



MEDIA RELEASE

Firearms licensing in Northern Ireland

Today the Comptroller and Auditor General, Kieran Donnelly, published a short report on *Firearms licensing in Northern Ireland*. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is responsible for managing the firearms licensing regime in Northern Ireland¹, with day to day decisions administered by the Chief Constable, through the PSNI's Firearms and Explosives Branch (FEB). In November 2017, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) raised a number of issues with the C&AG around the operation of the licensing system.

Mr Donnelly said *'The introduction of online applications for firearms licenses has lessons for all public bodies as they seek innovation in how they deliver services. It is not enough to innovate: they must be able to demonstrate improved service delivery to stakeholders and citizens'*.

Key issues

- There have been significant backlogs in applications. In February 2018 there were 2,485 applications waiting for processing to commence, which had been received on or after 15 December 2017. The backlog was largely cleared by July 2018.
- The BASC contends that delays have led to situations where license holders who had submitted applications found themselves outside the law as their license expired. The Chief Constable can and does exercise his lawful discretion to suspend recovery of firearms and has introduced a 'holding letter' for applicants in this situation. The PSNI views this as entirely legal and a pragmatic solution to the benefit of licence-holders.
- Performance statistics have not been published on the PSNI website since January 2017, coinciding with the introduction of online processing. Consequently, it is difficult to assess any improvement from the introduction of the online processing system².
- Full cost recovery should be achieved for the service provided. The service costs £1.6 million annually yet recovers only £1.3 million. In effect, there is a public subsidy for firearms licensing (£267,000 in 2017-18). There is no clear plan to achieve full cost recovery in the foreseeable future.

Notes for Editors

1. 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.
2. The PSNI moved to a fully online system for firearms licensing from 9 July 2018.
3. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
4. Background briefing can be obtained from the Northern Ireland Audit Office by contacting Neil Gray (028 9025 4345).