



Northern Ireland Audit Office

**Report by the  
Comptroller and  
Auditor General for  
Northern Ireland**

# **Firearms licensing in Northern Ireland**

This report has been prepared under Article 8 of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 for presentation to the Northern Ireland Assembly in accordance with Article 11 of the Order.

**K J Donnelly**  
**Comptroller and Auditor General**

**Northern Ireland Audit Office**  
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For further information about the Northern Ireland Audit Office please contact:

Northern Ireland Audit Office  
106 University Street  
BELFAST  
BT7 1EU  
Tel: 028 9025 1100  
email: [info@niauditoffice.gov.uk](mailto:info@niauditoffice.gov.uk)  
website: [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk)  
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# Firearms licensing in Northern Ireland

## Introduction

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is responsible for managing the firearms licensing regime in Northern Ireland. The relevant legislation is the Firearms (NI) Order 2004, as amended. This differs from the legislation that applies in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, day to day decisions on firearms licensing in Northern Ireland are administered by the Chief Constable, through the PSNI's Firearms and Explosives Branch (FEB).

There are a significant number of registered firearms holders, dealers and clubs in Northern Ireland:

- 57,083 firearms holders;
- 86 firearms dealers;
- 75 target clubs; and
- 10 clay clubs.

A licence is usually valid for five years. Licensing requirements in each category are different, but broadly similar under the terms of the Order with the overriding emphasis upon public safety. In January 2017 the PSNI introduced a new online system for firearms licensing applications. This system operated alongside the existing paper-based system until 9 July 2018 when paper based applications were discontinued. The intention is that this will contribute to more effective and efficient delivery of the firearms licensing service in Northern Ireland.

The PSNI told us that it had received positive feedback on the online application process, with a satisfaction rating of 88 per cent from users. Some stakeholders have yet to be convinced, however. In November 2017 the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) raised a number of issues with the Comptroller and Auditor General. This report focuses on four principal areas:

- processing applications for firearms certificates;
- the adequacy of performance reporting in FEB;
- the dual systems in operation currently; and
- recovering the costs of the service.

## There have been significant delays in processing applications

Applicants have been experiencing delays in processing firearms licensing applications for a number of years. This has resulted in a significant backlog in applications. At 28 February 2018 FEB had commenced processing applications received on or after 15 December 2017. At this date there were some 2,485 subsequent applications waiting for processing to commence (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Backlog in applications waiting to be processed**

Application medium	Total	Application Type			
		Initial Grant	Re-grants	Re-grants with variations	Variations
Paper-based	1,207	FEB unable to analyse paper-based application types			
On-line	1,278	193	429	52	604
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,485</b>	-	-	-	-

*Source: FEB as at 28 February 2018*

The FEB is unable to analyse the paper-based applications by type. It is unclear how management can monitor FEB's performance effectively in these circumstances. At this time, applications waited more than two months for processing to commence.

The FEB is unable to count the number of outstanding paper-based applications and consequently, is not aware of the total number of applications that are currently in process. The BASC told us of delays of up to six months in processing applications for renewals; FEB acknowledges that there have been waits of considerably longer than this in some more unusual cases. The process often relies on information from third parties, such as medical reports, which may increase processing times beyond the control of FEB. The BASC contends that delays can lead to situations where licence holders who have submitted applications find themselves outside the law as their licence expires. It also argues that without a current licence, members of the public have no right to possess a firearm and can be subject to recovery action by the PSNI under Article 13 of the Order. For its part, the PSNI accepts that the Chief Constable has no explicit statutory power to extend the life of a licence until a renewal can be processed. However, the Chief Constable can and does exercise his lawful discretion under the Order to suspend recoveries and has introduced a 'holding letter' for applicants in this situation on a case by case basis. The PSNI views this as entirely legal and a pragmatic solution to the benefit of licence-holders. Neither of these interpretations of the Order has been tested in court. A licence-holder who does not submit an application prior to its expiry date will be in illegal possession of firearms and subject to recovery under Article 13.

Since March 2018, additional resources in FEB have helped to improve the backlog considerably. At 25 June, there were 148 paper applications and 22 on-line applications waiting to be processed. The wait for processing to commence was then closer to one week. By 20 July there were only 20 paper applications and 6 online applications outstanding.

### **Performance reporting is inadequate**

Performance statistics in respect of firearms licensing have not been published on the PSNI website since January 2017. This coincided with the introduction of the online system. The FEB told us that it was not satisfied with the data being generated for reporting purposes and there may be some omissions and duplication in input data. The FEB has as yet been unable to resolve this issue.

The FEB has a set a target for processing all types of applications at 56 days. This is not as useful as it might be as a driver of performance: for example, a 56 day target for 'variations' is questionable as historic data suggests that these can be processed much more quickly. Establishing appropriate performance targets for each application type is fundamental to effective performance management.

## Dual systems do not contribute to effective performance

At present it is difficult to assess any improvements derived from the introduction of online processing for firearms licensing, due to the absence of reliable performance information. What is evident is that in trying to run two systems in parallel, the PSNI has not yet achieved the efficiencies anticipated from the on-line system. Even so, this has not prevented FEB from making a number of changes to the system since it went on-line in order to improve its accessibility and ease of use for stakeholders. The PSNI moved to a fully online system for firearms licensing from 9 July 2018. It will be important to demonstrate an improvement in processing times from this point onwards.

## The PSNI is not recovering the cost of the licensing service

It is a requirement of Managing Public Money Northern Ireland (MPM (NI)) that full cost recovery should be achieved for the service provided. The FEB costs the PSNI some £1.6 million annually. It recovers around £1.3 million. In effect, there is a public subsidy for firearms licensing (£267,000 in 2017-18).

**Figure 2: Analysis of the deficit in full cost recovery over the last three years**

	2017-18 £'000	2016-17 £'000	2015-16 £'000
<b>Income</b>	1,368	1,455	869
<b>Costs</b>	1,635	1,600	1,337
<b>Deficit</b>	(267)	(145)	(468)

Source: PSNI

*N.B. the figures exclude the cost of Firearms Enquiry Officers (FEOs) within District Policing which is a substantial cost area and crucial to the licensing process. Consequently, the true deficit is higher than shown here.*

Annex 1 provides details of the licensing fees in Northern Ireland. While the increase in fees from May 2016 has moved some way towards achieving full cost recovery, there is no clear plan to achieve this in the foreseeable future.

## Recommendations

Performance reporting is currently inadequate and a thorough overhaul of the information being reported should be undertaken. This is essential to assure stakeholders and the wider public that the system operates effectively.

The PSNI should quantify the efficiencies being achieved by the online system for firearms licensing and report these publicly. It should also keep the online system under review and consider further enhancements to deliver increased efficiency for all stakeholders.

The PSNI should establish a plan to move towards full cost recovery for firearms licensing in the longer term.

## Licensing fees

Activity	Licence term	Fee (£)
<b>Firearm certificate</b>		
Grant of a firearm certificate	5	98
Variation by Chief Constable		30
Variation by firearms dealer - substitute firearm		15
Variation by firearms dealer - delete firearm		No fee
Duplicate / Updated certificate		14
<b>Firearms Dealer's Certificate</b>		
Grant or renewal of firearms dealer's certificate	5	300
Duplicate certificate / Updated		14
<b>Firearms clubs and shotgun clubs</b>		
Authorisation of firearms / shotgun club		71
<b>Visitor's Firearm Permit</b>		
Grant of visitor's firearm permit		16
Grant of six or more permits		80
<b>Certificate of approval for airgun for GB resident</b>		
Certificate of approval for airgun for GB resident		11

Source: PSNI