

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

Queen's Speech Debate

May 2021

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BUILDING BACK BETTER: JOBS AND ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Levelling Up

The main elements of the levelling up agenda are:

- *The new £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund will invest in infrastructure to improve everyday local life and boost growth and jobs. Launch the UK Shared Prosperity Fund in 2022 and have already supported places with £220 million through the UK Community Renewal Fund. The £830 million Future High Streets Fund is supporting regeneration in 72 areas across England.*
- *Through the Towns Fund invest £3.6 billion in 101 towns in England towards their own local priorities such as upgrades to high streets and transport, while investing £2.9 billion in City and Growth Deals to drive forward local economic priorities in cities across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.*
- *Recruiting 20,000 new police officers to keep our streets and communities safe across England and Wales.*
- *Rolling out fibre across the UK, investing £5 billion in Project Gigabit to target getting to a minimum of 85 per cent gigabit-capable coverage by 2025 and to get us as close to 100 per cent as possible.*

Countryside Alliance position

Digital Connectivity

- Delivering full fibre and gigabit capable broadband to the countryside by 2025, as committed to in the Conservative General Election Manifesto, must remain a Government priority. It was disappointing in the Comprehensive Spending Review last year to see that commitment watered down to 85% coverage.
- Increased investment in full fibre connectivity by broadband operators is to be welcomed but this financial commitment must also be delivered in hard-to-reach rural areas to ensure they can also benefit from the opportunity a fibre connection brings.
- 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. 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 per cent of all UK firms and over one million small businesses.
- Business satisfaction with connectivity is lowest in remote rural areas and among those whose job requires them to travel. The British Chambers of Commerce found that 30 per cent of firms in rural areas had unreliable broadband, more than twice as high as those in towns and cities. Economic productivity in rural areas is 16 per cent the national average. The gap between superfast broadband connectivity in urban and rural areas has widened according to the 2019 Connected Nations report by Ofcom.
- 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. We saw a 62 per cent rise in outages in April 2020 and a third of people surveyed had experienced internet issues during lockdown. This impacts everyone from those trying to home school to homeworkers supporting the economy.

- The Countryside Alliance believes connectivity should certainly be right at the top of the Government's list of topics to review following lockdown.

Countryside Alliance calls for

- The decision to down grade the commitment to deliver gigabit enabled broadband to all in rural communities must be urgently reviewed. It is unacceptable that the needs of rural communities are once again being ignored.
- Currently, only 1 million homes are being connected a year to superfast. If the Government is going to match its manifesto commitment this needs to increase to 4 million a year. However with the scaling back of the commitment we are concerned the Government will take their foot off the pedal. To deliver the required outcome of levelling up economic opportunity and investing in infrastructure, the Government actually needs to increase funding, deliver regulatory change and reverse its decision to downgrade the rollout programme.
- The USO should be available to everyone, as the name implies. It is necessary to ensure that the most rural, hard-to-reach properties can enjoy the same workable broadband speeds as the rest of the UK. Rural properties should not be priced out of the service. BT must review the cost cap to allow neighbours to share costs when the threshold is reached.
- Broadband is not an optional extra in this digital world and rural consumers should not be expected to pay excessive amounts to be connected. As such, properties should be allowed to share the costs under USO, this would ultimately help connect rural residents and, depending on how many individuals were involved, could also bring costs below the cost cap.

Crime in Rural Areas

- Crime has always been a key issue throughout the countryside, but this has only risen up the national agenda over the last few years, thanks to a growing awareness of the problems rural communities are facing. However, this increased awareness is often not felt by the communities that live and work in the countryside, with 47 per cent of people who responded to the Countryside Alliance's 2020 Rural Crime Survey telling us they don't think the police take rural crime seriously and 38 per cent said that they have had a crime committed against them in the last 12 months.
- The extent of crime in rural areas is only part of the problem. For many people, whether they have fallen victim to crime or not, the simple fear of crime can have as great a detrimental effect on their quality of life as the actual experience of crime itself.
- We are also concerned that the people who make up these communities don't get the support through public services that are more widely available in urban areas. Coupled with an absence of a visible police presence, and the fact that rural crime is often not taken seriously, it is leaving those rural businesses and communities feeling undervalued and even more isolated, for which there is simply no excuse.

- The implication of these findings is that we have a rural population simply putting up with the crime they experience and making do as best they can. There is often no escape from the effects of rural crime, with the fear of crime doing just as much damage as the crimes that are committed.
- Good rural policing is about far more than numbers of police officers on the ground. If we truly want to tackle rural crime, then we must form effective partnerships between the police, rural communities and other authorities to ensure that the needs of our rural communities are truly understood so that the availability of services matches those needs. It is clear from these results that there is a lot to do in tackling rural crime and working with communities to ensure the impact of it is lessened, and to tackle the crime problems rural communities face.

Countryside Alliance calls for

- A National Rural Crime Taskforce to be set up to ensure there is a greater understanding of the needs of rural communities by police/government and other partners to ensure the problem of rural crime is tackled and appropriate solutions are identified.
- The police funding formula to be reviewed to reflect the unique nature of policing in rural areas and take into account the cost of delivering services in a sparsely-populated area.
- Training to be provided so that the unique nature and impact of rural crime is better understood by the judiciary and police, and the response they provide is reflective of the crime.
- Rural crime to be taken seriously, recognising the impact it has on the victims and communities is no less than in urban areas.

Support for Business

Value Added Tax (VAT) Reduced Rate for Hospitality and Tourism

- *In July 2020 the Government cut the rate of VAT applied to goods and services in the hospitality, accommodation and attractions sector from 20 per cent to 5 per cent.*
- *To continue supporting the cash flow and viability of around 150,000 businesses, and the 2.4 million people they employ, the Government is extending the 5 per cent reduced rate of VAT affecting these sectors until 30 September 2021. To help those businesses manage the transition back to the standard rate, a new 12.5 per cent rate will apply from 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022.*

Business Rates Measures

- *Eligible businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors in England will benefit from business rates relief worth over £6 billion in 2021-22. This includes a three-month extension of the current 100 per cent business rates holiday from 1 April 2021 to 30 June 2021. This will be followed by 66 per cent relief for the period 1 July 2021 to 31 March 2022 for eligible properties, with a cap of £2 million for businesses that were required to close on 5 January 2020, and up to £105,000 relief for businesses that were permitted to open.*

- *The Government has also announced a new £1.5 billion relief fund to be awarded to non-retail, hospitality and leisure properties most affected by COVID-19. The relief, which will be awarded by Local Authorities on a discretionary basis, will ensure support is available to those not within scope of the £16 billion of support already announced for eligible properties in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors.*
- *To further support businesses, the Government has also decided to freeze the business rates multiplier in 2021-22, saving businesses in England an estimated £575 million over the next five years.*

Countryside Alliance Position

- We welcome the extension of the business rate holiday as this will help thousands of small rural businesses across England and Wales who are continuing to struggle.
- COVID-19 will continue to have a devastating impact on our high streets and businesses if we do not review how we tax physical businesses and recognise the role they can play in delivering a green economy. For businesses to be part of that, they must invest in green solutions, and be incentivised and enabled to do so.
- Business rates are currently a huge detriment to businesses. A recent study concluded that the business rates system is accelerating shop closures in many towns. As such it will be difficult for many to invest in new green measures when struggling to stay-afloat themselves. We support a tax based on output rather than input which would be more equitable.
- The landlord of The Boot pub in St Albans, claims his rates bill is set to soar by 280 per cent over five years from £14,000 a year to £52,000. They would have to sell an additional 22,000 pints of beer a year just to pay for the increase. Around one-third of the cost of a pint in a pub is made up of one tax or another. Many pubs are facing increases in the amount they pay in business rates and ultimately, it will be the consumers who pay the price as publicans are forced to put up prices or shut up shop.
- We also welcome the move to extend the 5% reduced rate of VAT for six months as this will support our hard-pressed hospitality sector.

Countryside Alliance calls for

- The COVID-19 pandemic continues to highlight the unfairness of this tax and we continue to call for a full-scale review of business rates to ensure we have a system which enables rural businesses to compete fairly with those online. Businesses need long term certainty if they are to be able to invest and plan for the future.
- Technology giants should pay more tax. Current tax is disproportionate. For example, the retail sector accounted for 5 per cent of the UK economy's gross value added, but paid 10 per cent of all business taxes and pubs are responsible for 0.5 per cent of turnover of the UK economy but pay 2.8 per cent of business rates. Amazon pays only around 2 per cent in direct taxes of its total revenue. A proportionate, fairer, tax system could lead to further investment in green solutions and enable the survival of local businesses, which would reduce distances travelled to access key services.
- The VAT extension does not cover alcohol. Those pubs which do not serve food will therefore be disproportionately impacted. We urge the Government to take a look at

how they can support wet pubs in the coming months to ensure these businesses at the heart of our communities also remain viable.

BUILDING BACK GREENER: BUILDING A CLEANER AND GREENER UK

Environment Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to

- *Put the environment at the centre of policy making, making sure that this Government – and those in the future – are held accountable for making progress on environmental issues.*
- *Introduce a framework for legally-binding environmental targets and establish a new, independent Office for Environmental Protection.*
- *Introduce measures to revolutionise how we recycle; enhance local powers to tackle sources of air pollution; secure long-term, resilient water supplies and wastewater services; and protect nature and improve biodiversity.*

The main elements of the Bill are

- *Placing a duty on Ministers to ensure environmental considerations are central to policy development; setting legally-binding targets; producing a long-term environmental improvement plan; and setting up the independent Office for Environmental Protection.*
- *Preserving our resources by minimising waste, promoting resource efficiency, and moving towards a circular economy. These measures include extended producer responsibility, product labelling powers, introducing a consistent approach to recycling across local authorities in England, introducing a deposit return scheme for drinks containers, and providing for more effective litter enforcement. It will also provide the powers to introduce charges for single use plastic items to combat pollution.*
- *Improving air quality by requiring the Secretary of State to set at least two legally-binding targets on air quality for PM2.5, the most harmful air pollutant.*
- *Managing water sustainably through modernised legislation to secure a long-term, resilient water supply and wastewater services.*
- *Protecting nature by mandating ‘biodiversity net gain’ in the planning system, ensuring new houses are not built at the expense of nature and delivering thriving natural spaces for communities. We will improve planning for nature recovery through Local Nature Recovery Strategies and create Nature Recovery Networks to join up nature sites and create wildlife-rich places. We will give communities a greater say in the protection of local trees.*
- *We will be putting forward amendments to the Environment Bill to reduce the harm from storm overflows to our rivers, waterways and coastlines. New duties will require the Government to publish a plan to reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows by September 2022 and report to Parliament the progress of implementing the plan.*

Countryside Alliance Position

- The Countryside Alliance has always supported the overall objectives of the Environment Bill. However, we do believe that the Bill, especially in the application of the environmental principles, needs to recognise the work of land managers. More recent use of the precautionary principle has been used to attack traditional activities such as shooting and vital wildlife management such as the control of predator birds, like corvids.
- Those engaged in wildlife management are being targeted by animal rights groups on the basis that although there is no evidence of significant or irreversible harm being caused by activities, there is an absence of evidence that harm will not be caused, and in the absence of evidence that no harm will be caused then the precautionary principle is applied requiring that evidence to be supplied. There is no recognition that stopping an activity, such as managing pest birds, could just as easily cause harm, and often greater harm environmentally, than the existing activity. Unless the precautionary principle is applied properly, as it was originally intended, on the basis of real risk, then it will result in substantial harm to the environment and biodiversity. Brexit provides a real opportunity to address this situation.
- We remain concerned that the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) still lacks sufficient independence from government.
- We would like to see the environmental principles properly defined in law, rather than being set out in a statutory policy statement.
- We would seek further reassurance that the OEP has the resources and legal powers to hold the Government to account.

Countryside Alliance calls for

- An approach to the environmental principles that ensures these principles cannot be used to attack responsible wildlife management.
- In particular, the precautionary principle should be understood so that it does not become a weapon of protectionism.
- Further strengthening of the independence and powers of the OEP.

Animal Welfare Plan and Legislation

The purpose of the plan and legislation is to

- *Deliver on our commitment to the highest standards of animal welfare by bringing forward ambitious plans to improve standards and eradicate cruel practices through an Action Plan for Animal Welfare and legislation.*
- *Take advantage of our status as an independent nation outside the EU to go further in protecting our animals, whether on the farm, at home or in the wild and address the challenges presented to the welfare of animals in both the domestic and international spheres.*

- *Solidify and enhance our position as a global leader in protecting animal welfare by influencing practices and setting high standards for others across the world to follow.*

The main elements of the plan and legislation are

- *Setting out our ambitious and wide-ranging plan for driving forward reforms in the first of its kind Action Plan for Animal Welfare.*
- *Delivering our commitment to recognise animal sentience in law through the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill.*
- *Increasing protections for pets, sporting animals, and farm animals by ending the export of live animals for fattening and slaughter, bringing in more effective powers to tackle livestock worrying, ending the low welfare practice of keeping primates as pets, improving standards in zoos, cracking down on puppy smuggling, and enhancing conservations through a Kept Animals Bill.*
- *Banning the import of hunting trophies from endangered animals abroad and ending the advertising for sale here of low welfare experiences abroad through an Animals Abroad Bill.*
- *Implementing the Ivory Act to ban dealing in elephant ivory and consider further steps to limit the trade and sale of foie gras.*
- *Co-designing and implementing an Animal Health and Welfare Pathway with industry to promote the production of healthier, higher welfare animals; and fulfilling our commitment to a wide-ranging review into food labelling.*
- *Bringing in mandatory cat microchipping, reviewing the operation of the current microchip databases, which also apply to dogs, with a view to introducing improvements.*
- *Continuing our initiatives to educate the public on how to buy pet dogs and cats responsibly via our National 'Petfished' Communications Campaign and drawing up recommendations on how to tackle pet theft through the newly created cross Government taskforce.*

Countryside Alliance Position

- The Alliance has always believed that animal welfare is of the utmost importance. There are many of the Government's proposals that we welcome, such as tackling the problem of puppy smuggling, livestock worrying and better food labelling.
- While the headline proposals may seem to be positive in terms of improving animal welfare at home and abroad, there is a serious danger that some of the measures being proposed could have unintended and negative consequences for animal welfare, both at an individual and species level. For example, an outright ban on e-collars may result in the destruction of some dogs where this may not otherwise have been necessary. We accept that there needs to be some regulation of electric training devices, and we accept they should be a method of last resort, but we remain to be convinced that a simple ban is the best way forward.
- The Government seem keen to ensure policies do not have unintended consequences and we will await more details of the Government's proposals before commenting in

greater detail. If advances are to be delivered in terms of animal welfare, it is vital that the Government listens to all sides in this debate and the Alliance hopes to be able to contribute to the ongoing development of animal welfare policy and its delivery. There must be no confusion between animal welfare and the agenda of the animal rights movement.

Live Exports and Abattoirs

- Banning live exports for slaughter and fattening is laudable in theory but in practice could result in a ban on exports to Europe involving shorter journeys than those which would remain legal within the UK, including between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. If the Government is genuinely interested in animal welfare, then it should be focused on length of journey and not jurisdiction. As such the Government needs to take advantage of Brexit to rebuild a network of local abattoirs so that all animals travel as short a distance as possible to slaughter.

Food Labelling

- Brexit also provides the UK with an opportunity to improve the labelling of food, empowering the consumer. Meat and products containing meat should only be labelled British if the animals were born, bred and slaughtered in the UK. For example, it should no longer be lawful for bacon to be labelled British because the pork meat from outside the UK was processed in the UK. We would prefer consumers to be empowered to make good animal welfare choices as to the food they eat, rather than resort to banning things.

Lead Ammunition

- The Government's Animal Welfare action plan includes a review of lead ammunition with specific reference to lead poisoning of waterfowl. Lead shot in the UK has been banned for use over wetlands and/or for shooting wildfowl since 1999. In addition, nine of the Country's leading shooting and rural organisations have jointly committed to a phase out of all lead shot and single use plastics for live quarry shooting within five years, which within its first year has resulted in a multiplicity of new non-lead cartridges being developed and coming to the market. A five-year timeframe is essential to allow this technically challenging product development to continue, and so that supply can be expanded to meet the full demand of the market. Further restrictions would be both ineffective at mitigating any damaging effects of lead and be disproportionate. There remain valid uses for lead ammunition on animal welfare where suitable alternatives are not available, and in certain instances of target shooting, where spent shot/ammunition is contained or recoverable.

Sentience

- There is a serious question as to whether the inclusion of animal sentience in legislation is necessary, and the danger that it could be used to further an extreme animal rights agenda, as opposed to genuine animal welfare which the Countryside Alliance supports.
- The Countryside Alliance has raised concerns about the Government's proposal to enshrine in law a duty on ministers to have regard to the welfare of animals as sentient beings.

- In evidence to the Commons EFRA Committee Mike Radford, Reader in animal welfare law at the University of Aberdeen questioned whether placing the principle of animals as sentient formally on the statute book would make any practical or “*legal difference ... for the simple reason that it is open to Parliament to pass whatever legislation it wishes to protect animals and to promote welfare. In so doing, it is doing that on the basis that those animals are sentient.*”
- The recognition of animal sentience and the consequent need for animal welfare laws is nothing new and animal welfare laws in the UK date back nearly 200 years. Successive governments and parliaments have recognised the fact of animal sentience both prior to and since our membership of the EU, as reflected in the body of animal welfare legislation on the Statute Book.
- We will look closely at the details of what the Government proposes and comment further when the Bill is published.
- We would also be concerned that any extension of a duty to have regard to welfare to wild animals, without further clarification could endanger properly conducted management of wildlife. The extent of the duty towards animals recognised as sentient must surely be determined by the nature and proximity of the relationship between man and animal. Where an animal is kept by man, or under his control, then a duty to ensure welfare arises, as well as the obligation to avoid causing unnecessary suffering. For wild animals there cannot reasonably be a duty to ensure welfare but there remains a duty to avoid causing unnecessary suffering such as when wild animals are culled. For example, man does not, and should not, have a responsibility to ensure wild rabbits have a suitable diet, but were a wild rabbit to be rescued by an animal sanctuary then while it is not living wild there would be a duty to provide a suitable diet. The welfare duty as far as wild animals are concerned should only apply where there is some interaction between man and the wild animal, so as to avoid unnecessary suffering.

Hare Poaching/Illegal Coursing

- The Alliance is a founding member of the Hare Coursing Coalition, representing a broad range of organisations who, together with the police, have agreed a course of action which they believe will help in tackling the illegal hare coursing activity which is such a blight to so many rural areas. We have spent three years trying to persuade the Government to address the scourge of illegal hare coursing, and are therefore delighted that the Government has finally decided to act.
- The Coalition members are: National Farmers Union, Country Land and Business Association, Countryside Alliance, British Association for Shooting and Conservation, Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, The Kennel Club, Rural Crime Network, Tenant Farmers’ Association and RSPCA.
- Illegal hare coursing, a form of poaching which has been prevalent for many years, is becoming an increasing problem in rural areas, particularly in flatter, arable areas where land is open and easier to access.
- Evidence is increasingly showing that hare coursing is closely connected to organised criminals and involves enormous sums of money changing hands through high-stakes illegal betting. The damage illegal coursers cause to land and property, and the verbal

abuse, threats, intimidation and violence faced by those on whose land they operate, should not be underestimated.

- Coursing also negatively impacts brown hare populations, as illegal hare coursing does not respect the breeding season when vulnerable young are still dependant.
- Police forces are working closely together to deal with hare coursing offences and these forces have found that dogs are the courser's key asset and that the ability to seize dogs is proving an important deterrent. Unfortunately, this means that police forces must fund kennelling costs and cannot reclaim costs from offenders via the courts.
- Simple changes to existing legislation, together with a joined-up approach across the criminal justice system, can begin to address the devastating impact illegal hare coursing has on farming families, and the wider rural community and wildlife across England.
- The legislative changes proposed do not have any impact on the existing situation regarding hunting or the Hunting Act.
- The older game laws are still considered the preferred route for prosecuting illegal hare coursing/poaching. A key ingredient of poaching offences is trespass, and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) guidance confirms that: *"Where trespass to land is an ingredient of the activity said to constitute an offence under Section 1 or Section 5 of the Hunting Act 2004, it will generally be easier to continue to prosecute under the Game Acts."* (CPS Guidance to the Hunting Act 2004)
- The older game laws should be amended to create consistent seizure and forfeiture powers for all poaching offences, including dogs and vehicles. This would both act as a deterrent, assist the police, and enable the courts to impose penalties that reflect the seriousness of the offence.
- The Game Act should also be amended to enable the police to recover the kennelling costs incurred where dogs have been seized. Such provision is made in other more recent legislation such as the Animal Welfare Act 2006.
- The existing limit on the fines that can be imposed under the game laws should also be lifted.
- These legislative changes would complement other action, which should be taken, such as a wider application of criminal behaviour orders across more than one police force area, revised sentencing guidelines, and recording crime statistics so that hare poaching is identifiable, enabling a proper understanding of the scale of the problem and where resources need to be focussed.

Countryside Alliance calls for

- All animal welfare measures to be based on principle and evidence and to avoid measures which are driven by an animal rights, not animal welfare, agenda, especially where these are motivated by other agendas such as those opposed to shooting, or vital wildlife management practices.
- The Government to work with the Hare Coursing Coalition to deliver the legislative and non-legislative changes needed to tackle hare poaching.

- To work with those who manage our wildlife and environment to avoid causing avoidable harm, with well intentioned but misguided policies. For example, the recovery of the grey partridge in the South of England would not have been possible without controlling predator species such as the fox. This control necessitates not simply culling by shooting but also the responsible and humane use of snares.

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