



John Champion
Police and Crime Commissioner
West Mercia



Rural Crime Strategy

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1. Foreword

Rural crime can have a significant cost, in a way that is more than just financial. It brings increased stress and pressure which impacts on mental health, leading people to feel more isolated. Rural communities can sometimes feel forgotten.

It is vital we make sure voices and priorities are heard and acted on from within our rural area, ensuring these communities and individuals feel more connected. We must understand these concerns and the unique challenges they bring to policing. I want communities to have the same efficient and effective service, regardless of where they are, and for communities to be safe and feel safe.

West Mercia is a predominantly rural police force area, with parts of Herefordshire and Shropshire amongst the least densely populated counties in the country. While there are some crime types that are more prevalent in rural areas such as wildlife crime or agricultural related crime, it's important to also consider issues such as serious and organised crime, modern day slavery, drugs, domestic abuse and violent crime which impact across all our communities.

We are fortunate that West Mercia is a relatively safe place to live and work, and extensive work has already been done, based on feedback from the public. This includes an uplift in officers to improve police visibility, investment in officers with specialist capabilities to tackle rural issues, a live public holding to account meeting specifically on rural issues and investment in schemes (such as SmartWater) which help people to protect themselves in the longer term.

There is always more we can do however and building safer, more secure rural communities is something that we must do ever more to deliver. This strategy outlines how I will deliver on my responsibilities as a Police and Crime Commissioner and how I will continue to actively work with communities and partners to tackle rural crime.



John Campion
West Mercia Police and Crime Commissioner

2. Introduction

This strategy has been produced to set out my response to addressing rural crime. Unlike other crime types or policing issues there is no specific government strategy for rural crime; however, as over a third of West Mercia's population lives in a rural area and in Herefordshire and Shropshire this rises to over 50 percent, it is important that the policing and anti-social behaviour concerns raised by our rural communities are listened to, understood and addressed. Rural crime can have a significant impact on quality of life as people in rural communities may feel particularly vulnerable because of their isolated location.

While the types of crime experienced in rural areas are similar to urban areas, I do recognise that there are certain crimes which are more prevalent in rural areas than more urban ones. The main rural challenges we face include:

Farm and agricultural crime: opportunist and acquisitive crimes present a significant threat to our farmers and small holders. The loss of equipment and livestock can have a negative impact on people's livelihoods.

Business crime: as with farm and agricultural crime, crimes against other rural businesses can impact greatly on people's livelihoods and the wider community.

Wildlife and heritage crime: issues such as poaching and illegal fishing along with the damage to/theft from our heritage sites across West Mercia, can effect both the natural and overall environment.

Serious and organised crime: organised crime is not just a problem for urban areas, it is also a significant driver for many of the crimes that occur in our rural communities.

Community concerns: issues such as fly tipping and speeding traffic negatively impact on our rural communities on a daily basis, but importantly, are not solely policing matters.

As part of my wider approach to strategy development I will ensure that the needs of rural communities are addressed in other relevant policy documents and strategies I publish; for example, on serious and organised crime, drugs and domestic abuse.

3. Context

Scale and impact of rural crime

Detailed below are some of the key findings from research into the scale and impact of rural crime. The complete findings can be found in Appendix 1 of this strategy.

- West Mercia Police along with a number of other forces define rural crime as: any crime or anti social behaviour that takes place in a rural location or is identified as such by the victim.
- In 2018/19, 23% of all police recorded crime in West Mercia occurred in a rural area.
- Across West Mercia's rural areas in 2018/19 the most prevalent crime was 'violence without injury', accounting for 23% of all crime. This was in line with West Mercia's non rural areas.
- Organised criminality is increasingly being recognised as having an adverse impact on rural communities and wildlife.
- The National Rural Crime Network's (NRCN) 2018 rural crime survey identified 'criminal damage/vandalism/arson' as the most commonly experienced crime for most respondent types and 'flytipping' for rural specific businesses (farmers).
- Around one third of all crimes committed against NRCN survey participants were not reported to the police.
- 34 people were killed on rural roads in West Mercia in 2018/19.

- In the NRCN 2018 survey 'fly tipping' and 'speeding' were the highest ranked 'crimes against society' concerns listed by respondents.
- In the 2018 NRCN survey approximately 30% of respondents perceived their local police to be doing a good or excellent job.

Policy

National

At present there is no national government strategy or approach specifically addressing rural crime. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) has recently agreed a strategic policing direction for all UK forces in relation to rural affairs and wildlife crime. This is set out in two key documents:

- National Police Chiefs' Council Rural Affairs Strategy 2018 – 2021
- National Police Chief's Council Wildlife Crime Policing Strategy 2018 – 2021.



Local

West Mercia Police has recently refreshed its Rural Matters Plan in line with the NPCC and published a replacement Rural Affairs and Wildlife Strategy. This document provides a tactical 'plan on a page' approach to be taken by the force to rural and wildlife crime in line with the NPCC strategic priorities shown below.

Rural Affairs Priorities	Wildlife Crime Priorities
Farm machinery, plant and vehicle theft	Badger persecution
Livestock offences	Bat persecution
Fuel theft	CITES (endangered animals)
Equine crime	Raptor Persecution
Fly tipping	Freshwater Pearl Mussels
Poaching	

The NPCC's approach to priority delivery is structured around the PIER principles of prevention, intelligence, enforcement and reassurance.

Rural Affairs & Wildlife Crime Strategy

Delivering the police contribution towards the NPCC priorities in conjunction with West Mercia Police and Crime Commissioner's Safer West Mercia Plan.

OUR APPROACH
Working together with:

- Partners/stakeholders
- Police officers and staff
- Rural and Business Crime Officers
- Volunteers
- Communities

1 PUTTING VICTIMS FIRST

2 REASSURING WEST MERCIA COMMUNITIES

3 BUILD A MORE SECURE WEST MERCIA

WILDLIFE CRIME - OUR AIMS

- BADGER PERSECUTION:** Improve recording of incidents, crimes and quality of intel; improve investigation process; increase awareness.
- BAT PERSECUTION:** Promote crime prevention; improve quality of intel and investigation process; increase awareness.
- CITES:** Increase disruption activities and detection; increase quality of intel; improve analytical assessments; increase investigation and enforcement outcomes.
- RAPTOR PERSECUTION:** Increase awareness; Promote crime prevention; increase enforcement activity.
- FRESHWATER PEARL MUSSELS:** Increase awareness.

POACHING: Increase awareness; Build trust and relationships with partners/communities; Increase intel/enforcement; Promote crime prevention.

RURAL CRIME - OUR AIMS

- FARM MACHINERY, PLANT AND VEHICLE THEFT:** Reduce theft; Share intel and best practice; Promote crime prevention.
- LIVESTOCK OFFENCES:** Reduce theft/worrying; Increase awareness; Improve sentencing.
- FUEL THEFT:** Reduce theft; Increase awareness; Promote crime prevention.
- EQUINE CRIME:** Reduce crime; Improve cross border collaboration; Promote crime prevention.
- FLYTIPPING:** Collaborate with stakeholders.

West Mercia POLICE

Police Operations Policy and Crime Commissioner

Safer West Mercia Plan

My Safer West Mercia Plan 2016-2021 sets out my strategic vision for West Mercia. This includes four priority areas, one of which, [Reassuring West Mercia's communities](#), contains a specific commitment from me to hold the Chief Constable to account for making sure voices and priorities are heard and acted on from within our rural communities, via the Rural Matters Plan (now the Rural Affairs and Wildlife Strategy) to ensure their specific needs are addressed.

The table on page 8 illustrates the overlap between the delivery framework used by the NPCC for each priority area and the priorities within my own Safer West Mercia Plan.



Police and Crime Commissioner funding

To make policing in rural communities more visible and effective, I have allocated some of the monies from the 2019/20 precept rise to provide an uplift in the allocation of funding given to West Mercia Police for rural crime. I have committed to provide this dedicated funding until March 2021.

I have agreed with the force that the funding will be used to increase the five existing Rural and Business Officer (RABO) posts from five to the equivalent of 10 x full time equivalent RABOs, and to provide a £40,000 RABO project fund. The funding uplift will also secure five vehicles (one per local policing area) to be prioritised for rural and business crime.

The RABOs will be tasked to increase public confidence, promote crime prevention, provide advice and guidance, and work with the public and partners to reduce the crimes that most impact rural and business communities.

NPCC framework	Safer West Mercia Plan priorities
Prevention	<p>Building a more secure West Mercia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work closely with partner agencies to reduce harm and prevent victimisation • Work more effectively with partners and local communities to prevent, resolve and reduce crime and disorder • Make sure the Safer Roads Partnership responds to community concerns
Intelligence	<p>Building a more secure West Mercia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactively find the causes of crime so threats are identified and targeted before they escalate
Enforcement	<p>Building a more secure West Mercia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure the police provide the right response to incidents at the right time
Reassurance	<p>Reforming West Mercia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure the force has the right contact channels for the public and that it provides the right response every time • Increasing the number of special constables and police volunteers <p>Reassuring West Mercia’s communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging with the public and acting on their concerns locally • Ensuring the force is visible and accessible both in communities and online • Making sure people get an individual response based on their specific needs • Make sure voices and priorities are heard and acted on from within our rural communities, via the Rural Matters Plan (Rural Affairs and Wildlife Crime Strategy) to ensure their specific needs are addressed • Ensure that the police and partner organisations are active and effective in tackling the issues that are important to our communities • Involve, engage and empower communities

4. My vision for tackling rural crime

This strategy sets out how I intend to work with West Mercia Police, partners and communities to achieve my vision which is reducing crimes that most impact on rural communities.

In support of my vision I am seeking to:

- ▶ Work with West Mercia Police and partners to reduce crime in our rural communities.
- ▶ Improve the confidence our rural communities have in the police by ensuring West Mercia Police is visible and effective in our rural communities;
- ▶ Ensure West Mercia Police delivers its Rural Affairs & Wildlife Crime Strategy and in doing so reduce the harm caused by crime in our rural areas;
- ▶ Ensure the financial resources I have committed to rural crime are used by West Mercia Police to provide a dedicated rural crime team within each local policing area;
- ▶ Ensure the concerns and issues affecting our rural communities are better understood and effectively addressed;
- ▶ Increase awareness of rural crime issues and provide support to empower those communities affected by them so that they can actively be part of the solution;
- ▶ Improve information sharing between communities, partners and West Mercia Police to fully understand the true picture of rural crime and provide a more effective response;
- ▶ I will seek to strengthen links with academia to further enhance our understanding and approach to addressing rural crime;
- ▶ Ensure West Mercia Police and partners protect the people in our rural communities who are most vulnerable to crime;
- ▶ Ensure victims of crime in rural areas receive the support they need to cope and recover and are not disadvantaged by their location or access to services;
- ▶ Collaborate with local, regional and national partners to ensure a borderless approach to effectively tackle rural crime;
- ▶ Use my convening role to influence change at a local, regional and national level;
- ▶ Ensure rural crime remains a key focus and priority area for me.

How I will achieve my vision and aspirations will be through prevention, intelligence, enforcement and reassurance and is outlined in the following sections.

Measures of success

It is important for me to know whether the financial resources I have committed and the aspirations I have set out in this strategy are making a difference in reducing rural crime, improving the quality of life and ensuring an equality of service for all of West Mercia's communities. I will be actively monitoring the following to assess the success of this strategy:

Measure	Source	Outcome
Confidence in the police	National and local surveys	Increased confidence in rural areas
Increased crime reporting	Survey	Increased confidence in rural areas
Police visibility	Surveys	Increased visibility in rural areas
Victim satisfaction	Surveys	Increased satisfaction in rural areas
Police response times	Police data	Improved response times in rural areas
*Theft of farm machinery and plant	Police data	Reduction in volume
*Theft of all-terrain vehicles	Police data	Reduction in volumes
*Criminal damage and arson	Police data	Reduction in volume
*Business and community burglary	Police data	Reduction in volume
*Livestock offences	Police data	Reduction in volumes
*Wildlife crime	Police data	Reduction in volume

*As a commitment within this strategy I will work with the force to develop a suite of measures that better reflect the rural crime and wildlife crime issues affecting our rural communities.

5. Prevention

Taking action after a crime has occurred is important to stop repeat victimisation, however, equally important is to stop crimes from happening in the first place. The NRCN survey results show that one of the main changes in behaviour of victims of crime in rural areas was to take preventative measures to stop it happening again.

I have prioritised some of the additional funds raised through the 2019/20 precept to focus on rural crime. This will enable West Mercia Police (the force) to increase the number of Rural and Business Crime Officers (RABOs) from the five currently in post. The RABOs are tasked to increase public confidence, promote crime prevention, provide advice and guidance, and work with the public and partners to reduce the crimes that most impact rural and business communities. The force also has a cohort of trained wildlife crime officers who are able to deal with wildlife crime offences and provide specialist support for their fellow officers when investigating such crimes.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account for ensuring the additional rural crime resources I have provided are effective in reducing crime.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to ensure all police officers and staff are aware of the rural crime resources available to them and utilising them fully to prevent rural crime.

I will work with the strategic force lead for rural and business crime to develop an effective means of securing feedback from rural communities the RABOs engage with to ensure the work they undertake is providing the support needed.

As well as the additional rural resources I have provided to the force I have also directed funding for an uplift in police officer numbers which will see an additional 215 officers in post by December 2019. This along with the investments I have made in mobile technology such as personal issue mobile phones and laptops will enable our police officers to provide a visible police presence in our rural communities, providing an effective response to calls for help.

There is a whole force approach to problem solving, which expects police officers to work with their local communities to identify local problems and to address them collectively.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to ensure the additional police officer numbers are achieved and that there is an uplift in officers in rural areas.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to ensure that local police officers are actively engaging with their rural communities to understand their issues and are working with them to address the identified issues.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to work more closely with local authorities and the Environment Agency to tackle waste crime.

I will work with the force and partners to protect the people in our rural communities who are most vulnerable to serious and organised crime.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to work collaboratively with local, regional and national partners to ensure a borderless approach to preventing rural crime.

The force works with volunteers and local communities, in its support of community resourced prevention and awareness schemes. This includes:

- Resourcing a neighbourhood watch coordinator post to develop, build and encourage neighbourhood watch and other 'watch' schemes across West Mercia;
- Community Speed Watch - a scheme coordinated by the force but run by volunteers in the community who work in partnership with their local policing team to raise awareness of the dangers of speeding.
- The Community Concern Programme which allows the Safer Roads Partnership to respond to concerns from local residents and community groups about speeding traffic.

I will work with the force, communities and partners to promote the use of volunteer and watch schemes across rural communities.

I provide funding for a range of initiatives that help tackle rural crime and community issues. These include:

- We Don't Buy Crime - an initiative which takes an innovative approach to reducing and disrupting the market for stolen goods and protecting homes, by working with partners to property mark as many households as possible with SmartWater.

- Safer roads funding - the Safer Roads Partnership is in place to educate road users, carry out enforcement activity and to work with partners to engineer out poor road design. I have recently launched two funding streams for safer roads.
- West Mercia Diversionary Network - provision for a targeted early intervention fund to assist partners in reducing youth crime and exploitation.
- Funding to community safety partnerships, organisations and groups to address crime and safety issues and commissions support services for victims of crime.

I am responsible for the commissioning of services to support victims of crime and in April 2019 launched the Victim Advice Line (VAL) which works alongside the force to provide free and confidential advice to anyone affected by crime, be it a victim, witness or family member. I also commission services to support victims of domestic abuse and sexual offences.

I will ensure that the needs of rural communities are considered in any of the commissioned services or funding I provide.

I will use my commissioning intentions to ensure the victim of a crime accessing services funded by me are not disadvantaged by their location.

I will work with the force and partners to identify repeat victims of crime and antisocial behaviour and effectively manage our response to their needs.

6. Intelligence

The NRCN research identified that around one third of all crimes committed are not reported to the police. Additionally both the NPCC and West Mercia Police have identified a potential intelligence gap around rural crime.

The NPCC has identified organised crime as one of the main drivers of rural crime, from the taking of farm machinery through to the emergence of 'County Lines' drugs trafficking into rural communities. West Mercia Police has a structured approach to the identification and mapping of organised crime groups. This includes utilising partner intelligence and working with partner agencies and other forces to disrupt and tackle serious and organised crime.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to make better use of data and intelligence to understand issues relevant to rural communities.

I will work with the force to develop a suite of measures that better reflect the rural crime and wildlife crime issues affecting our rural communities

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to work with partners to identify people and groups that cause the most harm in our rural communities.

I will use my influence through the Crime Reduction Board and other forums to encourage partners and stakeholders to further improve the sharing of intelligence.

I will work with the force and partners to obtain and develop intelligence on hidden harm crimes such as modern day slavery.

The NRCN survey found that around one third of all crimes committed against survey participants were not reported to the police and my own contact with rural communities has indicated this is often the case. However, intelligence from our rural communities is critical to ensuring the most appropriate resources are used to prevent crime and victimisation.

The force moved to a national website platform in summer 2019. This enables members of the public to more easily report crimes in their communities. The force actively participates in national days of action around rural crime which promotes the sharing of information with communities so that local rural crime and wildlife crime issues can be addressed.

I will work with the force, communities, businesses, watch schemes and partners to encourage an increase in the reporting of rural crimes.

I will seek to strengthen links with academia to further enhance our understanding and approach to address rural crime.



7. Enforcement

West Mercia Police is resourced to provide a 24/7, 365 day a year response to crimes and incidents reported to it. The uplift in police officer numbers will see additional officers stationed in rural areas, increasing the level of resources available to tackle rural crime. The force also has a cadre of Special Constables across all of its policing areas who provide an invaluable additional policing resource.

I will hold the constable to account to ensure an effective police response to reports of rural crime and antisocial behaviour.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to ensure the force prioritise and reduce rural crime that causes the most harm in our communities.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to ensure relentless disruption and targeted action against prolific offenders who target rural communities.

The force actively works with other forces and stakeholders to address cross border criminality. Operation Farm Watch and Operation Vulture are examples of this enforcement activity. Operation Vulture was a joint operation involving North Wales, Cheshire and Dyfed Powys Police with West Mercia Police to combat rural crime.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to further develop existing partnerships with neighbouring police forces to combat and deter rural cross-border criminality and the organised crime impacting on our rural communities, bringing more criminals to justice.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to work collaboratively, regionally and nationally to ensure those causing harm in rural communities are brought to justice.

There is clear evidence from the policy research for this strategy that organised criminality has a significant influence on rural crime and is directly impacting on the quality of life of our rural communities. My Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) Strategy sets out in detail my approach to tackling SOC and includes the following commitment around rural resources.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account for ensuring the additional rural crime resources I have provided has an explicit focus on building resilience against SOC in vulnerable rural and business locations. Where relevant this should include advice and guidance in relation to cyber security.

8. Reassurance

The 2018 NRCN survey identifies that perceptions of the police have reduced since its first survey in 2015. Good two way communication and local engagement all have a role to play in providing reassurance and in giving communities confidence in the police to effectively tackle rural crime.

West Mercia Police have been working to make police officers more accessible and easier to contact by publishing all contact numbers and email addresses of local policing teams on its website to provide direct access, providing scheduled appointments for non-emergencies, along with encouraging the use of social media platforms to keep local communities informed of police activity and news alerts. Additionally the force has an active Community Messaging Service which sends news, appeals and crime prevention advice direct to members of the community via email.

Public contact vehicles are used in each local policing area, to enable officers and staff to engage directly in local communities. I have further strengthened this resource by using part of my additional rural crime funding to provide a dedicated vehicle in each local policing area for use by the RABOs in carrying out their work. These liveried vehicles will provide a visible presence in our local rural communities.

Engaging and seeking feedback from people in our rural area is essential if we are to fully understand whether the work being done by the police and partners to address rural crime and wildlife crime issues is effective. From my own annual town and parish survey I know that the interaction between these councils and local policing teams is inconsistent.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to build confidence in policing within rural communities.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to ensure that the force is accessible in rural areas and proactively engaging with its rural communities.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to provide a visible and responsive service that meets the needs of all its rural communities.

I will hold the Chief Constable to account to ensure that my investment in resources to tackle rural crime are effectively utilised.

I am committed to both the force's and my own communications team actively seeking opportunities to promote rural crime and wildlife crime matters.

I will seek views from people living in our rural communities to ensure their voices are heard on policing issues that are important to them through public engagement events such as my summer road shows, attendance at meetings and community events and my public holding to account meetings.

I will use my convening powers as a Police and Crime Commissioner and as a member of the National Rural Crime Network to highlight rural crime and wildlife issues at a local, regional and national level when opportunities arise.

Appendix 1: Policy Background

Unlike other crime types or policing issues there is no specific government strategy for rural crime nor an agreed national definition of what is meant by rural crime. As a consequence to begin to understand the issues surrounding rural crime it useful to firstly identify and establish what it means to be a rural area and then to consider what particular crimes or policing issues could be regarded as rural.

Defining 'rural'

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) uses a 2011 Rural-Urban Classification¹ (RUC2011) to distinguish rural and urban areas at different geographic levels. The most detailed classification is based on census output areas² and defines areas as urban if they have a resident population of 10,000 or more and rural as those with a population below 10,000. Based on output areas and settlement type³ this Rural-Urban Classification of Output Areas (Figure 1) consists of six rural and four urban settlement/context combinations. This is the classification of rural used by West Mercia Police.

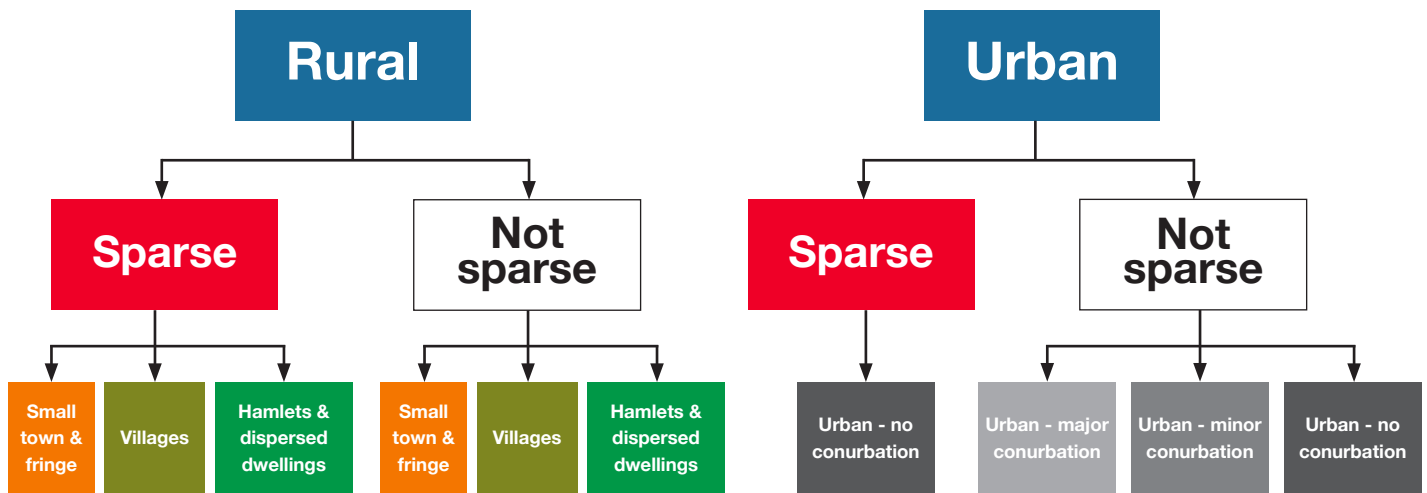


Figure 1 : Rural-Urban Classification 2011 User Guide (small area geographies)

Using this ONS classification as at the 2011 census 17.6% of people in England live in a rural area, compared to 35% in West Mercia. The percentage of West Mercia's population living in a rural areas in each local policing area is shown in table 1 below:

Local Policing Area	Rural population as a % of the total population
Herefordshire	54%
North Worcestershire	16%
Shropshire	57%
South Worcestershire	37%
Telford and Wrekin	6%

Table 1: Rural Population Based on the 2011 Rural – Urban Classification and 2011 Census Data

Where data are not available at OA level they are usually aggregated to bigger geographic area based on local authority districts (LADs). This classification considers some urban areas as hub towns. Hub towns have populations of between 10,000 and 30,000, serve a rural hinterland and are classified as rural. Using this classification Herefordshire, Shropshire, Malvern Hills and Wychavon are classed as largely or mainly rural and Wyre Forest is urban with significant rural.

Defining 'rural crime'

Currently there is no agreed national definition of rural crime. In 2013 ACPO (now the National Police Chiefs' Council) proposed a definition of rural crime as being: any crime or anti-social behaviour that takes place in a rural location or is identified as such by the victim. This definition was adopted for use by a number of police forces including West Mercia and is still used by West Mercia Police today.

It should be noted that the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) more recent Rural Affairs Strategy 2018-2021⁴ does not make any attempt to define rural crime. The Staff Officer for the NPCC lead has indicated that no definition of rural crime was included as it was found to be too wide-ranging to be agreed across different forces. It is now left to individual forces to define rural crime as they see fit.

Accepting that rural crime can be applied to mean any type of crime that occurs in a rural area, there are certain crimes which could be regarded as being more specific to rural areas such as crimes involving farm equipment, livestock and wildlife crime. Some force have adopted definitions which attempts to incorporate these more rural centric crimes. Examples include:

Lancashire Police - offences that relate to farms and agriculture, wildlife and the environment, tourism and heritage sites. It also includes damage, theft and violence against the rural community⁵.

North Yorkshire Police– states that rural crime is any type of crime occurring in a rural area but also identifies particular crime types as having a specific impact on rural areas, including farm equipment and livestock, wildlife crime, crimes against small rural business, heritage crime, tourism crime, serious and organised crime and road safety offences.⁶

Approaches used by other forces include:

Essex Police - any crime committed in a rural location, or where the victim is specifically targeted because of their connection to, or involvement in, the rural community, economy, or area⁷.

Suffolk Police does not specifically define rural crime, but states the impact of crime can be higher in rural communities and people may feel particularly vulnerable because of their isolation⁸.

Summary

In summary it can be seen that there is no right or wrong way to define rural crime. What does appear to be most helpful when attempting a definition, is to provide an indication of those rural centric crimes which can have more of an impact in rural communities than in non-rural communities.

Impact of Rural Crime

Whilst it is acknowledged that any type of crime could occur in rural areas, to provide an assessment of the impact of rural crime this chapter predominantly concentrates on data and research with a rural focus.

Information has been drawn from the following sources:

- police recorded crime figures;
- data from public perception surveys; and
- published information on more rural specific crimes and issues.

National crime statistics

At a national level, only a small number of published crime figures specifically identify any rural crime trends. In the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs monthly Statistical Digest of Rural England⁹ a very short crime section provides the following summary:

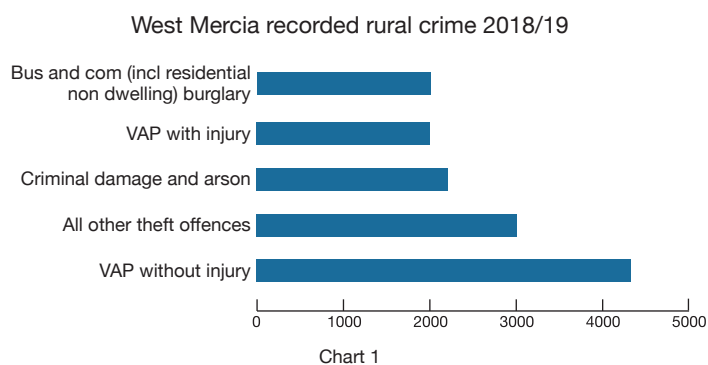
- Average crime rates are lower in rural areas than urban areas.
- In 2016/17, the rate of violence against the person was 14.1 per 1,000 population in predominantly rural areas compared with 22.2 per 1,000 population in predominantly urban areas.
- The rate of sexual offences in predominantly rural areas was 1.7 per 1,000 population in 2016/17, compared with 2.2 per 1,000 population in predominantly urban areas.
- The rate of recorded crime was also lower in rural areas than urban areas for crimes such as robbery, domestic burglary and vehicle offences (theft of, theft from or vehicle interference). For example, there were 3.9 vehicle offences per 1,000 population in predominantly rural areas and 8.5 per 1,000 population in predominantly urban areas in 2016/17.

At force level, West Mercia Police does not produce data that are directly comparable to the national statistics shown above. On a quarterly basis however, the force does publish some statistics based on crimes per 1,000 population for certain crime groups at both force and local policing level. This data does show that the more rural the local policing area the lower the crime rate per 1000 population.¹⁰

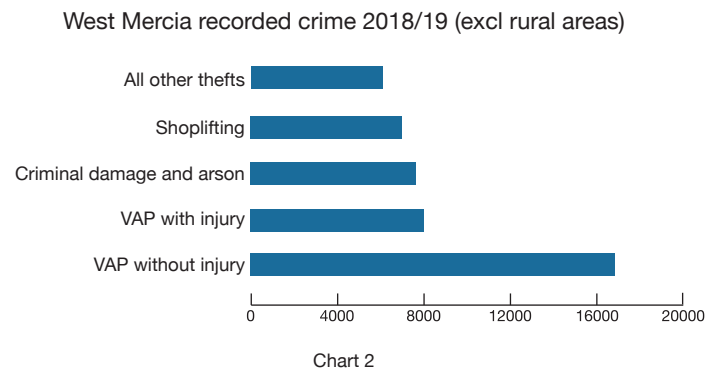
Force crime statistics

West Mercia Police is one of a number of forces that has defined rural crime as any crime occurring in a rural area as defined by the 2011 ONS Rural Urban Classification. Using this definition 23% of all recorded within West Mercia during 2018/19 occurred within a rural area. This percentage has increased slightly from 22% in 2017/18.

Looking more closely at the types of crime occurring in rural areas shows that in 2018/19 the most prevalent crime was violence against the person without injury, the same as in 2017/18. Chart 1 below shows the highest volume police recorded rural crimes in West Mercia.



When comparing police recorded rural crime to the remainder of West Mercia, the types of crime occurring are very similar. Chart 2 shows the breakdown of recorded crime in West Mercia as a whole for 2018/19 excluding the rural areas. Shoplifting is more prevalent in these areas and a high volume crime, whereas over the same time period there were only 635 shoplifting offences recorded in rural West Mercia. A similar pattern of crime occurred in 2017/18.



What is apparent from a review of recorded crime figures is that data on very rural specific crimes are not readily available. Police forces record all incidents of crime in line with the National Crime Recording Standards and the Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR). The application of these rules means that other than for some specific classes of wildlife crime, the only way to identify if a rural centric crime, such as the theft of a tractor had taken place would be to undertake a search of each individual crime recorded as 'Theft of Motor Vehicle' and check the description of the vehicle to see if it was a tractor.

Public perceptions

The National Rural Crime Network (NRCN) was established in 2014 and is supported by 30 PCCs and police forces across England and Wales, including West Mercia's PCC. The NRCN is working to see greater recognition and understanding of the problems and impact of crime in rural areas. Since its inception the NRCN has commissioned two surveys specifically targeting rural residents and businesses, the first in 2015 and a second in 2018. Both surveys have received over 20,000 responses and seek to identify the true personal, social and economic cost of rural crime and anti-social behaviour.

The NRCN survey splits the results into 'rural dwellers', 'rural visitors', 'other rural business owners' and 'specific rural business owners'. In the 2018 survey the top five crimes for each group are shown in table 2.

For each respondent group there is some variance in the crime types which reflects the nature of the respondent. The more rural centric crimes emerge most with the specific rural business owner group, who are mostly farmers. There is also a noticeable similarity to the West Mercia police recorded crime, with theft, criminal damage and burglary featuring strongly, however it should be noted that the survey did not use police crime categories for descriptors.

Respondent / Rank	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th
Rural Dwellers	Criminal damage / vandalism / Arson	Harassment	Theft from outbuilding	Attempted break in /theft	Burglary
Rural visitors	Criminal damage / vandalism / Arson	Vehicle related theft	Other type of theft	Violent crime	Theft of possession from person
Other rural business owners	Criminal damage / vandalism / Arson	Fly tipping	Burglary	Harassment	Theft from outbuildings
Specific rural business owners	Fly tipping	Wildlife crime or hare coursing on your land	Theft of agricultural machinery or equipment	Criminal damage / vandalism / Arson	Theft from an outbuilding

Table 2 : Top 5 crimes experienced by survey respondents by category

Around one third of all crimes committed against survey respondents were not reported to the police. Figures for non-reporting had increased by a third for 'Rural Dwellers' and two thirds for businesses when comparing the 2018 results to those from the 2015 survey. The main reason given for this across all respondents was that it was a waste of time/no point (31%) followed by the police couldn't have done anything (21%).

The survey identifies that perceptions of the police have reduced since the first survey in 2015. Perceptions of police are lowest amongst other business owners, with only 21% of this group perceiving their local police to do be doing a good or excellent job, the response from every group was less than 30%. Overall perceptions of police based on area showed that in sparse areas the perception was better than in less sparse, possibly due to the impact of crime not being so great in these areas. Perceptions were worst in rural towns with 38% of respondents feeling the police do a poor or very poor job.

As well as seeking to establish the types of crime that individuals and businesses in rural areas have experienced the NRCN survey also sought to better understand the impact this has had, including any emotional or financial impact. Overall across all four respondent types the most significant impacts were: Inconvenience (47%); Loss of trust in other people/the public (37%); Financial loss (including loss of earnings) (35%); Took additional security precautions (33%); and Effect on personal confidence (17%). Significantly the survey found that one in ten rural people feel unsafe in their homes after dark.

The NRCN survey also looked more broadly at rural crime and disorder, recognising that not all residents and businesses will have been a victim of crime. When asked what 'crimes against society' people had witnessed or seen evidence of in rural areas in the previous 12 months, Fly tipping (57%) and Speeding (32%) were the two highest ranked. Although not directly comparable, the response to a similar question in the PCC's 2018 Town and Parish Council Survey indicated that road safety and rural crime were perceived to be a big problem, with a number of additional comments made about fly tipping.

Amongst the NRCN respondents fear of crime was most strongly evident amongst rural specific business. 69% of these respondents had been a victim of crime in the previous 12 months and 60% were very worried or fairly worried about becoming a victim of crime in the future. Across demographic groups the fear of crime was highest amongst lower socio economic groups, younger people and women as well as those living in rural towns and hamlets and isolated dwelling. The survey found that on balance people feel more worried and less safe than they did five years previously.

Rural specific crime and issues

To focus this section on more rural centric issues, priorities identified in the NPCC Rural Affairs Strategy 2018-2021, the NPCC Wildlife Crime Policing Strategy 2018-2021 and the West Mercia Police Rural Matters Tactical Plan have been used to identify the issues included. It should be noted that none of the issues highlighted only occur in rural areas.

Organised crime

Organised criminality is increasingly being recognised as having an adverse impact on rural communities and wildlife. The National Police Chiefs' Council Rural Affairs Strategy¹¹ considers that rural communities are perceived to be soft targets for organised criminals who target and exploit rural communities across a range of crime types. This was reflected by respondents to the 2018 NRCN Rural Crime Survey, many of whom felt that perpetrators of crime were not acting alone and there was a perception that they had been specifically targeted. The feeling of being targeted increased the more remote the victim was in terms of geographical location¹². Where relevant the impact of organised crime is referenced in more detailed under each heading.

Organised serious acquisitive crime

This crime type encompasses a range of criminal activity undertaken by organised criminals whose offending behaviour can be distinguished by repeated use of cross-border mobility¹³. The theft of ATM machines is one such crime and a recent report by Cardtronics¹⁴ states that the total number of attacks on ATM machines in rural areas has increased by 21.5% per year on average since 2013 and that 42% of the overall percentage of ATM attacks in 2018 were in rural areas, compared to 31% in 2013. If this trend continues, half of all ATM attacks will be committed in rural areas by 2020.

As well as the potential risk to the public caused by the often violent method of ATM attacks, there is a wider economic and community impact. The National Crime Agency states that organised theft poses a threat to the safety, wellbeing and the economic prosperity of communities¹⁵. When an ATM attack occurs these machines are out of operation for a considerable period of time. If a service becomes economically unviable due to attack, it could be removed. There are also wider consequences in terms of perceptions of safety, confidence and security for the local community. Within West Mercia ATM attacks have taken place in a number of rural communities including Bromyard (2017), Market Drayton (2018) and Bewdley (2018).

Agricultural machinery, plant and vehicle theft

NFU Mutual is the largest insurer of farming in the UK, providing insurance for three quarters of the UK's farmer and a large number of rural businesses. Each year the company publishes an annual rural crime report based on its own claims data. The latest published in 2019¹⁶ reports that the insurance claim cost to the UK economy in 2018 was estimated to be £49.9m. This included £7.4m as a result of agricultural machinery theft and £2.6m on quad bikes and all-terrain vehicles. Highlighted within the report are the 30 highest claim areas by county, these include, Herefordshire (£1.05m), Shropshire (£1.23m) and Worcestershire (£1m). NFU Mutual's 2018¹⁷ report recognises the role played by organised criminals stating "It's big business for the organised gangs who are taking expensive machinery and either cloning it for sale here, or shipping it across the world".

Wildlife crime (including poaching)

In general, wildlife crime is any action which contravenes current legislation governing the protection of the UK's wild animals and plants. Examples include hare coursing, fish and deer poaching and the persecution of bats, badgers and birds of prey. On a global scale the trafficking of wildlife is increasingly recognised as a significant threat to many plant and animal species and an area of specialist organised crime with an estimated worldwide value of up to £17b per year¹⁸. The National Crime Agency regards wildlife crime as a form of organised commodity related theft, offering the greatest profit for the lowest risk. Examples of reported wildlife crime in West Mercia includes the arrest of three men following the shooting of 18 deer on the edge of the Wyre Forest (2018) and the destruction of a bat roost in Worcestershire (2018).

Livestock crime

Livestock crime includes both livestock theft and livestock worrying and attacks. The NFU Mutual Rural Crime Report 2019¹⁹ estimates the cost of livestock theft within the UK to have been £2.5m in 2018 and in its 2018 report estimated the cost of dog attacks on livestock to have been £1.2m. Across West Mercia there were 114 recorded thefts of sheep between January 2014 and October 2018 involving over 2000 sheep.

Environmental crime

Fly-tipping is the illegal disposal of household, industrial, commercial or other 'controlled' waste without a waste management licence and can occur in any area whether rural or urban. Local Authorities are responsible for the enforcement of small scale fly tipping and the Environment Agency for larger scale incidents; the police would not ordinarily become involved in straightforward reports of fly tipping unless there was a specific operational need. In 2016/17 local authorities in England dealt with over one million fly tipping incidents, including over 11,000 across West Mercia with an estimated clean-up cost of £57.7m.

An independent review into serious and organised crime in the waste sector suggests a move by organised criminality into waste crime through two broad models of operation, charging for disposal and then illegally dumping or using a waste business as a 'front' for other criminal operations²⁰. The report highlights that in 2015 illegal waste activity was estimated to have cost over £600 million in England alone.

Fuel theft

The NPCC Rural Affairs Strategy includes the theft of heating oil, diesel and petrol within its Fuel theft priority. Around 1.6m households in the UK rely on heating oil, including an estimated 34% of households in rural areas. Independent research commissioned by oil suppliers, Boilerjuice²¹, into thefts of heating oil in the UK between 2011 and 2016 showed a 51% increase over the time period with more than £4m of oil stolen in 2016 alone. It is believed that increases in the price of oil, the isolated nature of many of the homes, plus the location of oil tanks has made heating oil an easy target for thieves. Reports of heating oil theft alerts are a common sight on West Mercia's Community Messaging Service across many policing areas, often affecting rural properties and the Boilerjuice research identifies the HR9 postcode in Herefordshire as having the highest frequency of heating oil thefts between 2014 and 2017.

Heritage crime

Historic England commissioned research into the scale of heritage crime in England in 2012²². The research found that historic places are not being targeted over other places, except for their valuable materials and artefacts. Of more concern is the irreplaceable impact on the country's heritage. The research indicated that 18.7% of all listed buildings had been affected by crime in the previous year and that the biggest single threat was metal theft and the most threatened type of building was a church.

The NPCC's Heritage and Cultural Property Crime National Strategic Assessment 2017²³ states the harm caused to a heritage asset by crime or anti-social behaviour will often have both direct and indirect impact. For example the loss of historic fabric from a listed building through vandalism or theft will not only have a direct impact by damaging the fabric of the heritage asset itself but may also have an indirect impact such as social or economic loss to the amenity of an area.

Road safety

More deaths occur on rural roads than on urban ones, with three people on average dying on rural roads every day²⁴. A rural roads factsheet published by ROSPA in 2018²⁵ shows that in 2016, there were 1,015 fatal accidents on rural roads compared to 593 on urban roads. Motorcyclists are identified as a particular at risk group with 211 motorcyclist fatalities occurred on rural roads, compared to 101 deaths in urban areas in 2016. West Mercia's road fatalities follow a similar pattern to the national picture. The fatal road deaths for 2018/19 are shown in Table 3.

Policing area	Pedestrian	Pedal cycle	Motor cycle	Car	Goods vehicle	Vehicle passenger	Mobility scooter	Urban	Rural
South Worcs	1	1	1	5	1	0	0	4	5
North Worcs	2	0	2	4	0	2	0	5	5
Herefordshire	2	2	3	1	0	1	1	2	8
Shropshire	2	1	4	9	1	1	0	3	15
Telford	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	4	1
TOTAL	9	5	10	20	2	5	1	18	34

Table 3 : West Mercia road deaths 2018/19

One activity more applicable in rural areas than urban is horse riding. Accurate statistics for road accidents involving horses are not available, but the British Horse Society estimates that there are 3,000 such accidents each year, about half of which occur on minor roads. The nature of rural roads, often narrow with limited pavements, tight bends and high speeds are factors which are seen to contribute to rural road safety issues. Road Safety is a strategic priority of West Mercia Police recognising the impact on communities and the opportunities it presents to travelling criminality.

Equine crime has also been identified as a policing priority by the NPCC.

Summary

The crime data reviewed shows that the types of crime affecting rural areas are in line with those of non-rural areas, and that rates of crime in rural areas are lower than in non-rural areas. Of particular note is that organised criminality is a significant driver for rural crime.

The public perception information identifies a number of issues influencing and impacting on rural communities. These are: rural isolation, feelings of safety / confidence, a reluctance to report crime and poor perceptions of the police. Some of the most common community concerns identified such as fly tipping and road safety are not solely a police responsibility and require a partnership approach.

Prioritisation of rural crime

The drivers for crime occurring in rural areas are the same as in urban areas. Issues such as serious and organised crime, modern day slavery, violent crime, drugs and domestic abuse impact across all communities and this is reflected in national strategy which does not include or exclude any community because of location.

Although there is no national government strategy or approach specifically addressing rural crime, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) has recently agreed a strategic policing direction for all UK forces in relation to rural affairs and wildlife crime. This is set out in two key documents:

- ▶ National Police Chiefs' Council Rural Affairs Strategy 2018 – 2021

- ▶ National Police Chief's Council Wildlife Crime Policing Strategy 2018 – 2021.

At force level, in 2014 Warwickshire Police and West Mercia Police published a joint Rural Crime Strategy 2014-2016. Although this document has not been refreshed or updated since 2016, the Rural Matters Tactical Plan developed to provide the tactical approach to activity in support of the strategy has been periodically refreshed. Most recently it has been aligned to the NPCC priorities and renamed the West Mercia Rural Affairs and Wildlife Crime Strategy. This tactical plan outlines on a page the approach to be taken by the force to rural crime.

The NPCC priorities and the West Mercia operational aims are shown in Table 4.

NPCC Rural Affairs/wildlife crime priorities / West Mercia Rural Affairs and Wildlife Crime Aims
Farm machinery, plant and vehicle theft (RA)
Livestock offences (RA)
Fuel theft (RA)
Equine crime (RA)
Fly tipping (RA)
Poaching (RA) (W)
Badger persecution (W)
Bats persecution
CITES
Fresh water pearl mussels
Raptor persecution

Table 4 : NPCC Priorities / West Mercia Police Aims

Police and Crime Plan

The Police and Crime Commissioner's Safer West Mercia Plan 2016 – 2021 sets out the PCC's strategic vision for West Mercia. The plan includes four priority areas, one of which [Reassuring West Mercia's communities](#), contains a specific commitment to hold the Chief Constable to account for making sure voices and priorities are heard and acted on from within our rural communities, via the Rural Affairs and Wildlife Crime Strategy to ensure their specific needs are addressed. The PCC has provided funding to the force for the creation of five civilian Rural and Business Officer posts and has committed to use a proportion of additional funding from the 2019/20 precept rise to address rural crime.

Other PCCs/forces

A number of PCCs and police forces have developed dedicated rural crime strategies, most have been published as a joint document between the PCC and the force. All of the strategy documents provided an indication of the main challenges or priorities faced locally. In the main these are the rural specific issues reviewed earlier in this report, such as vulnerability, rural isolation and a dependency on partnership working for success. The NPCC's approach to priority delivery is structured around prevention, intelligence, enforcement and reassurance and this approach was adopted by all the rural crime strategies looked at.

Tactical approach to rural crime

National

To support the UK policing of wildlife crime a National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) was established in 2006 as a standalone police led unit. The unit's main role is to assist in the prevention and detection of wildlife crime through intelligence gathering and analysis of information from a wide range of organisations and by assisting police forces in wildlife crime investigations. The Unit's own strategy is currently being revised, however the NPCC's Wildlife Crime Policing Strategy is aligned to the NWCU's published priorities. The unit produces an annual Threat Assessment and a Strategic Assessment, the latter being updated on a less regular basis.

There is no national unit dedicated to rural crime/affairs, however. The Deputy Chief Constable for Cheshire is the current NPCC lead for rural affairs and wildlife crime and the NPCC sets the strategic direction for all forces. Unlike wildlife crime there is no national strategic assessment for rural affairs. The NPCC's rural affairs strategy does include an aspiration to develop a national rural crime strategic threat assessment which will allow for a better understanding of the challenges rural policing faces, however it is understood that at the present time limited financial resources mean that there is no capacity to progress this.

Regional

Within West Mercia Police a local policing Superintendent holds the strategic and tactical lead for rural affairs. The Superintendent is the current Chair of a regional rural affairs and wildlife group which brings together representatives from the four forces and key stakeholders seeking to progress delivery of the two NPCC related strategies. The NWCU attend this meeting.

Local

At force level the strategic lead for rural crime seeks to ensure delivery of the police contribution towards the Rural Matters objectives (priorities) and the PCC's Safer West Mercia Plan. Unlike some forces such as North Wales Police, West Mercia Police does not have a dedicated rural crime unit or taskforce, instead the policing of rural areas forms part of business as usual across the whole organisation.

The force does have a thirty strong cohort of wildlife crime officers (WCOs). WCOs are specially trained police officers who have a personal interest in wildlife and wildlife crime. These officers undertake WCO duties in addition to their substantive role. In addition, there are five Rural and Business Officers (RABOs), one for each local policing area. The RABOs aim to raise confidence in rural and business communities; work with communities and partners to reduce threat, harm and risk; promote crime prevention; and provide information and advice.

The force does not include rural crime within its Strategic Assessment or Control Strategy however a number of the issues identified earlier in this report are included, for example, SOC and serious acquisitive crime. The force has a structured approach to the identification and mapping of organised crime groups, some of whom operate and impact on rural communities, however it is acknowledged that there may be an intelligence gap locally as some of the rural specific crimes are committed by national teams that travel so may not have a local footprint.

Summary

The government does not have a strategic approach for addressing rural crime and the NPCC only recently published for the first time a rural affairs strategy, however a number of the more rural police force areas have published rural crime strategies. Dedicated policing resources for tackling rural crime are limited and there appears to be an intelligence gap from the national level through to the local.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations for the PCC have been made based on the research into the impact of rural crime and rural crime policy. These recommendations should be used to inform any future PCC strategy to tackle rural crime.

Recommendation 1: The PCC should consider providing a clearly defined definition of rural crime that focuses on rural specific issues.

Recommendation 2: The PCC should ensure that rural communities are considered and their needs addressed when any strategy is being developed.

Recommendation 3: If the PCC chooses to develop a rural crime strategy it should seek to address the community issues identified, including those which are not solely a policing responsibility.

Recommendation 4: The PCC should use his role and influence to ensure partner agencies and stakeholders are working together to address rural issues.

Recommendation 5: When opportunities arise the PCC should use his position to highlight rural issues with national policy makers.

Recommendation 6: The PCC should seek to ensure the intelligence gap around crime in rural areas is addressed.

Recommendation 7: If the PCC chooses to develop a rural crime strategy it should be structured in line with the NPCC approach of prevention, intelligence, enforcement and reassurance.

Appendix 2 : References

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