

12 January 2017

Countryside Alliance Parliamentary Update

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Highlights

Countryside Alliance turns 20 in an important year for the countryside

The Countryside Alliance was formed on 10 July 1997 to promote and defend the British countryside and rural life, both in the media and in Parliament. This cause is just as important 20 years later as our Chief Executive, Tim Bonner, sets out [what 2017 will bring for the countryside](#); a year that is likely to see significant changes. There will soon be major consultations on the 25 year plans for food and farming, and the environment. While these plans were Manifesto commitments, it is clear that they will be used to develop post-Brexit farming and environmental policy. Decisions taken this year will have an impact on our countryside for a generation and more so it is vital that rural communities have a voice and are listened to.

Strong support for Boxing Day hunt meets

Eleven years on from the Hunting Act coming into force, hundreds of hunts are still meeting and support for them in rural communities is as strong as ever with over 250,000 people turning out on Boxing Day to support their local hunt. Meanwhile, it is [over two years since anyone connected to a registered hunt has been convicted of a Hunting Act offence](#), leading to renewed calls for the law to be repealed. Our Chief Executive, Tim Bonner, has commented: “the law that was supposed to have got rid of hunts is now being used as little more than a vehicle to harass them and the taxpayer is picking up the bill”.

Pressure grows on RSPCA to stop prosecuting

The Attorney General has confirmed that the CPS has the financial resources and expertise to take over prosecutions from the RSPCA. The [Daily Telegraph](#) and the [Daily Mail](#) broke the news that Government sources are supportive of the position adopted by the EFRA Select Committee in November that the [RSPCA should refrain from being a prosecutor of first resort](#). While the RSPCA do a fantastic job in investigating animal cruelty, it should refrain from prosecuting. It cannot be right that an organisation that is involved in political campaigning, fundraising and investigating is also the principal prosecutor, given that we have an independent statutory prosecutor in the CPS.

Government Bills

Policing and Crime Bill

The House of Commons considered Lords amendments to the Bill on 10 January. These included an important amendment on police powers to remove disguises from protestors, and three important amendments to firearms law. We look forward to them becoming law later this year along with revised guidance in these areas of law. We have produced a question and answer document on the changes to firearms law contained in the Bill, available [here](#).

Digital Economy Bill

The Bill received its Second Reading in the House of Lords on 13 December; our briefing note is available [here](#). We welcomed the inclusion of the Universal Service Obligation in this Bill, and we are pressing the Government on how this is going to be delivered to ensure this helps to provide connectivity to all rural communities.

Select Committees

Environmental Audit Select Committee examined 'rewilding'

The Inquiry into the **future of the natural environment after the EU referendum** has reported. The final report recognises that 'rewilding' is a "contested term" with an insufficient evidence base for it to be adopted as Government policy. However, [we have raised concerns](#) that the report endorses an extremely vague definition of 'rewilding' which could mean almost anything and this must question the usefulness of this concept in environmental policy.

EFRA Select Committee considers Forestry in England and Rural Tourism

The Inquiry into **Forestry in England** is on-going. We submitted [written evidence](#) on the important role that shooting plays in woodland management.

The Inquiry into **Rural Tourism** is on-going. We submitted [written evidence](#) on the importance of tourism to the rural economy and the role that country sports play in this. Our Head of Policy, Sarah Lee, appeared as a witness to give oral evidence on 14 December and spoke about the need to develop a [365 day tourism season](#) and the challenges that tourist businesses face in rural areas.

Exiting the EU Select Committee

The Inquiry into the **UK's negotiating objectives for leaving the EU** is on-going. We will be submitting written evidence on the priorities for rural communities for Brexit early this year.

Reports and Consultations

Rural Connectivity still lagging according to Ofcom

Ofcom's [Connected Nations Report 2016](#) published on 16 December shows that while the digital divide is declining, it still exists. Over 1.4 million homes (960,000 of which are in rural areas) still cannot get a broadband speed of 10 Mbit/s. Our full response to the Report is available [here](#). We welcomed the [Government's commitment to invest a further £400 million](#) to provide highspeed broadband for people living in "hard to reach areas" and we hope this extra funding will be made available as soon as possible.

CA responds to Government consultation on the Post Office

The Countryside Alliance has stressed that post offices in rural areas are the lifeblood of their communities in our response to the Government's 2016 Post Office Network Consultation. The rural post office is much more than a place to stamp and post letters; it is a vital service, providing social and cultural advantages to isolated populations across the country. Our full submission is available [here](#).

Ofcom prepares for new role in regulating BBC

The Countryside Alliance welcomed the agreement to hand enforcement of editorial standards to Ofcom in place of the BBC Trust as part of the new Charter and Agreement. However, it is vital that Ofcom has the necessary procedures and resources in place to ensure that effective regulation can begin when the new Charter and Agreement come into force on 3 April 2017. We will be submitting a response to the consultation on [Ofcom's rules on due impartiality and due accuracy](#) to ensure that standards in rural broadcasting are upheld by the regulator.

New consultation on rules for mobile spectrum auction

Ofcom has set out plans to release valuable new airwaves in 2.3 GHz and 3.4 GHz bands to meet the growing demand for mobile broadband. These airwaves could be used immediately after release to provide extra capacity, meaning faster downloads and internet browsing for consumers. The Countryside Alliance will be submitting a response to a [consultation on plans to safeguard competition and encourage innovation](#) ahead of the auction later this year to ensure the requirements of rural communities are met.

Away from Westminster

Four must reads from Boxing Day

There was no shortage of media comment on the Boxing Day meets and these are four of the best:

- **Charles Moore in the Daily Telegraph:** [“The joy of the Boxing Day survives-even from a wheelchair”](#)
- **Camilla Swift in the Spectator Coffee House blog:** [“Are the hunt saboteurs out simply to harass people?”](#)
- **Jim Barrington in the Spectator Coffee House blog:** [“The truth about the fox hunting ban”](#)
- **Tim Bonner in the Yorkshire Post:** [“Law based on bigotry and lies will not stop hunting”](#)

Secretary of State to present Countryside Alliance Awards

The Winners Reception for the Countryside Alliance Awards will take place on Wednesday 22 March in the House of Lords and we are pleased to confirm that the Defra Secretary of State, Andrea Leadsom MP, will be presenting the national awards. MPs who have constituents attending this event will be invited.

Casting for Recovery and Fishing for Schools to attend London Fly Fishing Fair

The Countryside Alliance Foundation's projects Fishing 4 Schools and Casting for Recovery UK & Ireland will be exhibiting at the London Fly Fishing Fair, to be held at the Business Design Centre, Islington on 10/11 March 2017. This exciting new fair will include all aspects of the fly fishing world and will appeal to beginners and experts alike.

Shooting campaign ensures fair treatment for HSBC's shooting customers

HSBC has confirmed it does not discriminate against shooting, and has offered its services to businesses it had previously rejected, following an intervention by the Countryside Alliance. Following a letter from our Chief Executive, Tim Bonner, HSBC found that their policies were being misapplied, causing shooting businesses to be unfairly denied access to services as they were considered to be a “prohibited sport”. HSBC has since apologised to those affected and assured us that shooting businesses will not be penalised in the future.

And finally...

Lapwings are not shot!

On 8 January BBC presenter Chris Packham told his many thousands of twitter followers that the UK's declining population of lapwings is being shot, and as such people should sign his anti-shooting petition. For the avoidance of doubt, lapwings are not a legal quarry species in the UK and no one is shooting them. Our Head of Shooting, Liam Stokes, has written about this issue in an article for the Spectator Coffee House Blog, available [here](#).

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