

SIPR Briefing Paper 3/2026

Lights Under a Bushel:

Visibility Research for Police Scotland

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Executive Summary

This briefing summarises an independent SIPR funded qualitative study exploring how communities across Scotland understand police visibility, reassurance and trust. The research involved ten focus groups with 95 participants across Fife, Tayside and Angus. Findings show that visible policing remains closely linked to reassurance, safety and confidence, but that visibility now extends beyond foot patrols to include local engagement, marked vehicles, partnership working, local facilities and digital communication.

What Works

- Locally known officers who build relationships with communities before problems escalate.
- Visible patrols - on foot, cycle or in vehicles - targeted to local context and need.
- Partnership working with councils, youth work, schools, community groups and local services.
- Respectful, fair and culturally aware engagement with young people and marginalised communities.
- Clear communication, both online and offline, about police priorities, roles and outcomes.

Key Findings

- 1.** Police visibility remains strongly associated with public reassurance, safety and confidence.
- 2.** Communities define visibility more broadly than the traditional image of officers on foot patrol.
- 3.** Familiar, approachable officers are valued because they support trust and everyday engagement.
- 4.** Rural, small town and peripheral communities can feel overlooked or less visible to policing.
- 5.** Young people emphasise fairness and respectful treatment, while many participants recognise resource pressures on officers.

Next Steps

- 1.** Support neighbourhood policing models with locally identifiable officers.
- 2.** Target visible presence where fear of crime, vulnerability or community concern is highest.
- 3.** Strengthen engagement with young people and communities that are seldom heard.
- 4.** Improve communication about police roles, powers, priorities and outcomes.
- 5.** Expand partnership approaches to prevention, problem solving and community safety.
- 6.** Recognise digital communication as an important part of modern police visibility.

Conclusion

The study shows that communities continue to value visible policing, but presence alone is not enough. Trust is built through accessibility, fairness, communication and sustained relationships. A modern community policing model that combines physical presence with meaningful engagement offers a strong route to improving confidence in policing across Scotland.