

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

King’s Speech Debate

July 2024



Contents

Introduction	2
Planning and Infrastructure Bill	2
Great British Energy Bill	3
Crime and Policing Bill	4
Victims, Courts and Public Protection Bill	5
Skills England Bill	5

Introduction

The first King's Speech of Sir Keir Starmer's premiership contained nothing that was specifically about rural communities. As would be expected of the early days of a new government the measures announced are targeted at big, structural issues in the UK's economy and society, and this is to be welcomed. Many of these affect rural communities equally with urban ones, and if the programme succeeds in elevating living standards the countryside will also benefit; the reverse is equally true.

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.

Within this briefing, we shall summarise those Bills announced in the speech that would appear to have relevance 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.

Planning and Infrastructure Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Improve the planning system at a local level, modernising planning committees and increasing local planning authorities' capacity to deliver an improved service and accelerate housebuilding and infrastructure delivery.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Streamlining the delivery process for critical infrastructure including accelerating upgrades to the national grid and boosting renewable energy, including simplifying the consenting process for major infrastructure projects and implementing a new five-year review process for National Policy Statements.
- Further reforming compulsory purchase compensation rules so that compensation paid to owners of land required for infrastructure and housing is "fair but not excessive", unlocking new sites for development.
- Modernising planning committees.
- Building planning authorities' capacity.
- Subject to consultation over the summer, using development to fund nature recovery.

Countryside Alliance Position

- The Countryside Alliance supports efforts to develop local planning capacity and enable high-quality, well-evidenced local decision-making.
- When new housing is developed, careful thought must be given to the provision of vital services that are relied on in all parts of the country, rural as well as urban.

- The electrification of road transport remains a key element of the government's plans to achieve net zero carbon emissions. For rural areas to participate, funding must be made available to create an adequate network of charging points including at people's homes, and a robust enough electric grid infrastructure to support the additional demand, particularly at peak times.
- Last October the last government launched two consultations on improving access to broadband in rural areas. They set out clear ambitions for delivering the quality broadband infrastructure that we know is essential for rural businesses and homes in the modern day. However, the capital investment needed to achieve them must be made available.
- Any changes to the provisions on compulsory purchase must be genuinely fair to landowners and respect the right to the enjoyment of lawfully acquired private property.

Great British Energy Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Establish Great British Energy as a new, publicly-owned energy production company that will own, manage and operate clean power projects around the country, helping promote energy independence and lower household energy bills.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Establishing Great British Energy, which will develop, own and operate assets in partnership with the private sector, with a capitalisation of £8.3 billion of new money over the Parliament, and produce, distribute, store and supply clean energy.
- Giving the Secretary of State the power to fund the body and set its strategic priorities.

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 Caroline Lucas MP 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 containing measures to support householders with solar panels.
- Great British Energy should be tasked to support a more distributed energy system that makes better use of existing industrial, commercial and residential buildings where renewable energy infrastructure could be sited, without the need to take additional land out of agricultural production.

Crime and Policing Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Promote the government's mission to halve serious violence and increase confidence in policing and the Criminal Justice System, by giving police new powers to crack down on crime and anti-social behaviour while reforming law enforcement agencies.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Rebuilding neighbourhood policing by putting neighbourhood police and Police Community Support Officers back on the beat.
- Expanding the powers of HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services to intervene in failing police forces and raise standards on vetting and efficiency.
- Cracking down on anti-social behaviour by introducing new Respect Orders targeting persistent adult offenders, fast-track Public Spaces Protection Orders to act against rapid escalations in street drinking and new powers to tackle off-road biking, while creating a duty for local partners to co-operate to tackle anti-social behaviour.
- Tackling retail crime with a specific offence of assaulting a shopworker.
- Banning 'ninja swords and other lethal blades' and sanctioning executives of non-compliant online distributors.
- Building police capacity to tackle violence against women and girls.

Countryside Alliance Position

- The Countryside Alliance has long campaigned on the issue of rural crime, both independently and as a founding member of the National Rural Crime Network.
- We conduct an annual Rural Crime Survey which aims to build a picture of the experience and perception of crime within rural communities. [Our last survey](#) was published in January based on data gathered from November 2023. Its headline finding was that nearly six out of ten people living in the countryside did not think rural policing has improved since Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) were introduced in 2012. We have since been working with PCCs elected in May to assist their efforts in supporting rural areas.
- Rural policing faces unique challenges, including lower population densities and the need to police less well understood categories of crime such as hare poaching and fly-tipping. We are concerned that the current funding formula is inadequate to address these circumstances.
- The Alliance is fully supportive of government action to tackle knife crime, but we have warned that any changes to the law must not restrict or prohibit machetes and knives, or other bladed implements, used legitimately by those engaged in farming, land management, wildlife management and shooting, or by gardeners, thatchers, chefs and butchers for whom they are essential tools of trade. In 2023 we [responded to a consultation](#) under the previous government making this argument in some detail.
- Labour's manifesto announced the intention to move towards full cost recovery in firearms licensing. However, wide disparities exist between the cost-efficiency delivered by forces' licensing teams. With too many licensing teams running inefficiently, pricing firearms licences based on the poorest performers' costs would be a reward for failure. Tackling these inefficiencies would be a salient objective in empowering the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services to tackle police inefficiency more broadly.

Victims, Courts and Public Protection Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Promote the needs of victims by improving available support, reducing court delays and strengthening protections for the public.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Improving support available to victims of crime and anti-social behaviour.
- Strengthening the powers of the Victims' Commissioner over systemic failures in support.
- Requiring convicted criminals to attend their sentencing hearings.
- Restricting parental responsibility for child sex offenders and restricting offenders' ability to change their names.
- Reducing court delays by allowing Associate Prosecutors to work on appropriate cases.

Countryside Alliance Position

- The Countryside Alliance supports efforts to clamp down on anti-social behaviour and would like to see any measures applied in respect of rural crime, where appropriate and without diminishing the severity of these offences.
- During the election campaign the now-Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Steve Reed MP, announced a policy of requiring convicted waste criminals to join clean-up squads.
- With fly-tipping a crime that disproportionately affects rural areas, causing particular hardships to farmers, we would support this policy and suggest that this Bill might serve as an appropriate legislative vehicle.

Skills England Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to:

Establish Skills England as a new body bringing together businesses, providers, unions, Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) and national government to improve the workforce skills base, which will inherit the functions of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE).

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Transferring functions from IfATE to Skills England as a central body governing the promotion of workforce skills.
- Supporting economic growth by empowering Skills England to assess national and regional skills needs and training provision, as well as governing training programme design.
- Replacing the Apprenticeship Levy with a more broadly based Growth and Skills Levy, with Skills England empowered to determine the training for which Levy funds will be eligible to be used.

Countryside Alliance Position

- The Countryside Alliance supports the development of workforce skills and would expect Skills England to take account of the skills needs of rural areas and occupations. The body must take account not only of differing skills requirements between regions of the UK but also between different types of place.

- Training the next generation of farmers, land managers and gamekeepers is vital to allow the countryside to deliver the competing demands of food production and the restoration of nature.
- With the Apprenticeship Levy set to be replaced with a less focused Growth and Skills Levy, it is important that the continuing need to develop the skills of young people is not overlooked or de-prioritised in favour of funding continuing professional development activity that responsible employers should be supporting already.

For more information please contact:

James Legge

Director of Public Affairs

James-Legge@countryside-alliance.org

David M Bean

Parliament & Government Relations Manager

David-Bean@countryside-alliance.org