

ACCESS & environment

Access to nature

Caroline Lucas (Green, Brighton Pavilion) has led a parliamentary debate on increasing access to nature, this country being the worst in Europe for connectedness to nature. Among those supporting her was Gareth Thomas (Lab/Co-op, Harrow W) who suggested 'Voluntary access arrangements are clearly not working in any significant way. Does she agree that, at a minimum, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 needs to be extended to cover water as well as land?'

She did agree. 'It is slightly unfortunate that the phrase "right to roam" does not automatically include the right to access water, but that is exactly what is understood by it.' She included an announcement that BC had prepared a paddlers' access code for waters for which they did have access.

She noted 'Just 3% of rivers in England and Wales are accessible, and even that is only provided by voluntary agreements with landowners and can therefore be taken away.'

Margaret Greenwood (Lab, Wirral W) gave the example of the 2nd West Kirby Sea Scouts helping young people to experience watersports.

Opposition speaker Alex Sobell (Leeds NW) gave a firm commitment 'Like in Scotland, Labour's approach will be that our right to roam will offer access to high-quality green and blue spaces for the rest of Britain. We will replace the default of exclusion with a default of access.'

'Currently, only 3% of our rivers are accessible to the public.'

The response by Trudy Harrison, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, who includes kayak use in her claimed activities, did not meet universal approval.

Lucas commented 'I am not quite sure how long the Minister is going to speak, but I am anxious that she will come to answer the questions. I counted eight or nine of them in my opening statement and, although I appreciate her eulogy of everyone else's speeches, I just hope that she is leaving herself enough time to answer those eight or nine questions.'

Harrison claimed 'There are also 43,910 miles of inland waterways in England and Wales' but said nothing else about them, in particular the fact that Defra claim the overwhelming majority have no right of access.

Lucas finished 'I hope the Minister will allow me to re-present in a letter the questions that I asked her in my speech, because she has not answered a single one of them.'

'I hope the Minister, as well as answering my questions, will meet me so that we can discuss how we can genuinely move forward on a comprehensive right to roam, which so many people both inside and outside this House want to see. That momentum is growing and the campaign is not going away.'

PI asked that, if a meeting was arranged, Harrison could also be asked to name any legislation taking away the general right of navigation on non tidal waters in England and Wales, less easy to avoid answering in a face to face meeting. No such meeting ever took place.

Honesty in politics

A Westminster Hall debate in late October, introduced by Martyn Day (SNP, Linlithgow & E Falkirk), followed on from two petitions calling for misleading the public or lying in the House of Commons to be made a

criminal offence. While there was generally cross party concern about the current level of honesty by politicians, especially the more senior ones, it was not so clear what to do about it.

Comparison was made with perjury in court. Should sanctions against lying extend to other places, outside discussions, the media, social media? There was no reference to Parliamentary Written Answers but they are nearer to the Commons than some other outlets.

There was concern about how some people who could afford rich lawyers could control what was said in the Commons. There was also concern about the difficulty of MPs correcting their own genuine errors.

Dishonesty and lack of honesty may not be the same thing. Lack of honesty and evasive answers may well be misleading the public. Responding, Cabinet Office Parliamentary Secretary Alex Burghart said 'Honesty is not just about what someone says; it is sometimes about what someone chooses not to say'.

This is the reason why we now give Parliamentary Written Answers on access in their exact wording.

Access questions

Parliamentary Written Questions on access continue to be addressed to the Government. In answer to Barry Sheerman (Lab, Huddersfield) on funding for access under the Agriculture Act 2020 the Government will continue to make these payments although we have yet to see any benefit.

In answer to Dr Luke Evans (Con, Bosworth) on the adequacy of trespass laws, Trudy Harrison does not mention water. For the law to be applied, it needs to be known to exist by the public, the police and the Government, none of whom know of any such law. Our

More beaver dams

Rushden on the River Nene in Northants has been chosen as the next place for releasing beavers this winter, presumably the Rushden Lakes in old gravel pits initially. They are most noted for felling trees and building dams across rivers at random locations.

Clean Scottish coastal waters

SEPA have added Wardie Bay and Fisherrow Sands to their list of bathing waters sampled, bringing their total to 89. They report 98% are sufficient or better and the number rated excellent is the highest ever.


Tidy canals

Some 954km of the CRT's canals have been awarded Green Flags by Keep Britain Tidy. New this year are the entire Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal and the Stourbridge Canal and Town Arm.

Question



Mr Barry Sheerman
Labour
Huddersfield



To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, if she will make an assessment of the potential merits of including public access to the countryside in the definition public good in the Agriculture Act 2020.

Answer



Mark Spencer
Conservative
Sherwood



Answered on

15 May 2023

The public goods supported by the [Agriculture Act 2020](#) are listed under [Section 1 of the Act](#). Section 1 allows financial assistance to be given for or in connection with any one or more of a range of purposes, including supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland and better understanding of the environment. We have confirmed in a [recent publication](#) that we will continue to pay for access to the countryside.