

We are encouraging those living in rural communities to look out for the signs of domestic abuse, as a recent report reveals survivors living in more isolated rural areas are less likely to report it or ask for help.

According to the report, which was published by the National Rural Crime Network (NRCN), of which we are members, abuse lasts, on average 25% longer in rural locations with victims half as likely to report abuse. Between 2016 and 2018 we logged an 8.3% increase in the total number of reported domestic abuse cases in Avon and Somerset, reflecting an improvement in police response and growing confidence in victims to report to us. However, those living in rural areas are still at high risk of under-reporting for a number of reasons such as: lack of access to available services due to location, fear of reprisals from tight-knit communities, as well as the stigma and shame associated with domestic abuse.

Superintendent Deryck Rees, Avon and Somerset Police force lead for Domestic Abuse comments: "In support of the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence, we are encouraging those living in rural locations to be aware of the signs of domestic abuse and how to report.

"It's not always easy to immediately recognise the signs that someone is being abused. But, if you notice something isn't quite right with a friend, neighbour, or someone from your community, we urge you to look, listen, ask and ask again. Some of the things to look out for could be your friend being texted an inappropriate number of times by their partner when they aren't together, sudden lack of contact from someone, or over-hearing abusive language from neighbours during an argument.

"Throughout the 16 Days of Activism we want to send the message that domestic abuse isn't something limited to urban areas, it can happen anywhere, and to anyone. We all have a responsibility to look out for the signs of someone being manipulated and abused.

If you do decide you would like to speak to the police you can call 101. Or you can get advice from specialist services in your area. If you or someone else is in immediate danger – call 999."

Julia Mulligan, Chair of the National Rural Crime Network, said: "Our research shows clearly that domestic abuse is hidden under our noses, hidden by abusers who like to keep it that way and on a scale of abuse hitherto unseen.

"All parties with a duty to help victims; the police, support services, charities, Police and Crime Commissioners, health services, and many others, need to understand that we have missed this. We have let victims and survivors down. We have collectively failed. We need to put that right.

“We need to better protect the women, children and men in rural communities who suffer daily at the hands of calculating, manipulating, controlling and violent abusers. I hope this campaign helps achieve that across Avon and Somerset.”

Trudi Grant, Director of Public Health at Somerset County Council said:
“Domestic abuse can happen to anyone, and from every walk of life. The signs of domestic abuse are often difficult to spot, and it can take a whole range of physical and emotional forms. If you are worried about someone, remember that if something doesn’t feel right to you, it probably isn’t. Don’t ignore a gut feeling or the small signs, but seek professional advice first before you try to help.”

Signs you are in an abusive relationship:

Your partner is violent or threatening towards you

Your partner criticises you and puts you down

Your partner is controlling about what you do, where you go, who you see or what you spend

You feel afraid of your partner

You think you are to blame for the way your partner treats you

You feel embarrassed when your friends and family see how partner treats you

Signs someone you know may be in an abusive relationship:

They withdraw from their circle of friends and do less with other people

They receive lots of phone calls or texts from their partner when they are not with them

They become anxious when they might be home late or plans change

They have unexplained bruises or physical injuries.

For more information about organisations and services for domestic abuse victims, please visit: www.thisisnotanexcuse.org