while also ensuring the resilience of the local food supply and supporting farmers and small producers.

Financial Services and Markets Bill

- This Bill will create a framework for a new scheme of regulation for the financial services industry. Alongside sectoral regulation, it aims to protect access to cash and enable the Payment Systems Regulator to require banks to reimburse Authorised Push Payment (APP) scam losses.

Countryside Alliance position:

- Preserving access to cash is of especial importance to rural communities which have been disproportionately affected by bank branch closures.

- One important means of accessing cash is the post office network, either using its own financial products or because it provides access to the current accounts of 26 other banks and the business accounts of over 15 other banks. Expanding financial services offered through post offices could replace lost banking and financial services to rural communities and small businesses, ensuring the long-term viability of the network and that the post office remains at the centre of rural community life.
- Nationally there are more post offices than there are bank branches (of all the banks combined). Moreover, the post office network has rural reach, since more than half of its outlets are located in rural areas and have a presence in many villages.
- Enhanced consumer protections against scams are also most welcome, but while the Government has referred specifically to APP scams, these are by no means the only type. Others include inducing victims to make payments via gift cards or cash sent by courier. Without tackling the root causes of scams – which would require robust engagement with the countries in which the scammers are located – victims of these scams will still be left out of pocket, and there is a risk that banks could face escalating compensation costs that will ultimately be passed on to the consumer.

Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill

- This Bill will change the UK's domestic procurement regulations to comply with obligations in the Free Trade Agreements with Australia and New Zealand when they come into force.

Countryside Alliance position:

- In negotiating and implementing free trade agreements it is essential that the Government avoids undermining the domestic agricultural sector and production standards, by declining to accept the import and sale of goods, in particular foods, that it would be unlawful to produce in the same manner in the UK.
- We would expect that this Bill, and the underlying trade deals, will be one of the matters in which the new Animal Sentience Committee will take an interest.

Draft Mental Health Act Reform Bill

- This Bill seeks to give patients suffering from mental health conditions greater control over their treatment, and to make it easier for people with learning disabilities and autism to be discharged from hospital.

Countryside Alliance position:

- Although not directly relevant to this specific Bill, the Countryside Alliance has been active in highlighting issues with mental health and healthcare provision in rural areas. In response to an inquiry into rural mental health, being run by the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, we submitted an extensive and detailed response informed by the replies to a survey we ran over Christmas.
- Areas highlighted especially include the provision, visibility and funding for services in areas of sparser population, and the damage to mental health caused by growing social pressures formed in ignorance of the rural way of life, propagated through media and exacerbated by instances of ideologically motivated harassment.

- As noted above, we have called on the Government to address some of these issues through measures in the Online Safety Bill to tackle online bullying and abuse.

Other measures: crime

- The Queen's Speech outlines a number of Bills aimed at addressing specific categories of crime, including guerilla protest, modern slavery and the carried-over Online Safety Bill, on which we have briefed separately. There appears to be little in the legislative programme, however, that addresses rural crime. We appreciate that new legislation is very frequently not the answer, but the issue nevertheless merits prominence in the political agenda.
- Results of the 2021 Countryside Alliance rural crime survey were released at the end of November. They showed that one in nine people had not seen a police officer in the past week, and seven in ten people reported an increase in crime over the past 12 months. With concern about crime in rural areas growing it is not surprising that 46% of respondents told us they don't think the police take rural crime seriously, and one in four did not bother reporting the crime to the police.
- The crimes that were recorded as the most frequently committed in rural areas include fly-tipping, agricultural machinery theft and trespass [trespass is not in itself criminal unless aggravated], with respondents wanting the police to prioritise tackling these crimes.
- Additionally, according to the survey, there is a serious problem of crime being underreported in rural areas, with one in four not reporting crime they were a victim of. Those surveyed felt it was either a waste of time to report it or that the police would not be able to do anything. This is why 46% of people don't think the police take rural crime seriously and 59% of people disagree with the statement that the police are spending more time on tackling rural crime
- The results suggest the rural population is simply putting up with crime and making do as best they can. There is often no escape from its effects, with the fear of crime doing just as much damage as the crimes that are committed.
- We also expect the Government to implement swiftly the new offences and powers to tackle hare poaching, which were passed in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act at the end of the last session.

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