



House of Commons  
Scottish Affairs Committee

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# Firearms licensing regulations in Scotland

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**Third Report of Session 2022–23**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

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## Summary

We were shocked and saddened to hear about the incident on the Isle of Skye involving a licensed firearm, which led to the death of John McKinnon. This incident prompted widespread media attention and led the Member of Parliament for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, Ian Blackford MP, to call for a review of firearms licensing regulations, and we launched our inquiry in September 2022.

Our first recommendation centred on the cost of firearms licences. We recommended that the UK Government put in place a two-tier system of firearms licence costs. Individuals who use firearms for leisure would pay the full cost of their licence applications, with no immediate financial cost to police forces or the taxpayer, while the second tier would apply to those who use firearms for work purposes.

Further recommendations centred around reviewing the processes for how people can raise concerns about people who own, or are applying to own firearms (for example, if that person develops mental ill health). We recommended that the UK Government review the process by which applicants gather character references for firearms licences - focussing on addressing applicants canvassing for positive references, applicants putting pressure on people to give positive references, and how police ought to react when people change referees between application and renewal, and between subsequent renewals. When approaching people for references, we recommended that applicants give their application reference number to potential referees, so that these potential referees can raise concerns with the police more easily. We recommended that police involve applicants' conjugal partners more closely in the licensing process.

We recommended that the UK Government conduct a review investigating the merits of creating a new service within the 101 service, which could direct callers towards call-handlers with firearms expertise (in the same way as the lifeboat and mountain rescue services are reached via the 999 emergency control centre). This review could include a survey of the public's understanding of how to contact the police through existing channels like the 101 service, and could look into how to better advertise these existing channels.

Different parties told us variously that the period between renewal of firearms licences, and between initial application and first renewal, should be shorter or longer. We recommended that the current renewal period of five years remain in place for the time being - but that the renewal period should be kept under review.

Many parties told us that there is no good reason for which requirements for shotgun licences are different from requirements for firearms and air weapon licences. Therefore, we recommended that the UK Government make the legislation related to shotgun licences consistent with legislation related to firearms and air weapon licences.

We gave a number of recommendations concerning medical assessments for the firearms licensing process. We recommended that the UK and Scottish Governments review the system by which GPs flag that a patient is a firearms owner, to alert clinicians in case that patient develops mental ill health. This review could address issues including communication between medical practitioners and the police, and problems which

arise when firearms owners move medical practices. As GPs can object conscientiously to giving medical reports (crucial to the firearms licence application process), we recommended that the UK Government consult GPs on whether GPs' engagement with the firearms licensing process should be made mandatory. If this consultation concludes that GPs' engagement should not be mandatory, we recommended that the UK Government strongly emphasise the expectation that GPs who conscientiously object should pass patients requiring medical assessments as part of the firearms licensing process to another GP in the same practice.

Currently, no medical checks are conducted between initial application and renewal. For this reason, we recommended that the UK Government and Scottish Government review the merits of medical practitioners and police conducting interim checks on firearms licence holders, in order to pick up changes in firearms owners' mental health more easily. To help firearms owners to seek help for mental health conditions for themselves and be supported to receive the right support, we further recommended that the UK Government support the development of buddy initiatives within shooting organisations so that their members can speak with others about their mental health, and support shooting organisations to provide their members with resources about sources of help (building on existing leafletting campaigns about mental health). Because people who own firearms are likely to live in rural communities, we recommended that the UK Government and Scottish Government work together either to put mental health resources like counselling in place in remote rural communities, or to ensure that mental health resources can be easily accessed in such communities.

# 1 Introduction

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## Current firearms legislation

1. We heard that the UK has some of the strictest firearms laws in the world.<sup>1</sup> The possession of firearms and ammunition in the UK is regulated mainly by the Firearms Act 1968.<sup>2</sup> This Act was followed by the 1988 Firearms (Amendment) Act which introduced new restrictions on shotguns and prohibited certain types of rifle, the 1997 Firearms (Amendment) Act which prohibited certain types of handgun, and the 1997 Firearms (Amendment) (No 2) Act which prohibited civilian ownership of handguns.<sup>3</sup> The Home Office published new statutory guidance for police on firearms licensing, which came into effect on 1 November 2021.<sup>4</sup> Regulations related to air weapons are set by the Scottish Government, with changes to those regulations being a devolved matter.

## Context of this inquiry

2. We were shocked and saddened to hear about the incident on the Isle of Skye involving a licensed firearm, which led to the death of John McKinnon. This incident prompted widespread media attention and led the Member of Parliament for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, Ian Blackford MP, to call for a review of firearms licensing regulations.<sup>5</sup> At the time of this report, this case is being considered by the courts, thereby being subject to ‘subjudice’ considerations. Therefore, to avoid prejudicing the decision of the court, it will not be discussed further in this report. The Police Investigations and Review Commissioner for Scotland is investigating the response to the incident. At the time of writing, this report resulting from this inquiry had not been published.

3. The terms of reference for the inquiry can be found on our website.<sup>6</sup> To gather information for this inquiry, we held three public oral evidence sessions with the Gun Control Network, the pastor from the area of the Isle of Skye in which the August 2022 incident took place, the Scottish Association for Country Sports, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, Police Scotland, the Scottish Government, and the UK Government. We also received written evidence from people and organisations. We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to our inquiry.

4. This is not the first time that a select committee has inquired into the topic of firearms. The Home Affairs Committee published two reports on the topic: *Controls over firearms* in 2000<sup>7</sup> and *Firearms control* in 2010.<sup>8</sup> In the first report, that Committee recommended that firearms control be based on the protection of public safety, and on effective administration at no net cost to public funds<sup>9</sup>. In the second report, that Committee recommended that firearms licence fees paid by applicants be raised to cover the costs

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1 Home Office, [UK’s strict gun laws strengthened by new medical arrangements](#), accessed 14 September 2022; Home Office, [Guide on firearms licensing law](#), November 2022, page 3

2 Home Office, [Guidance: firearms licensing](#), accessed 14 September 2022

3 Gun Control Network, [Gun control in the UK](#), accessed 27 September 2022

4 Home Office, [Statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police on firearms licensing](#), accessed 27 October 2022

5 “[What are Scotland’s existing gun laws and should they be reviewed?](#)”, The Press and Journal, 12 August 2022

6 [Terms of reference for the Scottish Affairs Committee’s inquiry into firearms licensing regulations in Scotland](#)

7 Home Affairs Committee, Second Report of the Session 1999–2000, [Controls over firearms](#), HC 95

8 Home Affairs Committee, Third Report of the Session 2010–2011, [Firearms control](#), HC 447

9 Home Affairs Committee, Second Report of the Session 1999–2000, [Controls over firearms](#), HC 95, Summary of recommendations and conclusions, Recommendation (f)

to police<sup>10</sup>; that the licence renewal period remain at five years<sup>11</sup>; and that the process for licensing shotguns be the same as for other firearms.<sup>12</sup> The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published one report on the subject in 2003: *Control of firearms in Northern Ireland and the proposed draft firearms (Northern Ireland) order 2002*<sup>13</sup>. That Committee's recommendations included that the Police Service of Northern Ireland establish more effective internal police communications to avoid unnecessary risks to the public from firearms licence holders who are no longer suitable to own firearms.<sup>14</sup>

5. We have made every effort to ensure the findings of this Report are accurate and up to date. However, there is a possibility that aspects of policy may evolve quickly in the period between publication of our report and the UK Government's formal response to our conclusions and recommendations.

## Incidents involving firearms in the UK and Scotland

6. This report will focus on the licensing process for legally held firearms in Scotland. Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP, Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire for the Home Office told us that incidents involving firearms are "rare"<sup>15</sup> in the UK. According to the latest statistics for firearms offences in Scotland, levels are the second lowest since records began.<sup>16</sup> In written evidence, the Scottish Government stated that levels "remain well below the level of previous historic peaks of 1,933 offences recorded in 1992, and 1,260 in 2006–07".<sup>17</sup> The Minister told us that there had been three homicides recorded in Scotland during 2020–2021, and one during 2021–2022.<sup>18</sup>

## The number of firearms in Scotland

7. As of September 2022, there are 60,743 certificates on issue in Scotland for firearms, shotguns and air weapons.<sup>19</sup> In comparison, as of 31 March 2022, there were 151,218 firearms certificates on issue in England and Wales.<sup>20</sup> Superintendent Steven Duncan, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing for Police Scotland, told us that approximately 2% of all applications are refused for failing to meet suitability criteria.<sup>21</sup> In written evidence, the Gun Control Network and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation noted that this number does not represent the number of individuals

10 Home Affairs Committee, Third Report of the Session 2010–2011, [Firearms control](#), HC 447, Conclusions and recommendations, Recommendation 15

11 Home Affairs Committee, Third Report of the Session 2010–2011, [Firearms control](#), HC 447, Conclusions and recommendations, Recommendation 12

12 Home Affairs Committee, Third Report of the Session 2010–2011, [Firearms control](#), HC 447, Conclusions and recommendations, Recommendation 13

13 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Fourth Report of the Session 2002–2003, [Control of firearms in Northern Ireland and the proposed draft firearms \(Northern Ireland\) order 2002](#), HC 67-I

14 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Fourth Report of the Session 2002–2003, [Control of firearms in Northern Ireland and the proposed draft firearms \(Northern Ireland\) order 2002](#), HC 67-I, Summary of recommendations and conclusions, Recommendation (v)

15 Q192

16 Scottish Government, [Recorded crimes and offences involving firearms, Scotland, 2018–19 and 2019–20](#), accessed 15 September 2022

17 Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans, Scottish Government (FLR0019)

18 Q192

19 Police Scotland (FLR0011) Appendix 1

20 Home Office, [Statistics on firearm and shotgun certificates, England and Wales: April 2021 to March 2022](#), accessed 14 September 2022

21 Q115



owning a single firearm each. People may own between one and four firearms, on average, with a certificate for each firearm.<sup>22</sup> Fraser Lamb, Firearms Licensing Advisor for the Scottish Association for Country Sports, told us that this means that just over 1% of Scotland’s population have access to firearms.<sup>23</sup>

8. We have heard concerns about the current UK legislation regarding firearms in the context of Scotland. Firstly, Superintendent Duncan stated that the age of legislation could cause issues. Superintendent Duncan told us that:

“legislation is now over 50 years old... there have been amendments to that legislation over that time, but the existing legislation was an amalgamation of legislation dating even beyond that. I think that, if we were rewriting it from scratch, it would be done in a slightly different way.”<sup>24</sup>

9. Secondly, we heard concerns about the language used in the legislation and statutory guidance. Police Scotland told us that subjective language like “intemperate habits” or “unfitted to be entrusted with a firearm” caused potential for different police forces to interpret legislation differently.<sup>25</sup>

10. Thirdly, shooting organisations like the British Association for Shooting and Conservation have expressed concerns that “there remain too many loopholes for the forces to choose from”.<sup>26</sup> They state that this may cause inconsistencies between police forces dealing with firearms, saying “policy decisions are being made on a force-by-force basis. One force might grant a variation for the very same reason another is refused”<sup>27</sup>. In written evidence, the Gun Control Network told us that loopholes are “constantly being exploited by gun manufacturers and shooting enthusiasts”.<sup>28</sup>

11. Finally, we heard from the Gun Control Network that “[t]he primary weakness in the regulatory system is how the licensing process is conducted”.<sup>29</sup> The organisation stated that “the following may have contributed”<sup>30</sup> to “failures in the process”<sup>31</sup>:

“Inadequate guidance resulting in, for example, failure to require family and household members or GPs to be consulted about any mental health problems or alcohol /drug abuse.

A lack of resources resulting, for example, in failure to make home visits, to follow up public and social media concerns or to integrate police data.

A cosy relationship between police and shooters resulting in, for example, a disinclination to follow up family or neighbour concerns”.<sup>32</sup>

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22 Gun Control Network (FLR0020); British Association for Shooting and Conservation (FLR0015)

23 Q57

24 Q92

25 Police Scotland (FLR0011)

26 British Association for Shooting and Conservation, [Why firearms licensing must be reformed](#), accessed 13 September 2022

27 British Association for Shooting and Conservation, [Why firearms licensing must be reformed](#), accessed 13 September 2022

28 Gun Control Network (FLR0020)

29 Gun Control Network (FLR0020)

30 Gun Control Network (FLR0020)

31 Gun Control Network (FLR0020)

32 Gun Control Network (FLR0020)

## Current requirements for firearms licence applications and renewals

12. Each firearms licence application and renewal is processed by the police force in the applicant's local area.<sup>33</sup> Individuals applying for, and renewing, firearms licences must demonstrate that they are not a “danger to public safety or the peace”<sup>34</sup>, and that “they require their firearm on a regular, legitimate basis for work, sport or leisure”.<sup>35</sup> Individuals must provide character references from two referees<sup>36</sup>, who must be “of good character”.<sup>37</sup> Checks carried out on individuals include background checks on individuals' financial data and open social media posts<sup>38</sup>, and home visits by police to ensure that individuals have appropriate secure storage for firearms.<sup>39</sup> Other factors considered by police forces include “a request from a partner or family member that the applicant should not hold a certificate”<sup>40</sup> and individuals' criminal records.<sup>41</sup> Individuals who have criminal records can apply for firearms licences. Individuals who have received custodial sentences of between three months and three years when convicted may apply for licences five years after release. Individuals who have received a custodial sentence of three years or more are prohibited for life—but the prohibition may be lifted on application to the Crown Court.<sup>42</sup>

## Scotland's system for firearms licensing

13. It has been said that Scotland's system for processing firearms licence applications is “among the best in the UK”.<sup>43</sup> While police forces in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have experienced delays in granting and renewing firearms licences, this is not the case in Scotland.<sup>44</sup> Superintendent Steven Duncan, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing for Police Scotland, told us that this is partly because Police Scotland (which has combined local police forces under one umbrella) can spread cases between different processing centres.<sup>45</sup> In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, individual forces of different sizes must carry their own workload, using different approaches.<sup>46</sup> This is, in part, because of the automated nature of Scotland's system. Assistant Chief Constable Alan Spiers, Strategic Firearms Commander for Police Scotland, told us that Police Scotland is “the only force in the UK”<sup>47</sup> to introduce an automated system, which reduces the administration time involved in applications and renewals.<sup>48</sup> Dr Colin Shedden, Director Scotland for the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, told us that:

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33 College of Policing, [Firearms licensing](#), accessed 14 December 2022

34 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 14

35 Home Office, Guide on firearms licensing law, December 2021, page 4

36 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 6

37 Q193

38 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 10

39 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 5

40 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 12

41 Q65

42 Unlock, [Shotgun and firearms licence](#), accessed 15 September 2022

43 Q155

44 British Association for Shooting and Conservation, [Firearms licensing inconsistencies are symptomatic of wider police failures](#), accessed 13 September 2022

45 Q152

46 Q155

47 Q155

48 Q153

“Scotland is something of an exemplar just now because 99.53% of certificates are renewed within the appropriate timescale, whereas in England and Wales there are widespread delays, and in Northern Ireland there are very extreme widespread delays”.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, Nick Hunt, Head of the Firearms Policy Unit for the Home Office, told us that the National Police Chiefs’ Council is using Scotland’s example to learn lessons about performance, efficiency and effectiveness which can be applied to English and Welsh police forces.<sup>50</sup>

## 2 The cost of firearms licensing

14. In Scotland, individuals pay fees of £88 for each new firearms licence application and £62 for each firearms licence renewal.<sup>51</sup> Superintendent Steven Duncan, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing for Police Scotland, told us that “fees have not been changed for a number of years”.<sup>52</sup> However, Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP, Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire for the Home Office, stated that “costs [of processing applications] have gone up”<sup>53</sup> since fees were last reviewed. Individuals applying for licences and renewals must also pay for medical assessments.<sup>54</sup> The cost of medical assessments can vary considerably between medical practitioners.<sup>55</sup>

15. Applicants do not pay for the full cost of their licences. The cost to the police forces processing applications and renewals is higher than the income from licence fees. Some reports state that “the cost of handling a firearms licence application by the licensing departments can differ by up to six times”<sup>56</sup> - ranging from approximately £80 to over £500.<sup>57</sup>

16. Assistant Chief Constable Alan Spiers, Strategic Firearms Commander for Police Scotland, told us that the amount generated by the licence fee “goes only a very small way towards supporting some of the costs associated with firearms licensing”.<sup>58</sup> Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP of the Home Office told us that “[e]ffectively the police, or the taxpayer more widely, are subsidising the provision of these licences”.<sup>59</sup> For this reason, some (like Professor Peter Squires, Professor Emeritus of Criminology and Public Policy at the University of Brighton) have suggested that individuals applying for, and renewing, licences should pay the full cost of processing licences and renewals.<sup>60</sup> Professor Squires stated that:

“a full-cost licensing system, borne by shooters themselves, would enable police to devote the appropriate resources to firearm licensing and make many of the improvements (proactive and ongoing monitoring, unannounced visits, improved technology, better liaison with health agencies and wider stakeholders) that the licensing system needs”.<sup>61</sup>

The Minister told us that work is “ongoing”<sup>62</sup> at the Home Office to “get the fees into a better place where forces are recovering the cost of running this service”.<sup>63</sup> Currently, there is no difference in cost for those who require firearms licences for work (like gamekeepers) and those who require licences in order to shoot for pleasure.

51 Police Scotland, [Firearms and shotguns](#), accessed 13 September 2022

52 Q145

53 Q194

54 “Gun licence delays lead to police visit for farmer”, *The Packet*, 19 February 2022

55 Sporting Shooter, [Guidance on firearms licensing - to pay the GP or not to pay the GP?](#), accessed 28 November 2022

56 Politics.co.uk, [Firearms licensing inconsistencies “are symptomatic of wider police failures”](#), accessed 13 September 2022

57 Politics.co.uk, [Firearms licensing inconsistencies “are symptomatic of wider police failures”](#), accessed 13 September 2022

58 Q146

59 Q206

60 Professor Peter Squires (FLR0007)

61 Professor Peter Squires (FLR0007)

62 Q194

63 Q206

17. Moving to a full-cost system for licence fees would free up some more resources for the police forces to spend elsewhere - including being spent on improvements to the licensing process. Assistant Chief Constable Alan Spiers told us that “there is no doubt going forward that the pressure on Police Scotland around resourcing is significant”<sup>64</sup> and that individuals covering the full cost of applications and renewals “would go some way to supporting the service that we provide in relation to firearms licences”.<sup>65</sup> For example, the country sports community have stated that there have been substantial delays in processing licence applications and renewals.<sup>66</sup> Dr Michael North (a founding member of the Gun Control Network whose daughter was killed during the Dunblane Primary School tragedy) told us that “this is largely due to a lack of resources [ ... ] because the licence fee does not cover the full cost of what the police have to carry out in order to provide an applicant with a licence”.<sup>67</sup> We heard from numerous organisations that appropriate funding is needed, as firearms licences are important to public safety.<sup>68</sup>

18. Dr Colin Shedden, Director Scotland of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, told us that “[t]here is a wide range of people involved in shooting sports, from some who obviously are wealthy and can afford it to those less fortunate, but who can still enjoy the sport”.<sup>69</sup> Dr Shedden stated that he “would be very concerned at pricing ordinary working people and retired people out of their recreational interests”.<sup>70</sup> This may especially affect younger people and older people, who may not be able to pay as much - both Dr Shedden and Fraser Lamb, Firearms Licensing Adviser for the Scottish Association for Country Sports, told us that their organisations offer membership discounts for elderly and younger licence holders.<sup>71</sup>

19. One solution could be a two-tier system of licence fees. This could require those who shoot for leisure to pay the full cost of their firearms licences (with no cost to police forces or the taxpayer), while individuals who shoot for work could have their licences fully or partly funded. However, Dr Shedden told us that a two-tier system of fees, differentiating between those who shoot for leisure and for work, would be “fraught with difficulty”.<sup>72</sup> Fraser Lamb of the Scottish Association for Country Sports stated that “[a] lot of farmers shoot game recreationally—for want of a better word—so how do you differentiate between the farmer who goes out with his pals and someone who just goes driven shooting, or controls vermin, pest species on behalf of a farmer?”<sup>73</sup>

20. The matter of firearms licence fees is reserved, as they are set by the Home Office. However, the Scottish Government contribute to the working group on licence fees.<sup>74</sup> Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice for the Scottish Government who represents the

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64 Q150

65 Q150

66 Fieldsports Channel, [Police delay firearms licensing as livestock and wildlife suffer](#), accessed 15 September 2022; Shooting UK, [Some police forces begin accepting new certificates again](#), accessed 15 September; The British Association for Shooting and Conservation, [The firearms licensing crisis continues](#), accessed 13 September 2022

67 Q2; It should be noted that Scotland has seen fewer delays than England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In fact, the Scottish system has been called “amongst the best in the UK” (Q155) and “an exemplar” (Q66) - we were told that, in Scotland, between 99.45% (Police Scotland FLR0011) and 99.53% (Q66) of certificates were being renewed on time.

68 Professor Peter Squires (FLR0020); Q74; Q150

69 Q80

70 Q74

71 Q79

72 Q78

73 Q79

74 Q178

Dunblane area of Scotland<sup>75</sup>, stated that a full-cost system for licence fees “may help to provide further income for the police force, but I would want to make sure that we were not unduly penalising those who rely on these licences for their work”.<sup>76</sup> The Cabinet Secretary went on to tell us that he would support “in principle”<sup>77</sup> a two-tier system of licence fees.

21. Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP told us that he endorsed the full-cost system of licence fees - saying that “It is not really fair that the taxpayer generally or police forces subsidise a relatively small group of people” so “the funding of this service... should ultimately fall on the applicant”.<sup>78</sup> The Minister stated that, as the Home Office “want to make sure that the police are recovering their costs... [,] specific work is going on to review fees [and t]hat is a piece of work that is actively happening at the moment”<sup>79</sup>. We are pleased to hear that the UK Government is looking into this issue.

22. The Minister also told us that a review of the statutory guidance for police forces on firearms licensing is being conducted, one year after its introduction. As part of this review, licence fees are being considered. He told us that “[t]he review is being conducted broadly with that thought in mind” that “it is reasonable that [licensing] is paid for by the people needing and benefiting from the licence rather than from the general taxpayer and the public as a whole”.<sup>80</sup>

**23. Police forces’ resources are stretched, so it seems unsatisfactory that they bear most of the cost of processing applications for firearms licences. It would seem desirable to move towards a situation where those people seeking a licence pay a fee to cover the cost of the process that it involves.**

*24. We recommend that the UK Government put in place a two-tier system of firearms licence costs. This system ought to require individuals who use firearms for leisure to pay the full cost of their licence applications, with no immediate financial cost to police forces or the taxpayer. The second tier would apply to those who use firearms for work purposes. To facilitate this, the UK Government ought to produce a list of work purposes for firearms which would entitle licence applicants to pay the second tier rate. We understand that there is a view that all firearm holders should consistently cover the cost of their own applications. However, we would err on the side of caution, and encourage a UK Government review to consider the implications that those costs might impose on those who rely on firearms for work (as well as a clear definition of ‘work’ for the purpose of clarity). Following a thorough consultation with affected parties, the UK Government would be in a better position to take a decision on whether individuals who use firearms for work could have their licences partly funded.*

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75 Q156

76 Q178

77 Q180

78 Q206

79 Q194

80 Q228

## 3 Raising concerns

### The referee system

25. Amongst other requirements as part of the licensing process, applicants must give the police character references from two referees who must have known them for at least two years<sup>81</sup> and be “of good character”.<sup>82</sup> Police will contact at least one referee - whether by telephone, e-mail or home visit.<sup>83</sup> Licence holders may change their referees between their original application and renewal. We have heard about several issues with the referee system, as it stands, which have been raised in written and oral evidence.

26. By requiring applicants to provide proof that they are considered “fit to be entrusted with a firearm”<sup>84</sup>, the referee system currently in place was installed with the aim of protecting public safety and the peace. This is the principal consideration in firearms licensing regulations.<sup>85</sup> We heard that police forces will investigate when licence holders change referees between their original application and renewal. Dr Colin Shedden, Director Scotland for the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, stated that police “ask existing referees is there any reason why they have not acted as a referee this time” as this could indicate “serious issues”.<sup>86</sup> Superintendent Steven Duncan, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing for Police Scotland, told us that it is important to check the reason for which applicants have changed referees - police “are mindful that when a referee change is made, that does prompt questioning about why that might be the case ... we may still go back to speak to one of the original referees to see whether there has been some sort of change in the dynamic or relationship, and to try to understand why that may be the case”.<sup>87</sup>

27. During this inquiry, we heard about several problematic issues with the referee system. Firstly, Reverend Gordon Matheson (pastor of the Free Church of Scotland at Sleat and Strath on the Isle of Skye) told us that “canvassing for favourable character references is one of the things people found very difficult”.<sup>88</sup> Reverend Matheson noted his concern that “you can trawl around as long as you like until you find a couple of people willing to give you a reference”.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, Fraser Lamb, Firearms Licensing Adviser for the Scottish Association for Country Sports (who was formerly the Head of Firearms Licensing for Police Scotland) told us that he sees “no benefit to having a referee”<sup>90</sup>, saying “[y]ou are going to ask your pals who are going to give it to you. You are not going to ask someone who is not going to give you a reference. In the four years that I was a firearms licensor, there was only one occasion when the referee raised a concern”.<sup>91</sup>

28. We also heard concerns about applicants putting pressure on people to provide references. Reverend Gordon Matheson told us that people in more remote and rural

81 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 6

82 Q193

83 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 6

84 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 22

85 Home Office, [Statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police on firearms licensing](#), accessed 27 October

86 Q88

87 Q128

88 Q33

89 Q33

90 Q84

91 Q84



areas may feel peer pressure to give positive references, if asked.<sup>92</sup> He told us that, in smaller communities, “[t]he sense that you are helping out somebody I think does create an awful lot of pressure to give a favourable reference when you may have reservations”.<sup>93</sup>

29. We have heard suggestions that the referee system could be made more robust, if certain people close to applicants could provide information about their suitability to own firearms. For example, in Canada, firearms licence applicants must provide details of their conjugal partners, over a period of two years, and they are required to countersign the application forms. If this does not happen, the Chief Firearms Officer will tell applicants’ conjugal partners about the application.<sup>94</sup> In the UK, statutory guidance only suggests that “a request from a partner or family member that the applicant should not hold a certificate should be taken into account”.<sup>95</sup> However, this may not be an appropriate solution to the issue. As with canvassing for references, Assistant Chief Constable Alan Spiers, Strategic Firearms Commander for Police Scotland, stated that “[y]ou could have matters of coercion around domestic violence”<sup>96</sup> if the UK were to introduce this step into the licensing process.<sup>97</sup>

30. Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice for the Scottish Government, stated that “[t]he issue of [ ... ..] shopping for referees is an important one”.<sup>98</sup> To combat this issue, the Cabinet Secretary suggested that “one way you could go is a statutory duty to report if somebody asked you for a reference that you didn’t want to give”.<sup>99</sup> However, the Cabinet Secretary warned against a Canadian-style system of firearms licensing, in which conjugal partners are required to countersign licence applications, stating that “[a] partner who has been subject to domestic abuse, for example, could be intimidated into providing a good reference, to allow somebody to get a licence”.<sup>100</sup>

31. The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire for the Home Office, Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP, suggested to us that the referee system could be improved by requiring referees to be drawn from a list of recognised professions.<sup>101</sup> This would bring firearms licence applications into line with similar processes, like passport applications.<sup>102</sup> However, the Minister warned that “we need to make sure that we do not impose onerous burdens on people wanting to apply”.<sup>103</sup>

**32. The referee system has merit in protecting public safety and the peace; but we have significant concerns about the referee system for the firearms licensing process, which must be addressed before it is fit for purpose. These include concerns about applicants**

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92 Q34

93 Q34

94 Royal Canadian Mounted Police, [Licence renewal for individuals](#), accessed 27 October 2022

95 Home Office, [Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police](#), December 2021, page 12

96 Q126

97 The Home Office’s [statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police on firearms licensing](#) strongly emphasises the need to ensure that perpetrators of domestic abuse are not granted firearms licences. The statutory guidance states that “evidence of domestic abuse is one of the most serious factors that should be taken into consideration in assessing an application” (page 11, section 2.46).

98 Q188

99 Q188

100 Q187

101 Q193

102 Q193; A list of recognised professions accepted for countersignatories of passport applications can be found on GOV.UK, [Countersigning passport applications and photos](#), accessed 28 November 2022

103 Q193



canvassing for referees, and lack of mandatory consultation with people close to firearms licence applicants. We heard from a former Head of Firearms Licensing for Police Scotland that he “saw no practical merit in having referees”.<sup>104</sup>

33. *We recommend that the UK Government conduct a review of the referee system, to determine whether it is fit for purpose. This review ought to address the issue of individuals canvassing for positive references, or putting pressure on people to give positive references (for example, by engaging in the peer pressuring behaviours which may be experienced in smaller communities, or coercion as a feature of domestic violence). This review should also address the options open to police when individuals change referees between application and renewal, and between subsequent renewals. While policy relating to the police is generally a devolved matter, the UK Government ought to be looking to share best practice with the Scottish Government and Police Scotland.*

34. **There is potential for conjugal partners to play a vital role in assessing individuals’ suitability to own firearms. In Canada’s firearms licensing system, conjugal partners play a key role in assessing whether applicants are fit to be entrusted with firearm - either by countersigning applications or (if this does not happen) discussing the application with police. Following Canada’s example by involving conjugal partners more closely in the UK’s firearms licensing process could help to ensure that only people who meet the statutory guidance’s suitability requirements<sup>105</sup> are granted firearms licences.**

35. *We recommend that the UK Government change the statutory guidance on firearms licensing to more strongly recommend that police forces involve present and former conjugal partners in the application and renewal process. Echoing the system used in Canada, this could involve police interviewing individual’s present and former conjugal partners as a routine part of firearms licence applications and renewals, to confirm that the individual is suitable to own firearms. While this option may be a helpful addition to the firearms licensing process, it is not without risk. We heard that pressure to provide a partner with a positive reference might aggravate domestic violence. It would also place an additional burden on police resources. We urge the UK Government to consider those risks and to put in place safeguards where appropriate.*

## Contacting the police using a dedicated hotline

36. As the Scottish Government told us: “The purpose of firearms licensing regulation is to protect public safety”.<sup>106</sup> It is important for public safety that people can raise concerns about individuals who own, or are applying to own, firearms - for example, to express concerns about someone’s mental health.<sup>107</sup> It is also important that people can raise these concerns anonymously. We have heard that it is “a fact that neighbours may be reluctant to notify the authorities about any suspicions that a license holder or otherwise might not now be suitable to possess weapons” as there is “a danger that reporting concerns might cause a backlash”.<sup>108</sup>

104 Q84

105 The Home Office’s [statutory guidance on firearms licensing for Chief Officers of Police](#) (published on 1 November 2021) sets out suitability requirements in Chapter 3.

106 Scottish Government (FLR0019)

107 Q22

108 Robert David Ware (FLR0017)

37. Currently, there are several ways in which people can report concerns to the police. One way is to call the 101 service for non-emergency incidents. Fraser Lamb, Firearms Licensing Adviser for the Scottish Association for Country Sports, told us that police will ask firearms licence applicants' referees: "Would you know who to phone if you had concerns about the person?" ... trying to elicit the answer 'Dial 101'.<sup>109</sup> An alternative, which Superintendent Steven Duncan, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing for Police Scotland, told us is for people to contact the police using an online portal.<sup>110</sup> A third way is to call the charity, Crimestoppers - Superintendent Duncan noted that one advantage of Crimestoppers is that people "can raise information or intelligence anonymously".<sup>111</sup>

38. We have, however, also heard calls for a dedicated hotline to augment these existing ways to contact the police, which people could use to report concerns about firearms owners anonymously. Dr Michael North, a founding member of the Gun Control Network, stated that "it is sometimes very difficult"<sup>112</sup> to contact the police using existing helplines. For this reason, Dr North told us that the Gun Control Network has advocated for "a separate hotline for concerns about a gun owner".<sup>113</sup> Assistant Chief Constable Alan Spiers, Strategic Firearms Commander for Police Scotland, corroborated this, saying that "there are challenges and strains put on that system [the 101 service]"<sup>114</sup>, so "Police Scotland would be open to" a hotline which would "enhance firearms licence reporting".<sup>115</sup>

39. Several witnesses have told us that establishing a new hotline may not be necessary, as there are other existing ways to raise concerns. For example, Assistant Chief Constable Spiers told us that already "there are a range of ways in which we encourage family, friends and clubs to make contact with us [the police]".<sup>116</sup> As noted by Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice for the Scottish Government, these ways include "on the ground, if local community police officers are around, but also online ... Above that, people know the contact number for the police in Scotland [101]".<sup>117</sup> Therefore, Superintendent Duncan stated, while there is "definite merit in trying to encourage reporting... There are probably other opportunities, such as advertising how you make direct contact with the police"<sup>118</sup> using existing helplines.

40. We have heard that there may be challenges involved with establishing and advertising a new hotline. One challenge may be resourcing. Assistant Chief Constable Spiers told us that there are "a number of challenges that Police Scotland would face depending on the future funding of Police Scotland"<sup>119</sup>, which may make it difficult to fund another service. Another challenge may be difficulty embedding a new hotline into public consciousness.

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109 Q85

110 Q140; Police Scotland's online portal for reporting crime can be found here: <https://www.scotland.police.uk/secureforms/c3/>

111 Q140

112 Q15

113 Q15

114 Q142

115 Q144

116 Q125

117 Q186

118 Q124

119 Q142

The Cabinet Secretary stated that helplines like the 999 and 101 services already “are well known”<sup>120</sup> so, to make a new hotline effective, “you would have to advertise it strongly to ensure that people are aware of it and that it gets into people’s consciousness”.<sup>121</sup>

41. However, the Cabinet Secretary further told us that - while “We should always keep an open mind on these things” - “I am not sure that a hotline would add a great deal”.<sup>122</sup> The Cabinet Secretary stated that there are “ways in which people can already get in touch with the police, which is a straightforward thing to do”<sup>123</sup> so “there may be a case for just generally ensuring that people are aware that they can contact the police if they have to, rather than creating a specific hotline”.<sup>124</sup>

42. We heard that, previously, the Home Office have participated in discussions about establishing a hotline. Dr Michael North told us that the Gun Control Network “have talked to the Home Office about it and it looked as though there may have been money set aside for it... but it never happened”.<sup>125</sup> In oral evidence, Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP of the Home Office stated that the “benefit [of a dedicated hotline] is a public-badged place to go”.<sup>126</sup> However, the Minister warned that a new hotline not only “would somewhat duplicate existing channels” which people can use to express concerns to police<sup>127</sup>, but also would involve “additional cost”.<sup>128</sup>

**43. A single, dedicated channel for reporting concerns about people who own, or are applying to own, firearms could make that process simpler and easier. However, a dedicated hotline may be too difficult to resource and we are very much aware of the challenges around advertising such a new hotline, such as resourcing that advertisement and endeavouring to embed any new channel in the public consciousness.**

*44. We therefore recommend that the UK Government conduct a review investigating the merits of creating a new service within the 101 service, which could direct callers towards call-handlers with firearms expertise (in the same way as the lifeboat and mountain rescue services are reached via the 999 emergency control centre). This would allow people close to a firearms licence applicant to raise concerns about their suitability to be granted or to renew firearms licences – for example, if there were concerns about the individual’s mental health.*

*45. The review also could investigate alternatives to a hotline, such as means by which to better advertise existing methods of raising concerns (like the 101 and 999 services). This could include specifying gun-related concerns on the online reporting form for Police Scotland. We are aware that this specific matter is devolved, although we think there would be great benefit in the UK Government and Scottish Government collaborating on this matter in order to share best practice.*

*46. Any such review ought to include a survey of the public, to ascertain the public’s general understanding of how to use existing methods to raise concerns to the police.*

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120 Q186  
 121 Q185  
 122 Q185-Q186  
 123 Q185  
 124 Q185  
 125 Q23  
 126 Q215  
 127 Q215  
 128 Q215

***With access to this data, Governments would be able to make informed, evidence-based decisions about how best to provide reporting services for firearms. We recommend that the UK Government consider advertising current methods of reporting more widely, so that people are more aware of the various existing ways in which they can raise concerns.***

## Unique reference numbers

47. We heard (for example, from Reverend Gordon Matheson) that people close to an individual may not know that they own, or are applying to own, firearms.<sup>129</sup> This lack of knowledge may prevent family and friends from reporting concerns about an individual who is not best placed to own firearms (for example, because of poor mental health).

48. It has been suggested that these issues could be addressed by assigning unique reference numbers to firearms licence applications and renewal applications. Police forces in the UK already give application numbers to applicants and certificate numbers to people who have been granted firearms licences<sup>130</sup>, and personal identification numbers and application reference numbers are used already by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, as part of Northern Ireland's firearms licensing process.<sup>131</sup> Assigning unique reference numbers in this way means that firearms licence applicants in the UK could share their unique application number with people whom they approach to be referees.

49. Using application reference numbers in this way could allow police and individuals to communicate effectively, when individuals contact the police to express concern about those who own firearms, or are applying for firearms licences. This could also help to simplify internal communications for police.

50. So that concerns can be raised at the earliest opportunity, Reverend Gordon Matheson suggested that people seeking a reference should need to provide potential referees with their unique application reference number.<sup>132</sup> This would mean that, if someone has concerns about an application which is in the process of being made, "their concerns can be relayed in connection to the reference for the application that is being made".<sup>133</sup> Having a unique reference number related to a specific application could be useful at any stage of the licensing process - whether someone has concerns on being asked for a reference, or whether they develop concerns after a firearms licence has been granted.

51. We heard from several witnesses that it is important that reference numbers would not be related to an openly available register of firearms. Reverend Gordon Matheson stated that "for good reasons... you don't want public awareness of who everyone with a firearm is".<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Dr Colin Shedden, Director Scotland for the British Association of Shooting and Conservation, told us that "our members would be slightly concerned if their names were to be put on a public register"<sup>135</sup> as "from a public safety perspective, it is better that people do not know that guns are stored in private houses".<sup>136</sup>

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129 Q33

130 GOV.UK, [Firearms licensing supporting documents](#), accessed 9 December 2022; Home Office, [Guide on firearms licensing law](#), November 2022, page 80

131 Police Service of Northern Ireland, [Request a firearms licence](#), accessed 7 December 2022

132 Q33

133 Q33

134 Q42

135 Q76

136 Q76

52. It would be valuable to have a single, simple means by which to identify people applying for a firearms licence about whom concerns have been raised, to assist police when investigating these concerns.

53. *We recommend that, when approaching potential referees, applicants would be required by police to share their unique application reference numbers with those referees. This would make it simpler to report concerns about applicants to the police. Such a system would be valuable both for those who decline to give references, and for those who give references but subsequently become concerned that applicants might no longer meet the statutory guidance's suitability requirements.<sup>137</sup> We recommend that the UK Government raise this recommendation with the Scottish Government, during their review of statutory guidance and best practice.*

### Length of time between renewals

54. Firearms licences are valid for five years.<sup>138</sup> Before their licences lapse, individuals must apply to their local police force for renewal. At that point, police review individuals' suitability to own firearms by carrying out much the same process as for licence applications. The renewal process, however, differs slightly from the process for first-time applications. For example, police forces may determine whether it is necessary to conduct additional background checks if (for example) individuals have held firearms licences for longer than ten years, or necessary to contact individuals' referees.<sup>139</sup> Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some risk assessments for renewals were conducted "over the telephone, videocall or by email"<sup>140</sup> rather than on home visits as with first-time applications - a change to practice which has been retained post-pandemic.<sup>141</sup>

55. Various parties have suggested changes to the period between an initial firearms licence application and its renewal.<sup>142</sup> Some of our witnesses (like the Gun Control Network<sup>143</sup>) told us that the renewal period should be shorter, while others (like the British Association for Shooting and Conservation<sup>144</sup>) told us that the renewal period should be longer.

56. We heard in evidence about some of the potential benefits of shortening the length of time before a renewal was required. Dr Michael North (a founding member of the Gun Control Network) told us that the Gun Control Network "would certainly argue in favour of a shorter period... [because] some of the personal circumstances of gun owners are likely to change, in some cases quite significantly, over a period of five years—relationship

137 The Home Office's [statutory guidance on firearms licensing for Chief Officers of Police](#) (published on 1 November 2021) sets out suitability requirements in Chapter 3.

138 Metropolitan Police, [Firearms licensing fees](#), accessed 14 September

139 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 13 and page 6

140 Home Office, Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 5

141 Q71

142 These include the Gun Control Network (The National, [Dunblane victim's dad calls for stricter gun laws after Skye shooting](#), accessed 13 September 2022) and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (Shooting UK, [BASC: the case for ten year shotgun and firearms certificates](#), accessed 15 September 2022).

143 Gun Control Network (FLR0020)

144 British Association for Shooting and Conservation (FLR0015)



changes; problems with drug and alcohol abuse”.<sup>145</sup> The Gun Control Network has called for licences to be renewed every two to three years, echoing Belgium’s and Brazil’s firearms licensing process.<sup>146</sup>

57. Various commentators have pointed out the disadvantages of shortening the renewal period. The Home Affairs Committee concluded in its 2010 report, *Firearms control*, that it had not “seen any evidence to suggest that there has been an increase in misuse of lethal firearms since the period was increased from three years in 1995”<sup>147</sup>, and concluded that “We are not convinced by arguments put forward in favour of decreasing the licence renewal period from five to two years”.<sup>148</sup> The Committee further concluded that “decreasing the licence renewal period... would place considerable pressure on police resources”.<sup>149</sup> Some witnesses to our inquiry came to similar conclusions. Superintendent Steven Duncan, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing for Police Scotland, estimated that shortening the renewal period would “double the demand placed on the firearms licensing system”<sup>150</sup>, while the British Association for Shooting and Conservation stated that “[r]educing the term of certificates to 2 or 3 years would place an additional and unnecessary burden on the police”.<sup>151</sup>

58. However, we heard from Dr Colin Shedden, Director Scotland for the British Association of Shooting and Conservation, that shooting organisations have “an expectation that we could move to 10 years”<sup>152</sup> between an original licence application and its renewal. Dr Shedden questioned “why waste more police time at these renewals, when we can extend it to 10 years, knowing that we have the comfort that there is almost 24-hour surveillance of certificate holders anyway?”, stating that “if you get involved in a speeding offence, it will be reported to firearms licensing very quickly”.<sup>153</sup> Superintendent Duncan corroborated this, telling us that there are “ongoing checks that take place in the background throughout the five-year period”<sup>154</sup> of a firearms licence. However, Professor Peter Squires, Professor Emeritus of Criminology and Public Policy at the University of Brighton, told us that “recent suggestions that firearm licences should be extended to ten years, rather than the current five, represents a step in the wrong direction”.<sup>155</sup> Professor Squires stated that lengthening the renewal period “signals a reduced level of licensee scrutiny and longer time periods during which the social and psychological circumstances of licensees might vary/deteriorate considerably”, noting that this carries the possibility of “producing greater risk”.<sup>156</sup> Given that licence renewal fees are lower than fees for original applications, we suggest that licence renewal fees could be increased to provide more resources to process more frequent renewals.

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145 Q3

146 “[Dunblane victim’s dad calls for stricter gun laws after Skye shooting](#)”, The National, accessed 13 September 2022

147 Home Affairs Committee, 14 December 2010, *Firearms control*, [The Licence Renewal and Revocation Process](#), section 78

148 Home Affairs Committee, 14 December 2010, *Firearms control*, [Conclusions and recommendations](#), Recommendation 12

149 Home Affairs Committee, 14 December 2010, *Firearms control*, [Conclusions and recommendations](#), Recommendation 12

150 Q115

151 British Association for Shooting and Conservation (FLR0015)

152 Q83

153 Q83

154 Q135

155 Professor Peter Squires (FLR0007)

156 Professor Peter Squires (FLR0007)

59. Overall, there is no general agreement on whether the current five-year renewal period should be shortened or lengthened. This means that there may be little value in changing it. Presently, Superintendent Duncan stated, “the reality is that a large majority of the renewals pass through the system without any further refusals or revocations, and only about 2% do not progress”<sup>157</sup>, suggesting that the current renewal period is working adequately on an individual basis. Assistant Chief Constable Alan Spiers, Strategic Firearms Commander for Police Scotland, summarised the position, saying that “the five-year renewal programme is about right”.<sup>158</sup>

60. Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice for the Scottish Government, told us that “you would likely want to have shorter timescales”<sup>159</sup> for firearms licence renewal periods, and that this is “certainly something worth looking at”.<sup>160</sup> However, the Cabinet Secretary stated that “if we are to reduce it, of course, that increases the workload for police and others”.<sup>161</sup> The Cabinet Secretary noted that, for licence renewal periods, “regulations are entirely reserved”<sup>162</sup>, although the Scottish Government does “feed into the thinking through a number of working groups”.<sup>163</sup>

61. Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP, Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire for the Home Office, summarised the advantages and disadvantages of shortening and lengthening the firearms licence renewal period:

“If the length of time were reduced, it would catch change in circumstances faster but, equally, it would impose a higher burden on the police operationally and additional administration on the person who holds the firearms certificate.

Conversely, if it was lengthened, for example to 10 years, it would reduce the bureaucratic burden on the police and the firearms holder, it would reduce cost, but it would increase the chance that there was some change in circumstance that did not get caught”.<sup>164</sup>

62. The Minister told us that “[i]t is a balance... [t]he balance is currently struck at five years”.<sup>165</sup> He suggested that the Home Office would be willing to consider reviewing the firearms licence renewal period, saying: “we are very happy to look at evidence arguing both ways... I would be very interested to see that in your report and see what the Committee suggests”.<sup>166</sup>

**63. We have heard that the current renewal period of five years is appropriate. We have heard that there is scope to consider lengthening the renewal period in order to free police resources, although we are concerned that this would reduce the ability**

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157 Q115  
 158 Q123  
 159 Q160  
 160 Q161  
 161 Q161  
 162 Q161  
 163 Q161  
 164 Q204  
 165 Q204  
 166 Q204

**of police to monitor firearms possession adequately. Similarly, more frequent checks would require additional burden on police resources, which might not be feasible at this time.**

64. *We recommend that the current renewal period of five years remain in place for the time being. However, we recommend that the renewal period should be kept under review, particularly if an alternative, workable method of mental health monitoring and assessment were to be introduced, which we look at in the next Chapter of this Report.*

## Differences in legislation between firearms and shotgun licences

65. There are differences in requirements which applicants must meet, in order to obtain firearms licences and shotgun licences. Although legislation related to air weapons is devolved<sup>167</sup>, Superintendent Duncan told us that “the air weapons test is effectively the same test that would be applied to a firearm”<sup>168</sup> - further highlighting the difference between these requirements and the requirements for shotgun licences. We have heard calls from witnesses for shotgun legislation to be brought into line with firearms and air weapon legislation.

66. Superintendent Steven Duncan, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing for Police Scotland, told us that, to obtain firearms licences, “you have been deemed to be fit to be entrusted, that you have had good reason for the possession of the firearm, and that that possession would be without danger to public safety”.<sup>169</sup> By contrast, to obtain shotgun licences, Superintendent Duncan told us that “you still need to have good reason, but the only other additional requirement is that there is no additional risk in terms of public safety”.<sup>170</sup> Moreover, Superintendent Duncan stated that even “the onus to demonstrate good reason for a firearm sits with the applicant, whereas, with the shotgun legislation, the onus is on the police to show that there is not good reason”.<sup>171</sup>

67. Additionally, the number of referees required to obtain firearms licences is higher than for shotgun licences.<sup>172</sup> Superintendent Duncan told us that “For a firearm application you are required to provide two referees, for a shotgun application, you are required to provide one”.<sup>173</sup>

68. The differences between firearms and shotgun legislation extend beyond obtaining licences - there are also differences related to revoking licences. Superintendent Duncan stated that:

“if you lose your good reason to possess a firearm, we are empowered to withdraw your certificate. However, the same cannot be said for shotguns: if you no longer have a good reason, it would need to be on the grounds of public safety”.<sup>174</sup>

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167 Scottish Government, [Air weapon licensing in Scotland: a guide](#), accessed 12 December 2022

168 Q116

169 Q116

170 Q116

171 Q116

172 GOV.UK, [Shotgun and firearms certificates](#), accessed 9 December 2022

173 Q129

174 Q116



He called this “a bit of a gap in the legislation”.<sup>175</sup>

69. Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP, Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire for the Home Office, stated that “the test is set differently ... [because] there are many people particularly in rural communities, and including across Scotland as much as anywhere else, where the possession and use of shotguns are part of rural life”.<sup>176</sup> However, Superintendent Duncan stated that the requirements for shotgun licences ought to be the same as for firearms and air weapons, as this would make the process “consistent and clear for everyone”.<sup>177</sup> He said that “I struggle to see why there would need to be that difference”<sup>178</sup> between requirements for different types of weapon. Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Minister for Justice for the Scottish Government, stated that “It is not immediately obvious to me why we should have different criteria for issuing those licences”.<sup>179</sup>

**70. Police and officials pointed out the inconsistencies between firearms and shotgun licensing requirements, as described in legislation. To resolve these inconsistencies, they were clear that shotgun licensing requirements ought to be brought into line with licensing requirements for firearms and air weapons. These inconsistencies include:**

- applicants for shotgun licences not being required to demonstrate that they are ‘fit to be entrusted’ with shotguns;
- not having their licences revoked except on the grounds of public safety (rather than no longer having a good reason to own shotguns);
- being required to provide one character reference rather than two.

Having the same requirements for firearms, shotgun and air weapon licences would make the licensing process clearer for applicants seeking to obtain these licences, and for police forces administering the licensing process.

*71. We recommend that the UK Government make the the legislation related to shotgun licences consistent with legislation related to firearms and air weapon licences. We recommend that the UK Government change shotgun licence legislation to require people applying for shotgun licences to demonstrate that they are ‘fit to be entrusted’ with shotguns, and to provide character references from two referees.*

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175 Q116

176 Q197

177 Q118

178 Q118

179 Q157

## 4 Medical assessments

72. Medical assessments for firearms licence holders were being carried out in Scotland for several years before they were statutorily introduced in the UK. Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice for the Scottish Government, stated that Police Scotland have undertaken “mental health checks... going back to 2016”<sup>180</sup>, while Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP, Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire for the Home Office, told us that, in the UK, “the statutory guidance that was introduced on 1 November 2021 made it a requirement that police sources consider medical information”<sup>181</sup>.

73. GPs’ involvement is key to the firearms licensing process. For example, Superintendent Steven Duncan, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing for Police Scotland, told us: “We are quite clear that if your GP practice is not willing to put a flag on to your medical records, you are not getting granted a firearms certificate”<sup>182</sup>. For this reason, further consultation with GPs on areas like medical assessments for firearms licence applicants and the flagging system would be valuable. The responsibility for the NHS in Scotland is devolved to the Scottish Parliament<sup>183</sup>, so the UK Government and Scottish Government should work together on consulting GPs working for NHS Scotland about areas like medical assessments and the flagging system.

### The GP flagging system

74. A key issue covered in firearms licensing is safety, in which firearms owners’ mental health plays a crucial role. The Home Office’s statutory guidance requires individuals who are applying for and renewing firearms licences to disclose relevant conditions like drug and alcohol related conditions<sup>184</sup>, depression, anxiety, and dementia.<sup>185</sup> Since the Home Office’s statutory guidance came into effect in November 2021, individuals who are applying for or renewing firearms licences must also provide a medical assessment from their GP.<sup>186</sup>

75. GPs can place ‘flags’ on patients’ medical records to alert clinicians that individuals own firearms.<sup>187</sup> Both policy experts advocating gun control and shooting associations have expressed concern that the flagging system is inadequate. Professor Peter Squires, Professor Emeritus of Criminology and Public Policy at the University of Brighton, has stated that police needed to engage in “much more involvement with health services to ensure people with mental health problems didn’t get through the licensing system”<sup>188</sup>, while the British Shooting Sports Council told us that the flagging system as a whole is “unacceptably weak”<sup>189</sup>. The Council said that:

“In the absence of agreement from the medical profession for a GP to be required by law to place the marker, the Statutory Guidance envisages it

180 Q159

181 Q218

182 Q139

183 Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland, [Facts about NHS funding in Scotland](#), accessed 8 December 2022

184 Home Office, Firearm licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 8

185 [“Dunblane victim’s dad calls for stricter gun laws after Skye shooting”](#), The National, 14 August 2022

186 Home Office, Firearm licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police, December 2021, page 6

187 British Medical Association, [The firearms licensing process](#), accessed 13 September 2022

188 BBC Sussex Radio, [Interview of Professor Peter Squires by Danielle Perry](#), transcript accessed 13 September 2022

189 British Shooting Sports Council (FLR0010)

being placed by the GP on a ‘best endeavours’ basis. We believe that to be inadequate insofar as it allows for the possibility that a medical practitioner is left unaware that the patient who he is treating may be in possession of firearms”.<sup>190</sup>

76. Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice for the Scottish Government, told us: “We are aware that there can sometimes be some technical challenges to using the marker, for example when a patient moves between practices, and we are continuing to work with the police and with doctors”.<sup>191</sup> The Cabinet Secretary suggested that the flagging system “this could be looked at in greater depth, and we could finesse it and make it more refined and effective”.<sup>192</sup>

**77. The GP flagging system is valuable, but we believe that it could be strengthened in order to make it as effective as possible.**

**78. We recommend that the UK Government and the Scottish Government work together to review the GP flagging system. This review could address issues including communication between medical practitioners and the police, and problems which arise when firearms owners move medical practices.**

## Medical reports by GPs

79. If a GP conscientiously objects to firearms, they might refuse to engage with the licensing process.<sup>193</sup> In this case, applicants must obtain a report from another licensed medical practitioner.<sup>194</sup> The British Medical Association supports GPs’ right to conscientiously object to engaging with the firearms licensing process, and further states that “conscientious objectors do not need to arrange for alternative provision of a report”.<sup>195</sup> We heard calls to make GPs’ involvement in the firearms licensing process a “statutory obligation” (in the words of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation).<sup>196</sup>

80. Dr Colin Shedden, Director Scotland for the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, told us that “the fact that GPs are not legally obliged to participate, so they can opt out under the conscientious objector banner” is “the one area that we do have concern about”<sup>197</sup> in the firearms licensing process. Dr Shedden suggested that “[i]f the Home Office was to introduce a statutory requirement for GPs to participate in the process with respect to public safety, we would certainly welcome that”.<sup>198</sup>

81. However, it may not be necessary to make GPs’ involvement mandatory. We heard from Superintendent Steven Duncan, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing for Police Scotland, that the number of GPs who choose not to provide medical reports as part of the licensing process is “incredibly low”<sup>199</sup>, which was echoed by other witnesses. Dr Shedden estimated that “[m]aybe 10 or 20 of them are doing that in Scotland just now,

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190 British Shooting Sports Council (FLR0010)

191 Q181

192 Q159

193 British Medical Association, [The firearms licensing process](#), accessed 13 September 2022

194 Home Office, *Firearms licensing: statutory guidance for Chief Officers of Police*, December 2021, page 6

195 British Medical Association, [The firearms licensing process](#), accessed 13 September 2022

196 British Association for Shooting and Conservation (FLR0015)

197 Q72

198 Q72

199 Q139

out of over 1,000 GP practices” - concluding that “it is a low proportion”.<sup>200</sup> Rt Hon. Chris Philp MP, Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire for the Home Office, told us that, in Scotland, 95% of GP practices do engage with the process.<sup>201</sup> This suggests that the current process works adequately. The Minister stated: “I hesitate somewhat for the Government to intervene with regulation or statute where it is essentially working already”, but said that “I am always happy to keep it under review”.<sup>202</sup>

**82. *We recommend that the UK Government and Scottish Government work together to consult GPs on whether GPs’ engagement with the firearms licensing process should be made mandatory. GPs’ compulsory engagement may help GPs to flag health issues affecting firearms owners’ suitability to police more quickly and easily. Although this inquiry has not included a consultation with GPs, it is imperative that such a consultation be carried out so that the UK Government is able to make evidence-based policy decisions on the matter of conscientious objection.***

**83. *If a review concludes that it is inadvisable to make GPs’ engagement with the firearms licensing process mandatory, we recommend that statutory guidance emphasise the strong expectation that GPs who object conscientiously to engaging with the firearms licensing process will pass on applicants to another GP in the same practice, where there is one.***

## Interim checks on licence holders

84. The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health says that an individual’s mental health “can change in a short period of time and fluctuate rapidly”.<sup>203</sup> Despite this, in-depth checks are carried out on firearms owners only at initial applications and at five-yearly renewals. Dr North, a founding member of the Gun Control Network, stated that currently “there aren’t many ongoing checks between the five-year period”.<sup>204</sup> The British Association for Shooting and Conservation went further, saying that there is “potentially no medical monitoring during the life of the certificate”.<sup>205</sup> This is the more problematic because Dr North told us that “five years is often being extended now”<sup>206</sup> due to the delays which some police forces are experiencing in processing renewals - some firearms owners whose licences have lapsed have been given “temporary permits”.<sup>207</sup> Dr North stated that temporary permits mean that firearms owners “do not have to surrender their gun before renewal”<sup>208</sup>, meaning that they are in possession of firearms for longer without checks. Professor Peter Squires, Professor Emeritus of Criminology and Public Policy at the University of Brighton, quoting a 2015 report from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services<sup>209</sup>, told us that this represents a “[f]ailure to undertake ongoing monitoring of health, including mental well-being”.<sup>210</sup> For this reason, we have heard calls for ongoing or interim medical checks during the life of licences.

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200 Q72

201 Q218

202 Q219

203 Institution of Occupational Safety and Health, [Mental health](#), accessed 6 December 2022

204 Q20

205 British Association for Shooting and Conservation, [Statutory guidance on firearms licensing published](#), accessed 13 September 2022

206 Q20

207 Q20

208 Q20

209 At the time of the 2015 report, this organisation was named ‘Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary’.

210 Professor Peter Squires (FLR0007)

85. Interim medical checks at regular intervals would enable GPs, and thus potentially police, to become aware of changes in individuals' mental health during the life of firearms licences. Noticing changes soon after they emerge may mean that individuals could be given help before they experience significant deterioration in their mental health which, in firearms owners, could impact both the individuals themselves and public safety. One witness told us that "continuous monitoring of the licence holder has to be the way to go as it should allow faster response to issues".<sup>211</sup> This position was supported by the British Shooting Sports Council, who told us that GPs and police "should ensure continuous monitoring of the medical fitness of an individual to possess firearms throughout a certificate's 5 year life".<sup>212</sup> We heard that this could be done as frequently as annually, stating that "maybe yearly mental health assessments are a better way, rather than every 5 years".<sup>213</sup>

86. We heard from some witnesses that more checks which could detect changes in licence holders' mental health and suitability to own firearms are not needed. Dr Colin Shedden, Director Scotland for the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, stated that "individual certificate holders are under practical 24-hour-a-day surveillance now"<sup>214</sup> by police, rendering set checks obsolete. Similarly, Dr John Thorogood, who has held firearms licences in Scotland for over forty years, told us that "[t]he involvement of GPs, the licensee's criminal record together with the licensee's posts on social media already provide sufficient evidence on which to base a decision regarding a licensee's fitness".<sup>215</sup> Nick Hunt, Head of the Firearms Policy Unit at the Home Office, told us:

"One of the things that we are stressing as part of the statutory guidance and working with the police is the continuous assessment process. They are looking at other police intelligence databases or whatever to make sure that they are picking up issues about individuals with firearms certificates".<sup>216</sup>

**87. We recommend that the UK Government and Scottish Government work together to investigate the merits of medical practitioners and police conducting interim checks on firearms licence holders. These checks would take place between licence application and renewal. Interim checks would allow police to observe more accelerated changes in individuals' mental health, which might affect their suitability to own firearms during the life of their licences.**

## Buddy initiatives

88. We heard concerns that firearms owners might not inform authority figures that they are suffering from poor mental health for fear of repercussions. For example, Dr Michael North, a founding member of the Gun Control Network, stated that firearms licence holders "will not consult with a GP or anybody else for fear that they might lose their

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211 Mr Andy Spence (FLR0006)

212 British Shooting Sports Council (FLR0010)

213 Anonymised (FLR0004)

214 Q83

215 Dr John Thorogood (FLR0005)

216 Q221

licence”<sup>217</sup>, and Fraser Lamb, Firearms Licensing Adviser for the Scottish Association for Country Sports, told us that “[t]he myth is that if you went to your doctor with a mental health problem, the police will take your guns away from you”.<sup>218</sup>

89. However, Dr North stated that “[i]t is telling how many cases there have been where somebody’s poor mental health has been apparent retrospectively and then it has been revealed that somebody close to them was well aware of it, yet the system does not have a way of dealing with that”.<sup>219</sup> This suggests that, although individuals may not discuss poor mental health with GPs or the police, it is likely that people close to them know about the issue.

90. For this reason, it may be advisable to set up more formal ‘buddy’ initiatives within shooting organisations. This could involve each member of a shooting organisation having a ‘buddy’ with whom they check in regularly - allowing buddies to notice any changes in each other’s mental health in a timely manner, and escalate any concerns.

91. Shooting organisations already have informal ways of supporting their members who are experiencing poor mental health, such as providing open channels for members to discuss mental health with leaders of organisations, who then raise concerns with police where necessary. Nick Hunt, Head of the Firearms Policy Unit at the Home Office, told us that shooting clubs “have liaison officers who liaise with the local force... It might be that their friends and colleagues in the shooting club bring it [a mental health concern] to the attention of the relevant police force so that action could be taken by that police force”.<sup>220</sup> These informal ways to support members with their mental health involve creating an atmosphere in which members feel comfortable to approach others in their shooting organisation, to discuss their own and others’ mental health. For example, Fraser Lamb told us that “Members may phone us with concerns”<sup>221</sup> and “[i]f we were made aware of any concerns in respect of someone’s suitability for firearms, there is a close enough relationship between the shooting organisations and Police Scotland to be able to communicate”.<sup>222</sup> He confirmed that he, himself, had raised such concerns with the police in the past.<sup>223</sup> Dr Colin Shedden, Director Scotland for the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, confirmed that for him, too, “there have been occasions when I have received information that has caused some concern and I have had discussions with Police Scotland or the previous constabularies that were dealing with it”.<sup>224</sup> As current informal arrangements do help members of shooting organisations to address mental health concerns, formal ‘buddy’ initiatives may make this process even more successful.

92. Presently, there is no formal channel by which shooting organisations may raise concerns about their members with the police. Assistant Chief Constable Alan Spiers, Strategic Firearms Commander for Police Scotland, noted that, at the moment, “[t]here is a great responsibility placed on shooting organisations and clubs to highlight concerns”<sup>225</sup> of their own accord. Additionally, with no official channel, the current arrangement relies

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217 Q18

218 Q59

219 Q19

220 Q221

221 Q51

222 Q50

223 Q51

224 Q52

225 Q123



on individuals who have connections with police forces - like Fraser Lamb (formerly Head of Firearms Licensing for Police Scotland), who “because of my police service and intelligence background, know[s] how to sanitise that and to pass it on to the police so that they can turn it into whatever executive action is required”.<sup>226</sup> An official channel for all members of any shooting organisation would mean that individuals could express their concerns to police more quickly and easily.

93. Encouraging shooting organisations to have formal buddy initiatives may also create spaces in which firearms licence holders feel comfortable with discussing their mental health. This could be an important way to help improve individuals’ mental health, so that it does not become problematic for them or for public safety - the Mental Health Foundation states that “just talking things through with a person we trust can help”.<sup>227</sup> This is especially relevant for groups of people who are more likely to use firearms for work or leisure. Dr Shedden told us that there is a “long-standing belief that men in particular [are] reluctant to discuss health issues, especially mental health issues, and it is predominantly men who have firearms in society in Scotland and in Great Britain”.<sup>228</sup>

94. ***We recommend that the UK Government and Scottish Government encourage and support the creation of ‘buddy’ initiatives for firearms owners. Buddy initiatives could be integrated into shooting organisations, workplaces and sporting clubs. Buddy initiatives would enable individuals to recognise and raise concerns about changes in their buddies’ mental health. This would formalise existing informal arrangements within shooting organisations and clubs.***

## Supporting shooting organisations in advertising mental health services

95. As mentioned above, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation stated that “some certificate holders may be unwilling to seek medical assistance if they feel that this could affect their suitability to retain their certificate(s)”.<sup>229</sup> Consequently, Fraser Lamb, Firearms Licensing Adviser for the Scottish Association for Country Sports, told us that shooting organisations like the Scottish Association for Country Sports “have done a lot of work on trying to stop that or trying to advise people accordingly”.<sup>230</sup>

96. One result of this work is the distribution of leaflets about mental health, aimed specifically at individuals who shoot for work or leisure, which outline “sources of help and advice”.<sup>231</sup> The British Association for Shooting and Conservation told us that this includes the Scottish Firearms and Explosives Licensing Practitioners Group’s leaflet entitled *Firearms and mental health: awareness and support*<sup>232</sup> and the Gamekeepers Welfare Trust’s leaflet entitled *Mental ill health in the work place for rural workers in Scotland: gamekeepers, stalkers, ghillies and shepherds*.<sup>233</sup> The British Association for

226 Q51

227 Mental Health Foundation, [Our best mental health tips - backed by research](#), accessed 6 December 2022

228 Q61

229 British Association for Shooting and Conservation (FLR0015)

230 Q59

231 Q60

232 British Association for Shooting and Conservation (FLR0015); This leaflet can be found on Scottish Target Shooting, [Scottish firearms bodies launch campaign to raise awareness about mental health support](#), accessed 6 September 2022

233 This leaflet can be found on the Gamekeepers Welfare Trust, [Firearms and mental health awareness and support - advice](#), accessed 13 September 2022

Shooting and Conservation stated that these leaflets are “designed to advise certificate holders and, importantly, their family and friends that mental health challenges are common throughout society and that it is always best to seek support”.<sup>234</sup> In a joint submission, the Scottish Association for Country Sports, Scottish Land and Estates, Scottish Target Shooting, The Gun Trade Association, The Scottish Countryside Alliance and The Scottish Gamekeepers Association told us that the leafletting campaign has been successful. They said that they had published and distributed:

“30k copies of the Firearms and Mental Health Awareness and Support leaflet. This [leaflet] will be distributed to all certificate holders over the next five years by Police Scotland who will include it in all correspondence, including grants, renewals and variations. The shooting organisations, where possible will include it in membership renewals. It has been circulated by Scottish Government, Health and over 1100 copies have been sent to local surgeries”.<sup>235</sup>

97. As the shooting community has started advertising mental health support services of their own accord, it may be productive for the UK Government to support further efforts.

98. *We recommend that the UK Government support the shooting community in advertising avenues to mental health support, to build on the recent release of leaflets about mental health in that community. We recommend that the UK Government ask the Scottish Government to join this effort in advertising mental health services to shooters, and distributing materials such as the mental health leaflets produced by shooting organisations.*

### Impact on remote rural communities

99. The tragic incident on the Isle of Skye highlighted the particular challenges faced by rural communities traumatised by fatal shootings. In relation to mental health generally, the British Shooting Sports Council told us that “the isolation inherent in some rural communities and occupations is well known to represent an area of concern”.<sup>236</sup> Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice for the Scottish Parliament, corroborated this, saying “there are questions around [mental health], especially in small and rural communities”.<sup>237</sup>

100. However, in relation to specific incidents, Reverend Gordon Matheson told us that “[t]here are issues around the subsequent trauma that people have experienced and accessing counselling care for that”.<sup>238</sup> This issue is compounded by the relative lack of policing and medical infrastructure which can respond to traumatic incidents. For example, Fraser Lamb, Firearms Licensing Adviser for the Scottish Association for Country Sports, stated that “people who stayed in the more rural communities...

234 British Association for Shooting and Conservation (FLR0015)

235 Scottish Association for Country Sports, Scottish Land and Estates, Scottish Target Shooting, The Gun Trade Association, The Scottish Countryside Alliance, and The Scottish Gamekeepers Association (FLR0009)

236 British Shooting Sports Council (FLR0010)

237 Q159

238 Q32



by definition do not see the police as often as you might in inner-city areas”<sup>239</sup>, while Reverend Gordon Matheson told us that “Skye has two ambulances, generally speaking one for the north end of Skye and one for the south end and Lochalsh”.<sup>240</sup>

**101. We are concerned by the reports we heard about the impacts of fatal shootings which take place in rural communities in Scotland. It is clear to us that these communities should be provided with appropriate support where needed.**

***102. We recommend that the UK Government and Scottish Government work together either to put mental health resources like counselling in place in remote rural communities, or to ensure that mental health resources can be easily accessed in rural communities when tragedies involving firearms occur.***

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239 Q66

240 Q37

## Conclusions and recommendations

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### The cost of firearms licensing

1. Police forces' resources are stretched, so it seems unsatisfactory that they bear most of the cost of processing applications for firearms licences. It would seem desirable to move towards a situation where those people seeking a licence pay a fee to cover the cost of the process that it involves. (Paragraph 23)
2. *We recommend that the UK Government put in place a two-tier system of firearms licence costs. This system ought to require individuals who use firearms for leisure to pay the full cost of their licence applications, with no immediate financial cost to police forces or the taxpayer. The second tier would apply to those who use firearms for work purposes. To facilitate this, the UK Government ought to produce a list of work purposes for firearms which would entitle licence applicants to pay the second tier rate. We understand that there is a view that all firearm holders should consistently cover the cost of their own applications. However, we would err on the side of caution, and encourage a UK Government review to consider the implications that those costs might impose on those who rely on firearms for work (as well as a clear definition of 'work' for the purpose of clarity). Following a thorough consultation with affected parties, the UK Government would be in a better position to take a decision on whether individuals who use firearms for work could have their licences partly funded.* (Paragraph 24)

### Raising concerns

3. The referee system has merit in protecting public safety and the peace; but we have significant concerns about the referee system for the firearms licensing process, which must be addressed before it is fit for purpose. These include concerns about applicants canvassing for referees, and lack of mandatory consultation with people close to firearms licence applicants. We heard from a former Head of Firearms Licensing for Police Scotland, he "saw no practical merit in having referees". (Paragraph 32)
4. *We recommend that the UK Government conduct a review of the referee system, to determine whether it is fit for purpose. This review ought to address the issue of individuals canvassing for positive references, or putting pressure on people to give positive references (for example, by engaging in the peer pressuring behaviours which may be experienced in smaller communities, or coercion as a feature of domestic violence). This review should also address the options open to police when individuals change referees between application and renewal, and between subsequent renewals. While policy relating to the police is generally a devolved matter, the UK Government ought to be looking to share best practice with the Scottish Government and Police Scotland.* (Paragraph 33)
5. There is potential for conjugal partners to play a vital role in assessing individuals' suitability to own firearms. In Canada's firearms licensing system, conjugal partners play a key role in assessing whether applicants are fit to be entrusted with firearm - either by countersigning applications or (if this does not happen) discussing the

application with police. Following Canada's example by involving conjugal partners more closely in the UK's firearms licensing process could help to ensure that only people who meet the statutory guidance's suitability requirements are granted firearms licences. (Paragraph 34)

6. *We recommend that the UK Government change the statutory guidance on firearms licensing to more strongly recommend that police forces involve present and former conjugal partners in the application and renewal process. Echoing the system used in Canada, this could involve police interviewing individual's present and former conjugal partners as a routine part of firearms licence applications and renewals, to confirm that the individual is suitable to own firearms. While this option may be a helpful addition to the firearms licensing process, it is not without risk. We heard that pressure to provide a partner with a positive reference might aggravate domestic violence. It would also place an additional burden on police resources. We urge the UK Government to consider those risks and to put in place safeguards where appropriate.* (Paragraph 35)
7. A single, dedicated channel for reporting concerns about people who own, or are applying to own, firearms could make that process simpler and easier. However, a dedicated hotline may be too difficult to resource and we are very much aware of the challenges around advertising such a new hotline, such as resourcing that advertisement and endeavouring to embed any new channel in the public consciousness. (Paragraph 42)
8. *We therefore recommend that the UK Government conduct a review investigating the merits of creating a new service within the 101 service, which could direct callers towards call-handlers with firearms expertise (in the same way as the lifeboat and mountain rescue services are reached via the 999 emergency control centre). This would allow people close to a firearms licence applicant to raise concerns about their suitability to be granted or to renew firearms licences—for example, if there were concerns about the individual's mental health.* (Paragraph 43)
9. *The review also could investigate alternatives to a hotline, such as means by which to better advertise existing methods of raising concerns (like the 101 and 999 services). This could include specifying gun-related concerns on the online reporting form for Police Scotland. We are aware that this specific matter is devolved, although we think there would be great benefit in the UK Government and Scottish Government collaborating on this matter in order to share best practice.* (Paragraph 44)
10. *Any such review ought to include a survey of the public, to ascertain the public's general understanding of how to use existing methods to raise concerns to the police. With access to this data, Governments would be able to make informed, evidence-based decisions about how best to provide reporting services for firearms. We recommend that the UK Government consider advertising current methods of reporting more widely, so that people are more aware of the various existing ways in which they can raise concerns.* (Paragraph 45)
11. It would be valuable to have a single, simple means by which to identify people applying for a firearms licence about whom concerns have been raised, to assist police when investigating these concerns. (Paragraph 51)

12. *We recommend that, when approaching potential referees, applicants would be required by police to share their unique application reference numbers with those referees. This would make it simpler to report concerns about applicants to the police. Such a system would be valuable both for those who decline to give references, and for those who give references but subsequently become concerned that applicants might no longer meet the statutory guidance's suitability requirements. We recommend that the UK Government raise this recommendation with the Scottish Government, during their review of statutory guidance and best practice. (Paragraph 52)*
13. We have heard that the current renewal period of five years is appropriate. We have heard that there is scope to consider lengthening the renewal period in order to free police resources, although we are concerned that this would reduce the ability for police to monitor firearms possession adequately. Similarly, more frequent checks would require additional burden on police resources, which might not be feasible at this time. (Paragraph 62)
14. *We recommend that the current renewal period of five years remain in place for the time being. However, we recommend that the renewal period should be kept under review, particularly if an alternative, workable method of mental health monitoring and assessment were to be introduced, which we look at in the next Chapter of this Report. (Paragraph 63)*
15. Police and officials pointed out the inconsistencies between firearms and shotgun licensing requirements, as described in legislation. To resolve these inconsistencies, they were clear that shotgun licensing requirements ought to be brought into line with licensing requirements for firearms and air weapons. These inconsistencies include:
- applicants for shotgun licences not being required to demonstrate that they are 'fit to be entrusted' with shotguns;
  - not having their licences revoked except on the grounds of public safety (rather than no longer having a good reason to own shotguns);
  - being required to provide one character reference rather than two.

Having the same requirements for firearms, shotgun and air weapon licences would make the licensing process clearer for applicants seeking to obtain these licences, and for police forces administering the licensing process. (Paragraph 69)

16. *We recommend that the UK Government make the the legislation related to shotgun licences consistent with legislation related to firearms and air weapon licences. We recommend that the UK Government change shotgun licence legislation to require people applying for shotgun licences to demonstrate that they are 'fit to be entrusted' with shotguns, and to provide character references from two referees. (Paragraph 70)*

### Medical assessments

17. The GP flagging system is valuable, but we believe that it could be strengthened in order to make it as effective as possible. (Paragraph 76)

18. *We recommend that the UK Government and the Scottish Government work together to review the GP flagging system. This review could address issues including communication between medical practitioners and the police, and problems which arise when firearms owners move medical practices. (Paragraph 77)*
19. *We recommend that the UK Government and Scottish Government work together to consult GPs on whether GPs' engagement with the firearms licensing process should be made mandatory. GPs' compulsory engagement may help GPs to flag health issues affecting firearms owners' suitability to police more quickly and easily. Although this inquiry has not included a consultation with GPs, it is imperative that such a consultation be carried out so that the UK Government is able to make evidence-based policy decisions on the matter of conscientious objection. (Paragraph 81)*
20. *If a review concludes that it is inadvisable to make GPs' engagement with the firearms licensing process mandatory, we recommend that statutory guidance emphasise the strong expectation that GPs who object conscientiously to engaging with the firearms licensing process will pass on applicants to another GP in the same practice, where there is one. (Paragraph 82)*
21. *We recommend that the UK Government and Scottish Government work together to investigate the merits of medical practitioners and police conducting interim checks on firearms licence holders. These checks would take place between licence application and renewal. Interim checks would allow police to observe more accelerated changes in individuals' mental health, which might affect their suitability to own firearms during the life of their licences. (Paragraph 86)*
22. *We recommend that the UK Government and Scottish Government encourage and support the creation of 'buddy' initiatives for firearms owners. Buddy initiatives could be integrated into shooting organisations, workplaces and sporting clubs. Buddy initiatives would enable individuals to recognise and raise concerns about changes in their buddies' mental health. This would formalise existing informal arrangements within shooting organisations and clubs. (Paragraph 93)*
23. *We recommend that the UK Government support the shooting community in advertising avenues to mental health support, to build on the recent release of leaflets about mental health in that community. We recommend that the UK Government ask the Scottish Government to join this effort in advertising mental health services to shooters, and distributing materials such as the mental health leaflets produced by shooting organisations. (Paragraph 97)*
24. *We are concerned by the reports we heard about the impacts of fatal shootings which take place in rural communities in Scotland. It is clear to us that these communities should be provided with appropriate support where needed. (Paragraph 100)*
25. *We recommend that the UK Government and Scottish Government work together either to put mental health resources like counselling in place in remote rural communities, or to ensure that mental health resources can be easily accessed in rural communities when tragedies involving firearms occur. (Paragraph 101)*

# Formal minutes

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**Monday 19 December 2022**

## **Members present**

Pete Wishart, in the Chair

Mhairi Black

Wendy Chamberlain

Sally-Ann Hart

Douglas Ross

Draft Report (*Firearms licensing regulations in Scotland*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 102 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

## **Adjournment**

Adjourned till Monday 9 January 2022 at 2.30 p.m.

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Monday 24 October 2022

**Dr Michael North**, Founder Member, Gun Control Network; **Gordon Matheson**, Pastor of Sleat & Strath, Free Church of Scotland [Q1–46](#)

**Fraser Lamb**, Firearms Licensing Adviser, Scottish Association for Country Sports; **Dr Colin Shedden**, Director Scotland, British Association for Shooting and Conservation [Q47–90](#)

### Monday 31 October 2022

**Superintendent Steven Duncan**, Head of National Firearms and Explosives Licensing, Police Scotland; **Assistant Chief Constable Alan Speirs**, Strategic Firearms Commander, Police Scotland [Q91–155](#)

**Keith Brown MSP**, Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Scottish Government; **Paul Allen**, Team Leader for Building Safer Communities, Safer Communities Directorate, Scottish Government; **Jamie MacQueen**, Solicitor, Equalities and Criminal Justice Directorate, Legal Directorate, Scottish Government [Q156–191](#)

### Monday 21 November 2022

**Rt Hon Chris Philp MP**, Minister of State (Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire), Home Office; **Nick Hunt**, Head of Firearms Policy Unit, Home Office [Q192–234](#)

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

FLR numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Anonymised ([FLR0018](#))
- 2 Anonymised ([FLR0004](#))
- 3 British Association for Shooting and Conservation ([FLR0015](#))
- 4 Gun Control Network ([FLR0020](#))
- 5 Home Office ([FLR0021](#))
- 6 Kay, Mr Martin ([FLR0008](#))
- 7 McPherson, Mr Bruce ([FLR0001](#))
- 8 Police Scotland ([FLR0011](#))
- 9 Scottish Association for Country Sports; Scottish Land and Estates; The Scottish Gamekeepers Association; Scottish Target Shooting; The Scottish Countryside Alliance; and The Gun Trade Association ([FLR0009](#))
- 10 Scottish Government ([FLR0019](#))
- 11 Spence, Mr Andy ([FLR0006](#))
- 12 Squires, Professor Peter (Professor [Emeritus], University of Brighton) ([FLR0007](#))
- 13 The British Shooting Sports Council ([FLR0010](#))
- 14 The Law Society of Scotland ([FLR0012](#))
- 15 Thorogood, Dr John (Self-employed consulting engineer, Not Applicable) ([FLR0005](#))
- 16 Ware, MR Robert (Retired, I am the Secretary of Sleat Community Council, a voluntary community role.) ([FLR0022](#))
- 17 Ware, MR Robert (Retired, I am the Secretary of Sleat Community Council, a voluntary community role.) ([FLR0017](#))



# List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the publications page of the Committee's website.

## Session 2022–23

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Defence in Scotland: military landscape	HC 82
2nd	Access to cash in Scotland	HC 80
1st Special	Immigration and Scotland: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 84
2nd Special	Airports in Scotland: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2021–22	HC 303
3rd Special	Defence in Scotland: military landscape: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 674
4th Special	Access to cash in Scotland: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report	HC 695

## Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Universities and Scotland	HC 54
2nd	Welfare policy in Scotland	HC 55
3rd	The UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Scotland	HC 52
4th	Renewable energy in Scotland	HC 51
5th	Airports in Scotland	HC 601
1st Special	Welfare policy in Scotland: UK and Scottish Government Responses to the Committee's Second Report	HC 790
2nd Special	The UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Scotland: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report	HC 791
3rd Special	Renewable energy in Scotland: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report	HC 901
4th Special	Universities and Scotland: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 1252

## Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Coronavirus and Scotland: Interim Report on Intergovernmental Working	HC 314

<b>Number</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Reference</b>
2nd	Coronavirus and Scotland	HC 895
1st Special	Problem drug use in Scotland: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2019	HC 698
2nd Special	Coronavirus and Scotland: Government Response to the Committee's First and Second Reports	HC 1118