

PCC and CC Force Inspection response record

Version Dec 2024

Force	Staffordshire
Police and Crime Commissioner	Ben Adams
Chief Constable	Acting Chief Constable Becky Riggs
Title of inspection	Inspection of firearms licensing across police forces in England and Wales
Published Date	28 th August 2026
Inspectorate	 HMICFRS Making communities safer
Summary of inspection	To examine how police forces keep the public safe while making sure that their possession of firearms is lawful. We considered the effectiveness and efficiency of: • national guidance and legislation; • local policies and processes; • national, regional and local governance arrangements; • training for firearms licensing personnel; and • funding and resourcing.
Grade	
Recommendations	Twenty-three recommendations with five for Chief Constables. Recommendation 13: Ensure force delegation schemes comply with authorised professional practice and are being followed. Recommendation 14: Introduce audit and dip-sampling arrangements for firearms licensing decisions. Recommendation 20: Ensure every force has a firearms licensing governance structure and performance framework. Recommendation 21: Ensure every force has a documented stakeholder engagement plan. Recommendation 23: Ensure all staff handling and transporting firearms are appropriately trained and qualified.

Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's initial response

Whilst the Joint Staffordshire and West Midlands Firearms Licensing Unit was not one of the FELUs inspected during HMICFRS's fieldwork, the findings raise important national issues regarding governance, consistency, training and oversight which are relevant across England and Wales. I will therefore seek assurance from the Chief Constable regarding the recommendations directed at police forces and their application within the collaborative firearms licensing service shared with West Midlands Police. I also welcome opportunities to share learning and assurance activity where appropriate, while maintaining separate accountability arrangements for each force area.

The findings of HMICFRS highlight concerns that go beyond any individual force and point to longstanding shortcomings within the national firearms licensing framework. The inspection identifies significant variation across England and Wales in the way firearms licensing is governed, resourced and delivered, and concludes that stronger national consistency is required. Public safety must always be the overriding priority and it is right that HMICFRS has identified opportunities to strengthen governance, oversight and decision-making across the service.

In Staffordshire, I am aware that the joint Firearms Licensing Unit serving Staffordshire Police and West Midlands Police has experienced challenges in previous years, particularly in relation to application backlogs and processing times. Additional investment and staffing have been introduced to improve performance and service delivery. The Joint Firearms and Explosives Licensing Unit operates within an established governance framework and, given the joint nature of the service, I will continue to seek assurance from the Chief Constable regarding the implementation of HMICFRS recommendations, including arrangements for audit, dip-sampling and quality assurance, to ensure firearms licensing decisions are subject to appropriate oversight and scrutiny and support a robust, risk-led approach to public safety.

The report makes five recommendations directly for chief constables, focused on strengthening local governance, accountability and workforce capability. These include ensuring that decision-making powers are appropriately delegated, introducing effective audit and dip-sampling arrangements to review licensing decisions, maintaining robust governance and performance frameworks, improving engagement with firearms certificate holders and stakeholders, and ensuring that staff responsible for handling firearms are properly trained and qualified.

I welcome this focus on strengthening local assurance arrangements. I have asked the Chief Constable to provide assurance in relation to the five recommendations directed at police forces, namely the operation of delegation arrangements, audit, dip-sampling and quality assurance processes, governance and performance frameworks, stakeholder engagement arrangements and workforce training. I will monitor progress through established governance processes to ensure that Staffordshire Police continues to maintain a firearms licensing service that is effective, consistent and focused on protecting the public. Public confidence depends on a system that is thorough, proportionate and capable of ensuring that only those who are suitable are granted access to firearms.

Chief Constable's response

The Chief Constable acknowledges the findings of “An inspection of firearms licensing across police forces” in England and Wales, published by HMICFRS on 28 August 2026.

Although neither Staffordshire Police nor West Midlands Police formed part of the inspection fieldwork, the collaborated Firearms and Explosives Licensing Unit undertook an immediate review against the HMICFRS recommendations to assess compliance, identify risks and establish any necessary improvement activity. This review has been overseen through existing firearms licensing governance structures and reported through ACC and DCC governance arrangements.

The review identified that the majority of HMICFRS recommendations directed to Chief Constables were either already in place or substantially compliant within the collaborated service. In particular:

- Rec 12: A review of visitor permit processes confirmed compliance with the requirements of the Firearms Act 1988 and the Home Office Guide on Firearms Licensing Law.
- Rec 13: Existing delegated decision-making authorities have been previously reviewed through governance processes and legal scrutiny and are considered compliant with relevant legislation, Authorised Professional Practice (APP) and national expectations.
- Rec 21: The collaborated service maintains established governance arrangements through the Section 22 collaboration agreement, providing regular strategic oversight of performance, risk and compliance.
- Rec 23: All firearms licensing practitioners involved in handling or transporting firearms have received appropriate training. Refresher training has been commissioned to ensure ongoing competence and compliance with HMICFRS expectations.

The review identified some areas requiring further development which will be progressed in line with the timescales given.

- Rec. 14 requires forces to implement formal audit and dip-sampling arrangements to assess the quality and consistency of firearms licensing decisions. At the time of the review, a formalised process was not yet in place. To address this, Staffordshire and West Midlands have initiated work with regional firearms licensing leads to establish a structured peer-review and dip-sampling process consistent with the APP.
- Rec 20: Work is progressing to align local performance management arrangements with the anticipated national framework being developed by the College of Policing. This will further strengthen organisational oversight by introducing a consistent qualitative and quantitative assessment of demand, risk, performance and service delivery.
- Rec 21: The collaborated service has also developed a documented stakeholder engagement plan to strengthen consultation and communication with representative shooting organisations, firearms dealers and partner agencies. Formal engagement events have been scheduled to ensure compliance with APP Practice requirements and to support effective dialogue with the firearms community.

Overall, the Chief Constable is satisfied that the collaborated firearms licensing service has responded proactively to the HMICFRS inspection findings. The self-assessment undertaken has identified a strong baseline of compliance, with clear and proportionate improvement activity in place to address the limited areas requiring further development. Progress against the recommendations will continue to be monitored through established governance arrangements to ensure the service remains effective, lawful and focused on protecting the public while maintaining confidence among certificate holders and stakeholders.

Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's overall comments

I welcome the Acting Chief Constable's review of the HMICFRS recommendations and the positive level of compliance identified within the Joint Staffordshire and West Midlands Firearms and Explosives Licensing Unit. I note the actions under way to strengthen audit, dip-sampling, performance management and stakeholder engagement arrangements and am satisfied that appropriate improvement activity has been identified. I will continue to monitor progress through established governance arrangements and seek assurance that the remaining actions are delivered within the required timescales, ensuring the firearms licensing service remains effective, consistent and focused on protecting the public.