

RSPB protest on threat to our wildlife

Wildlife campaigners called on the government yesterday to "make the right choices" to help the countryside and preserve habitats.

The RSPB launched the most ambitious campaign in its 122-year history in an effort to end the continuing threat to wildlife in the UK and across the world.

Last year, world leaders failed to meet a global target to halt the decline in biodiversity. A new target was set by the EU for 2020, and UK governments have signed up to it.

It delivered a petition to 10, Downing Street signed by 335,000 people urging ministers not to cut funding.

It warned that UK farmland bird populations had fallen by half and species such as cuckoos and house sparrows were declining sharply.

Mike Clarke, RSPB chief executive, said: "When we missed the 2010 biodiversity target we failed nature."

Environment secretary Caroline Spelman, who attended the launch, highlighted the role of farmers in encouraging wildlife.

Insect life is also under threat. The charity warned it was vital to protect rare species found in the east, including the eyed longhorn beetle, swallowtail butterfly and Norfolk hawk dragonfly.

But it added: "Stone-curlew populations are on the increase thanks to the hard work of landowners and farmers in partnership with RSPB. In 2010, the number of booming male bitterns increased."

Restrictions on moving cattle

Restrictions on moving older cattle are being introduced as an "extra safeguard" to ensure animals which might have BSE do not enter the food chain, officials said yesterday.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) said the new restrictions on cattle born or reared in the UK before August 1, 1996, came after a government probe into whether there was an illegal trade in these animals.

Recent cases have included a Cumbria cattle dealer who was sentenced to 10 months in prison for sending an over-age animal to slaughter for consumption by people.

It is illegal to slaughter pre-1996 animals, which may have been fed animal proteins, for food under rules designed to prevent the spread of BSE to humans.

Train strike off

A planned strike by drivers on Arriva Trains Wales in a long-running row over pay was called off yesterday.

Members of Aslef were due to walk out for 24 hours on Saturday, the day of the Wales v Ireland Six Nations rugby match in Cardiff.

The union said further discussions would be held next week.

Simpler pensions 'to reward savers'

By ADAM AIKEN
MyMoney24 editor

The state pensions system is to be given a complete overhaul in a bid to make sure it pays to save for retirement.

Work and pensions secretary Iain Duncan Smith said the existing state pension was too complex and means testing for pensioners discouraged many people from saving at all for retirement.

He said pensions required the same kind of simplification that he was bringing to the benefits system through the universal credit.

There has been speculation that a single-tier pension could be worth about £140 a week, although that level of detail was not addressed by Mr Duncan Smith.

A move to a flat-rate state pension would remove disincentives for lower earners to build up savings, and such a change would be likely to benefit mothers who currently lose out on their pensions because of career breaks for raising children.

"We have to fundamentally simplify the system and we have to make it crystal clear to young savers that it pays to save," Mr Duncan Smith said.

He warned that younger workers were becoming "increasingly cynical" about saving and would not be able to afford a stable and secure retirement unless the government did "something radically different".

The state pension age is set to be increased because people are living longer, and the default retirement age is to be abolished in October. The government has also moved to require employers to enrol staff automatically in private pension schemes.

But Mr Duncan Smith said those moves were not enough and the government had to look at state provision as well.

"The state pension system is so complex that most people have no idea what it will mean for them now and in their retirement," he said.

"And too many people on low incomes who do the right thing in saving for their retirement find those savings clawed back through means-testing. We have to change this."

Financial plight of over-55s highlighted in report

A report into the financial situation of the over-55s has painted a bleak picture, thanks to a combination of falling incomes, increasing mortgages and fewer savings.

The latest Real Retirement Report – a quarterly publication produced by Aviva – has found that average incomes for over-55s have fallen by 4pc over the past year; the typical mortgage debt has risen by more than £10,000; and the number of households with savings of less than



OVERHAUL PLANS: Work and pensions secretary Iain Duncan Smith.

Robert Clarke, an independent financial adviser at Almary Green, said: "It is a great idea as the state pensions system is horrendously complicated – but as with all initiatives like this, be very aware when a politician uses the words 'fundamentally simplify', as the end result usually ends up as being horrendously complicated.

"The current system does lead to people who scrimp and save being no better off than if they had not bothered to do anything.

"If someone has the means and attitude to save for their future, they should not be penalised for it. Means-testing needs to be looked at."

John Nunn, senior financial planning consultant at accountants PKF, said the prospect of flat-rate basic pensions of about £140 a week and a much simplified structure was appealing – but he warned that somewhere along the line, someone would have to pay. The devil will be in the detail and it could be that the retirement age will be pushed further back," he said.

"That is going to make it difficult for people in their 30s having to plan 35 years ahead and even then find out that the goalposts are moved."

■ For more on this story, see the MyMoney24 section in Saturday's EDP.

FACTFILE

What changes are the government planning?

The aim is to replace the current basic state pension and the means-tested top-ups, such as the pension credit, with a single flat-rate pension. Full details are not yet known but it is thought the new system will not penalise women who take time out of work to look after children. People currently need to have paid national insurance contributions for 30 years in order to qualify for full basic state pensions. It has not been announced how much people would receive each week, but it is speculated that it would be about £140. Single people who currently receive full state pensions and pension credit get £132.60.

Why is the government planning to do this?

The change is part of plans to overhaul and simplify the benefits system generally. The existing system can be very complicated. The government also wants to create greater certainty about how much people will receive from the state, to help people plan for their retirement.

Who is going to benefit most from this?

The biggest winners are going to be women, who often take career breaks to look after young children. Under the current system, this can mean that they do not have enough years of national insurance contributions to qualify for full state pensions. People who would qualify for means-tested benefits under the current system could also be winners, as there is evidence to suggest that many people who are entitled to pension credit do not claim it, as they think the process is too complicated or they are uncomfortable with the idea of receiving extra handouts. The move should also make retirement planning easier for everyone.

What will happen to people who are already drawing their state pension?

The changes are aimed at the next generation of pensioners, and it is thought that those who have already retired will not be affected.



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