

Feature

A report from the trenches

by the NGO's firearms advisor, George Wallace.



I HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN HELPING AND advising the holders of firearm and shotgun certificates for just over 20 years, first for BASC and now for NGO members. In that time many problems have appeared, stayed awhile and eventually been consigned to history, but a few have remained and are still with us today.

We can do nothing about the Firearms Acts and their various amendments because they are a matter of law and we all have to comply, however daft, unreasonable and unhelpful they may be. We can certainly lobby for change, but in the meantime, the law is still the law.

Neither can I say too much about Home Office Guidance to the Police on administering the licensing process because I had a hand in writing some of

it (the good bits, of course), and particularly Chapter 13 which concerns the private possession of rifles. The legislation says you must have a 'good reason' for wanting to acquire a rifle and while recreational stalkers and rabbit shooters can show the required 'good reason', for many readers of this magazine it goes way beyond mere 'good reason' because a rifle is as much a necessity as a quad bike, a Larsen trap, a strimmer or a pair of good boots. It is a tool of the trade and with work to be done, we really don't need some 'numpty' in the licensing department putting mindless obstacles in our way; which brings me to the real cause of the problem.

The Firearms Acts in their present form are an unjustified nuisance; but that's all they are. The real difficulties which frustrate us, the users of shotguns and rifles, are mainly caused by individuals within the police service, whether licensing officers, office clerks or firearms enquiry officers. A very few of these – the most malevolent and devious – seem to have the ear of ACPO and the Home Office and have worked tirelessly to make life difficult for certificate holders. Fortunately they are getting older and will soon retire (we hope!).

On a more every-day note, we do need to get the scale of the problem into perspective. The NGO has more than 13,000 members, which means that in any given week around 50 will

be renewing their shotgun or firearm certificates and probably about the same number will be asking for a variation to a firearm certificate or a change of conditions of use. So let's assume that about 100 of us will be in touch with our local police firearms licensing department, for one reason or another, in any given week.

Of that 100, perhaps two or three will feel the need to contact me for advice or help. About half the time, advice is all that is required and, even when actual help is needed, the problem is usually caused by a lack of understanding of how the system works, either on the part of our member or by the licensing staff themselves. That can be dealt with quite easily, although because of bureaucratic procedures it can take some (frustrating) time. Genuine stupidity or actual bloody-mindedness are not unknown, but they are relatively rare, so we shouldn't tar all licensing staff with the same brush.

I generally appear on the scene only when there is a problem and that has led to occasional accusations of being anti-police. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. Modern policing can be a thankless job which makes the famous gap between a rock and a hard place look pretty comfortable by comparison. I have a son and a nephew who are both serving police officers and I say that with pride, so please don't accuse me of being anti-police. But I will happily plead guilty



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to being opposed to bad policing. None of us needs to put up with that and, just because it's a tough job, that isn't an excuse for doing it badly.

What brought all this on was a telephone call this week from a member who had asked a police licensing officer for an 'open' condition on his firearm certificate. Our chap was refused the

'open' condition which would have allowed him to use his rifles on any land where he had permission. When he asked why, he was also refused an explanation. So he contacted me.

Our member then spoke again to the licensing department and it seems they did not like him contacting the NGO. The licensing officer apparently got quite cross but did eventually explain that the application was refused because it was not made in writing with full details of the applicant's experience with rifles.

Now why couldn't he have said that the first time?

Our member hadn't put it in writing because he wasn't asked to do so and also because he knew that the licensing officer was already aware of his experience.

Although I cannot say exactly what started this particular difficulty, it does seem likely that no problem would have arisen if the licensing department had simply communicated properly with their certificate holder. Surely that's not too much to ask?

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