



Farmers are falling victim to crimes including thefts, intimidation, arson and vandalism, and hare coursing according to a report by the NFU

Criminals turning rural areas into a 'war zone'

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Police in Kent are powerless to stop a scourge of hare coursing, threats of violence, and thefts hitting the farming community, the minutes of a secret meeting have revealed.

Earlier this year, more than 80 farmers from across Kent met with senior officers from Kent Police, and representatives of the National Farmers' Union, to discuss the

ongoing issues. The minutes of the meeting, which have not been publicly disclosed, reveal an admission by officers that their "hands are tied" by a lack of resources and increasing demand. The 101 crime reporting phone number was also criticised as being slow and often manned by inexperienced staff.

Insp Dave Smith, of Kent Police's Rural Task Force, told farmers rural crime is now "largely run by organised criminals who are potentially violent", and that current laws are "out of date and not fit for

purpose". One member of the farming community told the Kent Messenger: "There's no point trying to confront the criminals because we'll come off worse. It's like a war zone. It's almost untouchable."

The NFU's Combating Rural Crime report, published in July 2017, detailed how farmers across the country are repeatedly falling victim to thefts, intimidation, arson and vandalism, and hare coursing.

Another farmer, who owns thousands of acres of land

across Kent, said that incidences of hare coursing have "grown out of control", and that the animal's existence could be under threat. Coursers also damage crops by driving across fields in cars.

At the meeting, police detailed their ongoing efforts to tackle rural crime, known as Operation Salmon, and said that they plan to double the number of dedicated rural officers from six to 12. Farmers were advised to report crimes quickly, and to install dashcams in their vehicles to try to capture footage of criminals.

Farmers have seen a huge rise in the number of offences

Kent farmers have faced a huge increase in the number of criminals targeting their land, while nationally, less than a third feel the police are doing a good job at protecting them, the annual National Rural Crime Survey has revealed.

Researchers were told agricultural communities felt crimes in rural areas were "hidden by a picture postcard view of the countryside".

Worrying statistics show a 33% rise in the number of rural crimes reported to Kent Police in 2017.

A total of 167,340 were reported last year, a number topped by only five other police forces including Greater Manchester and the Met in Greater London.

The survey also found more than two thirds of farmers and business owners in rural areas had been the victim of crime over the course of 12 months. Recommendations made in



Chief Inspector Alan Rogers

a report from the National Farmers' Union urged chief constables to change the way rural areas are policed.

Other suggestions included making it easier to report crimes and helping more rural businesses to prevent crimes happening in the first place. Ch Insp Alan Rogers said:

"Kent Police has made protecting its rural communities and bringing those who offend in the countryside to justice a priority.

"Kent Police's dedicated Rural Liaison Team is made up of specially-trained officers who have built strong relationships with members of the rural community to help them deter and detect offences.

"Furthermore, they work closely with partner agencies such as the National Farmers Union, the Environment Agency and RSPCA to build a clear picture of rural crime in Kent and organise a number of operations based on the seasonal pattern of offending.

"Typical rural crimes reported to police include theft, fly-tipping, hare coursing and poaching and rural officers attend regular regional and national meetings to share expertise and good practice with other forces."

MP leads countryside meeting

A Rural Business Forum organised by Maidstone and The Weald MP Helen Grant was well attended with the audience hearing from DEFRA Environment Minister Theresa Coffey on Brexit preparations, Kent Police and Crime Commissioner Matthew Scott on rural crime, and the Barclays digital engagement champion Alex Douglas on cyber fraud. Andrew Clarke from Gullands solicitors also gave a speech on some of the legal preparations rural businesses need to consider as Brexit approaches.

The forum was held at the Kenward Conference Centre in Kenward House, Yalding.

Mrs Grant said: "Amid all of the political drama over Brexit it was great to be able to offer something tangible for our rural community to hook into." Around £1,000 was raised for the Kenward Trust, which provides drug and alcohol rehabilitation, at the event.



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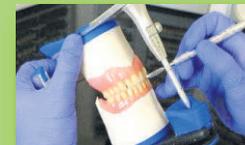
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