

Police Reform White Paper:

Implications for Rural Communities and NRCN Position Statement.

The UK government's 2026 policing white paper proposes major reform across policing in England and Wales. Its focus must be on delivering stronger neighbourhood policing, improved standards and accountability, better public trust and confidence, greater openness and transparency, more national coordination, and better use of technology. For rural communities, the key question is whether these changes will improve local visibility and specialist support, or further centralise services away from smaller and remote communities.

Summary of White Paper Key Proposals:

- **Creation of a new National Police Service:** A new National Police Service (NPS) will bring together key national policing functions in England and Wales, including counter-terrorism, roads policing, air support, serious and organised crime, financial crime, and professional training, while setting UK-wide standards and respecting devolved policing arrangements.
- **Neighbourhood policing:** a renewed emphasis on visible local policing and more neighbourhood officers.
- **Structural reform:** proposals for fewer, larger force areas and stronger national capability for serious and complex crime.
- **Accountability and standards:** changes aimed at improving misconduct processes, performance, and public confidence.
- **Technology, communication and workforce:** better digital capability, intelligence sharing, improved communication with communities through tools such as WhatsApp and other technologies, and a review of funding and workforce arrangements that reflects fairness and equity for rural communities, recognising higher costs, lower capacity, and longer emergency response times.

Possible impact on Rural Communities

- **Potential gains:** rural areas could benefit from stronger neighbourhood policing, better specialist support, and improved intelligence and technology.
- **Stronger action on cross-border crime:** larger regional structures may help tackle organised theft, county lines activity, and wildlife or machinery crime more effectively.
- **Key risks:** centralisation may reduce local visibility, weaken local knowledge, and reduce accountability to the taxpayer, leading to lower public trust and confidence if officers and resources are pulled toward urban centres.
- **Resource pressure:** rural priorities may lose out unless funding and deployment models reflect sparse populations, long distances, and hidden vulnerability.
- **Implementation matters most:** success depends on whether reform protects visible local policing and gives rural communities fair access to officers, funding, and specialist support.

NRCN Position Statements

- **Conditional support for the NPS:** NRCN supports the creation of the National Police Service only if the definition of serious organised crime explicitly includes serious organised rural crime as defined by the NRCN/NRCU
- **Modern community communication:** NRCN supports the wider use of appropriate communication tools, including WhatsApp or equivalent technologies, to improve engagement, information sharing, and responsiveness between police and rural communities across all forces.
- **Full endorsement of commissioned research:** NRCN fully endorses the research findings it has commissioned over recent years, including work on domestic abuse and the Kate Tudor report, and use this evidence base to inform its position on reform and rural policing.



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- **National Police Service role in waste crime:** NRCN supports a clear role for the National Police Service in tackling serious waste crime and organised fly-tipping, including consideration of transferring the most serious cases to a single national body where this would strengthen accountability, improve consistency, and better disrupt organised criminal networks.
- **A practical rural test:** NRCN will judge reform against a simple test: does it improve visibility, response, victim confidence, and protection for rural communities?

Calls to Action

- **Incorporation of the specialist NRCU into the NPS:** NRCN is calling for the specialist National Rural Crime Unit to be fully integrated into the new NPS.
- **Rural proofing:** NRCN is pressing for a published rural proofing assessment of all policing reforms, including force structures, funding, and service delivery.
- **Fair funding:** NRCN advocates for funding formulas that reflect large geographies, sparse populations, travel times, and hidden rural demand.
- **Increased rural capacity:** NRCN is seeking minimum expectations for visible neighbourhood policing in rural areas, including named officers or teams, with reform used to build and strengthen rural policing capacity rather than merely protect what already exists.
- **Economic analysis and rural harm:** NRCN is pressing for full economic analysis of rural crime and a better understanding of its impact on residents and businesses, recognising that the current THRIVE methodology does not adequately capture these harms or the costs of rurality.
- **Investment in rural crime technology and AI:** NRCN is calling for dedicated funding to ensure that new technologies, digital tools, and artificial intelligence are made available to policing and partner agencies specifically to tackle the challenges of rural crime, including prevention, intelligence development, cross-border coordination, and more effective use of limited rural resources.
- **Specialist rural crime capability:** NRCN is calling for every force to maintain specialist rural crime expertise and strong cross-border intelligence links.

- **Regional rural intelligence officers:** NRCN supports a dedicated regional rural intelligence officer in every region to coordinate intelligence on organised rural crime, strengthen cross-border links, and ensure rural threats are identified and acted on consistently.
- **Joint working with environmental regulators:** NRCN is calling for stronger formal coordination between the National Police Service and the Environment Agency, including embedded liaison officers and reliable intelligence-sharing arrangements, so that organised waste crime is investigated more effectively across force and agency boundaries.

Summary

Overall, the reforms offer opportunities for rural communities, but only if implementation protects local visibility, fair funding, and specialist capability. If rural communities are built into the reform programme from the outset rather than treated as an afterthought, these changes will help enable policing to meet the targets and expectations set out in the reform white paper on neighbourhood policing, public confidence, victim support, standards, and modern capability.

Further work should be carried out by the NRCU to identify what resources would be needed to ensure it can play an effective role in delivering the objectives set out in the white paper for policing rural communities.

Summary of responses to Rural Policing Reform Roundtable questions.

01 What are your concerns with the move to larger police forces?

The main concern is that larger police forces could centralise decision-making and resources away from smaller and remote communities. While bigger structures may improve national capability, they also risk reducing local visibility, weakening local knowledge, and drawing officers and funding toward urban centres unless rural needs are explicitly protected.

02 Do you feel victims of crime get different treatment in rural areas, and how can their experience be improved?

Yes, victims in rural areas can face different challenges because sparse populations, long travel distances, and limited local resources may affect response times and access to support. Their experience can be improved by protecting visible rural neighbourhood policing, ensuring fair funding for remote areas, and maintaining specialist support so that rural victims receive the same confidence and protection as those in urban communities.

03 What has been your experience with your local police, and what could a new police force learn from?

The key lesson from local policing is that visible officers, local knowledge, and trusted relationships matter. The document suggests that any new force should learn from the value of neighbourhood policing in building public confidence, understanding local patterns of crime, and responding effectively to the specific needs of rural communities.

04 What are the challenges with tackling crime in rural areas, and how could larger forces help address them?

Rural crime is harder to tackle because of large geographies, sparse populations, long distances, and hidden vulnerability. There are also particular issues such as organised theft, county lines activity, wildlife crime, and machinery crime. Larger forces could help by improving specialist support, strengthening cross-border intelligence, and creating better technology and coordination to deal with these complex crimes more effectively.

05 What are the opportunities presented by the creation of Local Policing Areas, and how can they work effectively for rural areas?

Local Policing Areas could create opportunities for clearer accountability, stronger neighbourhood policing, and a better focus on community needs. For rural areas, they will only work effectively if they protect visible local policing, provide named officers or teams, and are backed by funding and deployment models that reflect distance, sparse populations, and rural demand.

06 **How can the creation of fewer, larger forces and the National Police Service together better utilise specialist rural and wildlife crime provisions?**

Fewer, larger forces working alongside the National Police Service could make better use of specialist rural and wildlife crime expertise by bringing these capabilities together, improving intelligence sharing, and strengthening cross-border coordination. This would be most effective if serious organised rural crime is explicitly recognised, the National Rural Crime Unit is fully integrated into the new structure, and every force retains dedicated rural crime expertise.
