# Scottish Police Authority – Policing in Scotland

**Report by Diffley Partnership**

February 2025

**Diffley**
Partnership

*From many voices to smart choices*

# Contents

# Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a series of focus groups conducted with members of the Scottish public who reported low levels of trust and confidence in Police Scotland. Discussions explored public perceptions of antisocial behaviour, the effectiveness of policing, and the role of technology within policing in Scotland.

## Key Findings

**Antisocial Behaviour (ASB) is a persistent concern, but reporting concerns is seen as ineffective.**
Participants expressed frustration with police responses to ASB, noting that reports often result in little to no action. Many were uncertain about alternative agencies to report ASB to, with some feeling passed between police and local authorities without resolution. Better understanding of who is responsible for ASB within the community is required.

**Trust and confidence in Police Scotland are driven by concerns over visibility, responsiveness, and priorities.**
Participants felt that policing has become too reactive rather than proactive, with a lack of community presence and engagement. Many believed that officers prioritise low-level enforcement (e.g., speeding fines) over tackling local concerns such as vandalism and disorder.

**Technology in policing is seen as useful, but not a substitute for traditional engagement.**
While participants recognised the benefits of CCTV, data-driven crime prediction, and online reporting, many were concerned that over-reliance on technology could reduce face-to-face policing and public accessibility. There was interest in community-based digital engagement tools, but scepticism about whether such platforms would lead to real action.

## Implications for Police Scotland

Findings suggest that Police Scotland can improve public trust by strengthening community engagement and ensuring transparency in decision-making.

Participants do not understand who they should be making ASB reports to. Public awareness of community safety partnerships should be increased to ensure police time is not wasted.

Police Scotland could use technology that enhances, but does not replace, frontline policing.

# 1. Background and Methodology

## 1.1 Background

Diffley Partnership was commissioned to conduct regular polling of the Scottish adult (16+) public on policing in Scotland and related issues of interest to the Scottish Police Authority (SPA). This polling is bi-annual and is completed using the ScotPulse online panel.

As part of this polling, respondents were given the opportunity to take part in follow-up qualitative research. Three focus groups were conducted with those who identified as those with low (0-3) trust and confidence in the police, and their self reported level of trust and confidence has declined over the past 12 months.

## 1.2 Methodology

The focus groups were held online via Zoom online video software on Tuesday 26th November 2024, Wednesday 27th November 2024 and Thursday 9th January 2025. A total of 11 people took part in the focus groups.  The profile of participants relating to their age, gender and location[1] is included in Table 1.1. Participants were selected from their survey responses. People were invited to participate if they indicated they had low (0-3 on a 0-10 scale) trust and low confidence in the Police now and if this had decreased over the past 12 months.

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[1] Scottish Government Urban Rural 6 Fold Classification has been used to determine rurality

**Table 1.1: Profile of participants**

| Reference | Focus group | Age | Gender | Rurality |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | 44 | Male | 1 – Large urban area |
| 2 | 1 | 59 | Female | 5 – Accessible rural |
| 3 | 2 | 54 | Female | Unknown – new build housing |
| 4 | 2 | 60 | Male | 2 – Other urban area |
| 5 | 2 | 77 | Male | 2 – Other urban area |
| 6 | 3 | 55 | Female | 3 – Accessible small town |
| 7 | 3 | 33 | Female | 3 – Accessible small town |
| 8 | 3 | 44 | Female | Unknown – new build housing |
| 9 | 3 | 43 | Male | 2 – Other urban area |
| 10 | 3 | 47 | Female | Unknown – new build housing |
| 11 | 3 | 42 | Female | 2 – Other urban area |

The full discussion guide can be found in Appendix 1 which includes key sections on Antisocial Behaviour, use of technology and perceptions of Police Scotland,

Participants were provided with an information sheet prior to the session which outlined requirements and provided assurance that personal interactions with the police did not need to be detailed. When participants shared more detail, they were reminded they were under no obligation and facilitators checked in regularly to ensure all participants wanted to continue in the session.

## 1.3 Report Structure

This report presents findings from the focus group discussions, exploring key themes and perceptions related to policing in Scotland. The structure follows the discussion topics, covering:

- Antisocial Behaviour – Defining ASB, public perceptions, and reporting experiences.

- Perceptions of Police Scotland – Trust, confidence, and views on police priorities.

- Advancing Technology – Reactions to police use of technology and digital engagement.

The discussions were transcribed and analysed thematically, with illustrative quotes included throughout the report to highlight key perspectives.

# 2. Antisocial Behaviour

This chapter explores participants perceptions of Antisocial Behaviour (ASB), including their reactions to different scenarios, how they define ASB and their experiences with reporting it.

## 2.1 Key Findings

- Participants defined ASB broadly as behaviour that negatively impacts others' quality of life, even if it is not explicitly criminal.
- Younger people (ages 14-18) were frequently cited as the main group engaging in these behaviours.
- Common concerns included excessive noise, littering, misuse of fireworks, uncontrolled dogs and underage drinking.
- Social media was perceived as a driver of ASB, with some participants believing young people engage in disruptive behaviour to gain online validation.
- Reporting ASB was seen as ineffective, with some participants feeling passed around between the police and their local council.

## 2.2 Reactions to Antisocial Behaviour

To explore perceptions of ASB, participants were presented with two contrasting scenarios set on a beach and asked to share their reactions.

These scenarios were rotated for each focus group, to eliminate response bias through the ordering of the scenarios. Participants were then asked to share their reaction to the scenario using the poll functionality within Zoom software.

> **SCENARIO 1:** *You're walking along the beach and see* two adults with their two children. They have an area set up with some camping chairs, enjoying the evening. They're watching the sunset, you can see a bottle of wine, and can hear some classical music they have playing. They're well-dressed, have their pet spaniel with them, and they arrived in a nice car.

> **SCENARIO 2:** *You walk along the same beach and see* four young people gathered on the beach in the evening. You can see bottles of cider and carrier bags of food. They are wearing sportswear and you can see their tattoos and coloured hair. They have some dance music playing and are signing along. One young person has their bulldog with them.

Many issues were raised by participants, including:

Dog control – several participants noted that the scenarios lacked details about whether the dogs were on a leash, with one stating:

> "I absolutely cannot cope with dogs barking—if they're not controlled and on a lead, it makes me anxious."

Some participants admitted they were more likely to feel uneasy about the group in Scenario 2 due to their appearance, even though their behaviour wasn't necessarily disruptive.

However, Alcohol consumption was a central concern. Some participants worried about potential drink-driving in Scenario 1:

> "If they're having a bottle of wine and getting in a car with children, that would bother me."

Indeed, speculating on this then led to questions about the welfare of the children in the scenario:

> "I would be concerned if the children maybe weren't getting looked after well because the beach can be a dangerous place if children aren't supervised."

However, participants often wanted more information to contextualise the scenarios. This included information about who was consuming alcohol in scenario one, how they would get home and if there was any residential areas close by.

While no participant indicated they would report the behaviour on display in these scenarios, there was a feeling that excessive noise, intimidation and drink driving would provoke a response.

On a somewhat related theme, some participants expressed that they "didn't care" what people looked like as long as there was no violence or harassment involved in the situation. However, when providing anecdotes of anti-social behaviour in their communities the appearance of "youths in hoods" was commonly mentioned.

## 2.3 Defining Antisocial Behaviour

Participants broadly agreed that ASB includes any behaviour that negatively impacts others' well-being, even if it is not explicitly illegal.

Many participants shared examples of what they deem antisocial behaviour, including:

- misuse of fireworks
- uncontrolled dogs
- inappropriate use of e-scooters (e.g. on pavements, speed passing pedestrians)
- excessive noise from neighbours (e.g. having a house party)
- dog fouling
- littering
- underage drinking and public disorder

While participants acknowledged that not all young people engage in ASB, many shared experiences where groups of teenagers were involved in disruptive behaviour, including vandalism, verbal abuse and intimidation.

One participant shared the impact ABS has on their life:

> "I can't go out at night. The local cinema has films on for my daughters age group at 5:30 and I can't go down there because that's where the kids hang out."

Indeed, it was clear from the discussions that ASB was more than nuisance behaviour and some recollection of behaviour in the community blurs the line between ASB and criminal behaviour:

> "The youths have just been wrecking things, setting fire to bins and beating up old grannies at the bus stations. It's getting completely out of control."

Some also linked social media to ASB, stating that young people engage in reckless behaviour to record and share online for attention:

> "They're always doing more daring things. It's to post on social media, put on snapchat and stuff. So they just say to each other 'go punch him' or 'go take her bag' and there's always people recording it and it gets views."

However, a few participants expressed empathy for younger people, noting the lack of services and facilities for youths to engage with:

> "There should be more youth clubs like when I was younger. We had so many opportunities like brownies, youth clubs, guides."

## 2.4 Reporting Antisocial Behaviour

Most participants have never reported ASB but believed the police were the default authority for dealing with it. Frustrations were expressed about the lack of response and accountability.

Those who had reported ASB felt they were passed between agencies, with police referring them to the council and vice versa:

> "It's really hard work to report it because I've tried to report it both to the police and to the council. The council said go to the police and the police said to go to the council and it's like, can somebody please help?"

Some hesitated to report ASB, believing the police should focus on more serious issues suggesting local authorities could do more:

> "No I don't think [responding to ASB] should be a policing issue. No. I think police resources should be used for investigating criminal matters. I think the council should maybe do more."

There was little awareness of community safety initiatives or alternative reporting mechanisms. Some participants could name the council as an agency that "should take to do with ASB", but couldn't name or recall any specific community initiatives geared towards monitoring or tackling ABS in their local area.

Due to the low-level awareness of community safety partnerships, the majority of participants deemed Police Scotland to be the responsible agency for dealing with ASB. Unsurprisingly this meant participants generally felt that Police Scotland lacked visibility and engagement in tackling ASB. Many expressed a desire for more proactive community policing rather than a wholly reactive approach to incidents.

Participants expressed frustration with Police Scotland's response to anti-social behaviour. They highlighted issues such as the lack of police presence, inadequate community engagement and poor handling of reports.

# 3. Perceptions of Police Scotland

This chapter explores participants' low levels of trust and confidence in Police Scotland, exploring challenges and ways Police Scotland could rebuild relationships.

## 3.1 Key Findings

- Many participants recalled a time when policing was more community-focused but now perceive officers as distant and unresponsive. Negative personal experiences—such as poor crime response and lack of follow-up—reinforced this distrust.
- Police are seen as reactive rather than proactive. Participants felt that officers focus on enforcing minor infractions rather than preventing crime or tackling antisocial behaviour and local concerns.
- Perceptions of bias in policing exist. Some believed certain groups or communities were over-policed, while other issues were ignored or deprioritised.
- Participants had clear ideas on how to rebuild trust. They called for more visible policing, better responsiveness, stronger community engagement, and collaboration with local agencies.
- Youth engagement was seen as key. Many felt that early intervention through schools or youth programs could help improve relationships between young people and the police.

## 3.2 Trust and Confidence in Police Scotland

Participants generally expressed low levels of trust and confidence in Police Scotland, citing past negative experiences, lack of visible policing, and a perceived failure to address local issues. Many reflected on a time when they felt more positively about policing, often before the formation of Police Scotland as a national force.

For some, personal interactions had shaped their distrust, with reports of police officers being dismissive, slow to respond, or lacking in knowledge. One participant described frustration after reporting a stolen bike, only to be met with police inaction:

> "I saw someone steal a bike right in front of me. I reported it, and nothing happened. They just didn't seem interested."

Another participant, who had attempted to report a break-in, shared a similar experience, noting that unless an incident gains media attention, it is often deprioritised.

> "Unless it makes the news, they don't care. House break-ins? They won't even come out."

While some participants sympathised with the police and acknowledged staffing and funding pressures, this did not necessarily translate into greater trust. Instead, many questioned how existing police resources were being used and whether policing priorities aligned with public concerns:

> "I get that they're stretched, but where's the effort going? Why do we have so many officers handing out speeding tickets but not enough dealing with vandalism and anti-social behaviour?"

Additionally, there was a strong sense that the police have lost their connection with communities, particularly in comparison to other emergency services. Unlike the Scottish Ambulance Service, which was widely seen as responsive and compassionate, the police were often viewed as distant and disengaged:

> "People respect the ambulance service because they're there when you need them. The police? You rarely see them unless something bad has already happened."

For some, this disconnect stemmed from a perceived decline in community-based policing, with participants recalling a time when local officers were familiar, visible, and approachable. One participant contrasted their current experience with their childhood:

> "Growing up, you knew your local officers by name. Now? They're just a voice on the end of the 101 service, if you can even get through."

## 3.3 Challenges in Police Scotland's Approach

A recurring theme in discussions was that Police Scotland is too reactive rather than proactive. Participants believed the police often respond to incidents rather than preventing them, leading to a sense of ineffectiveness in tackling persistent issues such as antisocial behaviour, drug use, and minor crimes.

One participant noted:

> "They always seem to be chasing after problems instead of preventing them in the first place. It's like firefighting instead of problem-solving."

Additionally, there was a perception that the police prioritise easy-to-handle issues—such as enforcing speed limits—while neglecting community concerns. Participants were particularly frustrated by the focus on low-level offences at the expense of tackling visible social problems:

> "I see them pulling people over for minor speeding, but where are they when fireworks are going off at 2 a.m.? Or when someone's causing trouble outside my flat?"

Some participants also raised concerns about bias and fairness in policing, particularly in how different groups are treated. One individual felt that certain communities were disproportionately policed:

> "They're quick to show up when teenagers are hanging around, but if it's middle-aged men causing trouble, they don't seem as bothered."

Participants also discussed their frustrations with reporting crimes and receiving little to no follow-up. The 101 non-emergency service was widely criticised, with some saying they had waited hours on hold or never received a response at all:

> "I tried reporting an issue and gave up after waiting on the line for 40 minutes. If they don't want to hear from us, how are they meant to help?"

While many recognised that underfunding and policy constraints impact policing, they still felt that improvements in engagement and prioritisation were necessary.

## 3.4 Rebuilding Trust and Improving Police Engagement

Despite their frustrations, participants had clear ideas on how Police Scotland could rebuild trust and confidence. The most commonly suggested improvements included:

**Increased visibility and community policing**. Participants called for a return to local, familiar officers who engage with residents and address concerns before they escalate.

> "We need to see them walking the streets again, not just driving past in cars."

**Better responsiveness and follow-ups.** Many felt the police should communicate more effectively after incidents are reported, ensuring the public knows what actions (if any) have been taken.

> "Even a simple follow-up call to say 'we looked into it' would go a long way."

**More proactive youth engagement.** Some participants believed that early intervention with young people—through school visits or youth programs—could help prevent antisocial behaviour before it escalates.

> "If they had more positive interactions with young people, maybe they wouldn't see the police as the enemy."

**Focusing on real community concerns.** Participants wanted police to prioritise the issues that impact daily life, such as antisocial behaviour, vandalism, and neighbourhood disturbances.

> "Nobody's asking them to ignore crime, but they need to start tackling the things that actually make people feel unsafe."

**Partnerships with local agencies.** Some suggested that collaboration with councils, community wardens, and local organisations could improve responses to social issues that police alone may not have the resources to handle.

> "The police don't need to do it all—but they should at least be working with the right people to get things done."

> "I think it's also like a lack of awareness as to where we can go and who we go to with these issues."

As this is something which is well established, Police Scotland may want to review how this is publicised to raise awareness within communities.

While there was scepticism that significant change would happen soon, participants were open to trusting the police again if they saw genuine effort to engage with communities, improve responsiveness, and address local concerns more effectively.

# 4. Advancing Technology

This chapter explores public perceptions of police use of technology, including its role in crime prevention, data-driven policing, and community reporting platforms. Discussions focused on whether technology is being effectively utilised, the balance between digital tools and frontline policing, and the potential benefits and drawbacks of online reporting systems.

## 4.1 Key Findings

- Technology is widely accepted in policing but concerns remain. While participants acknowledged the benefits of CCTV, forensic tools, and predictive analytics, some questioned whether Police Scotland is using these resources effectively.
- Predictive policing was met with mixed reactions. Some felt it could help identify crime hotspots, while others worried that technology alone cannot account for local context or individual circumstances.
- Community reporting platforms received a mixed response. While some believed they could streamline reporting and improve communication, others worried about misuse, lack of police follow-up, and excessive complaints about minor issues.
- Technology alone cannot replace community engagement. There was a strong consensus that face-to-face interactions remain essential for building trust between the police and the public.
- Some participants rejected digital reporting altogether. A lack of faith in the system and aversion to social media led some to dismiss the idea of community portals as a viable reporting method.

## 4.2 Support for Police Use of Technology

Participants acknowledged that technology is already an integral part of policing, particularly for tasks such as CCTV monitoring, forensic analysis, and data-driven crime prediction. However, there were mixed views on whether Police Scotland is using technology effectively.

Some participants felt that technology could help predict and manage recurring issues, such as large public gatherings or antisocial behaviour hotspots.

Indeed, one participant was particularly keen to share intelligence through a hypothetical portal with the police gathered from their home:

"The stuff people put on the community Facebook can be valuable, it would cut the police's workload in half, you know, because people's naming people and now we have things like 'ring' doorbells and that's perfect. 100% the police should be allowed to look at that."

Others questioned whether resources were being allocated efficiently, expressing concerns that digital tools were being prioritised over frontline policing.

While participants generally supported the use of predictive analytics, some were sceptical about how well such tools could account for local context and individual circumstances. There were also concerns about whether increased reliance on technology could lead to reduced human judgment in decision-making.

## 4.3 Community Portal

Participants also explored the concept of community-based reporting platforms, where members of the public could log complaints or concerns online.

Some participants supported this idea, believing it could streamline reporting, improve communication, and allow communities to track issues collectively.

"It seems like quite a valuable resource for police, cutting out the middleman."

"It does sound good because like if we're all sort of pulling our resources it would be like a sort of neighbourhood watch type thing"

However, others raised concerns about the potential for misuse, including excessive complaints about minor nuisances or a lack of police follow-up on reports.

"It could be a good idea, but you'll get people just complaining for the sake of it."

There was also a general consensus that technology alone cannot replace direct community engagement. While digital platforms may improve accessibility, participants felt that face-to-face interactions remain essential for building trust between the police and the public. Some people refused to consider this as a viable option for reporting incidents. This was because a lack of faith in the process and an aversion to using digital reporting tools.

# Appendix 1: Discussion Guide

## Scottish Police Authority

**Discussion Guide – draft 1, November 2024**

### Set up (3 mins)

Introduce self/Diffley Partnership Team
Welcome to the interview/ focus group–
- Explain the discussion will last up to 90minutes.
- There will be plenty of time to get your views across and discuss issues between yourselves, something we encourage; my role is to keep the conversation flowing, ensuring we cover the broad areas we need to and ask any follow-up questions,
- Fully anonymous and confidential; The Diffley Partnership abide by the Market Research Society Code of Practice and the SRA Ethical Guidelines.
- Request permission to record discussion – with your permission I will record the discussion; this is just so we can go back and listen again after the discussion

**Do you have any questions before we start?**

### Introductions and opening discussion (5 mins)

**To begin, I want to give everyone the opportunity to briefly introduce yourselves: your first name and where abouts you live in Scotland.**

### ASB Activity (20 minutes)

**I'm going to read out two scenarios and you'll see a pop up on your screen with some questions to answer each time.**

**SCENARIO 1:** You're walking along the beach and see two adults with their two children. They have an area set up with some camping chairs, enjoying the evening. They're watching the sunset, you can see a bottle of wine, and can hear some classical music they have playing. They're well-dressed, have their pet spaniel with them, and they arrived in a nice car.

POLL APPEARS ON SCREEN:

1) **To what extent are you worried about the behaviour you witnessed?** SCALE: very concerned, somewhat concerned, not very concerned, not at all concerned,

2) **How likely are you to report the behaviour you have witnessed here?** SCALE: Very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, very unlikely

**SCENARIO 2:** You walk along the same beach and see four young people gathered on the beach in the evening. You can see bottles of cider and carrier bags of food. They are wearing sportswear and you can see their tattoos and coloured hair. They have some dance music playing and are signing along. One person has their bulldog with them.

POLL APPEARS ON SCREEN:

1) **To what extent are you worried about the behaviour you witnessed?** SCALE: very concerned, somewhat concerned, not very concerned, not at all concerned,

2) **How likely are you to report the behaviour you have witnessed here?** SCALE: Very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, very unlikely

**Would anyone like to share how they felt when presented with the two scenarios?**

Prompt: What were the main differences? (prompt for anxiety)

Prompt: What would trigger you to report the incident to the police?

**What does antisocial behaviour in your neighbourhood look like to you?**

Prompt: how would you describe antisocial behaviour?

*[Note for facilitator: Want to explore the differences between perceptions towards antisocial behaviour (parties/dogs/joy riding) and criminal offences put under the banner of antisocial behaviour (speeding, drugs).]*

## Individual experiences (10 mins)

**Now, I want to understand your individual experiences when reporting issues. You are under no obligation to share details of the incident you have reported.**

**Does anyone in the group have any experience reporting crime to the police?**

Prompt: reporting antisocial behaviour? Who did you report antisocial behaviour to?

**Does anyone in the group have any experience reporting antisocial behaviour?**

Prompt: Who did you report this to?

Prompt: Do you think the police are the best agency to report ABS to?

Prompt: community safety partnerships?

## Use of technology (20 mins)

**There are some recurring events the police need to respond to. For example, fireworks. Everyone knows when these will be on sale and when they will become problematic. How supportive would you be of the police using technology to predict other recurring events?**

**Thinking about social media, there are an increasing number of community-based groups appearing whether that be on Facebook or WhatsApp. Often there are posts about things happening in the community, such as bad parking, nuisance fireworks. Currently there is no**

obligation for the police to use this as intelligence, nor would people expect the police to be monitoring this.

**How supportive would you be of the creation of a local community discussion portal, where you can lodge these types of complaints?**

Prompt: Who do you think should respond? (Police, community safety partnership)

Prompt: How much follow up information would you want? (e.g. acknowledgement of concern, details about actions taken as result)

Prompt: What if you could see that other people have already reported the same concerns?

## Perceptions of Police Scotland (25mins)

**How would you describe Police Scotland?**

[Prompt: What comes to mind when you think of Police Scotland?]

[Prompt: Are Police Scotland reactive or proactive?]

**How well do you think Police Scotland engages with your community?**

[Prompt: Do you think there is a police presence? Would you describe this as positive or negative?]

**What could Police Scotland do better in your local area?**

**How would you describe your current level of trust and confidence in Police Scotland?**

[Prompt: Why is that?]

[Prompt: Have you always felt that way? If not, then what has changed? Why has your level of confidence/trust changed?]

**What could the police do to earn/earn back your confidence/trust?**

**How does this compare to other emergency services?**

[Prompt: What do these services do that Police Scotland don't?]

**What types of things should local police focus on?**

**Who should they partner with in these areas**

[Prompt: Local authority, residents associations]

[Prompt: Do you know what issues the police deal with locally?]

[Prompt: responsibility for anti-social behaviour]

## Conclusions and wrap-up (2 mins)

Thank you very much for the discussion, **is there anything not already covered that you would like to mention?**

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*From many voices to smart choices*