



CHIEF CONSTABLE OF STAFFORDSHIRE

Firearms Licensing

Internal audit report 9.22/23

FINAL

12 July 2023

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The objective of the review was to allow management to take assurance that the Force have adequate and effective processes in place for the safe issuing of firearms and that processes are being followed in line with the Firearms Licensing: Statutory Guidance for Chief Officers of Police, February 2023.

The Firearms Act 1968 controls the use and possession of firearms, and only persons granted a licence from an appropriate Force may possess or use a firearm. New licences are approved following extensive background checks, medical checks, reference checks and a home visit by a Firearms Enquiry Officer (FEO). Licences must be renewed every five years. Licences can also be refused or revoked at any point if intelligence is gathered to give reasonable grounds to do so. The Force also carry out continuous assessments against licence holders and this could result in no action, revocation, or the return of firearms.

Revised statutory guidance in February 2023 saw the introduction of social media reviews during suitability checks, at the time of our review, the Force were in the process of putting plans in place in order to facilitate this. In light of the Plymouth Shootings, a five-year retrospective review of the return of firearms had been directed by the Plymouth and Keyham Coroner with his regulation 28 notice to all Chief Constables to prevent further deaths. It was agreed at Staffordshire that a proportionate response was to look back three and half years as the remainder were historic and soon to be due for renewal where they would be subject to the scrutiny, in the usual manner.

The performance of the Firearms Licensing Department is subject to many audits, at both a national and local basis. Nationally audits are completed by the Home Office Fire, Licensing & Public Order Analysis, the National Police Chiefs' Council and locally operational governance is delivered via the WMP/Staffs Strategic Partnership, where performance figures around volume and backlogs, training, multiple firearms holders, appeals and external demand is considered. As a result of the APP which will be published in the summer, there is a requirement to have an annual firearm licensing Strategic

Demand Assessment and it is intended that the initial draft for Staffordshire will be made available by February 2024.

The Firearms Licensing Department consists of 27 full-time staff and forms part of a collaborative area with West Midlands Police. The Force use the National Firearms Licensing Management System (NFLMS) to input data relating to the license holders with any supporting documentation uploaded to the File Director system. The NFLMS is a centralised database that stores all records of license holders, or those who have applied for a license, is used in conjunction with Cyclops to retain all key documents, such as application forms and GP medical reports.

The team comprises of:

- Firearms and Explosives Licensing Manager;
- Deputy Firearms Manager;
- Senior Firearms Enquiry Officer;
- Office Supervisor;
- 3 Intelligence Officers;
- 5.5 Staffordshire Enquiry Officers;
- 3.5 West Midlands Enquiry Officers;
- 9 Administrators; and
- 2 Administrative Assistants.

From April 2022 to May 2023 the following applications have been approved:

- 99 Initial grants of firearms;
- 799 Renewals of firearms;
- 352 Initial grants for shotguns; and
- 2809 Renewals for shotguns.

As of December 2022, the Force had a significant backlog of 2419 firearms and shotguns temporary permits with that reducing to 99 by May 2023 following additional overtime and the assistance of those in intel and justice services.

Following the findings of the Plymouth Shooting, the lack of accredited firearms licensing training was noted to still be an issue nationally, with official training looking to be issued in 2025.

Conclusion

Our findings identified that the Force have a robust and well-designed control framework that is being consistently applied.

Furthermore, we can see efforts to strengthen this further, as the Force are making efforts to ensure staff are sufficiently trained despite the lack of national training.

Internal audit opinion:

Taking account of the issues identified, the Chief Constable can take substantial assurance that the controls upon which the organisation relies to manage the identified area are suitably designed, consistently applied and operating effectively.



Key findings

We identified the following key findings:



We confirmed that the Force have a Policy Statement in place that outlines their legislative obligations and reporting structure. The Statement is available via the Force's Policy Database.



The Force use Firearms Licensing: Statutory Guidance for Chief Officers of Police recently revised in February 2023.

A link to this guidance is contained within the Firearms and Explosives Licensing Policy.



The Guidance refers to the fact that officers should have received domestic abuse training. At the time of the audit, this training had not yet taken place, but on review of email correspondence it was confirmed that this training is booked and scheduled for 2nd and 3rd August 2023.

We confirmed that the Department received training on the National Decision Model and were able to review the relevant lesson plans associated with this training.

Whilst there is currently no accredited training for firearms licensing, we reviewed correspondence which confirmed that the Force had booked the firearms training that is to be offered by Durham Constabulary and provided by Mowbray Partners.



Our testing of ten initial grants of either firearms or shotguns that had been approved since January 2023, confirmed that in all cases:

- A background check was performed on the applicant including a check of their social media where applicable;
- A home visit was performed;
- Referees were proposed and noted as contacted;
- A medical records check was performed in conjunction with the licensee's GP;
- A full documented assessment of the licence holder was on file as well as reasons for the grant;
- The grants were approved by the Firearms Administrators;
- Payment was made prior to the grant of the application; and
- Files and licensee information as retained on NFLMS and File Director in line with Home Office Guidance.



For our sample of 12 renewals of either firearms or shotguns in February 2023, we confirmed that in all cases:

- A background check was performed on the applicant including a check of their social media where applicable;
- A medical records check was performed in conjunction with the GP;
- There is a full and documented assessment of all the evidence available and reasons for the final decision;
- Payment was made prior to the grant of an application; and
- Files and licensee information as retained on NFLMS and File Director in line with Home Office Guidance.

Testing on a sample of four suitability reviews that had taken place since January 2023, we confirmed in three cases that:

- A background check was performed on the applicant including a check of their social media where the officer deemed it applicable;
- A medical check was performed in conjunction with the applicant's GP;
- There is a full and documented assessment of all the evidence available and reasons for the final decision;
- Where licences were revoked, or temporality withheld the licence was on file as well as communication with the applicant regarding the decisions; and
- Files and licensee information as retained on NFLMS and File Director in line with Home Office Guidance.

In the remaining case, the suitability review was still ongoing.

A Daily Action File (DAF) Report is run from the Police National database (PNC) and the PNC Administrators communicate with the Firearms Licensing Team should any actions have been taken against a licence holder.



The three intelligence officers of the Firearms Licensing department review the System for Tasking and Operational Resource Management (STORM) each morning to see discover if there have been changes with a licence holder even if no action had been taken against them.

Whilst we could not obtain evidence to confirm that these tasks take place, we confirmed that this dedicated team exists whilst testing on site.

Review of the minutes and papers of the Regional Strategic Operations, West Midlands and Staffordshire Strategic Partnership in September 2023 and January 2023 confirmed that a briefing was delivered by the Firearms Licensing and Explosives Manager.



APPENDIX A: CATEGORISATION OF FINDINGS

Categorisation of internal audit findings

Priority	Definition
Low	There is scope for enhancing control or improving efficiency and quality.
Medium	Timely management attention is necessary. This is an internal control risk management issue that could lead to: Financial losses which could affect the effective function of a department, loss of controls or process being audited or possible reputational damage, negative publicity in local or regional media.
High	Immediate management attention is necessary. This is a serious internal control or risk management issue that may lead to: Substantial losses, violation of corporate strategies, policies or values, reputational damage, negative publicity in national or international media or adverse regulatory impact, such as loss of operating licences or material fines.

The following table highlights the number and categories of management actions made as a result of this audit.

Risk	Control design not effective*		Non Compliance with controls*		Agreed actions		
	0	(10)	0	(10)	Low	Medium	High
HMICFRS Governance	0	(10)	0	(10)	0	0	0
Total					0	0	0

* Shows the number of controls not adequately designed or not complied with. The number in brackets represents the total number of controls reviewed in this area.

APPENDIX B: SCOPE

The scope below is a copy of the original document issued.

Scope of the review

The scope was planned to provide assurance on the controls and mitigations in place relating to the following risks:

Objective of the area under review

The Force operate a thorough and effective firearms licensing process in line with the requirements of the Home Office's 'Guide on Firearms Licensing Law' and Statutory Guidance for Chief Officers for Police.

The following areas will be considered as part of the review:

The Home Office issued new statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police in February 2023 in relation to firearms licensing with a particular focus on streamlining the firearms and shotgun licensing process to ensure there is more of a consistent process for the police, medical professionals, and applicants. Our review will focus on the following areas:

- The Force has a policy covering firearms licensing which ensures it meets all applicable legislation and is appropriately authorised and reviewed on a regular basis.
- Written procedures are in place and understood by all relevant staff to ensure that the requirements of the Force's firearms licensing policy and applicable legislation are met.
- Training is provided to staff e.g., domestic abuse, National Decision Model etc, where applicable.
- Through substantive testing of firearms licensing, we will confirm compliance with the guidance in the following areas:
 - Grants;
 - Renewal;
 - Variations;
 - Revocation; and
 - Refusals.

- We will confirm the appropriate tests have been performed in relation to suitability checks, home visits (inspections), references, assessment of medical suitability, information sharing and engagement with medical practitioners and performing of additional checks (e.g., domestic abuse), where required.
- Decisions are appropriately authorised and documented.
- Processes are in place to allow for continuous assessment of suitability to possess firearms or to be RFD between grant and renewal.
- Data has been held in accordance with the Firearms Licensing: Statutory Guidance for Chief Police Officers of Police.
- Payment is received prior to the grant of an application or renewal of a license, and costs are in accordance with the Home Office guidance.
- Review of the governance structure for reporting and monitoring of the department's performance and budget.

The following limitations apply to the scope of our work:

- The scope of the work is limited to those areas examined and reported upon in the context of the objectives set out for this review.
- We will not comment on the data held and if this is in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations.
- We will not comment on the decisions made by the Force in relation to granting, renewing or refusing firearm applications.
- Testing will be undertaken on a sample basis only thus we will not confirm compliance with all areas of the Home Office's 'Guide on Firearms Licensing Law' and Statutory Guidance for Chief Officers for Police.
- We will only provide an opinion on the procedures and administration processes involved in the firearms licensing process.
- We cannot guarantee future backlogs will not occur.
- We did not test any revocations or refusals as there were no recent cases to include in testing (February 2023).
- We will not review the controls / procedures relating to the seizure of firearms as a result of a failure to renew a licence or on the revoking of a licence.
- We will not review the controls / procedures surrounding the storage, return of firearms or destruction of firearms.
- The results of our work are reliant on the quality and completeness of the information provided to us.
- Our work does not provide any guarantee against material errors, loss or fraud, or provide an absolute assurance that material error; loss or fraud does not exist

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We have no responsibility to update this report for events and circumstances occurring after the date of this report.

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