

# THE POLICE REFORM WHITE PAPER: HOW CAN IT WORK FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES?

Rural Criminology Policy Note #2  
March 2026

## Executive Summary

Policing in England and Wales has not seen significant structural change since the 1960s. As a result of the changing landscape of crime, the need for a change in policing response is arguable long overdue. The Police Reform White Paper<sup>i</sup> was released in January 2026 to great fanfare from the government. However, there is a distinct lack of consideration of how the proposals could work through a rural lens. Despite presenting itself as a reform that will benefit people regardless of where they live, the document refers solely to towns, boroughs, and cities, with rural mentioned just once in relation to target response times to emergency calls. A detailed review of the proposed policing reforms has highlighted several aspects that the government need to consider as this proposal is developed into a Bill to ensure that the proposed reforms truly do work for everyone no matter where they live.

## ISSUE

1. This Note is produced by Dr Kreseda Smith and reflects the key issues identified from the Police Reform White Paper when considered through a rural lens. This work highlights the main aspects that will affect rural community confidence, operational considerations, and highlights the need for the government to engage more widely in collaboration and consultation with a range of rural stakeholders to ensure that the future legislation is fit for purpose for those living and working within the rural communities of England and Wales.

## KEY JUDGEMENTS:

2. The recipient is invited to agree that:
  - a. There is a clear and present danger that the impact of crime on rural communities remains misunderstood and overlooked if a rural lens is not employed in the development of future legislation.
  - b. There is a need for clarity on the proposed structure of policing going forward to ensure that the local level appropriately considers the specific nature of agricultural crime, rural crime, and rurality-enabled crime.
  - c. There is a need for clarity on how Rural Crime Specialist Officers fit within the planned Local

## Policing Areas and the Neighbourhood Areas and whether they are seen commensurate with Neighbourhood Policing Teams

- d. It is considered how the creation of targets for response times and police performance could disproportionately impact rural communities as efforts could be focused on more urban-centric policing, hotspots, and timely responses coupled with factors that enhance detection of crime in urban locations.
- e. The government must ensure wider collaboration and consultation with rural stakeholders to ensure that future legislation is suitable for all crime and policing response to enable an improvement in rural community confidence and trust towards the police, an increase in policing by consent, and stronger adherence to the Police Service Mission and Values.

## Problem Definition

3. Rural policing is often overlooked in the development of policing strategy and operational planning. This is despite approximately 10.7 million people across England and Wales live in rural areas, and the rural sector adding on average 22% of Gross Value Added to the England and Wales economy<sup>ii</sup>. Despite this, the publication of the Policing Reform White Paper offers an opportunity to ensure that the lived experiences of rural communities can be represented in potential future legislation. If done correctly, this could represent a turning point in the policing of rural areas and provide an opportunity to improve trust and confidence in policing among rural communities across England and Wales.

## Key Findings

4. **Truly local policing:** The White Paper promises 13,000 extra neighbourhood policing personnel, but with 7,666 council-aligned neighbourhood areas proposed (May 2022)<sup>iii</sup>, this averages only 1.7 persons per neighbourhood area. Urban hotspots will likely receive more staff, undermining the pledge of visible policing everywhere, especially in rural communities. The proposed policing structure also gives no clarity on how Rural Crime Specialist

Officers fit, despite their distinct, community-embedded role unlike other specialist units such as firearms or roads policing. Furthermore, it is essential that these Rural Crime Specialist teams are afforded the same protection from routine abstraction as the neighbourhood policing personnel.

**5. Neighbourhood operations:** The operational aspects for neighbourhood policing teams are unclear from the proposals set out in the White Paper. With the number of operational police stations continuing to dwindle<sup>iv</sup>, police officers are becoming increasingly invisible. This invisibility is enhanced among rural and remote areas of England and Wales due to many rural police stations being lost. As a result, any rural neighbourhood teams may have to travel from further afield to their rural communities.

**6. Local vs Regional:** Despite the extensive discussion around the intention to keep policing local, there is a real need for clarity on how the government propose to ensure this happens alongside the move towards regional police forces – potentially aligned with the 12 existing Probation Service regions. The local policing structure needs more detail around where the decision-making and accountability lies between the regional structure and the local structure. In addition, it is essential that there is a clear pathway for the public, both rural and urban, to be able to hold their local policing decision-makers to account. The local reassurance and accountability are essential for rural communities to ensure that the service provided is meeting their needs and ensure the high-quality victim experiences and investigative outcomes.

**7. Rural Serious Organised Criminality:** The White Paper sets out plans for key functions including counter terrorism and organised crime policing to become part of the function of the National Police Service. It is incumbent upon to government to ensure that rural crime is raised as a priority within the National Police Service due to the clear evidence of the increase in serious organised criminals targeting rural areas<sup>v</sup>. Rural crime must be treated as a high priority in the new policing structure, as offenders targeting rural and farming communities are often linked to wider organised criminality, including drug trafficking, MSHT, fly-tipping, waste crime and wildlife offences. These activities are increasingly interconnected, making it essential that rural crime receives appropriate focus and resourcing.

**8. Targets:** The White Paper via the Police Performance Framework (PPF) reforms offer key targets as part of the

restructure. The PPF provides that 90% of grade 1 incidents in rural areas will be responded to within 20 minutes. It is arguable, when you consider geographical challenges, road infrastructure, sparse communities, and poor location identification, this target will disproportionately affect rural residents through a potential focus towards calls from peri-urban and accessible rural locations to meet such a target and avoid action being taken.

**9. Funding the reforms:** It is unclear how the government plan to fund the reforms set out in the White Paper. What is also unclear is whether this will impact the central government funding police forces receive moving forward. Linked to this is the clear need to update the Police Allocation Formula to make it work for the local and regional forces and be more transparent in its calculation to enable public accountability. The funding also needs to reflect the pressures experienced by the police in resourcing rural crime teams adequately. It is recognised that predominantly rural forces consistently receive less funding per capita than their more urban counterparts<sup>vi</sup>.

**10. Collaboration is key:** Based on the contents of the White Paper, there is a clear need for the government to collaborate more widely and work more closely with those who represent rural communities to ensure the issues around rural crime and policing are clearly understood. This includes charities, NGOs, the private sector, and academia. This needs to be something that the government undertake as the wider consultation process on the White Paper proposals moves forward and the expected Bill is developed.

**11. Policing Performance:** The PPF promises to improve consistency in reporting and analysing police performance, but this must ensure rural crime is accurately represented so rural areas are not viewed as crime free and undeserving of resources. Key data gaps persist: the CSEW lacks a boosted rural sample; hotspot funding is urban-focused; crime outcomes often record rural incidents as 'no-crime' for a range of reasons; and police-recorded data underestimates rural crime due to under-reporting linked to low confidence in police. Finally, NCA data will rarely show Serious Organised Crime in rural areas until the NCA recognise the important nature of these crimes.

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<sup>i</sup> Home Office 2026: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/from-local-to-national-a-new-model-for-policing>

<sup>ii</sup> House of Lords Library The rural economy (2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/quarterly-rural-economic-bulletin>

<sup>iii</sup> ONS: <https://cy.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/administrative-geography/england/>;

<https://cy.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/administrative-geography/wales>

<sup>iv</sup> Millie et al., 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2023.2293004>

<sup>v</sup> Tudor 2024: <https://nationalruralcrimenetwork.net/rural-crime-report-2024/#>

<sup>vi</sup> Police Foundation 2024: <https://www.police-foundation.org.uk/2024/07/now-is-the-best-opportunity-to-reform-the-police-funding-formula/>