The Countryside Alliance hosted a fringe event on the BBC and rural broadcasting at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham on Monday 3 October. The event, entitled Does the BBC Deliver for the Countryside, was an opportunity to discuss the BBC’s coverage of, and service for, rural communities.

The BBC is a much loved institution and its services are enjoyed by millions of people at home and around the world. There is an increased interest in programs about the countryside, but a BBC Trust Review in 2014 found that “rural stories and rural lives could be more fully represented in nationwide output.”

The renewal of the BBC Charter and Agreement, taking place this year, provides a rare opportunity for Government, Parliament and the public to influence how the BBC is financed and operated. It is essential that the views and interests of people in the countryside are taken into consideration as part of this process to ensure the BBC broadcasts for the countryside, not simply about it. The Countryside Alliance fringe event at the Conservative Party Conference brought together a panel of experts to discuss this, chaired by the CA Chief Executive, Tim Bonner.

Mark Hedges, Editor of Countryfile Magazine, criticised the organisation's "disneyfication" of rural life and its failure to represent diverse views on issues like the badger cull. He suggested the broadcaster is "squeamish" about some aspects of rural life but acknowledged it is making progress. "They did do Lambing Live which at least touched on the fact that if you are a shepherd then probably one in 10 or one in 20 lambs that are born dies…. It is important people recognise that,” he said.

Peter Heaton-Jones, MP for North Devon and former BBC radio producer and presenter, noted that recruitment practices and the pressure to "follow audiences" are likely to be significant influences on programming. "It is probably true that BBC journalists and editors and managers come from a rather niche group of an urban elite... and editorial polices are driven by the people who make the editorial policies," he said. He also stressed the role that local radio can play in covering rural issues and said the BBC “is missing a huge opportunity” to reflect the concerns of people who live in rural communities.

Sophie Chalk, from Voice of the Listener and Viewer, outlined the BBC Charter and said we must all hold the BBC to account on their countryside coverage. “The new Charter says we have the opportunity and it is up to us,” she said.