

Firearms licensing - Guidance overview

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

First published 23 April 2014 Updated 9 April 2024

8 mins read

This authorised professional practice (APP) relates to the licensing of firearms and focuses on the:

- strategic issues
- roles and responsibilities of individuals involved in this activity
- licensing process

The term 'firearms' is generally used in this APP to refer to all lethal barrelled weapons. This includes shotguns, unless there needs to be a distinction. For example, distinguishing between issues to do with firearms certificates and shotgun certificates.

Forces should align their activity with this APP and the [Home Office guide on firearms licensing law](#), and must take into account the [Home Office statutory guidance](#).

Forces that choose not to align their activities with statutory/non-statutory guidance and this APP should notify the national policing lead for firearms and explosives licensing. They should provide a rationale for these decisions.

Aims and objectives of firearms licensing

The aim of firearms licensing is to ensure public safety by controlling access to firearms. We can keep the public safe by focusing firearms licensing activity on the following objectives.

- Prevent foreseeable or avoidable harm.
- Manage risk and act decisively if risk is identified.
- Be proportionate and timely.
- Provide a fair, rigorous, transparent and consistent service to the public.

[Effective assessment](#), use of professional judgement and [decision making](#) underpins the aim and objectives.

Legislation

Firearms licensing activity is governed by legislation, the most relevant being the [Firearms Act 1968](#). Forces must align their activity with all relevant legislation.

Firearms licensing enables the lawful granting or renewal of firearms certificates to suitable people. Certificates allow the holder to possess, purchase and acquire the firearm to which they refer.

Some people deal in firearms for business (for example, manufacture, sale, repair, testing). These applicants may be registered as a firearms dealer.

Assessing suitability

Chief constables are responsible in law for firearms licensing decisions in their force. They grant and authorise firearm and shotgun certificates. Certificates are given to applicants with a good reason for possessing a firearm or shotgun and who are assessed as suitable.

Suitability criteria are set out in the [Home Office statutory guidance for chief officers of police on firearms licensing](#).

The main consideration for suitability should always be whether the applicant can possess a firearm without danger to either:

- public safety (including themselves)
- the peace

The chief constable should establish the governance and infrastructure to support effective firearms licensing in their force. This should be done in line with the [underpinning aims and objectives](#) set out previously.

Firearms licensing activity includes the refusal or revocation of certificates. Certificates are refused or revoked for individuals who are unsuitable, or become unsuitable, to possess firearms.

When forces use risk assessment tools alongside the [national decision model \(NDM\)](#) to inform the assessment of suitability, they should ensure they are used in conjunction with [professional judgement](#) to aid effective decision making.

Supporting guidance and bodies

Several national products and bodies support firearms licensing activity. These include the following.

- The [Home Office statutory guidance for chief officers of police on firearms licensing](#), which covers the processes and criteria for assessing suitability to possess firearms and to be a registered firearms dealer (RFD).
- The [Home Office guide on firearms licensing law](#).
- The [Home Office firearms security handbook](#), which provides guidance for police and others on securely storing and moving firearms.
- The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) portfolio and Firearms and Explosives Licensing Working Group (FELWG), which address national issues and act as gatekeepers of organisational learning.
- The firearms and explosives licensing community on Knowledge Hub, which enables practitioners to discuss ideas, problems, processes and legislation with colleagues from different forces.

Governance

A chief constable is responsible and accountable to the public for firearms licensing decisions. They should be able to audit and give reasons for decisions concerning grants, renewals, refusals, revocations and returns of firearms and certificates.

They should also ensure that any risks to public safety and/or any breaches of the [Firearms Act 1968](#) are identified and investigated.

The chief constable should consider appointing a member of the chief officer team to act as senior responsible officer (SRO) and strategic lead with responsibility for governance of firearms licensing in their force. This appointment should be based on appropriate capability, experience and capacity. The strategic lead should help forces to adopt and correctly implement this APP, the [Home Office firearms licensing guidance](#) and nationally agreed policies and procedures.

The role may also include:

- assigning and managing appropriate resources for the department
- [monitoring performance](#)

- financial responsibility
- public engagement

This appointment does not remove or reduce the chief constable's responsibility and accountability for firearms licensing.

The chief constable or strategic lead should hold regular **governance meetings**. These should be used to discuss and/or assess the overall performance of the licensing department.

A chief constable may delegate some or all of their powers to other staff in accordance with their role and responsibilities. The delegation of powers supports efficient and effective compliance with the administration of the Firearms Act 1968. Powers should be delegated to staff based on their capability, experience and capacity.

Full authorities should only be delegated to the strategic lead, a senior officer and/or the firearms licensing manager. Other selected staff members may be given partial authorities to grant, renew or vary a certificate.

The chief constable should define, agree and communicate in writing:

- the parameters of delegated authorities
- what decisions can be made and by whom

To be open and transparent, forces should consider making this information available publicly. For example, as part of the **strategic demand assessment**.

A chief constable may delegate some of their authority to selected staff members (for example, the strategic lead). They must, however, keep oversight, governance and accountability for all firearms licensing decisions made on their behalf.

Staff with delegated authorities should have the experience and capability to ensure that they can audit and account for their decision making. Although the majority of decisions will be made during office hours, forces need to ensure arrangements are in place to provide delegated authority 24/7, all year round – for example, to make urgent decisions around revocation.

Forces should document who can exercise delegated authority against different types of decisions (with a focus on ensuring appropriate experience and capability is aligned to each category).

Categories of decision can include:

- granting
- renewal
- variations
- refusal
- revocation
- return of firearm (following a suitability review)

Strategic demand assessments

Chief constables should develop a strategic demand assessment (SDA). This ensures their force has the appropriate capacity and capability to meet firearms licensing-related demand. The SDA should be undertaken against the **underpinning aims and objectives**. It should consider:

- identifying the demand for firearms licensing capacity and capability. This would include business as usual (for example, applications), anticipated renewals and ongoing suitability assessments for all certificate holders
- identifying the way this demand will be effectively managed, including the people, places, equipment and training required
- identifying and assessing the risks to capability and capacity
- outlining the plans to manage those risks

The SDA should be reviewed annually. The review should include input from the firearms licensing department. There may also be a need for support from other parts of the organisation (for example, performance analysts).

The chief constable should approve the SDA, or sign-off should be delegated by them to a senior member of staff (for example, to the strategic lead for firearms licensing).

Results of the SDA should be forwarded to the national lead via the NPCC firearms licensing portfolio. This enables the national policing lead to assess the level of national demand and capacity, as well as having oversight of challenges in the system. The portfolio and supporting working group (FELWG) can advise and facilitate discussion and action for forces who identify problems as a result of the SDA.

Early sight of potential or actual issues relating to demand, capacity and capability offer the opportunity for effective mitigating action.

Delivering a good service

Although it is not a legal right in the UK to possess a firearm, staff in firearms licensing departments should strive to deliver a high-quality service to applicants and certificate holders who require a firearm as part of their work or elect to hold a firearm for sporting and recreational purposes.

The ways in which the police engage and interact with the community – as well as the negative and positive experiences of the public when accessing firearms licensing services – can influence subsequent perceptions of police fairness and legitimacy, and confidence in the police.

Forces must deliver a high-quality service that encompasses public engagement and complies with the [Human Rights Act 1998](#) and the [Equality Act 2010](#). Adopting a procedurally just approach can help achieve this. For example, by:

- making impartial decisions and explaining how they were reached (for example, by explaining decisions on suitability)
- showing trustworthiness by being open and honest (for example, by making documents such as the strategic demand assessment publicly available)
- treating people with dignity and respect

Forces should ensure they are responsive to enquirers and provide communication options into the licensing department, for example telephone, email and/or web forms.

Information should be made available to applicants and certificate holders on how to appeal decisions made by the force. Forces should also make clear their complaints procedure.

Tags

Firearms APP