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## Parliamentary Update: A new start

Following a turbulent opening to the current parliament our end-of-term update arrives in the context of the Prime Minister's resignation and the resulting contest for leadership of the Conservative Party. It is essential that whoever succeeds Boris Johnson as Prime Minister takes rural issues seriously. As much as any other group in the UK, rural communities hold the keys to Number 10. In the wake of by-election defeat in Tiverton and Honiton, the Conservatives can no longer afford to take rural votes for granted.

The Alliance team would like to wish you all a lovely summer and we look forward to seeing many of you at the autumn conferences.

**The cost-of-living crisis in the countryside**

Few issues highlight rural needs as starkly as the cost-of-living crisis. Earlier in July the Countryside Alliance conducted [a snap survey](#) which revealed the damaging consequences of the crisis for rural businesses, households, and individuals.

With rural households suffering the country's [largest fuel poverty gap](#) it is no surprise that eight out of ten respondents worried increases in the cost of heating oil will make it harder for them to heat their homes this winter. Just over half thought, the cost of filling their oil tank had gone up at least 50%, and nearly three in 10 said they had invested in greater security to stop thieves from stealing oil. Meanwhile, separate research found that rural households were having to spend nearly £800 a year more on [fuel for vehicles](#) than people who live in urban areas and were paying up to 6p a litre more for their petrol than those living in towns and cities.

With fuel costs spiralling out of control in the countryside, the Alliance is calling on the new Prime Minister to prioritise an urgent VAT cut on fuel. This would go a long way to alleviating the pain for many in their daily lives.

### **Online Safety Bill stalled until the autumn**

Following the first day of its Remaining Stages in the House of Commons on 12 July, changes to the preliminary business in the week beginning the 18 July have meant that the Online Safety Bill will now not return for further consideration until the autumn. It may be subject to reappraisal by the new Prime Minister.

The Countryside Alliance is [calling on the Government](#) to ensure that the Bill can be an effective tool to tackle ideologically motivated bullying and harassment online. This would help safeguard the mental health and general wellbeing of potential victims, and also prevent businesses from coming under attack through the use of false reviews or 'false flag' efforts to discredit organisations or individuals.

We are especially keen to see further clarification as to how the Bill will tackle the issue of harassment under the cloak of anonymity. Its provisions on making identity verification available to all users of large platforms, and allowing users to filter out content from unverified accounts, may be contributory but we are yet to be convinced they amount to a complete solution, particularly where the abuse takes the form of reputational sabotage through falsehoods spread to others.

### **EFRA Committee publishes Alliance mental health research**

In June, the EFRA Select Committee [published Countryside Alliance research](#) which revealed the scale of the challenge to mental health in rural areas, not least from ideologically motivated animosity and abuse.

The research, based on a survey conducted over Christmas, uncovered a broad spectrum of experiences of mental health and healthcare. It suggested that a key driver of ill-health was a lack of appreciation and respect for the rural way of life throughout the country, from policymakers to individuals. Most disturbing were the reports of harassment and bullying much of which is taking place online, which is one reason why the Alliance is taking such a close interest in the Online Safety Bill.

In addition to action on abuse, the Alliance has recommended that mental health support must be tailored to the needs of rural communities with funding apportioned across the country in a manner

that recognises the inherently lower population density of rural areas. Services should also become more visible, to encourage people who need help to seek it at an earlier stage.

### **Leveraging the National Food Strategy to bolster the game market**

Also in June, the Government published its National Food Strategy and opened the first in a series of consultations on food procurement for the public sector.

The Countryside Alliance [welcomed the Strategy](#) and its proposals to back British farmers and producers, reconnect consumers with their food and ensure food security. Food production should play its part in achieving environmental benefits from agriculture. Unless we recognise the dual role of farmers as food producers and conservationists, we risk turning farmers into environmental contractors with little incentive to continue farming. The Strategy could therefore be clearer in linking food production to action against climate change and to enhancing the natural environment.

The consultation on public sector food and catering policy provides an excellent opportunity to [celebrate game meat](#) and push for it to be on the menu. There is already a [trial of six NHS Trusts](#) piloting pheasant, partridge and venison on their menus as part of a project driven by British Game Assurance.

### **Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill underwhelms the countryside**

Following its introduction in June the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill is making its way through the Committee Stage in the House of Commons.

By itself this Bill would make little difference to the fortunes of rural areas because it is largely focused on setting up new frameworks for policy. Assuming it is passed, what will make the difference is how the new powers it creates are used. The Countryside Alliance has therefore [taken the opportunity](#) to outline some of the key levelling up challenges facing rural areas. These include enhancing digital connectivity, growing the skills base and supporting the tourism and hospitality sector, not least through addressing our uncompetitive tax framework.

Funding must be apportioned to rural communities on a fair basis with the process of distribution rural-proofed so it serves rural communities better. The 'place-based' approach must recognise the diversity of our countryside and the capabilities and knowledge of those who live and work there. This would ensure that issues in the countryside, which are often more complicated than in urban areas, are tackled appropriately and resolved.

### **Help us raise wildfire awareness**

With temperatures soaring this summer the Countryside Alliance is [raising awareness](#) of the elevated risks from wildfires, the scale of the danger they pose and what simple steps those living in or visiting the countryside can take in precaution.

On 10th July, 20 firefighters spent several hours tackling two wildfires in an Essex woodland that covered about two hectares of woodland and shrubland. Fires and huge plumes of smoke were reported on Salisbury Plain in southern England two days later, while emergency services in Northamptonshire and Warwickshire said they had been called out to grass fires. Wildfires have the capability to devastate farmland, wildlife and protected habitats, as well as the lives of people living and working in rural communities.

The Countryside Alliance recommends that people in the countryside take several simple, common sense steps to minimise the risk of causing wildfires. These include disposing of all litter appropriately and refraining from discarding cigarettes, starting fires, using barbecues (particularly [disposable barbecues](#)) or launching sky lanterns.

We would appreciate your assistance in spreading the message and helping protect our landscapes. Please consider [sharing our post](#) today.

### **The Glorious Twelfth**

We look forward to 12 August – the ‘Glorious Twelfth’ – and what will hopefully be a successful grouse shooting season, recognising its considerable economic and social importance to numerous businesses and those living in rural communities in our uplands, for whom it can be the main economic driver, and the significant environmental benefits from its associated [land management practices](#).



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