NICRE
National Innovation Centre
Rural Enterprise

NICRE Submission to the Rural Taskforce on Government Mission Delivery: *Safer Streets*

Over summer 2025, NICRE were invited to contribute to a national Taskforce led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) considering Government Mission Delivery in a rural context.

The aim was to provide focus on the needs of rural areas in the development of policy under the five missions outlined in the UK Government Plan for Change (growth, clean energy, opportunity, crime and health). As part of our contribution, NICRE worked with partners to provide written evidence to the Taskforce relating to each mission.

This is our submission on the Safer Streets to Opportunity mission.

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What are the current challenges that rural communities and businesses face in relation to this mission?

Recorded **crime rates are significantly lower in rural areas** – for the year ending March 2024 police recorded 59 crimes per 1,000 population (excluding fraud) in rural areas compared against 99 crimes per 1,000 population in urban areas outside of London, and 140.6 crimes per 1000 people in Inner London.[1] Lower crime rates are one of the reasons which make rural places attractive to live and work, stimulating counterurbanisation.[2] However, **lower average rates may mask crime hotspots and rural areas are not immune from national trends** (such as increases in shoplifting).[3] Moreover, some rural businesses, such as **farms which have highly valuable assets**

[1] House of Commons Library (2025), *Rural Crime*, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2025-0032/CDP-2025-0032.pdf

[2] Halfacree, K. H. (1994) The importance of 'the rural' in the constitution of counterurbanization: Evidence from England in the 1980s, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 34 (2-3), pp. 164-189.

[3] BBC (2025) Rural shops being targeted by 'brazen' shoplifters, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg2wky9p57o

that are difficult to continuously monitor, may be particularly vulnerable to criminal activity.[4]

Tackling rural crime is especially important to maximising the full potential of rural economies across the government missions. Taking the growth mission as an example, **local criminal activity reshapes entrepreneurial opportunities**, as crime constitutes a cost of doing business.[5] Crime incurs direct costs (e.g., stolen goods) and indirect costs (e.g., fewer customers due to the fear of crime).[6] Higher costs of doing business due to crime **significantly hinder business growth[7] and productivity**[8]. Furthermore, crime induces uncertainty, diminishing the perceived value of opportunities.[9] The effects of unfair competition may also be significant where criminal enterprises (e.g., smuggling, counterfeit products) provide unregulated competition.[10] Crime also **discourages business start-ups**[11], undermines key elements of social capital – trust and social networks,[12] and also **impacts investment** by diminishing returns and increasing uncertainty.[13] Businesses face higher costs as they need to invest more in security measures and insurance. Moreover, crime can lead to crises that require immediate managerial attention, shifting a leadership team's focus from broader operational objectives.

Most **police forces across England and Wales contain at least some rural space within their borders**. Rural communities and businesses recognise the pressure police forces are under to deliver their services across sometimes large areas of rural territory. However, a key challenge that is constantly experienced by rural communities and businesses who have been a victim of crime relates to **service availability and accessibility, across the whole spectrum of services and support** including police response, victim support, physical and mental health support, as well as financial

[4] House of Commons Library (2025) Rural Crime, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2025-0032/CDP-2025-0032.pdf

[5] Matti, J. and Ross, A. (2016) Does crime affect entrepreneurship? A discussion of the current literature, *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Public Policy*, 5 (3), pp. 254-272.

[6] Kuratko, D. F., Hornsby, J. S., Naffziger, D. W. and Hodgetts, R. M. (2000) Crime and small business: An exploratory study of cost and prevention issues in US firms, *Journal of Small Business Management*, 38 (3), pp.1-13

[7] Barbieri, N. and Rizzo, U. (2023) The impact of crime on firm entry, *Journal of Regional Science*, 63 (2), pp. 446-469.

[8] Motta, V. (2017) The impact of crime on the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises: Evidence from the service and hospitality sectors in Latin America, *Tourism Economics*, 23 (5), pp. 993-1010.

[9] Lacoe, J., Bostic, R. W. and Acolin, A. (2018) Crime and private investment in urban neighborhood, *Journal of Urban Economics*, 108, pp. 154-169.

[10] Butticè, V., Caviggioli, F., Franzoni, C., Scellato, G., Stryszowski, P. and Thumm, N. (2020) Counterfeiting in digital technologies: An empirical analysis of the economic performance and innovative activities of affected companies, *Research Policy*, 49 (5), p. 103959.

[11] Rosenthal, S. S. and Ross, A. (2010) Violent crime, entrepreneurship, and cities, *Journal of Urban Economics*, 67 (1), pp. 135-149.

[12] Awaworyi Churchill, S., Hayward, M., Smyth, R. and Trinh, T.-A. (2023) Crime, community social capital and entrepreneurship: Evidence from Australian communities, *Journal of Business Venturing*, 38 (2), p. 106291.

[13] Forgione, A. F. and Migliardo, C. (2025) The Mafia's Economic Grip: Firm Efficiency and a Composite Indicator of Organized Crime, *Journal of Regional Science*, 65 (3), pp. 759-779.

services. Generally, response times of the police to reported crimes are longer in rural areas.[14]

Sub-optimum responses from the police or wider criminal justice system to reports of crime in rural areas lead to **rural communities often feeling less likely to report future crimes** unless they are required to do so for insurance purposes[15]. This situation is instigated and intensified by the geographic and social isolation that rural communities and businesses operate within. Rural areas are often hard to navigate if particularly remote or isolated. Despite pockets of good practice in rural policing, in many cases **police officers that are not dedicated rural officers may be unprepared** for the location and without the correct equipment needed to investigate these specific crimes.

The centralisation of police resources has meant that local resources and **connections between rural communities and police have been eroded**, and despite the best efforts of some forces to reinstate rural crime teams, they are still often based in an urban location leading to increased travel times, irregular patrols, and less time within the communities they protect. In turn, low levels of confidence in the police in some places, leads to reduced reporting, fewer information opportunities, and an incomplete picture of the reality of rural crime.

Specifically, **the impact of crime on the mental health and wellbeing of farmers**, and it is suspected other rural crime victims, is only just being understood, with suicidal ideation being directly attributed to victimisation[16],[17]. This links directly to the issue of wider service and support availability, and the ability for rural victims to be able to access the same support post-victimisation as those in towns and cities where services are more widely available.

Some crimes are less associated with the countryside. Offences such as Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), fraud, hate crime, modern slavery and human trafficking are often more hidden within rural communities[18]. There can be a skewed perception among police strategists that such crimes do not exist in rural areas, and resources focused within towns and cities, when these hidden crimes can sometimes be more pervasive and long-lived in rural communities and businesses for fear of speaking out.

Anti-social behaviour and criminal offences in rural areas are rarely addressed in a timely fashion due to threat, harm, risk allocation processes undertaken by the police. The use of the THRIVE process at call handling centres and beyond often ends up downgrading the seriousness of crimes because of a lack of understanding of the impact of the offence. For example, when considering Vulnerability, one of the questions that should be asked is whether the victim can distance themselves from the risk. This

[14] House of Commons Library (2025), Rural Crime, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2025-0032/CDP-2025-0032.pdf

[15] Smith, K. (2019) The Emergence of Ungoverned Space in the British Countryside. *International Journal of Rural Law and Policy*, 9 (2), e6555. http://doi.org/10.5130/ijrlp.2.2019.6555

[16] Smith, K. (2020) Desolation in the Countryside: How agricultural crime impacts the mental health of British farmers. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 80: 522-531. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.10.037

[17] Smith, K. (2022) Piling on the Pressure: Crime and Stress in British Farming. *International Journal of Rural Criminology*. 6(2): 197-222. http://doi.org/10.18061/ijrc.v6i2.8754

[18] Smith, K. and Byrne, R. (2024) The darker side of rural masculinity: second and third order impacts of low help-seeking behaviour following the trauma of victimisation. *International Journal of Rural Criminology Special Issue* 8(1), pp. 642-670. https://doi.org/10.18061/ijrc.v8i4.9971

can be less likely in the case of a rural business, particularly a farm, or a remote rural dwelling, when the ability to separate home and business premises is not possible, or the ability to leave the home is restricted as the offender is in the only route out. Downgrading the seriousness of crimes is a CJS-wide issue, illustrated repeatedly with reports of sentences of offenders who have committed crimes in rural areas[19].

While the **rise in organised criminal group activity** is well known[20],[21], this extends far beyond traditional acquisitive crime – theft of tractors, quad bikes, GPS units – and extends to much wider offences including hare coursing, modern slavery and human trafficking, wildlife crime and fraud. These gangs are often urban based, targeting rural areas. Offences against the person and financial crimes must not be excluded from the rural crime remit. Without good data however, it is hard for Regional Organised Crime Units to recognise rural crime as Organised in any way, despite the increasing academic evidence to support this conclusion.

What can rural communities and businesses offer to support the delivery of this mission?

There is a clear **need for rural communities/businesses to work with the police** to highlight the key issues experienced at the local level, recognising that no two rural communities are the same **Highlighting the true scale and impact of crime in rural areas** would improve confidence and allow police officers, PCSOs, and Specials to be better prepared and equipped to deal with these types of crimes and enable an equitable minimum standard of service when crimes do happen.

Closer collaboration between rural communities/businesses and the police will also enable the **sharing of information** relating to possible suspicious activities or offences that is currently predominantly retained within community WhatsApp group chats. This information is critical to strengthened intelligence around possible organised criminal groups targeting rural locations, as well as other offending, and can support more effective targeting of resources to tackle these offences. Indeed, community-led policing will be welcomed by many rural communities and businesses as it will enable the quick sharing of information with the rural crime teams/local neighbourhood policing team that reflects the issues in the local rural area.

Two-way communication between rural communities/businesses and the police, as well as opportunity to feedback and feedforward, is essential to building confidence and

[19] Watling, T. (2024) Man found guilty of stealing sheep and killing them in garage. The Independent, 26th October 2024. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/steal-sheep-garage-theft-rustling-b2636202.html [Accessed 29/05/2025]

[20] Tudor, K. (2024) Rural Crime: Serious, Organised and International. Who Victimises Rural Communities? Available at: https://nationalruralcrimenetwork.net/rural-crime-report-2024/#:~:text=The%20research%20offers%20an%20unprecedented,criminal%20activity%20targeting%20rural%20areas

[21] Smith, K. (2024) The Intersection of Rural Criminology and Food Security: The Impact of Organised Criminal Groups in the Rural Space. In G. Mesko, S.K. Ivkovic, R. Hacin (Eds.) The UN Sustainable Development Goals and Provision of Security, Responses to Crime and Security Threats, and Fair Criminal Justice Systems. University of Maribor Press: Ljubljana, pp. 185-208. Available at: https://press.um.si/index.php/ump/catalog/book/894

understanding, and keeping rural communities and businesses bought in to this approach. This would enable that forward-looking approach to be explored through better understanding of the impacts of rural crime among the police, CPS, courts, and other criminal justice services. It would also allow change to be driven more from communities themselves, based on their own suggestions on how to improve community confidence at the local level.

Rural communities have a range of regular local community meetings that could host local rural crime teams, whether that be parish council meetings, or more general meetings. **Rural communities and businesses could be more involved in the training of police officers**, PCSOs, and Specials around the specific nature of rural crimes, for example in relation to the experience of farms and equine businesses where animals and equipment are vulnerable to theft.

How can government ensure that the missions work for and reflect the needs and opportunities inherent to rural communities and businesses?

The Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee (NPG) needs to enable full-time, dedicated teams for rural areas, and this should establish or extend rural crime teams in all force areas. These rural crime teams need to be better staffed, with many rural communities reliant on one or a couple of officers for policing large geographical areas. Added to this is the need to allow rural crime teams to use WhatsApp (or alternative instant messaging system) as a de facto Neighbourhood Watch messaging system.

Neighbourhood policing within a rural setting needs to be a part of the government's intention to create a new neighbourhood policing career pathway. Police Constables working through their Degree Apprenticeship should be exposed to issues of rural policing and a rural career pathway option. If a new career pathway is intended, then there needs to be a balance between neighbourhood policing in urban areas, and the equivalent in rural areas. Linked to this is a need to avoid the Safer town centre priority in the mission simply displacing crime and ASB to rural areas through higher levels of policing and police presence in towns and cities which is not replicated within rural areas.

The government needs to consider **a more joined up approach to the reporting and recording of rural crime**. Police forces use a range of record management systems including Athena, NEC Connect, and Niche RMS. While these systems can be connected, this can sometimes depend upon how the connectivity is configured. This presents issues in information sharing across forces given that organised rural criminals often cross police force boundaries to commit their crimes. Furthermore, there needs to be a way of configuring all systems to enable the flagging of rural crime on the system so that this information can be accessed much easier by rural crime teams.

Linked to this issue is that of **call handler training**. While there is a high turnover rate in police call centres, training inductions must include some basics on rural crime. Added to this, there should be a toolkit for all call handlers to use to direct call handlers to ask the right questions to ascertain a real understanding of the seriousness of the crime

under the THRIVE process. This would not be a new suggestion. In 2023, the College of Policing recommended the use of a question toolkit to enable call handlers to appropriately implement the Right Care Right Person processes[22]. Something similar could and should be developed for rural crime. This would instil confidence in the caller that the person they were talking to had some idea of the crime, and were asking for the right information.

The NPG needs to **make clear what the minimum level of service guarantee looks like in practice**. This needs to be realistic and attainable for those police officers working in the rural space, given that they may still be based in a town/city police station, meaning extensive response times not being reduced. Rural communities and businesses should be consulted on the development of this minimum level of service guarantee and to ensure that it is achievable for those policing large rural and remote areas.

Linked to this is the establishment of the Police and Crime Performance Unit. While a national approach to policing is welcomed, this should not be driven by the current state of police information and intelligence. There needs to be a concerted effort to properly flag rural crime via systems as discussed, but also to rebuild relationships and communications between rural communities and businesses and the police. Without this foundational work, the true levels of crime in rural areas will remain under-reported, under-represented, under-resourced, and misunderstood.

Other references of potential interest:

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Smith, K. & Byrne, R. (2017) Farm crime in England and Wales: a preliminary scoping study examining farmer attitudes. *International Journal of Rural Criminology*, **3 (2)**. pp. 191-223. http://doi.org/10.18061/1811/81047

For further information about NICRE:

[22] College of Policing (2023) Force control room implementation guidance. Available at: https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/right-care-right-person-toolkit/force-control-room-implementation-guidance

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