

Issue and carriage of firearms

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 23 October 2013 Updated 24 March 2022

Written by College of Policing

7 mins read

This page provides guidance on the operational issue and carriage of firearms and related equipment, and the authority to deploy these resources.

Authorisation

Chief officers must ensure an effective and auditable system exists for the storage and issue of firearms, ammunition, specialist munitions and less lethal weapons and in their force area, and that these systems comply with the principles set out in this guidance.

Chief officers should consider the circumstances in which they provide:

- standing authority for the issue and carriage of firearms
- specific authority for the issue of firearms

Standing authority for the issue and carriage of firearms

A standing authority for the issue of firearms may be provided by a chief officer to officers engaged on specific duties where a threat and risk assessment deems this appropriate.

Examples of duties which might fall under this heading include:

- officers crewing armed response vehicles (ARVs)
- officers undertaking protection duties
- those involved in specific escort duties
- officers involved in prolonged operations for which the issue and carriage of firearms is an integral part of those duties.

The continuing need for the standing authority should be reviewed on a regular basis. Standing authorities should therefore be reviewed annually, unless a specific requirement to review it is identified through the force Armed Policing Strategic Firearms Threat and Risk Assessment.

Protection and Vulnerability Mitigation (PVM) arrangements

The Chair of the Executive Committee for the Protection of Royalty and Public Figures (RAVEC) has delegated responsibility for deciding which individuals, within state, government and under international obligations, should receive protective security.

The associated RAVEC process for threat and risk assessment recognises that the risk to a protected person is a combination of actual, perceived and postulated threat to the individual, the likelihood of that threat being realised, and the implications or consequences if it.

The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) has national and International policing responsibility for such protective security, and undertakes this responsibility in accordance with section 96A of the Police Act 1996. It may therefore be appropriate to provide a standing authority for routine PVM deployments for protected individuals on the basis of the associated threat and risk assessment undertaken by RAVEC.

This principle applies to PVM measures in Great Britain, including visiting foreign royalty and public figures, and where PVM is requested for overseas visits. (Other arrangements apply to Northern Ireland).

Northern Ireland

In recognition of the special circumstances prevailing in Northern Ireland, the nominated chief officer has given standing authority for all officers, subject to successful training, to be issued with a personal issue handgun which may be carried when officers are both on and off duty.

In addition, the standing authority addresses situations in which officers may be issued with other firearms and less lethal weapons when they are on duty.

The standing authority issued by the nominated chief officer of PSNI is kept under regular review in accordance with Recommendation 65 of [A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland – Report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland \(1999\)](#).

Specific authority for the issue of firearms

Forces should have documented procedures in place for the granting and recording of specific authority where there is a requirement for officers to be issued with and carry firearms operationally and there is no standing authority in place. These 'standard operating procedure' documents should identify at what level and by whom such authority can be given.

The actual deployment of armed officers must accord with the criteria set out in the guidance on deployment of authorised firearms officers (AFOs).

Authorised firearms officer (AFO)

An AFO is a police officer who has been selected, trained, accredited and authorised by their chief officer to carry a firearm operationally. There is a range of specialist AFO roles for which AFOs receive additional and specific tactical training and accreditation.

Further information is available within the National Police Firearms Training Curriculum (NPFTC).

Recording the issue of firearms and related equipment

Where firearms, specialist munitions and less-lethal weapons are issued operationally to officers, those officers must be trained and currently authorised to use that particular type of weapon or munition.

A full audit trail must be maintained, detailing the issue, transfer and return of all firearms, ammunition, specialist munitions and less-lethal weapons issued to AFOs or other police staff, irrespective of the reason for issue. The person to whom the equipment is issued is responsible for its security and carriage, in accordance with force procedures.

A system must exist within each force area which enables officers issuing firearms, ammunition, specialist munitions and less-lethal weapons to establish that each AFO is currently authorised in the equipment issued.

Fitness for duty

The use of drugs in medical treatment or consumption of alcohol can reduce an officer's alertness and performance. The Standards of Professional Behaviour provided under the Police (Conduct)

Regulations 2020 address the importance of officers' fitness for duty and issues associated with consumption of alcohol, illegal drugs and prescription drugs.

These standards are particularly important in respect of officers undertaking firearms duties. An officer who is receiving a course of drug treatment must seek the advice of their own doctor or occupational health unit if they are concerned about side effects of the drugs. Where those concerns are shared, or there are any other relevant concerns or medical advice given to an officer, these must be brought to the attention of their immediate supervisor or force occupational health unit, who should take appropriate action.

Request to temporarily stand down

AFOs, commanders and tactical advisors, without prejudice to the role they undertake, can request to be temporarily stood down from duties. This is particularly relevant where there are medical, emotional or other life stresses which may impact on their ability to make critical decisions or their overall effectiveness. This principle also applies to those involved in key support roles.

Personal responsibility to inform

AFOs have a personal responsibility to inform the weapon issuing officer or a supervisor of anything that they believe may negatively impact on their fitness and ability to carry out their duties as an AFO. On receiving such a declaration the weapon issuing officer or supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the AFO is not issued with a firearm, or deployed as an AFO, until the circumstances have been fully investigated.

Any decision regarding the future issue of firearms should be referred to a person best qualified or placed to make a decision, in line with force policy. Any decisions taken, and supporting rationale, should be recorded.

Suitability for the AFO role

Forces should have a process in place for monitoring the continued suitability of an officer to perform an armed policing role. Such a process should provide an opportunity to appropriately consider, and determine, an individual's continued or future operational deployment where a change in personal or professional circumstances may be of particular relevance, or have implications in respect of their carriage of firearms or critical decision making. While it remains a

matter for forces to make decisions as to what they specifically consider, and how they make a decision in relation to suitability for a role, there should be no concerns in relation to suitability arising from the officer's demonstration of their ethics and the standards of professional behaviour.

Operational carriage of firearms

It is the responsibility of each AFO to whom a firearm has been issued to ensure that the weapon is operating correctly. Weapon function checks, including safety precautions, should be completed before any firearm is loaded.

When a firearm is to be carried in a holster, it is important that any retention mechanisms, including lanyards (where issued), are fitted properly and are in working order. Similarly, where slings are issued for particular types of weapons they should be fitted correctly.

Firearms should be loaded and carried in accordance with force standard operating procedures relevant to each weapon.

Armed response vehicles (ARV)

A standing authority for ARV officers should include the mode of arming (for example overtly armed) and requirements related to the safe storage of weapons within the vehicle. Where weapons are retained in secure vehicle cabinets these should, where practicable, be accessible from the interior cabin of the vehicle.

Force standard operating procedures should specify which weapons and other essential equipment are carried in an ARV. The minimum requirements are documented within the national resource standard.

Aircraft and vessels

The responsibility for the safety of an aircraft or vessel rests at all times with the person in charge of the craft. In the case of aircraft, this is governed by guidance issued by the Civil Aviation Authority.

Where necessary chief officers should ensure that standard operating procedures exist for the operational carriage of firearms in aircraft or vessels.

The overriding consideration in the carriage of armed officers or firearms and munitions is that the safety of the aircraft or vessel, persons on board, or persons or property on the ground is maintained.

Tags

Armed policing