Ensuring Domestic Abuse response reaches every Village in Hertfordshire

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Ensuring Domestic Abuse response reaches every Village in Hertfordshire

A countywide response must reach every village. Together, we can challenge abuse and build safer rural communities.

Domestic abuse happens in villages, farms and rural homes. Distance, limited transport, housing insecurity and concerns about privacy can make seeking help more difficult. Perpetrators can exploit those circumstances to deepen their control.

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by domestic abuse. Their experiences must remain central to prevention, protection and recovery. Men also experience abuse and need recognition, a voice in decisions and appropriate support.

For Hertfordshire, the question is practical: **how do we ensure that people living in rural communities can safely access help whilst encouraging their communities to visibly stand against abuse?**

CDA Herts' 16 Days of Action campaign, running from 25 November to 10 December 2026, brings those ambitions together. Walking together is a public statement of solidarity and determination. It must connect with a lasting commitment to safety, support and change.

Rural life can create additional barriers to safety

Rural communities have considerable strengths. Familiar faces, local organisations and strong relationships can help people feel connected and supported. Those same relationships can make disclosure difficult when someone fears being recognised, disbelieved or discussed.

The National Rural Crime Network's *Captive and Controlled* research, published in 2019, identified particular barriers for people experiencing domestic abuse in rural areas. It reported that abuse lasted longer, on average, in the rural areas studied. This research remains an important warning about isolation and restricted access to help. [1]

The government's Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance also recognises rural barriers, including isolation from support networks, difficulties accessing services and poor digital connectivity. [2]

The implications go beyond the distance between a home and a service. Someone experiencing abuse may have no independent access to a car, money or a private telephone, and be miles from any help. Online support may be difficult to use safely if a device is monitored or shared.

A service can be available across a county without being safely accessible from every village.

Experiences must shape the rural response

Hertfordshire's response sits within a wider commitment to tackle violence against women and girls. Domestic abuse includes physical and sexual violence, economic abuse, coercive control, stalking and emotional abuse. These behaviours can overlap and continue after a relationship ends. [2]

For women in rural communities, seeking safety may involve difficult decisions about children, housing, employment and income and remaining close to trusted support. Public information and service arrangements need to recognise those practical circumstances.

BBC Wales reporting in October 2026 brought these issues into sharp focus through the experiences of Tracy Lewis and Rhianon Bragg. Their accounts illustrate how isolation can intersect with abuse, and how a home, farming livelihood, animals and family relationships can become bound together.

The article also highlights the costs of reaching dispersed communities and the importance of support for children. These are Welsh experiences rather than evidence of the scale of abuse in Hertfordshire, but the questions they raise are relevant here. [3]

Safety planning needs to consider the circumstances that enable continued control. It must preserve women's choices and avoid placing responsibility for stopping abuse on those experiencing it.

Male victims need recognition and a proper voice

Men can experience physical and sexual violence, economic abuse, coercive control, stalking and abuse within families. Their experiences should be reflected clearly in public information and routes to support.

The government's *Men and Boys Explanatory Note*, accompanying its national Violence Against Women and Girls strategy, acknowledges that male victims can be overlooked. It identifies barriers including shame, harmful stereotypes and fears of not being believed. [4]

For a man living in a small community, concerns about privacy may sit alongside uncertainty about whether a service is intended for him. Campaign messages should make clear that men can experience domestic abuse and are entitled to be taken seriously.

Male survivors should have opportunities to influence rural service design. Commissioners should be able to explain how men can access suitable support and accommodation where needed.

Recognising women's disproportionate experience of abuse and giving male victims a proper voice are both necessary. Support should reflect each person's circumstances and needs.

Home, livelihood and care can restrict choices

For someone whose housing, employment and transport depend on the same household or business, seeking safety may bring fears about losing their home, income, animals or connection to their community.

Older people may face additional dependencies. Hourglass highlights how reliance on another person for care and support, family relationships and assumptions about older age can create barriers to recognising abuse and seeking help. Abuse may involve a partner, an adult child or another family member. [5]

People's experiences are also shaped by disability, sexuality, ethnicity, immigration circumstances and other factors. Rural service planning should examine how these circumstances interact with geography, rather than assume one route to support will work for everyone.

National policy needs to work in rural places

Judith Vickress's *Rural Domestic Abuse — The Paradox of Community* draws on international learning and argues for responses built around rural realities. It offers learning about coordination between rural organisations and specialist domestic abuse services. It is not a measure of domestic abuse prevalence in Hertfordshire. [6]

The government's national Violence Against Women and Girls action plan commits to gathering evidence from rural stakeholders about the availability of support and effective delivery methods. This creates an opportunity for rural experience to influence national decisions. Evidence gathering must lead to practical improvements in access. [7]

ACRE has also raised the issue. Its 2023–24 annual report records concerns about limited recognition of rural circumstances in the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's annual report. [8]

There is practical experience within the rural community sector. Rural Action Derbyshire's Willow Project uses awareness training, film and community engagement to address rural domestic abuse. Derbyshire's Rural Crime Strategy connects this work with wider partnership activity. Hertfordshire can learn from these examples while considering local needs, existing services and resources. [9, 10]

Building on Hertfordshire's existing response

Hertfordshire's Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2026–2029 provides the current partnership framework. Its priorities cover prevention, action against those causing harm, increased safety and support after harm. It recognises the disproportionate impact on women and girls while also addressing the needs of men, boys and non-binary people. [11]

The county's earlier Domestic Abuse Pathways Project examined victims' and survivors' support needs and their experiences of services. Hertfordshire Constabulary's VAWG Strategy 2026–2028 provides a further policing framework. [12, 13]

The task is to make rural access visible within delivery.

The sources reviewed for this paper do not establish a current rural domestic abuse prevalence rate for Hertfordshire. That does not mean no relevant information is collected. It makes the case for bringing the available rural evidence together and making it accessible.

Recorded incidents and referrals cannot, by themselves, show how many people need help or explain why others have not come forward. A low number of referrals from a village should prompt questions about access, awareness and confidence.

Five priorities for rural Hertfordshire

1. Make rural access explicit in delivery plans

The county partnership, commissioners and police should identify how their plans address rural circumstances, who is responsible and how progress will be reviewed.

That should include transport, private communication, housing, outreach and access outside larger towns. Rural access needs to influence service design and funding from the outset.

2. Test the journey to support

Commissioners and providers should examine what accessing help involves for someone without a car, independent money, reliable connectivity or a safe device.

This should inform appointment arrangements, safe contact methods, outreach and practical assistance. Public information should clearly explain who a service supports and where someone can turn if it cannot meet their needs.

3. Make rural experience visible in monitoring

It should be possible to establish what available evidence tells us about domestic abuse in rural Hertfordshire. Countywide figures alone cannot show whether people in villages and isolated homes are being reached.

We call on the county partnership, police and commissioners to establish a shared rural monitoring approach and publish an accessible summary. This should bring together:

- Reported domestic abuse incidents and offences.
- Referrals, access to specialist support and waiting times.
- Barriers to access and unmet need identified by services and survivors.
- Differences by sex and other relevant characteristics, where numbers allow safe and meaningful reporting.

Partners should use a consistent definition of rural areas, explain gaps and limitations, and protect confidentiality where small numbers could identify individuals. Measures should distinguish incidents, individual victims and service contacts to avoid misleading comparisons.

Recorded incidents must not be presented as the full prevalence of abuse. Low reporting may reflect barriers to disclosure or support, while an increase may reflect greater confidence in seeking help.

Survivor feedback should inform the monitoring approach, with safe opportunities for women, men and groups whose experiences may be overlooked to contribute.

The aim is to make rural needs visible, identify gaps in provision and track whether access improves.

4. Connect safety with housing and livelihoods

Housing, domestic abuse, health and policing partners should consider the dependencies that may restrict someone's choices.

Where relevant, this includes tied accommodation, family businesses, financial control, caring arrangements and concerns about animals. Specialist advice and coordinated planning are essential.

Responsibility for preventing further harm must remain focused on the person causing it.

5. Give communities a clear and supported role

Parish councils, village halls, employers and community organisations can challenge harmful attitudes and share accurate information about specialist support.

They need clear boundaries and appropriate training. Volunteers should not be expected to investigate abuse, mediate between those involved or manage dangerous situations.

Communities can demonstrate that abusive behaviour will not be excused and that people seeking help will be treated with dignity.

16 Days of Action — communities taking a stand

CDA Herts' 16 Days of Action campaign invites people across rural Hertfordshire to walk together and make a visible statement: **domestic abuse is unacceptable in our communities.**

"Not around here" expresses the standard we stand for and our determination to act. It means refusing to excuse abusive behaviour, challenging attitudes that allow it to continue, and standing alongside people experiencing abuse.

Domestic abuse happens in rural communities. By walking together, we acknowledge that reality and show that victims should not have to face it alone.

Everyone is welcome. Nobody needs to disclose an experience of abuse or explain why they are taking part. The campaign will recognise the disproportionate impact on women and girls while making clear that male victims also deserve recognition and support.

The walks turn individual concern into a shared public commitment. Parish councils, village halls, employers, local groups and residents can demonstrate the values they expect their communities to uphold.

That commitment must carry beyond the campaign: knowing where specialist help is available, responding appropriately when someone seeks support, and pressing for services that rural residents can safely access.

CDA Herts brings rural knowledge, community connections and a platform for collective action. Specialist services provide individual safety advice and support.

We propose a focused discussion with Hertfordshire's existing partnership and relevant commissioners to identify where rural access is working well, where gaps remain and which practical improvements should follow.

We walk together to say: domestic abuse has no place here, and people experiencing it have our support.

Will you join us?

Sources and further reading

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3. **Gemma Dunstan, BBC Wales**, *"Dad dragged me out of bed by my hair to work" — rural abuse victims want more support*, 6 October 2026, updated 7 October 2026. Article

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7. **HM Government**, *Freedom from Violence and Abuse*, Volume 2 action plan. National action plan

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12. **Hertfordshire Domestic Abuse Pathways Project**, *A review of the support needs of victims and survivors of domestic abuse in Hertfordshire and how they are currently being met* (2021–22). Report

13. **Hertfordshire Constabulary**, *Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2026–2028*. Police strategy

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