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Parliamentary Update: The end of the tunnel

The 2021-22 parliamentary session saw a legislative programme that posed a level of challenge to rural interests without precedent in recent years. While eyes understandably turn to the local elections and, on 10 May, to the Queen's Speech and the Government's plans for the next session, the Countryside Alliance would like to review the past year and what we and rural-minded MPs and peers have achieved together.

Hare poaching crackdown accepted for Police Bill

A multi-year campaign culminated in [government amendments](#) to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, after the Countryside Alliance and others finally persuaded the Government to give the police and courts enhanced powers to combat the blight of hare poaching.

These include removing the cap on fines and raising the maximum prison sentence to six months. Courts will be able to disqualify offenders from owning a dog, and order that the police be paid the costs of kennelling dogs seized in connection with offences. There will also be a new criminal offence of trespassing with the intent to pursue a hare.

After tenacious campaigning in the House of Lords, led by the Bishop of St Albans with our support, the amendments delivered all the essentials of what we had sought. The Secretary of State will need to fix an implementation date and we urge her to set this well in advance of this year's 'season', beginning just after the harvest. The Countryside Alliance will then monitor implementation closely.

Animal Sentience Act recognises traditions

At the eleventh hour, the Government [agreed to accept](#) Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown's amendment to the Animal Sentience Bill requiring that the new Animal Sentience Committee's recommendations "*respect legislative or administrative provisions and customs relating in particular to religious rites, cultural traditions and regional heritage*". This restores a provision in the Lisbon Treaty.

The Countryside Alliance helped promote this amendment within Parliament, in concert with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and others. We also worked with peers and MPs to promote [a series of amendments](#) highlighting other deficiencies in the Bill, which also secured a Government pledge that "*people from extremist organisations*" would be excluded from the Committee.

The Animal Sentience Act remains an unnecessary law, but the amendment that the Government finally accepted does give some protection to cultural and regional traditions and some safeguards against future manipulation. We will watch closely to ensure attention is paid to the interests of people, especially in rural communities, as well as those of animals.

Online Safety Bill promises protections from vile abuse

The Online Safety Bill has been carried over to the next session following a belated [Second Reading](#). Our primary interest is in its potential to emerge as a potent weapon against online abuse. We have seen the damage caused to rural communities, and those who live and work there, from [bullying and harassment](#) by extreme animal rights activists – not least to their mental health.

This behaviour is already illegal and we want the Bill to ensure that what is illegal offline is no longer tolerated online. We have therefore launched a [new survey](#) of people's experiences of online bullying, so that by sharing their experiences they can help us ensure this can be an effective response.

With rigorous enforcement this Bill should enhance the existing deterrence, but the best defence for those suffering harassment is for it not to happen in the first place, or at least that it be stopped at source. We look forward to continuing our contribution to the scrutiny of this Bill to help ensure this can be accomplished.

EFRA Committee reviewing rural mental health

In November the EFRA Select Committee announced an inquiry into the state of mental health in rural areas, opening with a call for evidence. The Countryside Alliance responded by launching [our own](#)

[survey](#) of people's experiences, which ran over Christmas and attracted over 700 responses, serving to underscore the issue's severity.

These contributions helped us submit an extensive and detailed response. Areas that were especially highlighted included 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 ideologically motivated harassment. The inquiry is continuing.

Wait-and-see on Kept Animals Bill

Having failed to complete its parliamentary stages, the [Kept Animals Bill](#) has been carried over to the 2022-23 session. It is a good Bill that stands to make a real difference to animal welfare in this country, not least in its provisions to protect livestock from worrying by dogs with thoughtless and irresponsible owners.

It has, however, provoked a flurry of unrelated amendments from animal rights extremists that have little or nothing to do with the welfare of animals being kept by people. Most notably, we have seen a series of hastily-written amendments with no apparent aim beyond the desire to provoke a divisive debate on fox hunting – a subject MPs had the opportunity to discuss as recently as this Monday, 25 April – as well as targeting owners of all working dogs.

When the Kept Animals Bill returns for its Report Stage in the next session, the Countryside Alliance position will be clear: the Bill must not be hijacked. It must pass substantially as tabled, so that animals can reap the welfare enhancements it promises for generations to come.

Animals Abroad Bill

Envisaged as a set of new restrictions and prohibitions on the import of animal products such as hunting trophies, the [Animals Abroad Bill](#) has not been moved in this session and reports suggest that the Government may be thinking again in light of the available evidence.

The Countryside Alliance continues to support well thought-out restrictions on trade in products derived from endangered species, as we already have through the CITES process. Real progress in conservation is best achieved through sensitive multilateral negotiation that accounts for the local circumstances of countries endangered species inhabit, and the sources of reliable financing for conservation projects, not by crowd-pleasing unilateral bans that may actually be counter-productive for animal welfare.

For many years this had been the Government's position too, and we continue to support it. If the lack of movement in the wrong direction signals that the Government has reasoned that it was right the first time, this would be welcome.

Parliamentary Shooting Club launched

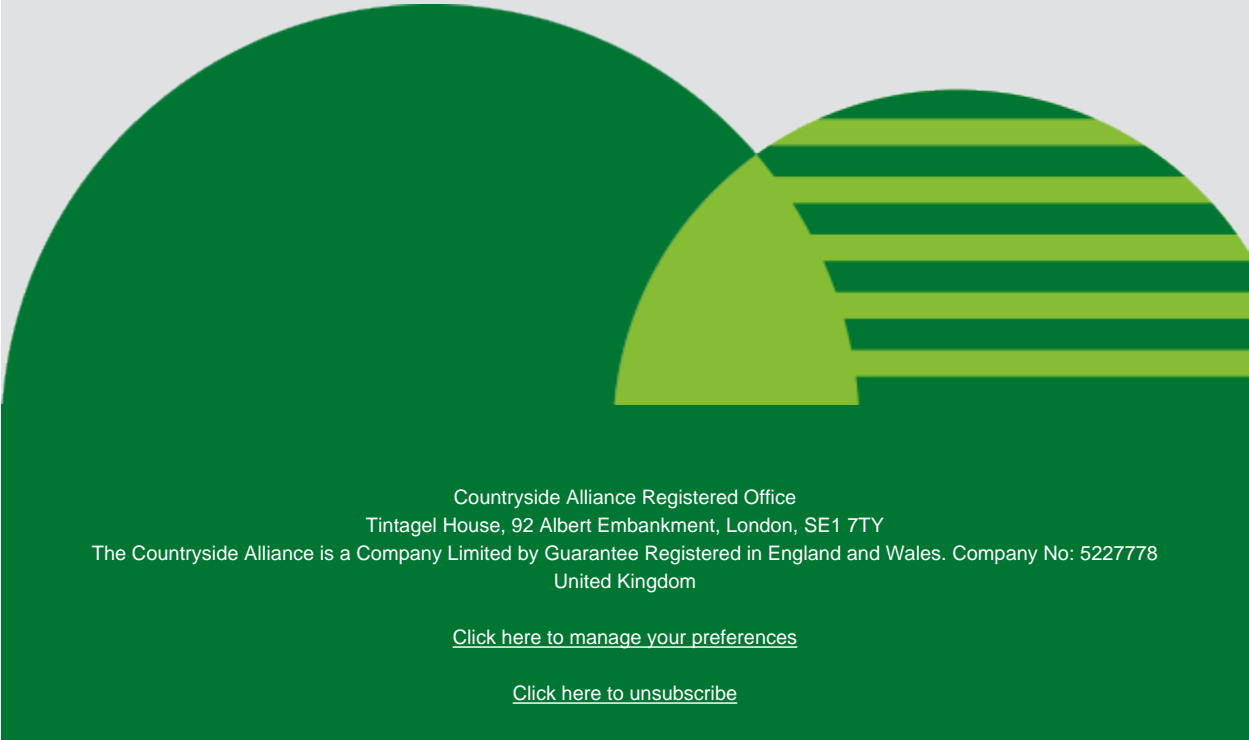
The Countryside Alliance has organised a new Parliamentary Shooting Club to give MPs and their staff the opportunity to learn more about the shooting sector, and to experience it for themselves. We held an initial drinks reception and briefing in March and a clay shooting afternoon, to include

parliamentary staff and Special Advisers, has been scheduled at the West London Shooting School in May.

If you or any of your staff would be interested in being kept informed about future club events, please contact our Shooting Campaign Manager, James Aris, at shooting@countryside-alliance.org.

Best wishes while Parliament is prorogued

We would like to wish the very best of luck to the rural realists across the country standing in the local elections on 5 May, and all readers a peaceful and contented break while Parliament is prorogued. In this historic Platinum Jubilee year, we look forward to briefing you on the Queen's Speech and continuing our work to protect and promote our countryside and its communities.



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