

Written evidence submitted by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation

- **How adequate are firearms licensing regulations in the UK, and in Scotland in particular?**

Firearms licensing in Scotland is regulated by legislation reserved to Westminster, except for the Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2015 that introduced a licensing regime for low powered airguns in Scotland.

Police Scotland is the licensing authority for shotgun and firearm certificates in Scotland and does so in accordance with statutory and non-statutory Home Office firearms licensing guidance for Scotland, England and Wales.

BASC asserts that the administration of firearms licensing in Scotland is adequate and Police Scotland, as one unitary force, appears to be one of the best performing licensing administrations in the UK, if not the best.

For example, over 99% of firearms, shot gun and air weapons certificates are renewed before expiry (5 years) an efficiency hardly matched by any other licensing authority in the UK. There is no indication that this efficiency is due to reduced scrutiny of applicants and current certificate holders at renewal, to the detriment of public safety.

In fact, Police Scotland introduced a mandatory medical verification process for the grant and renewal of all certificates (apart from Air Weapon Certificates) in 2015, 6 years before this became accepted practice in England and Wales.

- **To what extent are firearms licensing regulations adequate and relevant to Scotland's particular circumstances, including its agricultural communities and its strong connections with countryside sports?**

BASC asserts that the current firearms licensing regulations are adequate and relevant to Scotland's particular circumstances. Despite being among the most stringent regulations anywhere in the world they do work effectively and this is recognised both by Police Scotland and by certificate holders.

For example, the most recent Firearms and Explosives Licensing Service – User Satisfaction Survey 20/21 (<https://www.scotland.police.uk/about-us/what-we-do/firearms-and-explosives-licensing/>) found that:

- A strong majority of respondents (88% of 341) said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall application process whilst 7% said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the service.
- Over 80% said it was easy to get information, complete the application forms and contact Police Scotland.
- 82% stated they were satisfied with the speed and efficiency of the service whilst 9% said they were not satisfied.

- The majority of the respondents (85%) felt that the officers and staff they dealt with were knowledgeable and professional whilst 4% were dissatisfied with the interaction with officers and staff.

With respect to the specific mention of agricultural communities we do not have data to hand that shows whether the current regulations are adequate. What we do know is that not very farm, farmer or crofter has access to either shotguns or rifles. While this may have been the case many years ago we regularly come across the situation where farmers and indeed crofters require the services of our members to deal with animals and birds that may be damaging their crops or to dispatch wounded livestock. This is a common occurrence with respect to managing deer, rabbits, crows, pigeons and geese. In fact, the local management of feral greylag geese on Orkney, the Uists, Lewis and Harris, and barnacle geese on Islay, is regularly carried out by local, licensed shooters and paid marksmen rather than by the farmers and crofters themselves.

Press coverage of this issue has been extensive – such as:

<https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/highlands-islands/4826524/gun-laws-parliament-ian-blackford/>

This article in particular draws the conclusion that since there were 102,861 “gun licences held by individuals” this was the equivalent of one ‘licence’ (certificate) for every 53 people (in Scotland). This is misleading. The 102,861 certificates were actually held by 47,925 individuals. One individual could hold two or three certificates (air weapon, shotgun, firearm) and many do. A more useful statistic would be that there was one licenced individual for every 115 people (in Scotland).

Again, misguided logic refers to the fact that in the Western Isles, Skye, Highland and Orkney and Shetland there is one certificate per 16 people. The figure will be double this i.e. one licenced individual per 32 people.

However, what is really important to consider is whether this higher level of firearms ownership in northern Scotland presents a greater threat to public safety than elsewhere in Scotland.

The most recent statistics are contained in Recorded Crimes and Offences Involving Firearms, Scotland, 2018-19 and 2019-20. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/recorded-crimes-offences-involving-firearms-scotland-2018-19-2019-20/>

This report notes that the 332 offences in 2018-19 were the lowest since records began in 1980, and the 341 offences in 2019-20 were the second lowest. It is also worth noting that the most commonly used firearm in 2019-20 was a pistol/revolver. These firearms are rarely held on a firearm certificate and the majority if not all of these would have been held illegally.

Given the relatively high proportion of certificate holders identified in northern Scotland compared to other parts of Scotland it is worth comparing offences geographically, in this case the areas with the highest levels of firearms ownership compared to those with the lowest, such as cities.

<u>Local Authority Area</u>	<u>Firearms Offences 2018-19 and 2019-20</u>
Glasgow City	134
North Lanarkshire	61
South Lanarkshire	41
Edinburgh City	32
Aberdeen City	31
Highland	19
Dundee City	15
Argyll and Bute (including Skye)	6
Na h-Eileanan Siar	2
Orkney Islands	2
Shetland Islands	1

The total number of firearms offences in northern Scotland in two years (30) was less than those recorded in Aberdeen, or Edinburgh, over the equivalent period. It was just 22% of all offences recorded in Glasgow.

Clearly, proportionately high levels of firearms ownership in northern Scotland is not reflected in high levels of firearms offences.

- **Should the process for obtaining a licence for firearms be changed (for example, to place greater emphasis on applicants' mental health)?**

We do not consider that the process for obtaining a certificate should be changed nor that there is a need for greater emphasis on an applicant's mental health. For the last six years in Scotland all individuals applying for or renewing a shotgun or firearm certificate have had to supply confirmation from their regular GP (or another suitably qualified doctor registered with the GMC) that they are not suffering from relevant health issues, including mental health issues. In the vast majority of cases a marker is placed upon the certificate holder's medical records that ensure that if the certificate holder attends his or her GP with respect to mental health or other relevant issues the GP is made aware that they have access to firearms and will, in all probability, inform Police Scotland. There is also a legal obligation upon all certificate holders to inform Police Scotland of any new and relevant illness or symptoms.

We are, however, aware 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). With this in mind, the Scottish Firearms Licensing Practitioners Group have recently produced a leaflet entitled "Firearms and Mental Health" that will be sent to all certificate holders at renewal and also made available through a number of other routes. This is 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, either through a GP or organisations qualified to offer such support and advice.

[\(https://basc.org.uk/leaflet-launched-on-mental-health-support-for-firearms-licence-holders/\)](https://basc.org.uk/leaflet-launched-on-mental-health-support-for-firearms-licence-holders/)

BASC cannot suggest what more could be done under current or future legislation that would be both proportionate and fair.

However, we do want an efficient, cost-effective, robust system of firearms licensing that protects public safety and provides excellent service to the shooting community. BASC believes that all parties in the licensing process in England, Wales and Scotland should have statutory obligations and this must include GPs.

If GPs were included under a statutory obligation then this would mean that those that chose not to participate under the “conscientious objector” heading would be unable to do so. It is essential that GP involvement is incorporated into their NHS contract so that the current postcode lottery of fees charged (ranging from £0 to £250) is avoided.

It has also been suggested that the current 5-year lifespan of certificates should be reduced to 2 or 3 years. (The lifespan of certificates was increased from 3 years to 5 years in 1994. The involvement of GPs in the licensing process, and the placing of a marker on medical records, is part of an initiative to actually extend certificate duration to 10 years.)

Reducing the term of certificates to 2 or 3 years would place an additional and unnecessary burden on the police and serve no useful purpose. Certificate holders are effectively monitored each day of the year, by both the police and GPs, not just at their 5-year renewal.

Belgium and Brazil have been cited as countries who do renew firearms certificates every 2 or 3 years. Firearms homicides per 100,000 population for Belgium and Brazil are 1.24 and 21.9 respectively. As the UK's is 0.23, Belgium's firearms homicide rate is more than 5x the UK's and Brazil's more than 95x the UK's. Brazil's is the fifth highest in the world. We are not sure there is much to learn from these countries in terms of firearms licensing and its supposed effect on public safety.

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