OPCC
Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner for Gloucestershire

Gloucestershire Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) response to inspections of Gloucestershire Constabulary published by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)

Section 55 of the Police Act 1996 (as amended by section 37 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017) requires local policing bodies to respond to recommendations in inspectors reports within 56 days

Title of inspection:	An inspection of firearms licensing across police forces in England and Wales			
Link to inspection report:	https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publications/inspection-of-firearms-licensing-across-police-forces-in-england-and-wales/			
Date of publication:	28/08/26			
Type of inspection:	Gloucestershire Specific		Regional	
	Follow up		National	✓
	Partner inspection		Thematic	✓
	Spotlight report		Joint inspection	
Is Gloucestershire quoted in the report?	Yes	✓	No	

Summary of report

This national thematic inspection was commissioned following concerns raised after the 2021 Plymouth shootings. HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary found that, while most firearms licence holders are law-abiding and forces have made improvements in recent years, significant weaknesses remained in firearms licensing arrangements across England and Wales.

Key findings:

1. The firearms licensing system is under significant pressure

- Nearly every force inspected had backlogs in processing applications and renewals.
- Demand had increased, while specialist licensing units often lacked sufficient staffing and resources.
- Delays created risks both for public safety and for lawful certificate holders.

2. Inconsistent decision-making between forces

- Different forces interpreted guidance and risk factors differently.
- Similar cases could result in different licensing decisions depending on the force involved.
- HMICFRS concluded that greater national consistency was required.

3. Risk assessment processes need strengthening

- Forces were not always obtaining or properly assessing information relating to:
  - domestic abuse;
  - violence;
  - mental health concerns;
  - substance misuse; and
  - previous police contact.
- Some cases showed insufficient professional curiosity when warning signs existed.

4. Information sharing remains a weakness

- Information sharing between police, health professionals and other agencies was inconsistent.
- Medical information was not always available when required to support licensing decisions.
- HMICFRS highlighted the importance of the medical marker system and stronger collaboration with GPs and health bodies.

5. Governance and oversight vary considerably

- Some forces had strong governance arrangements, clear supervision and quality assurance processes.
- Others lacked effective oversight, auditing and performance monitoring.
- Senior leaders did not always receive sufficient information about firearms licensing risks and performance.

6. Training and workforce capability require improvement

- Licensing staff and decision-makers were not always receiving consistent specialist training.
- HMICFRS found a need for nationally consistent standards of competence and accreditation.

Recommendations

The inspection made 23 recommendations, including:

- Greater national oversight of firearms licensing.

- Improved national guidance and consistency of decision-making.
- Better management of risk information, particularly concerning domestic abuse and vulnerability.
- Stronger information sharing with health services.
- Improved training and accreditation for firearms licensing staff.
- More robust governance, audits and performance monitoring within forces.
- Better management of application backlogs and workforce capacity.

Recommendation 1
By 1 September 2029, the Home Office should establish a single firearms licensing authority for England and Wales and make it fully operational. The authority should have:

- appropriate powers;
- a decision-making function under central control;
- locally based personnel to carry out suitability visits;
- internal audit functions;
- a qualitative and quantitative performance framework that reflects both risk and timeliness;
- direct access to all relevant police intelligence and information, including the Police National Database;
- standardised training; and
- external inspection by an independent body such as HMICFRS.

Recommendation 2
By 1 September 2028, the Home Office should prepare, and as soon as reasonably possible thereafter lay before Parliament, a bill setting out simplified and modernised firearms legislation for England, Wales and Scotland.

Recommendation 3
By 1 December 2027, the Home Office should introduce a firearms licensing verification system to supplement physical certificates and permits.

Recommendation 4
By 1 September 2028, as part of new firearms legislation, the Home Office should require all new firearm and shotgun certificate applicants to pass a standardised assessment of competence that includes the safe handling and use of firearms.

Recommendation 5
By 1 September 2028, as part of new firearms legislation, the Home Office should work to align the firearms licensing regimes for section 1 and section 2 firearms and ammunition.

Recommendation 6
By 1 September 2027, the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for firearms licensing, working with the Registrar General for England and Wales and the General Register Office, should develop a process to:

- notify police forces regularly of all deaths registered in their area; and
- require forces to cross-reference this information with certificate records so they can recover firearms promptly after a certificate holder's death.

Recommendation 7
By 1 September 2028, the Home Office, in consultation with the College of Policing, the National Police Chiefs' Council, Police Scotland and other stakeholders, should introduce legally enforceable rules for firearms licensing on a similar legal footing to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 Codes of Practice. These should replace existing firearms licensing guidance.

Recommendation 8
By 1 September 2028, the Home Office should ensure that the new statutory rules for firearms licensing clearly set out the processes that apply to foreign nationals or those who have lived overseas for a prolonged period and who apply for a firearm or shotgun certificate.

Recommendation 9
By 1 September 2028, the Home Office should ensure that the new statutory rules for firearms licensing clearly set out when forces must make in-person home visits as part of the firearms licensing renewal process.

Recommendation 10
By 1 September 2028, the Home Office should introduce a requirement for all firearm and shotgun certificate applicants, and certificate holders at renewal, to have an in-person medical assessment with an approved clinician.

Recommendation 11
By 1 September 2028, the Home Office should establish a statutory requirement for firearm and shotgun certificate holders to notify the firearms and explosives licensing unit, and when operational the national firearms licensing authority, within seven days of any relevant changes to their medical circumstances.

Recommendation 12
By 31 March 2027, the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs' Council should review the visitors' permit regime to reduce the inherent risks to public safety. As part of this review, they should consider whether visitors' permits should be restricted to applicants from countries with firearms licensing and safety practices similar to those in Great Britain. In the interim, chief constables should ensure applications are assessed in line with the Guide on Firearms Licensing Law.

Recommendation 13
By 1 December 2026, chief constables should:
- have a scheme of delegation for firearms licensing decisions that complies with the Firearms Licensing Authorised Professional Practice; and
- check that decision-making is in accordance with that scheme.

Recommendation 14
By 1 December 2026, chief constables should ensure they have audit and dip-sampling processes in place to review firearms licensing decisions in line with the Firearms Licensing Authorised Professional Practice.

Recommendation 15
By 1 September 2029, the Home Office should consider establishing a national firearms licensing tribunal composed of appropriately qualified panel members to hear appeals.

Recommendation 16
By 1 December 2027, the Home Office, working with the National Police Chiefs' Council and the Police Digital Service, should introduce a secure, integrated online national firearms register and licensing system. The system should operate as the single authoritative record of certificate holders and applicants and support verification, transfers, imports and case management.

Recommendation 17
By 1 December 2026, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for firearms licensing should:
- ensure each region appoints a chief officer lead for firearms licensing; and
- implement a regional and national meeting structure.

Recommendation 18
By 1 December 2026, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for firearms licensing should specify the financial information forces need to understand the cost of firearms licensing. Chief constables should then record and report this information annually.

Recommendation 19
By 1 September 2028, the Home Office should introduce legislation to:

- ensure firearms licensing fees increase annually, at least in line with inflation; and
- stop licensing authorities having to refund fees when applications are refused.

Recommendation 20
By 1 December 2026, chief constables should establish or maintain:

- a force-level firearms licensing governance structure compliant with the Firearms Licensing Authorised Professional Practice; and
- a qualitative and quantitative performance framework covering both risk and timeliness.

Recommendation 21
By 1 December 2026, chief constables should ensure they have a documented engagement plan in line with the Firearms Licensing Authorised Professional Practice.

Recommendation 22
By 1 February 2027, the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for firearms licensing, working with the College of Policing and police forces, should secure long-term funding for national training for those involved in firearms licensing.

Recommendation 23
With immediate effect, chief constables should satisfy themselves that any firearms and explosives licensing unit practitioners responsible for handling and transporting firearms are qualified to do so safely.

For OPCC purposes, the recommendations that most directly require action or assurance from chief constables are 13, 14, 20, 21 and 23, with 12 also creating an interim expectation around visitors' permits. These are likely to be the key recommendations to track through a PCC accountability board or audit process.

PCC response

I welcome HMICFRS's national thematic inspection, *An inspection of firearms licensing across police forces in England and Wales*, and the important contribution it makes to strengthening public safety and confidence in firearms licensing arrangements. The inspection identifies national and local opportunities for improvement and highlights the importance of robust governance, effective risk assessment and consistent decision-making across policing.

As Police and Crime Commissioner, I recognise that firearms licensing is a critical public protection function. The lawful possession of firearms relies upon rigorous assessment, continual monitoring of risk and effective oversight to ensure that only suitable individuals are granted and retain certificates.

I welcome Gloucestershire Constabulary's positive and proactive response to the inspection. As one of the forces inspected, it was able to begin responding to the emerging findings at an early stage and has already completed actions relating to visitors' permits and firearms handling competency. It is also reassuring to see clear plans in place to strengthen governance, quality assurance, decision-making oversight and stakeholder engagement.

The Constabulary's commitment to implementing the recommendations demonstrates a constructive approach to continuous improvement and its determination to maintain the highest possible standards within the firearms licensing function. I particularly welcome the establishment of enhanced audit arrangements, the review of delegated decision-making authorities and the continued development of governance and performance monitoring processes.

While many of the inspection's recommendations are directed at national bodies, I expect Gloucestershire Constabulary to continue making timely progress against those actions that apply locally. I will seek regular assurance through my accountability arrangements with the Chief Constable to ensure that improvements are embedded, risks are effectively managed and firearms licensing arrangements continue to meet the high standards rightly expected by the public.

I am satisfied that the Temporary Chief Constable has recognised the significance of the inspection and has put in place appropriate plans to address the recommendations applicable to Gloucestershire Constabulary. I will continue to monitor progress through established governance and accountability arrangements and will expect evidence that the changes being implemented result in improved oversight, stronger decision-making and increased public confidence in the firearms licensing process.



Chris Nelson
Police and Crime Commissioner for Gloucestershire

Section 55 Response

HMICFRS - Firearms Licensing Inspection 2026

Introduction

The Force welcomes the findings of HMICFRS contained within the report, 'An Inspection of Firearms Licensing Across Police Forces in England and Wales', published on 28 August 2026. We recognise the importance of maintaining public confidence in firearms licensing and are committed to implementing the recommendations directed at chief constables. As one of the forces inspected the constabulary benefitted from an early hot debrief of the findings and likely recommendations, that has enabled us to make more rapid progress against these. Two recommendations are assessed as met already with most of the others progressing towards completion in the coming weeks.

Recommendation 12

By 31 March 2027, the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs' Council should review the visitors' permit regime to reduce the inherent risks to public safety. As part of this review, they should consider whether visitors' permits should be restricted to applicants from countries with firearms licensing and safety practices similar to those in Great Britain.

In the interim, chief constables should make sure that firearms and explosives licensing units assess visitors' permit applications in line with the Guide on firearms licensing law.

Current Process

1. Checks by Firearms Licencing staff are carried out on visitors and sponsors, e.g. LEDs/Niche and PND
2. Proof is required by visitors who are bringing Arms into the country that they have them lawfully in their own country e.g. European Firearms Pass
3. Firearms Licensing Department liaises with the sponsor to ensure there is appropriate security for the duration of the permit
4. Permits are only issued for the duration of the visit unless the applicant can prove that they are returning multiple times, then permits will be issued for a maximum of a year
5. Where possible (for firearms permits only) conditions are placed on the permit to restrict them to named pieces of land
6. When the permit is issued, security expectations are outlined to the sponsor. It is their responsibility to ensure that the visitors are aware of the expectations

Rationale

- Ensuring all information and intelligence is considered to identify public safety concerns
- Assurance that any arms brought into the country were lawfully acquired
- Appropriate security to reduce risk of loss or theft
- Possession is limited and defined for legitimate purpose
- Safe and lawful use of firearms during visit
- Maintains standard/expectations

Target Completion Date – Completed. Above process is in place

Recommendation 13

By 1 December 2026, chief constables should:

- Satisfy themselves that their scheme of delegation for firearms licensing is fit for purpose and in line with the firearms licensing authorised professional practice; and
- Check that decision-making is in accordance with that scheme

Action Taken

1. The out of hours delegation for revocation which was highlighted within our HMICFRS report has been addressed, Duty Silver now have the appropriate delegation
2. The attached document provides an overview of delegations: -



3. A review of the current delegation arrangements is in progress
4. This will involve legal services being asked to review the delegated authorities in relation to grants, renewals, revocations, refusals and variation decisions
5. Training is being scoped to support the professional development of decision makers and administrators
6. Dip sampling process is being scoped as per recommendation 14 below

Rationale

- Ensure lawful and consistent decision making
- Compliance with national guidance and APP
- Accountability

Target Completion Date: 30 November 2026

Recommendation 14

By 1 December 2026, Chief Constables should ensure that audit and dip-sampling processes are in place to review firearms licensing decisions.

We are committed to being an anti-discriminatory organisation. This means not only acting in a non-discriminatory way, but addressing systemic inequalities, disadvantage and discrimination.

Action Taken

1. Standing Operating Procedure is being developed to formalise the dip sampling process/requirements
2. Audits will be undertaken across the range of licensing decisions:
    - Grants
    - Renewals
    - Revocations
    - Refusals
    - Variations
3. A cross section of decisions by all staff will be included
4. Results will be reported to the ACC during quarterly governance meetings

Rationale

- Ensure consistency in decision making
- Highlight and learning or considerations for decision makers
- Audit trail of reviewed cases
- Accountability

Target Completion Date: 30 November 2026

Recommendation 20

By 1 December 2026, chief constables should establish or maintain:

- A force-level firearms licensing governance structure that is compliant with the firearms licensing authorised professional practice; and
- A qualitative and quantitative performance framework that covers both risk and how quickly firearms and explosives licensing units process applications.

Action Taken

1. The oversight, governance and accountability of the constabulary's statutory firearms and shotgun licencing functions is provided by the Firearms Licensing Governance Board. Please see below Terms of Reference.



Terms of Reference - Firearms Licensing.

2. The unit has developed a HMICFRS Improvement Plan documenting progress and actions in relation to Areas for Improvement (AFIs) (monitored via the above board)
3. Performance meetings are chaired by the Criminal Justice Det Superintendent on a monthly basis where the Performance Framework and progress of the improvement plan are monitored and any risks managed accordingly.
4. The department is reviewing current processes for efficiency, utilising potential ICT solutions to improve the quality of performance data as well as process efficiencies.

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5. Dip-sampling as referenced in recommendation 14 whereby decisions/risk are managed

Rationale

- Clear governance structure
- Documented progress with clear direction to achieve best practice
- Data to allow reporting and performance monitoring/tracking
- Accountability and consistency of decision making

Target Completion Date 30 November 2026

Recommendation 21

By 1 December 2026, chief constables should make sure they have a documented engagement plan in line with firearms licensing authorised professional practice.

Action Taken

1. The Firearms Licensing Department host Bi-annual meetings with Registered Firearms Dealers (RFDs) to update them on issues, trends and current FAL performance and to elicit feedback on our service.
2. Firearms Licencing staff meet with shooting organisations to discuss issues/update
3. The Firearms Licencing Unit staff attend local community events (e.g. Country Fayres)
4. The Firearms Licensing Unit have a positive relationship with the Local Medical Council (LMC) where updates are shared and improvements in local process are implemented
5. The FAL department are exploring the option of setting up community alerts, whereby certificate holders would be encouraged to sign up to the alerts, enabling the department to share updates/news with holders.
6. The above needs to be formalised into a documented engagement strategy

Rationale

- Improve service delivery by providing timely updates
- Understand stakeholder concerns
- Transparency
- Promote public safety

Target Completion Date 30 November 2026

Recommendation 23

With immediate effect, chief constables should satisfy themselves that any firearms and explosives licensing unit practitioners who are responsible for handling and transporting firearms are qualified to handle them safely.

Action Taken

We are committed to being an anti-discriminatory organisation. This means not only acting in a non-discriminatory way, but addressing systemic inequalities, disadvantage and discrimination.

1. The attached policy contains guidance in relation to safe handling procedure, this document requires updating



Firearms and Shotgun Administra

2. The Force Armourer has attended the Initial Armourers course and multiple weapon courses (and reattends every 3 years for all weapon types)
3. All of the force's Firearms Enquiry Officers (FEOs) have all been trained in Safe Handling of Firearms and have CPD every year
4. All Armed Response Officers are trained in safe handling and 'make safe' as part of annually weapon handling and make safe College of Policing lesson package
5. The force property store will not accept any firearms in if not certificated by the ARVS or Armourer as safe
6. Force Control Room staff have received training to understand FAL processes
7. New Recruits also receive an input on FAL processes – this is ongoing

Rationale

- Public and Staff safety
- Reduce organisational risk
- Maintain operational integrity by ensuring consistency

Target Date – Completed

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