

POLICE & CRIME PANEL – 3 FEBRUARY 2022
FIGHT RURAL CRIME PROGRESS REPORT

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

This paper provides an update on Priority Four in the Police and Crime Commissioner's Police and Crime Plan – to Fight Rural Crime.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. The National Rural Crime Network (NRCN) believes that the scale, cost, social impact, and other effects of crime in rural areas are underestimated, under-reported and not fully understood. The Network is therefore concerned with all crime and anti-social behaviour occurring in rural areas. This includes problems typically associated with the countryside such as wildlife and heritage crime, farm equipment and animal thefts – as well as crime types that are encountered in urban areas, but for which rurality may either make some people more vulnerable to the criminality, or otherwise exacerbate the affect that the offence has upon victims. For example, this might include offences such as fraud and other scams, with tricksters deliberately targeting vulnerable people living in isolated places; or crimes such as domestic abuse, in which victims may feel even less able to seek help due to their remote location.
- 1.2. The Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) shares the NCRN's views and concerns about rural crime and the impact on individuals and communities living and/or working in the Dorset countryside. Consequently, to Fight Rural Crime is a priority within the PCC's new Police and Crime Plan for Dorset. Additionally, the PCC has also recognised throughout other priorities within his Plan – for example, Put Victims and Communities First – that the service provided to members of the public must be appropriate to the specific needs and expectations of all of Dorset's communities. He understands that rural communities can feel less engaged with Dorset Police, and also that many people living and working in rural parts of the county perceive that they are not provided with the same standard of service when compared with urban areas.
- 1.3. Therefore, while there is no single definition of rural crime used in UK policing, it is to be noted that the PCC, when talking about rural crime, is seeking to address, not only those crimes more traditionally associated with rural areas, but also, the impact of overall crime experienced by rural communities. This is an important distinction. To ensure resources are targeted effectively, police forces must consider the relative threat, harm and risk associated with particular crime types, and assign resources within different policing capabilities accordingly. It is therefore imperative that Dorset Police carefully considers the volume and impact of crimes that are typically regarded as rural, which may include:

Wildlife crime – actions which contravene current legislation governing the protection of wild animals and plants. Offences often include hare coursing, fish and deer poaching and interfering with protected species.

Agricultural crime – actions which contravene current legislation covering farms, farm machinery, farm buildings and smallholdings. Offences often include theft of equipment or fuel, damage to property and livestock worrying.

Heritage crime – actions which contravene current legislation that protects the value of (in this case) England’s heritage assets. Offences often include architectural theft (of metal or stone), criminal damage and unlawful metal detecting or salvage.

In tackling specialist crimes that are traditionally associated with rural areas, no reduction in prioritisation of rural areas for tackling overall levels of crime and ASB should be assumed, as both are appropriately addressed in the Police and Crime Plan.

- 1.4. In Dorset, in 2020, the main types of rural crime were poaching (76), theft – farm (26), theft of agricultural machinery or equipment (29), livestock attacks (15), and theft of livestock or horses (5). The NRCN survey in 2018 for Dorset showed the main rural crime experienced by farmers and specific rural business owners were; fly tipping (23%), theft of agricultural machinery or equipment (14%), theft from an outbuilding (9%), wildlife crime or hare coursing (9%), attempted break in or theft (8%), and theft of fuel (8%). By undertaking the pledges within his Plan – in particular through the work of the planned Rural Crime Reduction Board – the PCC intends to help prevent these crimes from taking place.
- 1.5. The PCC will also introduce a new scheme, Country Watch, designed to bring rural communities and relevant agencies together so that crime and ASB can be addressed, but also to improve resilience in Dorset’s more remote locations. He will also seek other cross-cutting improvements that will benefit all of Dorset’s communities – including rural communities – but which are detailed under other areas of his Plan. He believes that the totality of this work will lead to better engagement with rural communities and, therefore, that Dorset taxpayers will have a greater satisfaction in the service that they are provided.
- 1.6. This paper, then, sets out the specific activity relating to those actions included under the Fight Rural Crime priority within the Police and Crime Plan. It does not seek to address the wider ambitions that also apply to the rural residents, workers and visitors.

2. CONTEXT & THE POLICE AND CRIME PLAN

- 2.1. The priority to Fight Rural Crime is made up of four sub-themes: Rural Resources, Country Watch, Fly Tipping, and Wildlife Crime.
- 2.2. Rural Resources focuses on increasing the size of the Force’s Rural Crime Team (RCT); introducing special constables with a rural crime specialism; working with rural communities to improve communication between victims and the police and confidence in reporting crime; and ensuring a regional approach to more effectively fight organised crime in rural areas across the South West.
- 2.3. Country Watch is to develop and promote an overarching scheme to bring together rural communities and relevant agencies to best address crime, ASB and disorder issues in rural areas. This will include a strengthening of rural watch schemes, including initiatives for parish safety and grant funding to improve resilience in Dorset’s more remote areas; working with rural businesses to prevent crime such as funding innovative tactics and ensuring the Force understands the impact of crime on rural victims; and to oversee the work to fight rural crime introduce a Rural Crime Reduction Board in partnership with key agencies, organisations and communities in rural areas.
- 2.4. Fly Tipping and related crime can blight our countryside and key to tackling this is to work effectively in partnership with agencies, such as the local councils and the Environment Agency, to prevent and detect fly tipping issues across Dorset. This will include introducing new approaches to dealing with fly tipping in hotspot locations and lobbying for tougher sanctions for those responsible for fly tipping and related crimes. It should be noted that the OPCC’s work in this area also includes urban parts of the county.
- 2.5. Wildlife Crime focuses on increasing the awareness and understanding of wildlife crime and the impact it has on people living and working in the Dorset countryside. It will include support for

schemes proven to reduce incidents; ensuring that the police have the required knowledge to deal with wildlife crime such as hare coursing and poaching; and also increasing the analysis and liaison across the region to tackle any organised criminality associated with wildlife crime.

- 2.6. As set out in Section 1.5, there are other areas of the Plan that have clear links to rural crime and the policing of rural communities. For instance, the priorities to Cut Crime and ASB, Make Policing More Visible and Connected and to Put Victims and Communities First will all deliver benefit to rural areas. The priorities complement one another and are not mutually exclusive.

3. PROGRESS TO DATE

- 3.1. So far, work to deliver this priority has included three key elements: the PCC hosted the Rural Crime Round Table meeting; there has been an increase in the staffing of the Force's RCT; and there has been activity at the national, regional and local level to target rural crime.

Rural Crime Round Table

- 3.2. On 16 November 2021 a Rural Crime Round Table was held, bringing together the PCC, Chief Superintendent Richard Bell and Chief Inspector Andy Edwards, with both the Inspector and PC from the Force's RCT, and representatives of national rural business groups, national and local government agencies, and local community organisations. These included the Association of Dorset Watches, the CLA, Cornish Mutual, DAPTC, Dorset Council, Dorset Farming Community Network, the Environment Agency, Kingston Maurward College, the NFU, and feedback from the Rural Officer for Dorset of the Diocese of Salisbury.
- 3.3. At the Round Table the PCC presented his Police and Crime Plan providing the reassurance to rural businesses and communities that rural crime features throughout the plan with each of the priorities covering elements that affect rural areas. The Force then presented their work to tackle rural crime. The presentations were followed by a two-part interactive session; to raise key issues and concerns in relation to rural crime, and then to explore ideas suggestions and solutions to the identified issues and concerns. The workshop sessions resulted in a range of potential workstreams, including agreement that the proposed Rural Crime Prevention Board should oversee this work.
- 3.4. Dorset Police presented to the Round Table its work to reduce rural crime which included:
- Identifying opportunities with partners, rural organisations, and rural communities to prevent and reduce crime – including bringing rural crime offenders to justice;
 - Providing support and assistance for victims of rural crime, especially the most at risk;
 - Increasing the opportunities and encourage rural people to report crime;
 - Maximising use of national resources and influence national policy; and
 - Improving the police response to rural crime and therefore confidence in the police
- 3.5. The Round Table's first workshop session identified several key issues and concerns, some of which included work that is already in progress by the OPCC or Dorset Police. The issues fell into four main categories: reporting; communication and engagement; fly tipping; and prevention. The second workshop session examined the concerns raised in the first session in more detail and attendees explored ideas, suggestions and solutions to the issues which affect rural communities and businesses on a regular basis.
- 3.6. Further detail about the Rural Crime Roundtable has recently been circulated to the Panel's priority lead for this area.

Increase in the staffing of the Rural Crime Team (RCT)

- 3.7. The increase in the staffing of the Force's RCT has begun and it is anticipated to be completed in the near future. The previous structure of the RCT was two PCs and a PCSO, whereas the new team consists of a dedicated Inspector, a dedicated Sergeant (with a detective background), five

PCs and two PCSOs. Part of the focus will also be attendance at events and community engagement. The Force is deploying three Neighbourhood Engagement Officers in the Dorset Local Policing Area including one specialising on Rural Crime, as part of the RCT. Some of the new police constable roles will be filled by student officers who have passed their probation period. Over time, this turnover of student officers will increase learning within the Force on rural crime work.

Activity at the national, regional and local level to target rural crime

- 3.8. The Force is developing a new Rural Crime Strategy, which is due for publication shortly. The strategy reflects the key actions identified within the Police and Crime Plan.
- 3.9. The Force has been involved in a range of joint cross border operations and is a member of many rural crime focused police networks and partnerships, and has been for several years, sharing good practice and problem solving relating to rural crime.
- 3.10. Specifically, the RCT is a member of the UK Tasking and Coordinating Group (UK TCG) for Rural and Wildlife Crime, chaired by the National Police Chiefs Council lead. Strategic and tactical assessments are created every three years. The UK TCG decides the UK wildlife crime priority areas – currently bat persecution, badger persecution, cyber-crime, CITES (illegal trade in endangered species), raptor persecution, poaching/coursing, and freshwater pearl mussels – and UK rural crime priorities – currently, agricultural plant theft, livestock (thefts and attacks by dogs), poaching/coursing, equine, fuel, and fly tipping.
- 3.11. Regionally there is the Joint Tasking and Actions Group (JTAG) for Rural Affairs – which focuses on the sharing of training and information with regional forces and adopting a consistent approach. This has enabled effective targeting of Organised Crime Groups. The JTAGs are groups formed between the neighbourhood teams and RCTs of each force that shares borders – Dorset has both an East one and a West one.
- 3.12. Locally the RCT is a member of the Dorset Rural Partnership and Coordinating Group (PCG), which reports to the Dorset Community Safety Partnership. It meets every eight weeks and the Force and enforcement partners share intelligence, carry out joint disruption work and identify operations. They also identify vulnerable victims, implement prevention work and utilise funding streams.
- 3.13. The RCT has also used Civil Behaviour Orders and other powers, such as vehicle and dog seizure, to tackle wildlife crime such as hare coursing. The Team is preparing to make use of the tabled amendments to the Police, Crime and Sentencing Bill to tackle this crime more effectively, when the changes become law. A recent success was working with regional and national colleagues to deal with hare coursing offenders.
- 3.14. The PCC continues to fund a Fly tipping Coordinator post for Dorset, in partnership with the Environment Agency. This role has been recently focusing on improving intelligence by working with both BCP and Dorset Councils, the Force, and the Environment Agency. This work will help to identify Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) involved in fly tipping and, through the EA, looks to also target this on a regional basis.
- 3.15. The PCC also attends meetings with his regional counterparts. At such meetings, SW PCCs have discussed the need to tackle OCGs at the regional level and agreed the need to work together to ensure there is strong cross-border collaboration.

4. NEXT STEPS

- 4.1. Following the Rural Crime Round Table the OPCC is working to develop the first meeting of the Rural Crime Reduction Board and to launch the Country Watch Scheme.

- 4.2. The OPCC plans to hold the first meeting of the Rural Crime Reduction Board by April 2022, with work ongoing to agree the Terms of Reference. An early objective for this Board will be to agree a delivery plan by the summer – this plan will complement the commitments within the Police and Crime Plan, as well as address the four main categories (reporting, communication and engagement, fly-tipping, and prevention) that were raised through the Rural Crime Round Table. Performance against the delivery plan will be monitored closely to ensure that progress is being made and the PCC will use this information to hold the Chief Constable to account for performance against this priority area.
- 4.3. It is hoped that the Country Watch scheme can be launched by early summer 2022, at the latest. As part of this – besides developing a clear and recognisable brand for rural communities – the OPCC will map and scope the structure of existing watch schemes. Gaps will be identified and evidence-based plans will be designed to ensure that there is an improved reach for watch schemes operating in rural areas.
- 4.4. Meanwhile, the OPCC is continuing to work with Dorset Police and partner agencies to develop new approaches to dealing with fly-tipping and also to support schemes that are proven to reduce wildlife crime. It is also acknowledged that more work is required to understand benchmarking for this area – as it stands, the Force does not hold detailed statistics on rural crime and this will be explored in the coming months. Developments will be reported to the Police and Crime Panel on a regular basis.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1. The PCC is passionate supporter of Dorset's rural communities and businesses, and is determined to fight rural crime in the county. Having published his Police and Crime Plan on 29 October 2021, he has already hosted a Rural Crime Roundtable, with plans to set up the Rural Crime Reduction Board and to launch Country Watch being well underway.
- 5.2. He is clear that improvements will be made by working with the Force, communities and other partners to improve engagement and communication, facilitate easier reporting of incidents and intelligence, enable better use of preventative techniques and advice, and also by bringing offenders to justice.
- 5.3. The range of initiatives set out in his Police and Crime Plan are far reaching, will require effective commitment from partner agencies and rural organisations, and will take time to deliver. It is also the case that Dorset Police, and partners, need to better develop the data that they hold about rural crime in the county, so that more sophisticated benchmarking and analysis can take place.
- 5.4. The PCC was extremely encouraged by the feedback from the Rural Crime Round Table and believes, with the establishment of the Rural Crime Reduction Board in the next few months, that this work will continue to gather momentum.

6. RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1. Members are asked to note the report.

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