

Performance and Resources Scrutiny Programme 2021**Report to the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex**

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1.0 Purpose of Report

To provide an annual update on the performance of the Firearms, Shotguns and Explosives Licensing (FSEL) Department. This includes an update on the temporary actions taken in response to COVID-19, as well as longer term service delivery considerations.

2.0 Recommendations

Update to previous recommendations.

Board to note:

- In response to the Covid-19 restrictions 'virtual visits' for all **low risk** renewals have been adopted as business as usual. This process replaces a 'home visit' for renewals (only). This is a telephone interview with the applicant plus, a requirement to email FSEL with photographs of the serial numbers of their guns and storage location for the Firearms Enquiry Officer (FEO) to check against records held. Where the applicant has access to MS Teams this is additionally utilised where practicable.
- To support the demand on GP surgeries during COVID-19 and prevent certificate holders falling into illegal possession of firearms, a 1-year Temporary Permit was issued in abeyance of a medical screening report being obtained during the renewal process. This has since ceased, and all applications received since 1st March 2021 must now be submitted with the required medical screening report before a new certificate is issued.
- Home Office have accepted the National Firearms Licensing Working Group (FELWG) recommendations where the responsibility for obtaining a medical screening report rests with the applicant. New Statutory Guidance is currently being produced to reflect this change.
- Applications for new grants via the Single Online Home portal was switched off in Dec 2020 when the UK went back into COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. This has since been reinstated on the 4th May 21.

3.0 Executive Summary

- FSEL submitted a paper to COG in Sept 2020 recommending a suite of options to address the 2022 renewal uplift. Chief Officers agreed that FSEL would write to circa 9000 certificate holders due for renewal in 2022, requesting that they renew early with the proviso that no certificate holder would lose more than 6 months off their renewal status.
- In January 2021 a staff remodelling paper was submitted to Chief Officers that introduced a leaner structure by making use of changes in technology, improved working practices and structures placing Essex FSEL in a good position for future convergence with Kent FSEL (Op Hexagon). Agreement was obtained and staff consultation started on 8th

March 21 with an implementation date of the 1st August 2021. This leaner staffing model will lead to recurring annual savings of £44,644 for Essex Police.

- Following consultation with the Estates Team, Essex FSEL will be relocated from HQ to the newly refurbished offices in Chelmsford Police Station in July 2021. This will be a hot desk office environment with a smaller FSEL footprint due to agile working being very successful, albeit a Supervisor will always be in the office to provide leadership and visibility to the team

4.0 Introduction/Background

Essex FSEL manages all aspects of the licensing process of firearms and explosives for the (approx.) 27,000 firearms and shotgun certificate holders in Essex. The team are 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.

The team are a source of income generation for Essex Police however, the costs recovered by the NPCC fixed license (table 1) do not cover the running costs of the department (table 2), a pattern which is replicated nationally. The action being taken in 2021 to bring forward the renewal applications from 2022 will inflate the projected annual income figures for this year.

	Shotgun licence	Firearm Licence	Co Terminus (firearm and Shotgun)
Renewal of a licence	£49.00	£62.00	£65.00

Table 1. Costs for FSEL grants and renewals

Year	Department Costs ¹ (£)	Income from applications ² (£)	Net operating cost (£)
2016-17	815,872	(335,811)	480,061
2017-18	844,227	(312,713)	531,514
2018-19	878,481	(207,487)	670,994
2019-2020	863,158	(207,068)	656,090
2020-2021	948,839	(206,072)	742,767

Table 2. FSEL annual Costs and income for period 2016-2021.

1. Department costs extracted from SAP against FSEL cost centres
2. Income extracted from SAP (Firearm certificates code only)

4.0 Current Work and Performance

Essex remain in the top 10 Firearms Licensing Departments nationally for performance pertaining to processing applications, despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The tables below illustrate the turnaround time (in days) for processing all applications received into FSEL for the calendar years 2019 & 2020. The figures are produced by the Home Office and are extracted directly from data held in the National Firearms Licensing System (NFLMS) and published by BASC.

2019

<u>FAC Grant</u>	<u>SGC Grant</u>	<u>Coterminous Grant</u>	<u>FAC Renewal</u>	<u>SGC Renewal</u>	<u>Coterminous Renewal</u>	<u>Variation</u>
39	38	39	10	13	11	4

2020

<u>FAC Grant</u>	<u>SGC Grant</u>	<u>Coterminous Grant</u>	<u>FAC Renewal</u>	<u>SGC Renewal</u>	<u>Coterminous Renewal</u>	<u>Variation</u>
28	31	33	29	34	28	5

Note:

FAC – Firearms Certificate

SGC – Shotgun Certificate

Coterminous – where both a Firearm and Shotgun are being applied for

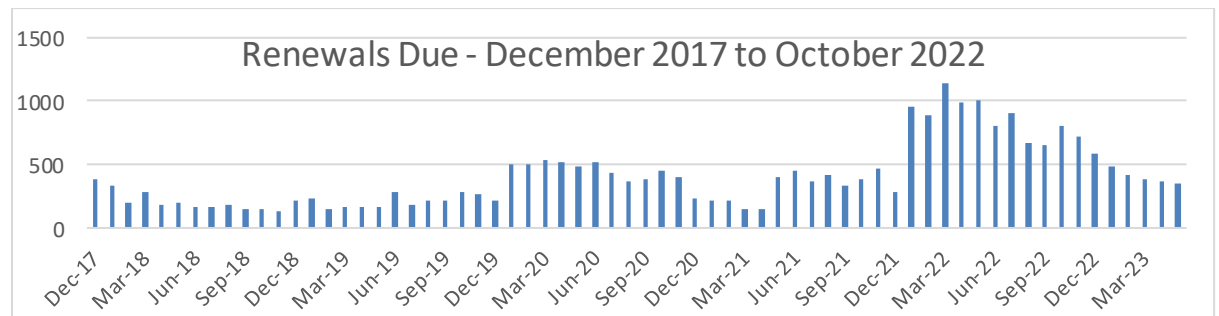
- The improved service delivery performance across all new grants was due to the COVID-19 pandemic; the process for new grants was turned off from April 2020 as FSEL could not physically visit addresses and therefore the reduction in workload led to existing new grant applications being processed in fewer days. The reduction in service delivery for all renewals was also caused by the pandemic as certificate holders could not access their medical screening reports from GP surgeries and visits could not be conducted. This was resolved through the introduction of virtual visits and temporary permits.

During the COVID-19 lockdown periods, many forces chose to renew a licence without a medical screening report. Essex FSEL adopted a different approach and issued Temporary Permits whilst deferring the requirement for a medical report for up to 1 year. This approach was selected to avoid a scenario where a full 5-year certificate was issued, and the holder then refused to provide a medical report. T/ACC Wells accepted this approach

to avoid possible legal challenges/ appeals as the requirement to provide a medical report had not yet been mandated. A Temporary Permit has a 'Pending' status, opposed to a 'Granted' status. This has had the effect of showing Essex with a slower turnaround in service delivery time compared to previous years. (29 days as compared to 10 the previous year). However, there has been no loss of service to the applicant.

- At its peak in September 2020, FSEL had issued 551 Temporary Permits. As of 23/04/2021, there are 154 certificate holders who are still in possession of a valid Temporary Permit that have not yet expired.
- Lessons learnt from the COVID-19 lockdown restriction have highlighted an efficiency saving through virtual visits without increasing risk. This is now business as usual and has subsequently been adopted nationwide by most forces. On the 4th May 2021, FSEL returned to conducting home visits for new grants and reviews. All FEO's have been vaccinated and will continue to follow government and Op Talla COVID guidelines.
- Since COVID-19 restrictions were introduced, FSEL has been operating remotely, with staff working from home. FSEL office staff continue their agile working approach with a small administration function (1 colleague) remaining office based.

6.0 Implications (Issues)



As previously noted, FSEL will throughout 2021 process early applications due for renewal in 2022 to reduce the expected volume.

The uptake of applicants wishing to renew their certificate ahead of its 2022 expiry date has been positive. As of the 23rd April 2021, 559 applications have been received for processing. The FSEL continue to make contact on a monthly basis with all those eligible for renewal in order to ensure the demand across each month is balanced and not too many are brought forward.

6.1 Links to Police and Crime Plan Priorities

Cracking down on anti-social behaviour

Any incidents involving firearms licence holders acting in an anti-social manner are flagged for FSEL for them to review by FCR staff. This will result in a review by FSEL. As they hold their own records and have access to other Police databases, they can monitor any trends and take necessary action.

Tackling gangs and serious violence

Throughout the COVID-19 lockdown period, FSEL has managed and maintained the 5-year renewal element of the licensing system throughout, with no certificate holders moving into unlawful possession and no backlog in the processing of renewal applications.

The team recommend the refusal or revocation of unsuitable applicants or those license holders who through their behaviour are assessed to be no longer fit to be trusted with owning and possessing firearms. They obtain medical verification from GPs to ensure relevant medical conditions are considered during the decision-making process.

Breaking the cycle of Domestic Abuse

All Domestic incidents involving firearms licence holders receive greater scrutiny. Following any domestic incident being created, the Assessment Centre within Public Protection complete their intelligence checks, which include NFLMS. If positive, in relation to any of the parties involved, this is flagged to Oscar1 for them to make an assessment and record their rationale. On occasion this will result in the relevant weapons and certificate being removed for an interim period to manage any threat, risk, and harm. All incidents are automatically "tagged" for FSEL, for them to review daily.

Disrupting and preventing organised crime

FSEL continually risk assess the suitability of certificate holders to own and possess firearms and take swift and effective action to review any certificate holder or others living at the home address who come to the adverse attention of police.

Protecting children and vulnerable people from harm

Working with colleagues in the PNC teams, 'flags' have been added to STORM, these flags are accessible to all FCR staff and users of STORM, not just Oscar 1's. This will remove unnecessary armed deployments where a certificate holder is under review and has already had their guns seized.

FSEL supported the force by coordinating the surrender and destruction of weapons held under the Offensive Weapon Surrender & Compensation scheme across the county.

6.2 Demand

From data held within the National Firearms Licensing Management System (NFLMS), we can accurately predict the demand for applications to renew existing licenses. A five-year average is used to predict the month to month applications for new grants. This allows for accurate forward planning of resource in both administration and field-based functions.

Single Online Home, medical screening at the point of application, and virtual renewal visits have enhanced the effectiveness of the department by making the process more efficient.

It was previously expected that the impact of COVID-19 would slow the renewal process where FSEL were awaiting outstanding medical screening reports. By adopting the Temporary Permit solution, FSEL has remained self-sufficient throughout.

6.3 Risks/Mitigation

At present there are adequate resources in FSEL to manage the demand throughout 2021. There is a risk during 2022 that FSEL will not have enough resource to meet the increased demand in renewal applications if there is insufficient uptake of the early application process during 2021.

Having suspended the Single Online Home option to apply for a new grant during the COVID lockdown periods, there is an unknown risk to the current workload if there is a high demand in new grant applications received after the COVID lockdown period.

Demand is reviewed on a weekly basis and subject of scrutiny by the Chief Inspector, this includes serge forecasts and temporary permits.

In terms of forward planning, 8 out of the 12 months in 2022 are now below 650 renewals, which is a significant decrease from 1000 plus originally anticipated. We do have contingencies in place if required to manage the demand.

Additionally, embedding the new staff structure may cause a period of disruption from Aug 2021.

6.4 Equality and/or Human Rights Implications

No identified implications on equality, diversity or human rights have been evidenced whilst completing this report.

6.5 Health and Safety Implications

MISUSE OF LICENSED WEAPONS DATA – 2015 - 2020

INDIVIDUAL FORCE DATA - 2015 to 2020					
Force	Misuse of licensed weapon (excluding suicides)	Suicides with a licensed weapon	Suicides by other means	Attempted Suicide with a licensed weapon	Attempted Suicide by other means
Avon and Somerset		3			
Beds/Herts/Cambs		1			
Cheshire Constabulary		1			
City of London Police					
Cleveland Police					
Cumbria Constabulary		5			
Derbyshire Constabulary		5			
Devon and Cornwall Police		2			
Dorset Police		6			
Durham Constabulary	7	7			2
Dyfed Powys Police		3			
Essex Police*	1	16			
Gloucestershire Constabulary		7			
Greater Manchester Police		2			
Gwent Police					
Hampshire Constabulary	2	13		1	
Humberside Police		7			
Kent Police		5		2	

Table 1 – Individual force data collated by TVP force on behalf of FELWG.

During 2020/21 there have been five suicides involving Essex certificate holders involving the misuse of their licensed shotguns. Additionally, there were two incidents where the certificate holder used their licensed shotgun to take the life of their partner before using the weapon on themselves.

CI Matt Cornish is conducting a review into all deaths of Firearms Licence holders in the last 3 years, which will be completed by the end of May 2021. Early findings show FSEL were unsighted on any issues that would have enabled them to intervene, however, it is noticeable that in nearly all cases, there was limited contact from GP's.

Whilst the data set is too small to draw proper conclusions; some themes have emerged, with several licence holders either suffering a stroke (unreported) or having long term caring responsibilities of a partner. This will be factored into the Medical Screening Report going forward.

It is worthy of note that within the last 18 months the Medical Screening Process has been implemented within Essex which serves to significantly reduce risk, the

next area of work is to improve understanding and information sharing between FSEL and GP's to improve reporting over the 5 year term of the certificate.

To address this gap, through the wider Essex Suicide Prevention work, FSEL have started a pilot with GP practices across Mid and South Essex whereby FSEL will provide enhanced support and training to GP's.

This collaborative approach with GPs allows FSEL to share the licensing process and the importance of the medical screening reports and medical markers when deciding a person's suitability and the opportunity to intervene when there is a concern with the certificate holder's health or domestic situation. This initiative is aimed at sharing information between both parties to prevent suicides across the county involving legally held firearms. This initiative is being supported by the Anglia Ruskin University, who are providing academic support and research with a view to evidencing 'what works', lessons learned and test the scalability prior to wider roll-out.

Regional BASC representatives are sighted on this project and keen to collaborate.

Additionally, the Home Office are working with the Department of Health and Social Care, to ensure proper use of IT and 'Firearms Markers' on NHS notes to ensure health providers and GP's are aware if someone has access to firearms. This is linked to the request from the shooting community to move to a 10-year license, which ministers are relatively comfortable with, provided the marker works. A twelve-month trial period to test and make sure the system works has been suggested before any big changes are made.

7.0 Consultation/Engagement

Relevant command team members within OPC have been consulted and contributed to this paper.

8.0 Actions for Improvement

None identified at this time

9.0 Future Work/Development and Expected Outcome

Op Hexagon - Collaboration between Kent and Essex Police

- Kent FSEL have now purchased the same document management system as Essex (Cyclops) with a projected July 2021 implementation date.

- Discussions between both forces are now being progressed regarding aligning the staffing models and delegated authorities under Op Hexagon.
- Several meetings took place with Essex FSEL and GSA the software provider for Cyclops system during 2019/20. GSA are currently developing a cloud-based system which will reduce the cost to Essex Police of purchasing individual desktop licenses when operating the Cyclops system. Additional efficiencies in processing times and the development of a performance management dashboard providing statistical data that is currently unavailable are benefits of the next Cyclops2 generation. Due to COVID, unfortunately the development of several GSA applications were temporarily paused in 2020, including Cyclops2. GSA have informed FSEL that Cyclops2 is high on the agenda for the GSA product roadmap but have not committed to any future roll out dates.
- Home Office consultation between 24 November 2020 and 16th February 2021 sought public opinion on a range of firearms safety issues that were raised in Parliament during the passage of the Offensive Weapons Act 2019. 13K responses were received which ministers are working through and deciding on next steps. They are:
 - Strengthening the controls on high muzzle energy rifles, including whether these should be prohibited under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968.
 - Improving controls on air weapons, including safe storage following the tragic death of 13-year old Benjamin Wragge, who was killed accidentally with an air weapon in 2016.
 - Addressing vulnerabilities presented by the current exemption from licensing that applies to miniature rifle ranges.
 - Strengthen controls on components of ammunition. Law enforcement raised concerns that component parts of ammunition are too easy to obtain and are being used by criminals to unlawfully manufacture complete rounds of ammunition.