



# FACTORS AFFECTING RURAL COMMUNITY CONFIDENCE IN THE POLICE

## 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. 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 judgements for government, police, and rural communities have been made.

## ISSUE

1. This report is produced by Dr Kreseda Smith and reflects the factors affecting rural community confidence in the police. This research is a qualitative exploration of how rural communities feel about the police and the policing of rural spaces in the West Mercia Force area, and highlights the key issues raised during these discussions.

## KEY JUDGEMENTS:

2. The recipient is invited to agree that:

### For Government

- a. **The Rural-Proofing<sup>i</sup> of the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee is needed to ensure that this is fit for purpose to ensure equal service delivery to rural communities.**
- b. **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.**

- c. **Consideration of specific funding sources to ensure permanent policing teams for all forces with rural communities within their remit.**
- d. **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

- a. **Police and Crime Commissioners must ensure that funding is ring-fenced for rural policing teams to enable appropriate and effective resourcing.**
- b. **Better awareness and training for new police officers about rural policing as a career pathway.**
- c. **Improve communications and interactions between the police and rural communities.**
- d. **Enable rural policing teams to work more closely with rural communities to ensure better understanding across both parties.**

### For Rural Communities

- a. **Report all crimes to the police.**
- b. **Pass on information to the rural policing team.**

## Problem Definition

3. **Context.** 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 since the closure of small, local police stations, many of which were located in rural areas<sup>ii</sup>. This has led to the loss of the 'village bobby' and the familiarity that brought. Despite official statistics suggesting that confidence in the police is higher in rural areas than urban counterparts<sup>iii</sup>, data from rural stakeholder organisations continue to show a deep dissatisfaction with the service rural communities receive from the police<sup>iv</sup>, although recognising the constraints within which the police are working. This research is the first to explore what factors are affecting confidence.

## Key Findings

**4. Police taking rural crime seriously:** Conversations indicate a clear dissatisfaction with the West Mercia Police and Crime Commissioner and his response to rural crime, with participants highlighting the way he uses statistics, his defensive nature, and the belief that he does not take rural crime seriously. 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. This leads to a feeling of being second class citizens.

**5. Resources and Confidence:** For many participants, there was some sympathy with the rural policing team as they recognised the pressures of trying to do their job with insufficient resources. However, some participants felt that the police were not using tools that were available to them to help with this work. It was recognised that police are doing what they can, but within the confines of their training and morale. This just highlights the difficulties police face in being able to do the job that in most cases they want to do and provide the service they want to deliver. Despite many of the participants recognising the issue of resourcing, the impact this and other factors has on confidence towards the police is extensive. These are just a small example of the depth of feelings rural communities have, whilst recognising the constraints the police are working under.

**6. 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. 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.

**7. Reporting Issues:** The difficulty in reporting was highlighted. 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. This then leads to experiences of long waits for anyone to attend. 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. This position has left a few participants talking about a rise in vigilantism.

**8. 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. Knowledge and putting in the effort to get prosecutions was raised. The range of issues faced when reporting crimes has a major impact on confidence. In conjunction with the issues highlighted in the previous four sections, this underpins 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 from the issues discussed. There was a feeling that local people who know rural life should be employed to police rural areas. Attitudes towards rural crime need to be improved. Training was mentioned as being required to support rural policing. Most comments around what police need to do to improve confidence revolved around the following three aspects: Resourcing; Presence in the community; Communication.

**9. Challenges to Current Policy:** When asked whether they thought the new Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee (NPG)<sup>v</sup> 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. 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. Some participants feel that the NPG will not make a difference to the policing of rural crime; others were not aware of this new initiative. Another issue identified around the NPG is that of having permanent rural policing teams rather than at times of high demand rural policing teams being redeployed to help with other policing priorities<sup>vi</sup>. While there were some positive comments, the overwhelming feeling across discussions was that the NPG was not written or designed to benefit rural communities.

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<sup>i</sup> Defra (2025a). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-proofing-the-governments-approach-and-priorities/the-governments-approach-to-rural-proofing-2025>

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

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

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

<sup>v</sup> Home Office (2025). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neighbourhood-policing-guarantee-performance-framework/neighbourhood-policing-guarantee-performance-framework-accessible>

<sup>vi</sup> BBC (2024). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c84jrwlx2do>