

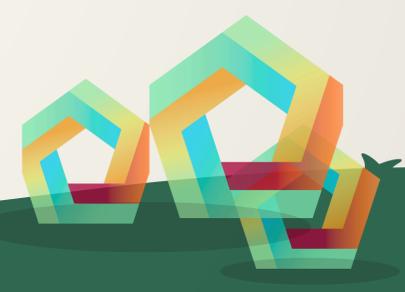
RURAL DOMESTIC ABUSE THE PARADOX OF COMMUNITY

Redesigning Safety with Rural Communities

Judith Vickress

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report stands out due to its clarity of purpose. We are too often presented with descriptions of harm without a clear route to change. This work is different. It offers a practical, action-focused blueprint grounded in evidence, lived experience, and frontline insight.

I welcome this Churchill Fellowship report and the challenge it presents. Tackling domestic abuse requires us to confront inequality in how safety is designed and delivered, and to ensure rural victims, including children and families, are no longer overlooked.

The recommendations... provide a clear and credible pathway forward. I hope they are widely read, shared, and acted upon.

**Excerpt from report Foreword by Dame Nicole Jacobs
Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England & Wales**



PURPOSE, CONTEXT AND WHY THIS MATTERS



...in the midst of the criminal justice system, I found myself in [2019], I was continuously highlighting the additional challenges I faced because of rurality that were not being taken into account. I can remember the immense relief I felt when I came across “Captive & Controlled”, the NRCN report. At last, a group of people who got it – the problems I faced were listed and the right recommendations made to move forward. But how much has changed since then? Not enough by a long way...

**Rhianon Bragg,
Survivor, Expert by Experience and National Campaigner**



1. INTRODUCTION

My Churchill Fellowship report explores how domestic abuse and violence against women, girls and children (VAWG/C) are experienced, understood and responded to in rural communities across the USA, Canada, Australia and back here in the UK. It builds on the National Rural Crime Network’s Captive & Controlled report, (2019), which powerfully centred survivor voice but has not achieved the systemic change many anticipated. This in part, I realised, was because there was no dedicated agency for Rural Domestic Abuse to hold policymakers, both nationally and locally, accountable for the actions recommended in the NRCN report. For this reason I have founded RiTA – Rural Initiatives Tackling Abuse. The Churchill Fellowship ask of Fellows to become “**change makers**” with their learning. Through RiTA I hope to drive the change we need to see – for rural survivors to be seen, heard, involved and for their experiences and needs to matter.

This report expands the evidence base while challenging assumptions that continue to shape national thinking about rural life. Rather than casting rural communities as inherently unsafe, closed or patriarchal, it embraces the paradox of rural community. The same close-knit ties that bring belonging, resilience and care can also create conditions for silence, stigma and isolation. Understanding this duality is essential if responses are to work with rural places rather than against them.

Julia Mulligan, in her foreword to the 2019 report, said: *“Revealing the truth was the easy bit. Acting on it is hard but acting on it is what we have to do. We need to do it positively, we need to look forward and work together to improve the service we offer to victims and survivors of domestic abuse in rural areas, and we need to do it now.”*

And Graham Biggs, Chair of the Rural Services Network, said: *“The report is shocking reading, for too long, residents in rural areas have been disadvantaged purely because of where they live. The distribution of Government funding should be fair and transparent so that rural communities, and in particular the vulnerable members of our rural communities, are not suffering from a lack of support.”*

1.1 GOVERNMENT'S VAWG(/C) STRATEGY 2025

In December 2025 the UK Government published Freedom from Violence and Abuse: a cross-government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls, alongside a cross-government Action Plan, an evidence review on “what works” and a Men and Boys Explanatory Note. Together

It is positive to see the national recognition that VAWG/C demands a whole-of-government and a whole-of-society response, but sadly, rural communities are not treated as a distinct context for risk, nor is there a clear plan to rural-proof the Action Plan or its metrics. This omission matters. Rural areas make up around 85% of England's land area, and in Wales, over four-fifths of the land is used for agriculture and other rural purposes. The cross-government VAWG/C Strategy, the forthcoming Duty to Collaborate in the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, and the ongoing English Devolution programme all signal a shift toward longer-term joined-up thinking, but rural realities remain largely unnamed within these reforms.

The experience of coercive control, economic abuse, threats and acts of violence in a small Welsh village, an English market town, a Scottish island or a farming community is shaped by geography, culture, visibility, inequality and access in ways that differ fundamentally from urban contexts. My report seeks to fill that gap by bringing rural survivor voice, evidence and solutions into the heart of national policy and practice.

Across my Fellowship travels I met survivors, practitioners, police, policymakers, librarians, church leaders, community navigators, lawyers, academics and activists. Their insights confirm that rural domestic abuse does not look the same as urban abuse, and our systems have never been designed with rural realities in mind.

2. WHAT RURAL DOMESTIC ABUSE LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Rural Inequalities

Rural domestic abuse is shaped by a distinct set of intersecting factors that compound risk and constrain choice. Distance from services, limited transport, digital exclusion, housing shortages, restricted employment options, community visibility, the social status of perpetrators and fear of repercussions all intersect to delay help-seeking and intensify harm.

Underfunded and inaccessible services mean survivors often must travel long distances to access specialist support, if it exists at all. For many, seeking help risks exposure within tight-knit communities where anonymity is scarce and confidentiality hard to guarantee. Digital solutions, while promising, can also increase risk when connectivity is poor or when perpetrators exert digital control.

Housing is a critical pressure point. In many rural areas there is no refuge provision, limited social housing, and a private rented sector that is both expensive and insecure. Survivors are frequently forced to choose between staying with the perpetrator or leaving their community, children's schools, work, land, animals or support networks to seek safety.

Rural communities also possess extraordinary strengths. Trusted relationships, local knowledge, informal networks, and a culture of stepping in to help can form powerful foundations for safety when systems recognise, value, and invest in them. Across my travels, I saw innovation rooted in relationships, including Community Resource Navigators, libraries as safe spaces, schools as disclosure routes, churches as connectors, businesses as allies, and men taking visible leadership in challenging harmful norms.

3. WHY CURRENT SYSTEMS ARE FAILING RURAL SURVIVORS

Urban Bias and the “High-Risk Cul-de-sac”

Despite decades of reform, current domestic abuse systems remain predominantly urban-designed, risk-led and crisis-focused. Threshold-based responses mean victims are often required to reach “high risk” before coordinated action is triggered - effectively waiting for harm to escalate before intervening.

International experts consistently challenged the UK’s reliance on meeting-based coordination and risk scoring. These approaches prioritise process over relationships, fragment responsibility, and obscure the lived reality of survivors, particularly in rural contexts where services are sparse and professionals are already overstretched.

The NRCN’s Captive & Controlled report remains foundational. It demonstrated that abuse lasts longer in rural areas, services are less visible and accessible and rurality is deliberately used as a weapon by perpetrators. Yet its recommendations have been under-implemented, in part due to the absence of a lead body to drive change and the persistence of language that inadvertently reinforces deficit narratives.

Policing is frequently criticised in rural VAWG/C responses. While there are often justifiable concerns, focusing criticism solely on police risks defensiveness, loss of trust and actually just deepens siloed working. Police are one part of a criminal justice system that is under-resourced, fragmented and not designed to respond to a “national emergency” at the scale VAWG/C now represents. Funding for policing in predominantly rural areas is significantly lower per capita than in urban areas and this is inherently unfair. Throughout my full report you will find me referring time and again to funding inequalities and the seemingly lack of acceptance that it simply costs more to provide adequate and safe service delivery in rural areas - including policing. The very fact that funding allocated to rural-classified areas remains significantly lower than that allocated to urban-classified areas, despite years of campaigning for fairness sends the message that “rural communities matter less”. I genuinely welcome the challenge to this assumption. I am eager to be proved wrong and to see a funding formula grounded in the real costs of service delivery and aimed at developing capabilities that enable access for everyone.

Whilst poor practice and service must always be called out and agencies held to account, focus on criticism and failings does nothing for officers, teams and leaders' morale, motivation, and desire to learn, develop or even build relationships with communities, What we need is better system alignment – a shared responsibility for risk, early intervention, and coordinated accountability that keeps perpetrators in view and survivors supported long before crisis point.



Systems wait for victims to become ‘high risk’ before acting.



“Those who never change their minds, never change anything”

Winston Churchill

THINKING ABOUT SYSTEMS AND SYSTEMS THINKING - LEARNING FROM STARLINGS

Interrupting the Executive Summary with a thought - or a vision:

During my travels, a seasoned systems expert shared the science of starling murmuration and its use as a visual metaphor for collaboration. As a visual thinker, I was entirely captivated by it. I decided to include it here in the executive summary, at the systems discussion point, because it could resonate with more readers and complement your understanding as you explore the full report, which is heavily focused on systems thinking.

Extensive research has shown us how and why murmurations happen. Instead of waiting for commands, birds follow simple rules that let them act alone or together, helping them survive and thrive. A key idea is that they match their speed and direction with their closest six or seven neighbors. The way starlings sense their surroundings and respond so quickly is crucial for their teamwork.

We see that these breathtaking murmurations aren't just triggered by sudden threats from large predators, but also during quieter times when there's a need to solve problems or find resources. Scientists studying starling behaviour suggest that *"when food is spread out and hard to find, the best long-term solution is sharing information widely among many birds."*

This insight is truly remarkable. A starling murmuration is, at its heart, a stunning, cooperative way of sharing information. Each bird feels part of the whole, sensing the movements of nearby neighbours, reacting swiftly, and helping the entire group respond to danger. This system has evolved over millions of years, based on the idea that birds can better protect their ability to find food and resources by working together, not by the strongest birds hoarding everything they can gather at the expense of others.

Just as starlings murmurate, the most successful partnerships - whether facing a crisis or not-are built on simple, shared principles that promote teamwork. From decades of experience with multi-stakeholder collaborations, it's easy to identify some key qualities needed in complex partnerships that mirror the behaviour of starlings:

- **A clear, shared vision of the partnership's goals**
- **Interdependence and mutual benefit, with resources shared generously and the collective needs prioritised**
- **Flexibility and adaptability to respond quickly to changing circumstances**
- **Collective leadership where no single person (or agency) is in charge**
- **Building equity by balancing power and fairness**
- **Trust-based relationships enabling open and rapid sharing of information**

One last lesson from the starling analogy relates to beauty. The shapes and displays that emerge from a murmuration are far more than what any one bird could produce alone. In the world of partnerships, we might say they create kinds of value that can't be achieved in any other way.

Can we learn from starlings? I think so..... watch and marvel [here](#)

Amazing starlings murmuration (full HD) -www.keepturningleft.co.uk
YouTube

4. WHAT WORKS - LEARNING FROM INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE

Reimagining the Architecture of Safety

Drawing on the learning from meeting so many experts and seeing projects in action my report proposes a **Rural Coordinated Community Response (RCCR)**, a systems-change approach grounded in survivor voice, collective impact, social capital theory and place-based design. Across the USA, Canada and Australia I observed approaches that move beyond crisis response toward alignment, early intervention and community capacity.

These include:

-  **Advocacy-Initiated Response (AIR) (Minnesota), programmes that ensure rapid specialist follow-up after police contact.**
-  **MARAM (Victoria), a statutory framework embedding shared responsibility for risk across agencies.**
-  **Community Resource Navigators acting as trusted connectors within rural places.**
-  **Culturally specific, peer-informed perpetrator interventions.**
-  **Health-led identification and relational advocacy programmes.**

What unites these approaches is a recognition that safety is relational before it is procedural, and that effective systems operate between interactions rather than just in meetings. Early intervention, whole-of-family approaches, community engagement, and workforce wellbeing are treated as core infrastructure, not optional add-ons.

It's important to say that I do not advocate for abandoning all multi-agency meetings. Where these are still held in person, they are invaluable for networking and building relationships across agencies. This was one of the key successes of the MARAC meetings when it was first introduced in the 2000's. The relationships built in that room supported, encouraged, and facilitated improved multi-agency collaboration. Over time, however, a focus on waiting until meetings to share information or act, coupled with a significant increase in case volume (as detailed in the full report), diminished the chance to use these meetings for opportunities to connect. Additionally, the shift to virtual meetings since 2020, following the COVID-19 pandemic, has essentially eliminated the regular in-person multi-agency gatherings that fostered team spirit and human connection.

5. A RARE POLICY OPPORTUNITY MOMENT

VAWG Strategy, National Emergency and System Reform

The Government's Freedom from Violence and Abuse strategy sets an ambitious ten-year mission to halve VAWG across England and Wales. It rightly emphasises prevention, perpetrator accountability and whole-of-government working. However, rurality is not recognised as a distinct context for risk, delivery or measurement.

This omission matters. Rural areas account for the majority of the UK's land mass, yet policy design, funding assumptions and metrics remain urban-centric. Without explicit rural-proofing, the Strategy risks reinforcing the invisibility first exposed by *Captive & Controlled*.

It is positive that the Government has recognised VAWG/C as a national emergency. However, this recognition is not yet reflected within the National Risk Register (NRR) which was also reviewed and updated last year. The NRR guides preparedness and resilience planning. Despite its scale, severity and intergenerational impact, VAWG/C is not explicitly listed as a national risk.

Including VAWG/C within the NRR as a standalone societal risk, a cross-cutting driver, and through Local Resilience Forum planning would translate political commitment into operational reality, strengthening prevention, preparedness and accountability across systems.

Alongside this, the Duty to Collaborate and English Devolution create a rare opportunity to redesign rural responses. Together they provide the legal impetus and governance architecture for joined-up commissioning, local innovation and place-based system design. Without explicit rural safeguards, however, they risk deepening postcode inequality.

*Opportunity
Not to be
Missed*



**Duty to Collaborate &
Devolution Can Redesign
Rural Responses**

6. RURAL DEPRIVATION, INEQUALITY AND SAFETY

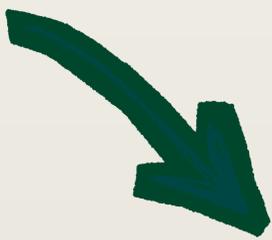
Why Rural Poverty Is a VAWG/C Issue

[Analysis of the English Indices of Deprivation 2025](#) demonstrates that rural deprivation is persistent, structural and systematically under-detected. Disadvantage in rural areas is dispersed rather than concentrated, shaped by poor transport, limited services, unaffordable housing, digital exclusion, low wages and high living costs.

Because standard indices under-capture rural need, rural communities receive less investment and weaker infrastructure, despite facing heightened barriers to safety. This has direct consequences for domestic abuse responses: fewer specialist pathways, limited outreach capacity, and systems unable to intervene early.

Rural deprivation is not simply a socioeconomic issue; it is a safety issue. It intensifies isolation, compounds economic abuse, restricts help-seeking and limits opportunities to hold perpetrators accountable. Addressing rural domestic abuse, therefore, requires both systems change and structural fairness, supported by funding decisions that reflect the true cost of delivering safety in rural Britain.

At the same time, rural responses must address the interaction between trauma, mental health and help-seeking norms. Emerging rural research suggests that where victimisation and distress go unsupported – particularly among men – the effects can ripple beyond the initial incident, increasing isolation, risk-taking and, in some cases, harmful attempts to regain control. A rural blueprint must therefore embed trauma-informed, stigma-sensitive pathways that meet people where they are in community hubs, workplaces, livestock markets, sports clubs and primary care, strengthening early intervention and prevention alongside survivor safety and perpetrator accountability.



**Rural deprivation
is a safety issue**

7. KEY FINDINGS AND THEMES

What This Fellowship Found

Key findings from this Fellowship include:

1

Rural inequalities in health, housing, transport, digital access and employment intersect with abuse to increase risk.

2

Rurality remains largely invisible in national data, funding and strategy

3

Systems require alignment, not additional meetings

4

Workforce wellbeing and psychological safety are prerequisites for effective practice

5

Prevention must be place-based and engage boys and men

6

Community assets and creativity are essential to culture change

7

Language matters - deficit narratives hinder engagement and innovation

8

Commissioners are fragmenting systems. Competition for funding creates division, poor working environments, inhibits place-based adaptation and creativity and ultimately harms survivors

9

The status quo is not working.
With humility, integrity, transparency and courage we can and must acknowledge this, change our mindsets and work together to create systems that work for those we want to see, support and save and hold those who are the problem in view and to account.

10

Engaging men and boys as allies to end male violence against women, girls and children is essential to prevention. Challenging harmful traditional values isn't a critique of culture - it's an invitation to create safer, more inclusive rural communities.

HEADLINE RECOMMENDATIONS

THE 12-POINT RURAL BLUEPRINT FOR SAFETY

This plan, informed by international best practice and UK policy levers including the Duty to Collaborate and Devolution, provides the roadmap for creating equitable safety in rural communities.

Visibility & Strategy - The Policy Directive

Focus	Key Action Points
1. National Leadership	Launch a Parliamentary Commission on Rural Domestic Abuse, Stalking and VAWG/C and develop a National Rural Domestic Abuse and Stalking Action Plan, co-created with rural and VAWG/C experts (e.g. RSN, English Rural, NRCN, RiTA), people with lived experience, and frontline practitioners. Anchor this in a Rural Coordinated Community Response (RCCR) framework, supported by implementation science and learning system approaches (e.g. Ripple Mapping, Rural Blueprint for Change, Collective Impact for collaboration).
2. Proofing Policy & Funding	Embed rural-proofing and VAWG (/C)-informed proofing across all strategies (health, housing, policing, transport, planning, digital safety and digital inclusion, and economic development). Reform Fair Funding and related financing mechanisms to reflect the real costs of rural service delivery, coordination, outreach, and transport. Use devolution and the Duty to Collaborate to lock rural needs into commissioning, accountability frameworks and local strategies, preventing rural communities from being sidelined again.
3. Sustainable Investment	Secure cross-government, multi-year funding for organisations dedicated to rural domestic abuse and inequalities (e.g. RiTA, RSN, NRCN and specialist by-and-for services). Fund rural-specific research and evaluation that disaggregates data by rurality. Ensure national VAWG/C leaders, including the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victims' Commissioner, make rural communities a visible priority in their strategies, expert by experience groups and systems thinking, setting off a "think rural" ripple from the top. Local commissioners collaborate and seek to centre victims in commissioning design. They employ systems thinking and avoid further fragmentation through split service funding.

Practice & Risk - The Systemic Shift

Focus	Key Action Points
4. Transforming Risk & Data	Mandate rural/urban data disaggregation across VAWG (/C), policing, health and local authority datasets and use it to drive funding, commissioning and accountability. Embed context-led rural risk frameworks and tools, including ethical, survivor-designed digital safety platforms that recognise coercive control, firearms, economic abuse, stalking, isolation, transport limitations and local power dynamics, and review existing tools (e.g. DASH) through a rural and intersectional lens. Scale early intervention programmes and MASIP-style responses across every rural force/local authority, designed locally to reflect place and community.
5. Build a Rural Coordinated Community Response	Commit to collectively designing RCCR frameworks locally across policing, health, social care, education, housing, CJS, specialist services and communities, using Collective Impact principles. Move beyond "meetings" to shared accountability for prevention, early identification, data sharing, risk assessing, perpetrator accountability and survivor-centred practice, drawing on learning from Blueprint for Safety, Advocacy-Initiated Response (AIR), Family Justice Centres and Canadian/Australian CCR approaches like MARAM adapted with, not done to, rural communities, including the practitioners who work in them and know them best.
6. Invest in People & Practice	Recognise that the key assets in a successful RCCR are its people. Develop a Rural Learning & Development Strategy (RLDS)** co-designed locally (and internally) to equip the workforce at all levels with the skills, knowledge and tools they need to do their jobs effectively, efficiently, safely, with pride and confidence. A RLDS that moves beyond one-off, generic training to a system-wide, continuous learning approach that includes mentoring, shadowing, peer exchange, ("teaching forward") reflective practice, supervision, and accessible (relevant to role) training, so that practitioners can confidently identify and respond to domestic abuse and stalking, and work with whole families while holding offenders accountable. Create psychologically informed, strengths-based workplaces where staff are supported, heard, able to "fail forward", and where local knowledge and creativity are valued and used to improve outcomes. **RiTA has a RDLS Template to share with Members

Equity & Prevention - The Cultural Directive

Focus	Key Action Points
7. Prioritise Marginalised Voices	Embed anti-racist, culturally competent, trauma and coercive control-informed practice across all services, supported by reflective supervision and psychologically safe teams. Co-design pathways with Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities, migrant families, disabled people (inclusive and considerate of different abilities and disabilities), LGBTQ+ communities, older people, those with insecure immigration status and seasonal/migrant rural workers. Map and fund grassroots and informal networks (neighbours, friends, faith groups, community connectors) and ensure outcome data is disaggregated by protected characteristics and rurality to expose and close equity gaps.
8. Prevention, Children & Young People	Collaborate to commission rural-specific early help, young person engagement and prevention work, recognising how rurality compounds disadvantage for children and young people experiencing abuse in their homes or relationships. Ensure rural content in school programmes on friendship, relationships, sex education and gender roles, and invest in positive masculinity and anti-manosphere work with boys and young men, particularly in agricultural and other traditionally patriarchal communities. Improve safe disclosure routes in small communities and protect continuity of education and housing for children and non-abusive parents.

Infrastructure & Allyship - The Place-Based Solution

Focus	Key Action Points
9. Connect Health & Community	Recognise health as a core pillar of the RCCR and use the Duty to Collaborate and devolution to commission and embed evidence based programmes such as IRISi/IRIS+, aligned with Core20PLUS5 and rural health inequality priorities. Invest in digital infrastructure, tele-health and discreet digital safety tools to reach those who cannot physically access services, while retaining safe in-person options. See all those health practitioners who access patients in their homes in rural areas as bridges to other services, including specialist domestic abuse services & ensure they are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and tools they need to identify abuse, including coercive & controlling behaviour, economic abuse and elder abuse. Fund Community Resource Navigators, Link Workers, Health Navigators and Social Prescribers who can reach “unseen” rural residents, co-locate services in emerging rural health hubs, and open conversations on mental health, gender equality and behaviour change.
10. Rural Housing Solutions	Introduce rural housing exemptions and targeted capital investment to unlock safe homes, dispersed housing models, and perpetrator housing options. Embed Whole Housing Approach principles with rural adaptations, including creative initiatives like “Roots to Grow”, and incentivise providers to allocate rural stock for move-on rather than relying on unsuitable temporary accommodation. Use planning tools (e.g. Section 106, rural exception sites) to embed domestic abuse and stalking needs into rural housing strategies.
11. Build Rural Allyship	Engage men, communities, businesses, schools, and faith and church groups as active allies in prevention and cultural change, not just as audiences. Use storytelling and creative practice to engage – particularly those who may need to learn to sit with some discomfort to challenge stigma, shift norms and make rural domestic abuse and stalking visible. Support the development of RiTA’s Rural Ally Network (RRAN)** and similar initiatives to build a strong, loud national voice that lights a path for boys and young men to grow up with emotional literacy, good mental health, a strong sense of self-worth, and respect for women and girls as equals. **Contact RiTA for more information on RRAN
12. Research for Evidence	Targeted research in rural UK areas is needed to understand how inequalities and traditional norms are linked to various forms of abuse. Studies should not homogenise rural communities but recognise differences among groups such as agricultural workers, Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Travellers, LGBTQ+ individuals, young people, older adults, ethnic minorities, migrants, people with disabilities, and residents of diverse rural settings. Research findings should be accessible and inform better policy and practice. Effective studies must include input from those with lived experience and rural practitioners across both specialist and general services who understand local challenges.



View from a mountain in Banff (the Rockies) June 2024



Community connection at its finest - Eudora, Douglas County, Kansas, (see full report) 2024

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See the Full Report [HERE](#)

*“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak,
it’s also what it takes to sit down and listen”*

Winston Churchill



The freephone, 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline
☎ 0808 2000 247

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