



FACTORS AFFECTING RURAL COMMUNITY CONFIDENCE IN THE POLICE

KEY JUDGEMENTS:

For Government

- The Rural-Proofing of the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee to ensure that this is fit for purpose to ensure equal service delivery to rural communities
- A specific consideration of rural communities and how neighbourhood policing can be improved and delivered within the rural space through the minimum level of service guarantee
- Consideration of specific funding sources to ensure permanent policing teams for all forces with rural communities within their remit
- Address the sentencing guidelines and National Crime Recording Standards to ensure accurate recording of rural crimes and appropriate levels of sentencing for those prosecuted

For Police

- Police and Crime Commissioners must ensure that funding is ring-fenced for rural policing teams to enable appropriate and effective resourcing
- The update and tailoring of rural crime pages on police websites to suit the specific nature of rural spaces within the force remit
- Improve communications and interactions between the police and rural communities
- Enable rural policing teams to work more closely with rural communities to ensure better understanding across both parties

For Rural Communities

- Report all crimes to the police
- Pass on information to the rural policing team

Executive Summary

Rural communities are showing ever-increasing levels of dissatisfaction and reduced levels of confidence and trust towards their police forces and their response to rural crime. This innovative research has undertaken a qualitative exploration of the lived experiences of rural

communities across the West Mercia Police force area as a proof-of-concept piece of research. Findings show that the police and police leaders do not take rural crime seriously, and that there are serious concerns about the resourcing of rural crime teams that directly impact confidence in the police. Communication and visibility were highlighted as key factors influencing low levels of confidence among rural communities. Reporting crimes and the response to these reports were seen as problematic among almost everyone interviewed. Recruitment and training, appropriate resourcing, increased communications and visibility, and a change in attitude towards rural crime were seen as essential to improve rural community confidence. Key recommendations for government, police, and rural communities have been made.

Problem Definition

Rural policing has long been seen as a pathway to retirement rather than as an exciting career option for the increasing number of new officers being put through the various Policing Degree Apprenticeships. This has led to a dearth of local, visible policing in rural areas across England and Wales. Despite pockets of good practice, relationships between the police and rural communities have become increasingly strained, particularly since the closure of small, local police stations and houses that began in the 1990s, many of which were in rural areasⁱ. This has led to the loss of the 'village bobby' and the familiarity of the local rural constable. Despite official statistics suggesting that confidence in the police is higher in rural areas than urban counterpartsⁱⁱ, data from rural stakeholder organisations continue to show a deep dissatisfaction with the service rural communities receive from the policeⁱⁱⁱ, although recognising the constraints within which the police are working. This research is the first to undertake a qualitative approach to rigorous evidence development to underpin survey-driven research around rural community confidence in

the police, and the first to explore what factors are affecting confidence.

Who Cares?

The increasingly organised nature of rural crime means that rural communities are being subjected to attacks from brazen, well-equipped, organised offenders, often stealing items to order to satisfy local, regional, national, and international market demands. Rural communities and farmers are increasingly experiencing repeat victimisation, with higher levels of violence and threats of violence associated with these crimes. Despite this, rural communities are continuing to feel disenfranchised in the response from the police to these crimes, and the low levels of resourcing allocated to rural crime teams where they exist. It is essential for the police leaders and government to recognise the feelings of rural communities that are now hampering the effective and appropriate policing of the countryside across England and Wales.

Methodology

Interviews and focus groups were organised and conducted with various members of rural communities across the West Mercia police force area (Shropshire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire) as a proof-of-concept piece of work to try to establish robust evidence to support the need for change. A set of 11 questions were established to explore the factors affecting their confidence and trust in the police force, particularly exploring their own experiences of interactions with the police. In addition, some quantitative data were collected, some of which mapped directly onto the community confidence survey conducted by the Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia. This allowed direct comparison with the official published data and the thoughts and feelings of the rural community participants. Participants were then also asked to review and comment on the outputs developed by this research, including this policy note and a MindMap of the key issues being discussed across all conversations held. This ensured that the research outputs were co-developed through feedback from participants on the draft outputs developed.

Key Findings

Through in-depth thematic analysis, six key themes emerged: Police taking rural crime seriously; resources and confidence; communications and visibility; reporting issues; factors affecting confidence/what police need to do; and the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee. The

MindMap created for this project provides an extensive evidence base of the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of the participants in response to these six themes. This Policy Note highlights just a small selection.

Theme 1 – Police taking rural crime seriously: Several quotes highlight the dissatisfaction with the West Mercia Police and Crime Commissioner and his response to rural crime: “He’s a politician, he misuses statistics”; “He’s very defensive...he doesn’t wanna take hold of the issues and help resolve them”. This latter point was added to by another participant who highlighted their thoughts about the PCC’s response to taking rural crime seriously: “But his attitude is very much ‘No, there’s not a problem and we’ve put more money in’”. Other comments referred to his lack of empathy to the plight of rural communities who have been victimised on multiple occasions in some cases, and are generally unhappy and want to raise issues with him. This unhappiness extends to their experiences with the wider police and the response received to crime reports: “Police are rung; nobody comes” and “the officers are pulled into the urban area...it feels like that’s always more important than farms”. This feeling of being second class citizens is highlighted again elsewhere: “I think the answer we were told is, there were more important things happening in [town]”.

Theme 2 - Resources and Confidence: For a number of participants, there was some sympathy with the rural policing team as they recognised the pressures of trying to do their job without sufficient resources: “In terms of resource, no I don’t think they are”; “In 1980 police sergeant, four police constables and about three or four specials...which is now one PC and one PCSO”; “I have every sympathy and confidence...that they want to a good job, but they’re hampered because there aren’t enough of them to do the job”. However, some participants felt that the police were not using tools that were available to them: “They’re not using the tools that are available to help to solve these crimes”; “even if there’s CCTV, we’ve heard of cases where there is still no attendance”. It was recognised that police are doing what they can, but within the confines of their training and morale: “when there are cuts, the first thing that suffers is training”; “in both rural environments and urban environments, police morale is at an all-time low”. Despite many of the participants recognising the issue of resourcing, the impact this and other factors have on confidence towards the police is extensive: “it just seems sometimes that there isn’t the desire to help”; “It’s very rare that we have a successful outcome or a prosecution from some of these incidents”; “I have no confidence, if

I ring 999, that I'm going to get a timely response"; "I've never seen them which makes you think you need to fend for yourself if anything happens"; "The police officer just providing a crime number 10 days later...allows me to lose faith in the force".

Theme 3 – Communications and Visibility: This seemed to be a common theme across all conversations – there is not enough communication with police, and they are not visible enough: "Well you don't [see the police], it's as simple as that"; "There's a bit of a problem with joined up communication"; "Not too long ago I recall seeing the PCSO walking around, but not lately"; "Even though we are provided with mobile phone numbers when we do call all we get a messages. Pointless!!"; "How can they do a good job when they are never here? The real crime is the total lack of policing in our countryside areas". This aspect seems to be a key issue among all the conversations undertaken, and provides a significant level of frustration for rural communities. Some simple changes were highlighted that could improve this area of contention: "there's a negativity around the lack of success stories"; "That's [WhatsApp] a really good modern mechanism of instant messaging, and the police have washed their hands of it"; "People want to see police officers...they feel more secure. Their sense of wellbeing is increased".

Theme 4 – Reporting Issues: The difficulty in reporting was highlighted: "You get to stay on the line for a long time...Farmers are busy". This seems to be the starting point of what becomes a real impact on community confidence. Response to a crime being reported was something that many participants talked about: "My neighbour and me both feel that the police would prefer letting the insurance companies deal with no injury things"; "It was a 999 call because the crime was happening...but nobody attended. We actually lodged a complaint"; "You're given an incident number and that seems to be the end of it...There's anger that there doesn't seem to be the will to solve the crime"; "They attend but no real effort is made. It's only like a courtesy gesture". This then leads to experiences of long waits for anyone to attend: "Long waits...Evidence is lost, and a cannot-be-bothered attitude if an officer (most likely a PCSO because we are not worthy of real officers) does attend"; "Nobody's got back to my neighbour or me"; "I have no expectation...of police coming out on time". This inability to obtain even a minimum level of service in many cases, is having an extremely negative impact on the likelihood of people reporting crimes in the future, and even where they say they will, expectations are low: "There's no point talking to the police because it will just

be managed administratively at best"; "If I got burgled...then I would report it because I'd need a crime number for the insurance...I wouldn't have very high expectations of them finding somebody"; "If you're a victim of crime and you've reported it and nothing's happened, you're bound to be less likely to report it"; "you might drive down the road and see a fly-tip and you might just think, well, what's the point of reporting it? No one's going to deal with it"; "I will still report but have absolutely no faith in any action being taken by police". This position has left a few participants talking about a rise in vigilantism: "No likelihood [of reporting] and that is why we see the rise of vigilantes sadly"; "The CPS decided not to pursue it...It led local people to think 'Well, perhaps he could have just had a smack around the head or something'".

Theme 5 – Factors affecting confidence and what the police need to do: Several factors were identified by participants that are affecting their confidence in the police which add to the frustrations already highlighted. A lack of deterrence to offenders was seen as a serious damage to confidence: "we live with this undercurrent of rural crime and we don't have any initiatives to stop these things from happening"; "The criminals will carry on committing the crime because they know they have a higher chance of getting away with it in the rural". Knowledge and putting in the effort to get prosecutions was raised: "Mine is the knowledge because I speak to the police whenever I see them"; "The fact that not a single fly-tipping incidence has...led to a prosecution, and there have been hundreds of fly-tipping incidences across the county". The range of issues faced when reporting crimes has a major impact on confidence: "It's such a rigmarole to get in touch with them if it's not a 999 immediate thing"; "The fact that you're given an incident number and that seems to be the end of it". In conjunction with the issues highlighted in the previous four themes underpin the issues affecting rural community confidence in the police.

As expected, the things that the police need to do to improve rural community confidence follow the issues discussed. There was a feeling that local people who know rural life should be employed to police rural areas: "we both see the need for a chap who's comfortable with his local environment, who knows the people"; "Employ officers that actually live in the countryside so they can see and understand first hand the impact"; "Police are no longer a part of the community and so they won't gain people's trust". Attitudes towards rural crime need to be improved: "A change of attitude would be the biggest thing I'd be asking for. A willingness to work

with us to try and bring the crime number down or solve them”; “The police and certainly the Police and Crime Commissioner don’t have a very positive attitude”. Training was mentioned as being required to support rural policing: “rethink training, rethink the core duties and responsibilities of the police”; “We need a massive rethink on the way in which we promote and train senior leaders...we need a Home Secretary who is time served”. Most comments around what police need to do to improve confidence revolved around the following three aspects: Resourcing: “What worries me is the staffing levels and the amount that they’re funded”; “The Police and Crime Commissioner’s put one of his main things to get more police. But whether he’d send them to the rural communities, who knows?” Presence in the community: “You need more police on the beat, visible police”; “Be present. Come out and support when a crime has happened”. Communication: “Celebrate their wins...resurrect the WhatsApp groups”; “We need to have a Police and Crime Commissioner and a Chief Constable who actually wants to work with the rural community and talk to them and listen to them”. Theme 6 will be addressed in the next section.

Challenges to Current Policy

When asked as to whether they thought the new Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee (NPG)^{iv} would help improve rural policing, visibility, and community confidence, the responses were predominantly negative. While participants recognised the ideal of the NPG, it was noted that there is no mention of rural in the policy nor in the Theory of Change: “Nowhere in their opening statement are farmers, the local communities and/or their experiences mentioned”. The main issue identified was that of police visibility which is one of the key tenets of the Outputs Pillar in the Theory of Change. This is very much designed with town centres in mind, and does not necessarily translate to rural police visibility: “If the police forces don’t have the money then they can’t create their own rural policing set ups”. Some participants see the NPG as “just paying lip service” and will not make a difference to the policing of rural crime. Others were clear that they were “not aware of this new initiative”. This raises the question, if communities are

not aware of the NPG, how are they meant to hold the force to account? Another issue identified around the NPG is that of having permanent rural policing teams highlighted by the comment “You’ve got to have continuity...They get moved”. This has been seen across various forces at times of high demand, such as the summer riots of 2024, rural policing teams are often redeployed to help with other policing priorities^v. While there were some positive comments “anything that increases police presence...has to be a good thing”, the overwhelming feeling across discussions was that the NPG was “just a lot of words that won’t come to any action”.

Conclusions

This proof-of-concept piece of work has established that there is substantial dissatisfaction among rural communities towards the police and the policing of rural crime. Additional work is needed to replicate this work across multiple police force areas to identify patterns at a national level rather than simply at police force-level. This will enable more detailed insights and recommendations to enhance those from this project.

Recommendations

Numerous recommendations are highlighted from this piece of research for policymakers, police, and rural communities. Key for government is to ensure that the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee is rural-proofed as per their 2025 policy paper^{vi}, and to explore ways to better record rural crime and ensure sentences reflect the harm these crimes bring to rural communities. Police and Crime Commissioners need to ensure appropriate funding is allocated to rural policing to allow improved communication and visibility of police in rural communities. Also, tailoring of rural crime pages on police forces websites to make them more appropriate to the issues experienced in different force areas is recommended. Rural communities must report all crimes to the police, and share information with their rural crime teams or Safer Neighbourhood Policing Teams to ensure the development of appropriate intelligence.

ⁱ Smith & Somerville (2013) <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pat031>

ⁱⁱ Defra (2025a) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-findings-statistical-digest-of-rural-england/key-findings-statistical-digest-of-rural-england>

ⁱⁱⁱ Countryside Alliance (2022) <https://www.countryside-alliance.org/resources/news/rural-crime-survey-2022>

^{iv} Home Office (2025).

[https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neighbourhood-](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neighbourhood-policing-guarantee-performance-framework/neighbourhood-policing-guarantee-performance-framework-accessible)

[policing-guarantee-performance-framework/neighbourhood-policing-guarantee-performance-framework-accessible](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neighbourhood-policing-guarantee-performance-framework/neighbourhood-policing-guarantee-performance-framework-accessible)

^v BBC (2024). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c84jrwwlx2do>

^{vi} Defra (2025b).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-proofing-the-governments-approach-and-priorities/the-governments-approach-to-rural-proofing-2025>