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Your Parliamentary Update: Spring forward

We hope you had an enjoyable break over Easter. As Parliament returns, we hope you may be interested in our periodic roundup of the Countryside Alliance's most recent parliamentary activity and other related news. This edition includes:

- Online Safety Bill
- Equipment Theft (Prevention) Bill
- Hare poaching prosecutions
- Liberal Democrat Spring Conference
- Attacks on livestock farming
- Countryside Alliance Awards finalists

[Online Safety Bill - Help us tackle malicious fake reviews](#)

After a prolonged absence the [Online Safety Bill](#) is set to return to the House of Lords for its first day of consideration in a Committee of the Whole House on 19 April. While we appreciate the broader controversies surrounding this Bill, our interest is in seeing it become as effective a tool as possible for combatting online abuse experienced in rural areas.

We are primarily concerned about the trend of activist extremists posting fake reviews of businesses they have never patronised, because they object to some of its activities, such as hosting shoots or producing meat or dairy. We are therefore supporting amendments in the name of Baroness Buscombe that would extend the scope of the Bill's new 'False Communications' offence to encompass financial harms and harms to third parties who did not necessarily receive the message. We have also organised an [email campaign](#) to ask MPs for support in calling on the Government to adopt them. We would ask all MPs to contact the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Rt Hon. Michelle Donelan MP on this matter.

Other amendments we are supporting, also in the name of Baroness Buscombe, would further extend the offence to incitement, require Ofcom to consider how to protect users from anonymous abuse and make the new communications offences 'priority offences' for enforcement by social media platforms.

Equipment Theft (Prevention) Bill clears House of Commons

The Countryside Alliance has been proud to support Greg Smith MP in successfully shepherding his [Equipment Theft \(Prohibition\) Bill](#) through its House of Commons stages. The Bill will require all new mechanised agricultural equipment to be fitted with a marked engine immobiliser, and dealers to retain sales records. Regulations covering other trade tools are expected to follow.

Debates on the Bill heavily featured results from the Countryside Alliance [Rural Crime Survey](#). The 2022 edition, published in February, revealed that 43% of respondents reported having had a crime committed against them in the past year and of those, 35% reported having experienced agricultural machinery theft. This was the second most reported crime, just 3% behind fly-tipping.

The Bill enjoyed cross-party support in the House of Commons and passed all stages unopposed. We look forward to its successful passage through the House of Lords.

Hare poaching law prompts disqualifications and cost awards

Over many years the Countryside Alliance campaigned for changes to the law on hare poaching that were finally realised in the Government's last-minute inclusion of Section 66 in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which came into force last August. Two recent landmark verdicts have seen the courts use their new powers for the first time.

[In February](#), two convicted poachers were disqualified by Colchester magistrates from keeping dogs for three years. [Then in March](#) the magistrates' court in Boston awarded £11,144 for kennelling and veterinary costs after dogs kept by two further offenders had their dogs seized by police. These measures are key elements in the suite of powers we campaigned for the police and courts to receive.

All-star panel joins Alliance Liberal Democrats Spring Forum fringe

Gathered in York for Spring Conference, on Saturday 18 March some of the Liberal Democrats' heaviest rural hitters joined the Countryside Alliance and a solid complement of party activists and guests for a wide-ranging [discussion of countryside politics](#).

Under the chairmanship of Countryside Alliance Chief Executive Tim Bonner, former Party leader and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs spokesperson Tim Farron MP, former Secretary of State for Scotland and Orkney and Shetland MP Alistair Carmichael, and North Shropshire by-election winner Helen Morgan MP tackled the big issues facing rural Britain. Our event, "Sustaining Rural Communities in the Carbon Trading Age", had been postponed from the autumn owing to National Mourning.

Defending against attacks on livestock farming

There has in recent times been an alarming increase in attacks on livestock farming and the consumption of dairy and meat, led by groups such as the so-called 'Plant-based Treaty' and the Extinction Rebellion offshoot, Animal Rebellion, now known as Animal Rising. Proponents have been lobbying councils to adopt independent food and farming policies that directly discriminate against livestock farming, meat and dairy, denying consumer choice.

Never one to shy from controversy, the Countryside Alliance has assumed leadership in opposing these moves. We believe this movement's exclusive focus on livestock as the "ill" in our food system is myopic and disingenuous and must be resisted. We have therefore been working to develop and advance arguments for healthy, sustainable livestock farming in town halls, on [television](#) and in the [national press](#). We also hope to see legislation to protect UK livestock farming, which operates to among the highest standards of sustainability and animal welfare in the world, from this unjustified and counter-productive assault.

Countryside Alliance Awards - Finalists unveiled

We have now announced the winners of the [Scottish](#), [Welsh](#) and [English regional](#) Countryside Alliance Awards 2023. [Our map](#) shows winners hailing from across the length

and breadth of the country.

The winners will now proceed to the UK finals where a National Champion will be selected in each of the five categories of Local Food / Drink, Village Shop / Post Office, Butcher, Pub and Rural Enterprise. The overall winners will be announced at our National Champions' Reception which will be taking place at the House of Lords in May, where we will celebrate these businesses' achievements and everything they mean for their local economies and communities.



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