

# RURAL AND WILDLIFE CRIME STRATEGY AND RURAL CRIME-RELATED LEGISLATION

Rural Criminology Policy Note #4  
June 2026

## Executive Summary

Rural crime remains deeply damaging for those who live and work in the countryside. As policing bodies increasingly recognise its serious and organised nature, there is a growing need for government and policing leaders to develop responses that match the scale of the threat. Recent legislation has been launched with considerable fanfare, but its impact is uncertain. The NPCC's 2025–2028 Rural and Wildlife Crime Strategy, released in November 2025, and related legislative measures reveal several areas that require further attention as organised rural criminality grows and wider policing reforms continue.

## ISSUE

1. This Note is produced by Dr Kreseda Smith and reflects the key issues identified from a detailed review of the NPCC Rural and Wildlife Crime Strategy 2025–2028, and key legislation to which it refers. This work highlights the main aspects of these documents that will affect the way in which crime in rural spaces is addressed, acted upon, and understood. While it is recognised that all documents reviewed in this Note are welcomed by rural communities as they bring overdue recognition of the impact crime has in the rural space, this Note highlights some of the questions that remain unanswered that may affect operationalisation of the strategy.

## KEY JUDGEMENTS:

2. **The recipient is invited to agree that:**
  - a. **Better and wider collaboration is needed to effectively tackle rural criminality in all its forms.**
  - b. **The recognition of rural criminality as serious and organised needs to be taken seriously to enable true understanding of the level of issues rural communities face.**
  - c. **The legislation needs to go further and faster to keep up with the pace of change in criminal tactics.**
  - d. **The appropriate resourcing of rural and wildlife crime teams needs to be actioned, particularly in light of the planned policing reforms.**

- e. **Information sharing and crime recording needs a significant overhaul to move away from historic silo working within the police.**
- f. **There is an opportunity now for rural and wildlife crime policing to become increasingly proactive rather than reactive in light of the reforms expected over the coming parliament.**

## Problem Definition

3. There is a clear need for a coordinated national approach to rural and wildlife crime. The third Rural and Wildlife Crime Strategy acknowledges many of the challenges facing rural communities, and recent legislation signals progress in addressing key offences. However, questions remain about the gap between the commitments made and the practical response delivered since these documents were published.

## Key Findings

### 4. Collaboration and Evidence-Based Decision-Making:

The strategy refers to a “robust partnership framework,” but it does not specify who is involved. This framework must extend beyond traditional policing to include academia and research organisations to ensure independent, evidence-based decision-making. Rural and wildlife policing requires a whole-society approach, bringing together government, business, civil society, charities, academia, and communities to tackle complex issues through shared goals, inclusive engagement, and collective resilience rather than traditional command-and-control models. Achieving this depends on building trust across all partners, creating a shared vision, and breaking down barriers so that capacity to prevent, absorb, and recover from rural and wildlife crime is strengthened through coordinated action rather than top-down direction.

5. Organised Crime: The strategy acknowledges that rural and wildlife crime is organised, but its focus remains too narrow on acquisitive offences. It should link with relevant NPCC leads to address the wider organised criminality affecting rural areas, including drug supply, people trafficking and modern slavery, hare coursing and

associated gambling, fraud, and counterfeit agricultural inputs. While the strategy notes that livestock theft is driven by supply and demand, this applies to most acquisitive crimes and should be recognised more broadly. The strategy promotes using crime-analysis data to identify hotspots, yet organised crime groups often disperse activity to avoid creating such patterns. This approach also depends on crimes being reported in the first place, which remains a significant limitation.

**6. Legislation:** The NPCC strategy cites the Crime and Policing Bill, the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, and the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee. The Crime and Policing Bill introduces warrantless entry powers, updated fly-tipping guidance for Local Authorities, and new ASB measures such as Respect Orders. While the ASB provisions may be useful in rural contexts, the fly-tipping guidance adds little to the Environmental Protection Act 1990, and the warrantless entry proposals raise procedural issues, rely on the assumption of a tracker, and contain unresolved textual contradictions. The Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 is widely regarded by practitioners as insufficient and significantly diluted from its original proposals. The Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee has been discussed by this author in a previous Policy Note<sup>1</sup>. Notably absent from the strategy is the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Act 2025. Although enacted in December 2025 and available to the strategy team, it provides updated terminology, seizure powers, forensic sampling guidance, sentencing provisions, and entry and search powers. The Act came into force on 18 March 2026, and it is too early to determine its impact on livestock worrying and attacks.

**7. Definition and Strategic Approach:** Police should already know what rural and wildlife crime looks like, but there needs to be a clear strategic definition to ensure parity and to create data that is comparable and useable. The strategic priorities across rural crime are essentially rural acquisitive crime and livestock worrying when looked at collectively. The use of the term ‘rural’ is arguably misleading, and it is suggested that the more specific term of ‘agricultural’ should be used for strategic purposes. This would sit more in line with the definitions provided. Something the strategy rightly highlights, is the need for a whole Criminal Justice System education piece to ensure that all involved understand the true impact crime has on our rural and farming communities.

**8. Resourcing:** There is a call for commitment for every police force to have an embedded rural crime team. However, when considering the content of the Policing Reform White Paper<sup>2</sup> it is not entirely clear how this will be

possible beyond neighbourhood policing that is not specialist, nor whether these rural crime teams will be permanent roles and protected from abstraction. This challenge remains despite the commitments set out in the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee, and will require significantly more rural neighbourhood police to be employed, something which does not necessarily sit well with the police funding settlements provided to predominantly rural forces, or the additional NPG funding allocated. While the continued funding of the NRCU has been applauded, their focus is on police advice, training, and coordination, and there are little direct benefits to rural communities.

**9. Information Sharing and Crime Recording:** The strategy cites “clear success” in preventing and reducing crime, but again relies primarily on insurance claims data. NFU Mutual figures capture only a fraction of rural crime due to other insurers, non-property offences, and widespread under-reporting. Comparable police-recorded crime data across all forces is needed. Although the strategy highlights progress on livestock theft, this approach should extend to all rural crime. The shared Teams Channel is a positive step for national information and intelligence sharing, but its force-level management needs review. Responsibility currently sits with rural crime teams or single points of contact, creating limited resilience given the volume of data likely to be shared. Data quality will also vary depending on each force’s recording system and how rural crimes are flagged—an essential issue for the strategy’s data-gathering aims. Finally, community engagement, harm identification, and intelligence-led operations depend heavily on strong police–community relationships, which remain inconsistent across force areas.

**10. Policing Approach:** Despite the strategy’s emphasis on the 4P model, rural policing still needs to shift from reactive responses to sustained proactive work. Short, week-long operations are insufficient; forces require long-term, coordinated prevention initiatives that target offenders effectively. Disruption tactics must be robust enough to affect organised criminality without simply displacing it. Crucially, proactive policing depends on strong rural community buy-in. Forces need genuine engagement so communities feel confident reporting crime, enabling the intelligence required to shape effective policing approaches.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cdn.harper-adams.ac.uk/document/project/260430-Can-the-Neighbourhood-Policing-Guarantee-Prove-Eff198110.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/from-local-to-national-a-new-model-for-policing>