

The Rt Hon Theresa May MP
Home Secretary
2 Marsham Street
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10 March 2016

Dear Home Secretary

HMIC Inspection: 'Targeting the Risk: An inspection of the efficiency and effectiveness of firearms licensing in police forces in England and Wales'

In line with my statutory responsibilities I am writing in formal response to the HMIC 'Targeting the risk: an inspection of the efficiency and effectiveness of firearms licensing in police forces in England and Wales' from 2015. I am now able to provide a considered response now that Dorset Police have had time to fully consider the report recommendations and implement any required changes.

The recommendations from this inspection are owned by the Firearms Board and I can update as follows:

Expired licences

Dorset Police was one of several forces inspected where concerns were raised over the response to expired licence notifications. An initial review of all expired licences was therefore undertaken and action taken as appropriate. Regarding processes, automated 'expired licence' reports are generated, assessed and action taken on a daily basis. Most relate to administrative issues that are already in-hand. Any reports of concern are reviewed by the Firearms Licensing Manager (FLM) and where necessary a Firearms Enquiry Officer (FEO) is tasked to follow up accordingly.

PNC & NFLMS error notifications

A daily report from the National Firearms Licensing Management System (NFLMS) signposts any Police National Computer (PNC) error notifications. Under the Strategic Alliance, Dorset notifications are now managed by Devon & Cornwall Police and are monitored on an ongoing basis by the FLM.

Governance

Dorset Police is represented both regionally and nationally at working group meetings seeking to achieve consistent standards of service to the public, considering national developments and emerging good practice.

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Locally, Firearms Licensing forms part of the Alliance Operations Department with a single Chief Inspector operating as the business lead for both Dorset and Devon & Cornwall force areas (although individual Chief Constables retain ultimate responsibility and accountability for firearms licensing). As permitted within Authorised Professional Practice (APP), decisions on licence grants, renewals, refusals and revocations are delegated to a senior officer at individual force level.

With the progression of the Detailed Business Case (DBC) for a single Firearms Licensing Department under the Strategic Alliance, governance arrangements form part of the considerations which factor in ongoing regular meetings to assess overall performance, including issues such as effective decision-making and timeliness.

Demand and capacity

Meeting the demand of this high volume area of police work continues to present challenges. Staffing resilience levels are therefore subject to constant review and fluctuations through normal staffing extractions are managed proactively by drawing on support from other business areas, such as non-operational Armed Response Vehicle (ARV) officers, where necessary. That said, it is difficult to provide resilience where resource is required across a number of key functions. It is anticipated that through the Strategic Alliance business case greater resilience will be provided.

The Force continues to focus on demand reduction and has systems in place to alert managers where processing times may be meeting key deadlines. A more risk-based assessment process has been introduced and continues to embed.

Temporary permits

A review of all temporary permit circumstances has been carried out by the Force with a view to reducing the overall number of temporary permits issued. This includes consideration of the timetable allocated for applicants to submit their renewal applications.

Police attendance at incidents and risk assessments

The introduction of the NICHE records management system by Dorset Police in May 2015 has presented some challenges in ensuring that full information on firearm certificate holders is available to frontline officers when attending incidents. A Working Group has therefore been established to resolve these issues and ensure that frontline staff are aware of the specific actions required from them.

Public engagement

The majority of stakeholder engagement activity is through the FEOs who attend gun clubs and interface with licence holders through the normal course of their role and on unannounced visits. Devon and Cornwall Police have assisted with the establishment of a Firearms Licensing Committee which brings together stakeholders and members of the firearms community to discuss changes to legislation or policies, national developments, and wider issues of concern.

Under Strategic Alliance arrangements it is intended to scope how this can be extended or replicated to encompass Dorset's firearms community.

Audit of procedures

Dorset Police was one of four forces identified as not having any formal monitoring or audit arrangements in place for the effectiveness of their firearms licensing procedures. However, all decisions to grant, renew, revoke or refuse applications are recorded and capable of audit.

Staff involved in the decision-making process have received training on the National Decision Model (NDM) and the FLM has systems in place to monitor the workloads of their staff, track progression of cases, and scrutinise decision-making.

The proposed structure of the Strategic Alliance Firearms Licensing Department provides an improved supervisory framework that will enable greater oversight of compliance and quality assurance of outputs. Establishing effective monitoring and audit processes across the Alliance structure is in progress and will soon be achieved. Full account will be taken of any guidance from the College of Policing as recommended.

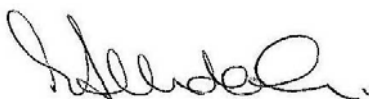
Retrospective review of Section 1 certificates

National guidance was updated following the Michael Atherton case in Durham, with police forces now required to have appropriate measures in place to monitor the activity of licence holders or associates who come to the notice of police. A review of continued suitability should also take place following domestic incidents. APP states that the requirement to monitor and assess risk is a continuous and ongoing process.

In March 2014, the National Policing Lead wrote to all forces to prompt retrospective reviews of current licence holders' suitability specifically with regard involvement in domestic abuse. Daily monitoring of certificate holders coming to notice is in place locally and during 2014 the FLM conducted a review of all certificate holders who had been granted certificates prior to daily monitoring being in place and had not since come up for renewal. The review took three months to complete and included any involvement by license holders in domestic abuse, mental health, drink/drug driving, violence and antisocial behaviour. This is considered appropriate in relation to the circumstances of this recommendation.

I can confirm that I have consulted with the Chief Constable in formulating this response and trust that this provides you with the necessary reassurance around action being taken locally by Dorset Police in response to the relevant HMIC report recommendations.

Yours sincerely



Martyn Underhill
Dorset Police and Crime Commissioner