**Performance and Resources Scrutiny Programme 2019**

**Report to: the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex**

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1. **Purpose of Report**

To provide an update on the Performance of the Firearms Licensing department (FSEL) from Jan 2017 to May 2019. The paper also includes an update regarding future efficiencies.

1. **Recommendations**

Board to note;

* Introduction of Single Online Home, 28th Aug 2019 (Firearms Licensing will be the first area of Essex Police to move to electronic payments)
* Introduction of Medical Verification for all new applications
* Review of the Renewal process, move to risk based approach

1. **Executive Summary**

This report shows there has been an overall and sustained improvement in the service provided to certificate holders and subsequent assurance provided to Essex Police and the PFCC through the continuous monitoring of those in legal possession of shotguns, firearms and explosives.

**4.0 Introduction/Background**

The Essex Police Firearms, Shotguns and Explosives Licensing (FSEL) Department manages all aspects of the licensing process of firearms and explosives on behalf of Essex police. The team is based at Police HQ and is responsible for:

* Managing applications for firearms, shotguns and explosives certificates,
* Issuing and maintaining records relating to certificates and permits in the Essex Police area,
* Assessing risk in relation to current certificate holders and if required revocation
* Managing registered firearms dealers and Home Office approved gun clubs.

**Current Staff Structure**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **FSEL** | **Essex-numbers** |
| Office Manager | 1.00 |
| Office supervisor | 1.00 |
| Senior Firearms Enquiry officer | 1.00 |
| Field Enquiry officers | 9.00 |
| Team Leaders | 3.00 |
| Case workers | 10.5 |
| Review officer | 1.00 |
| Clerk | 1.00 |
| Total | 27.5 |

**Background Context**

In 2012 there was a significant rise nationally in firearms applications affecting all UK police forces. This was a direct response to the UK’s success in shooting disciplines in the 2012 London Olympics. In 2016, the increase in work load in Essex was identified, however, insufficient resource was in place to cope with this additional demand. This demand was significant – renewals processed increased from 1222 in 2016 to 7639 in 2017, a 525% increase. The team’s capacity was significantly affected and they were unable to meet the service level agreements of 90% of all applications processed in 90 days.

**5.0 Current Work and Performance**

To tackle this demand , a comprehensive improvement plan was implemented which included a number of measures, including automatic renewal of all outstanding low risk shotgun applications and the provision of additional funding and use of restricted officers. This allowed the department to process low risk renewal applicants and significantly reduce the backlog.

In Jan 2018 a peer review was conducted by officers from the Metropolitan Police Service which highlighted 21 areas of improvement around risk and service.

These areas have been implemented and the significant good progress has continued with a more robust framework and monitoring process to ensure that this performance is not repeated

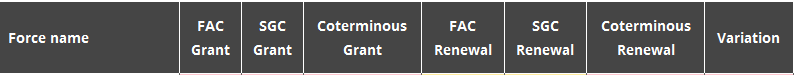
**The chart below shows the comparison and improvement to date:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **31/10 2017** | **31/05/2019** |
| Outstanding Grants | 846 | 157 |
| Outstanding Renewals | 810 | 55 |
| Average Waiting Time (All) | 164 | 41 |
| Average Waiting Time (Grants) | 317 | 47 |
| Average wait time Renewals | 107 | 16 |
| Applications over 1 year old | 123 | 0 |
| Applications over 6 months old | 298 | 12 |
| Applications over 3 months old | 506 | 23 |
| RFD Visits completed in last 6-months | 0 | 114 |

In the 2018/19 performance figures published by ‘The British Associate of Shooting and Conservation’ (BASC) Essex FSEL is shown in the top 10 of all forces on 4 measures and rated as average in 3. This was a notable improvement from having been ranked in the bottom 10 for the effective turnaround times on applications for new grants and renewals. (Based on having 1650 application pending with waiting time of 164 days). All measures are now well within the 90 days service level agreement.

**Firearms Licensing League Table 2018 – produced by BASC annually**

The table below shows the average number of days a police force takes to process different application types. The figures are colour coded to indicate relative performance (green top 10, red bottom 10, yellow average).





The best performing police service for Grants in 2018 was West Mercia with an average of 37 days for all applications, Essex FSEL is currently processing at 47 days, having reduced the waiting time by 20 days since the 2018 data was gathered.

**6.0 Implications (Issues)**

In Jan 2020 the FSEL demand will increase by 50 %. This a national trend and is a legacy from the 1990s when the renewal cycle was increased from 3 years to 5 Years.

OPC are currently reviewing the options to manage this uplift. Different options were considered and the choice was made for earlier renewals with a target of 150 per month bought forward from those due between Jan and Nov 2020. There will be early engagement with licence holders to request that they renew early and explain the benefits of this.

This increase in demand will be managed with the same resourcing, utilising the implementation of Single on Line Home (SOH), Medical verification at time of application and a further review of other ways of working. It is anticipated that FSEL will be able to cope with this increase with minimal impact to the service provision

**6.1 Links to Police and Crime Plan Priorities**

**The FSEL ensures** timely, effective and efficient service and supports

* **Local, Visible and Accessible policing** – FSEL have been undertaking significant engagement with all those in the lawful shooting community. This includes the FLAG (advisory group), supporting a number of public engagement events, and ongoing visits to licence holders by the Field enquiry officers. The team also ensures law abiding, fee paying customer receive a service which allows them to enjoy their sport whilst in the legal possession of shotguns and firearms
* **Crackdown on Anti -Social Behaviour - Reverse trend in serious violence Tackle gangs and organised crime**- FSEL continually risk assess the suitability of certificate holders to own and possess lethal barrelled weapons and taking swift and effective action to review any certificate holder or other living at that the home address who come to the attention of police or FSEL. They

Recommend the refusal or revocation of unsuitable applicants or those license holders who, through their behaviour are risk assessed to be no longer fit to be trusted with owning and possessing firearms.

There has also been support provided to criminal investigations where links with gangs and criminality has been identified through the dealer checks as well as one significant investigation where the dealer was in possession of a large number of unlicensed weapons.

**6.2 Demand**

From data held with in the National Firearms Licensing System, FSEL can accurately predict the demand for applications to renew an existing license. A five year average is used to predict the month to month applications for new grants.

Through the daily monitoring of incidents highlighted to FSEL involving certificate holders who come to police attention, since 2017 FSEL have reviewed 367 certificate holders which led to 36 certificates being revoked and a further 58 new applications being refused.

**6.3 Risks/Mitigation**

The increase in demand to cope with the 2020 increase in renewals estimated to increase from 250 per month to 550 per month. The current low turnaround times will increase, however they will be maintained within the 90 day SLA as published on Essex Police FSEL website.

**6.4 Equality and/or Human Rights Implications**

With the introduction of SOH, Essex FSEL will continue to accept paper based applications for those applicants who do not have access to the internet.

**6.5 Health and Safety Implications**

With the introduction of mandatory GP verification at the point of application, the risk of fraudulent applications where a relevant medical condition has not been disclosed by the applicant will be removed. Between 2017/18 Essex police refused 5 applications where a relevant medical condition was not declared by the applicant.

**7.0 Consultation/Engagement**

Firearms licensing and other forces

**8.0 Actions for Improvement**

The MPS peer review recommendations were combined with 7 internal objectives and 11 objectives developed as part of Operation Hexagon (cost savings and efficiency programme with Kent)

The recommendations included the following performance measures: -

* A review of management and visits to Licensed Clubs (62) and Registered Firearms Dealers (114), which was completed by the end of June 2018 and now reviewed every 6 months based on risk.
* The recommencement of visits to all who seek to renew a shotgun or firearm certificate. These recommenced on 1st April 2018. The process is proving successful with processing times remaining on track and within targets whilst also improving the level of risk assessment through the engagement by the Firearms Enquiry Officer.
* A review of arrangements for certificate holders who store elsewhere other than home addresses. This was scoped and the holders managed and risk-assessed. This storage elsewhere position now forms part of the Essex Police Firearms Procedure G2301.
* Re-establishment of FLAG (Firearms Licensing Advisory Group) to ensure effective engagement with the shooting community. The first meeting took place on the evening of 19th June 2018 at the Essex Police Sports Pavilion and successive quarterly meetings have been held. This is proving to be a popular meeting with guest speakers from both police (Armed Response, Rural Crime) and other organisation such as Fisheries Protection where issues of fishermen taking guns out to sea to shoot seals were discussed.
* The new facility for electronic payment of fees has now been approved with Finance and a separate bank account agreed. This process went live in Nov 2018 and has reduced the volume of payments made by cheque and postal order. FSEL no longer accept cash in the post as payment.
* FSEL have been developed an engagement programme during May/June 2019 with the Essex Local Medical Council (LMC) to scope the option of GPs to provide a summary of an applicant’s medical history in relation to relevant medical conditions. GP representatives are in broad support, however, shooting organisations (BASC) have raised issues with the disparity in fees charged by GPs. The national chair of the Firearms Licensing Work Group, ACC Dave Otford, is writing to all Chief Constables encouraging them to adopt a mandatory medical verification process and is briefing the Policing Minister with these changes

Over the last 3 years Essex police have paid the following costs where a GP report was required to complete a full risk assessment:

2016-17                £7,580

2017-18                £15,402

2018-19 £6,879

As previously mentioned, this measure will also remove fraudulent applications and speed up the process for both FSEL and the applicant. Kent have already moved to this process and Essex are working with them to ensure any learning from its introduction is captured and planned for

There are three areas of significance that have helped improve performance from the Metropolitan Police peer review.

* The daily monitoring/analysis of data using the National Firearms Licensing System gives clear visibility of current and future workloads.
* The introduction of Cyclops2 (electronic tasking to field based Enquiry Officers) alongside several marginal gains has proved to be a more cost effective and efficient way of file sharing. The risk to GDPR has been significantly reduced as no paper files are now printed and sent out from FSEL.
* All FSEL colleagues now have laptops and are now able to work agilely. The utilisation of Jabber has brought additional efficiencies and supports this way of working

**9.0 Future Work/Development and Expected Outcome**

The introduction of new systems and processes (Single On-line Home) and GP verification will drive further efficiencies in the department.

A risk based approach to the renewal process is being proposed for adoption from Jan 2020 for low risk cases -

* If the applicant has not come to police attention in the last 5 years
* Their GP report raises no new concerns

The renewal will be granted without the need for an FEO enquiry.

Additionally, FSEL has produced a security pro-forma which will be emailed to the renewal applicant asking them to confirm their security details, guns possessed and names of those living at the address. This will speed up the renewal process for both FSEL and the certificate holder. This approach puts the responsibility for gun security back on the certificate holder as per the conditions of their licences, currently, FSEL conducts security visits through FEO visits.

**OP Hexagon**

This programme of work between Essex OPC and Kent Tac Ops teams has been ongoing, and includes reviewing the opportunities to have a future shared FSEL service with Kent.

Kent are currently leading this work and a business case is being submitted by their Supt. The main areas of focus for both teams are;

* A Common IT system where work can be shared/exchanged (Kent currently have a paper based system, however, they are actively looking to purchase Cyclops)
* A common structure within both offices, currently Kent FSEL costs £972 000 and Essex costs £784,000, a significant difference of £188,000 per year.
* Delegated authorities, both forces have the delegate’s authorities at different decision making levels

**10.0 Decisions Required by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner**

To note the paper and current position with FSEL