

My son's homework had me stumped this week. (No surprise there I hear you cry!). In my defence I'm usually called in for projects like making a model of the London eye, or a cardboard bike, or a life size digestive system (his teacher's ability to test the practical skills of parents apparently know no bounds).

This week's worksheet however involved identifying "fact" from "opinion". Unfortunately there wasn't a picture of a big red bus with an eye watering sum of money emblazoned on the side; that would have been too easy. The phrases were more innocuous; "The jungle is a dangerous place, it's useful to take a rope". Yes, I thought, the jungle is dangerous, and having been to the Amazon I can confirm a rope can be useful. We continued to debate the phrases though. For it to be a fact surely we would need to test the statement my son made. Yes I said, good point, for example, by comparing it to the desert we could send 100 people to the jungle and 100 to the desert and see how many survived, with or without a rope; apparently I was over thinking it. A common trait of mine.

2016 has been an incredibly busy year defined by trying to keep up with facts and opinions. The first few months of the year were spent keeping on top of the latest functionality (or lack thereof) of the Rural Payments systems and juggling higher tier Countryside Stewardship outline applications with a large facilitation fund bid for the South Downs. In the first quarter we were dealing with whether Countryside Stewardship was in fact open for business or whether that was just the opinion of a Defra press release. By the time we were into the second quarter we were ensuring farms with expiring HLS agreements kept their hat in the CSS ring all the while NE opined on whether "early conversion" was possible and whether in fact they were dealing with woodland at all.

It is a fact that the second quarter of the year is our busiest with all eyes on BPS. Mark Grimshaw has consistently managed to get Ministers to see his opinions on the success of making BPS payments as fact. According to him a total of £1.31billion was paid to all 87,100 claimants by the end of May. We are finding, in fact, that the only way to resolve any ongoing issues with apparently "corrected" 2015 claims is to write to local MPs who do seem to understand that Mr Grimshaw's opinion isn't in fact, fact.

Mapping was once again one of the biggest



IDENTIFYING FACT FROM OPINION

'Post-truth' declared word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries

problems in ensuring correct applications and claims – plus ça change. The RPA losing, or binning, RLE1 forms from the year before, coupled with updating/losing parcels off the system meant that ensuring EFA rules were complied with was like hitting a moving target, not to mention ensuring all eligible land was claimed on.

Attention turned back to countryside stewardship in the third quarter, this time for mid tier applications. Now this is a scheme that has meaningful payments and is under rated; well, that's my opinion. It has the majority of the management options available as in higher tier but it is more formulaic and success is based on spatial eligibility criteria rather than what a local NE officer's opinion of your farm is.

LEADER has been stop-start this year with Ministers seemingly not able to make up their minds whether it was in fact open for business. In this last quarter and following Philip Hammond's statement (of the bloomin' obvious) on 3 of October we have been

able to press on with some great projects. These applications are probably the most opined type of grant application there is and it has been satisfying to note that our opinions on business viability and ability to deliver jobs and growth have been well received.

I wait with bated breath to see what opinions will be presented as fact next year by Mr Grimshaw et al. In the meantime I have remembered one important fact about the dangers of the jungle though; apparently the most dangerous thing in the jungle is a tourist with a machete. Well that was my guide's opinion as I hacked away at the undergrowth just in front of him.

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