Chapter 18: Rifle and muzzle-loading pistol clubs, schools and cadet corps

18.1. This chapter details:

- procedures for club approval;
- issues such as the use of ranges, security of firearms and good practice in club administration;
- information about the renewal of licences, club inspections;
- the requirement of the police to maintain a register of clubs within their force area; and
- how the Firearms Acts relate to cadet corps and school target shooting clubs.

Introduction

18.2. Applications for club approval are decided by the Secretary of State in England and Wales, and Scottish Ministers in Scotland, and should be submitted in writing on Form 124. If the club has, or intends to have, its own firearms, the application is to the local police licensing department for the area in which they will be stored. If the club has no storage facilities, the application should go to the police firearms department for the area in which the club principally operates.

18.3. Members of a rifle club, miniature rifle club or muzzle-loading pistol club approved by the Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers may, without holding firearm certificates, have in their possession firearms and ammunition when engaged as members of the club in, or in connection with, target shooting (section 15(1) of the 1988 Act as amended by section 45 of the 1997 Act). It should be noted that section 15(1) does not stipulate that the firearms must be club firearms. A member of an approved club may temporarily possess a firearm for use solely on the club’s range, or other ranges which it may use. However, a person cannot possess a firearm under this exemption if it is a class of firearm for which the club is not approved. It should also be noted that section 15(1) of the 1988 Act, as amended, does not apply to the use of long barrelled pistols or section 1 shotguns used for target shooting, as it only allows possession of a rifle. Accordingly, club approval cannot be extended to cover the use of these firearms.

18.4. Members may not purchase or acquire firearms or ammunition unless they have been granted firearm certificates and the exemption does not cover the use of firearms for purposes other than target shooting. The case of R v Wilson (1989) held that possession of firearms and ammunition must only be in connection with the club’s activities, and does not give members a wider authority.

18.5. Whether approved or not, miniature rifle clubs are exempt by virtue of section 11(4) of the 1968 Act. Under that subsection a person conducting or carrying on a miniature rifle range (whether for a rifle club or otherwise) or shooting gallery at which only miniature rifles and ammunition not exceeding .23 calibre or air weapons are used may, without a firearm certificate, purchase, acquire or possess such miniature rifles or ammunition for them.
Whilst there is no legal definition of a miniature rifle, other than one which does not exceed .23 inch in calibre, it is generally accepted that this refers only to rifles firing .22 rimfire cartridges (see also chapter 6). Persons using the range are exempt from holding a firearm certificate only whilst using such miniature rifles and ammunition at such a range or gallery. Home Office approval can only be granted to a miniature rifle club if it can adhere to the Home Office’s club criteria.

Procedure for club approval

18.6. All applications for the approval of the Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers should be made on form 124. This form is produced and kept by the principal shooting associations (the National Rifle Association, the National Small-bore Rifle Association and the Muzzle Loaders Association of Great Britain) and is also available from the www.GOV.uk website at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/117800/firearms1.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/117800/firearms1.pdf). Part A of the form is completed by the applying club’s secretary. Renewal applications should be submitted at least three months before the previous approval expires. All applications must be signed by an official of the club; this will usually be the club secretary. Applications should be submitted to the Firearms Licensing Department of the police for the area in which the club’s firearms are to be stored or, in cases in which the club has no firearms, the chief officer for the area in which the club principally operates (see 18.2).

18.7. The chief officer will arrange for a visit to take place, whereby checks will be made to ensure firearm security is satisfactory. If the chief officer of police is satisfied that the club satisfies the criteria for approval, they should complete part B of the form before submission. In cases in which enquiries indicate that there is no prospect of the club being able to satisfy the criteria for approval, the form should be submitted with part B uncompleted. A covering letter should be sent with the form indicating why the police cannot recommend the grant of approval.

18.8. Once the above steps have been completed, the form should be submitted without delay to the Home Office or the Scottish Government.

18.9. Should a club not immediately be in a position to satisfy the criteria, but it appears that given time it will be, the club secretary or responsible officer should be advised of the shortcomings. The submission of the application should then be deferred until such time as the club has been able to remedy the deficiencies (to a maximum of six months from the date of the original application). Once the club’s arrangements satisfy the criteria, part B of the form should be completed by the police and submitted to the Home Office or the Scottish Government. Should the club not be in a position to satisfy the criteria at the end of the six-month period, part B should be left blank and the form submitted to the Home Office or the Scottish Government with a covering letter explaining why approval has not been recommended.

18.10. In considering whether or not to grant an application for approval, the Secretary of State and the Scottish Ministers must satisfy themselves that:

(i) the club has regular use of ranges with financial arrangements in place to cover the losses to third parties which are safe for the class of firearms for which approval is requested;

(ii) the security arrangements for the storage of club firearms and ammunition, where held,
are satisfactory;

(iii) the application is being made by or on behalf of a bona fide club which is able to meet the criteria set out in paragraph 18.24; and

(iv) there are no other considerations which would make the club unsuitable for approval.

18.11. Club approval by the Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers will only cover target shooting with the categories of firearm listed below:

(a) Full-bore rifles, including pistol calibre “gallery rifles”;
(b) Small-bore rifles; and
(c) Muzzle-loading pistols

18.12. The decision about which categories will be included in the approval letter will be dependant upon whether suitable ranges are available to the club.

Variation applications

18.13. Applications for variation of Club Secretary, change of address or category of firearm must be submitted in writing to the Home Office or the Scottish Government. For clubs situated in England and Wales, the Club Secretary must also reside in England or Wales. For clubs situated in Scotland, the Club Secretary should reside in Scotland.

Ranges

18.14. The ranges which a club cites when applying for approval should be available for the club to use on a regular basis.\(^1\) Readily available access to a suitable range in another part of the country might be sufficient to qualify for approval purposes depending on the circumstances.

18.15. The responsibility now rests firmly with range owners/operators to ensure that their range is constructed and maintained safely. Failure to do so will leave them liable to sanctions under a range of legislation, such as the Occupiers’ Liability Act 1984, the Occupiers’ Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 and the Health & Safety at Work etc Act 1974. The National Rifle Association and National Small-Bore Rifle Association have a range inspection service.

18.16. The revised club criteria (see paragraph 18.24) and certificate conditions now include a requirement for owners/operators of ranges to have in place adequate financial arrangements to meet any injury or damage claims. In most cases this will be insurance cover. However, other arrangements are acceptable so long as they provide adequate cover. For example, some local authority ranges deposit a bond to cover their risk. Military ranges, which are regularly inspected, will normally cover their own risk.

18.17. The level of cover will vary according to the nature of the range and the type of firearms used on it. As a guide, cover should normally be around £5 million for any one incident.

\(^1\) As a guide, this would be a minimum of six occasions a year although in some circumstances, a lower frequency of use might be justified.
18.18. The National Small-bore Rifle Association (NSRA) and the National Rifle Association (NRA) have established their own inspection and approval scheme for the ranges run by their affiliated member clubs. The NSRA and NRA will require inspections at regular intervals to check that ranges do not deteriorate and remain suitable for the type of shooting taking place there.

18.19. The NSRA and NRA have prepared guidance for their members on the safe construction of ranges. That guidance will be used by the organisations as the basis for their inspections and the issue of approvals. The NSRA and NRA have indicated that they are willing to make their inspection and approval service available to ranges not affiliated to either organisation. It is anticipated that most ranges will use the NSRA and NRA scheme. However, it is for each range owner/operator to decide what steps to take to ensure their range is safe.

18.20. Police forces will need to satisfy themselves that ranges used by a club are safe and have adequate insurance or other financial cover. In many cases clubs will be expected to have an old-style military safety certificate or a NSRA/NRA approval letter, and/or an insurance certificate. The responsibility for safety on the range lies with the owner/operator. It is not intended that police forces should become experts in range construction or to have to inspect ranges. However, the NSRA/NRA guidance will be available to police forces to refer to where the need arises.

18.21. If a rifle or muzzle-loading pistol club seeking approval proposes to use a range situated on licensed premises, it is essential in view of the provisions of section 82 of the Licensing Act 2003 and the Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005, that the matter be considered by the licensing authority. The Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers will withhold approval until they are informed by the chief officer of police concerned that the licensing authority has no objections to the situation and to the use of the range in general.

Security of club firearms

18.22. The club’s co-operation should be sought to ensure that the firearms and ammunition owned by the club are stored securely. The signatory of the club certificate (usually the club secretary) is ultimately responsible for the safekeeping of club firearms and ammunition, but they need not necessarily be present each time these are issued to or used by club members. It is also acceptable for members other than the firearm certificate holder, if the activity is clearly in connection with target shooting, to transport firearms to another club or authorised range for a competition or to a dealer for repair. It is advisable when transporting firearms as a member of a club to have some form of written authorisation from a club official (see also chapter 22).

Administration of clubs

18.23. The Secretary of State and the Scottish Ministers attach great importance to the responsible administration of approved clubs and will wish to ensure that certain criteria are complied with. These criteria are found in the Home Office leaflet “Firearms – Approval of Rifle and Muzzle-loading Pistol Clubs”, and can be found via the following link: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/117803/approval-rifle-pistol-clubs.pdf. Please note that section 9 of the leaflet is outdated and responsibility now lies with individual clubs to ensure their range is constructed and maintained safely (see section 18.15).
18.24. The approval criteria for school target shooting clubs differ significantly from criteria found via the link above, and are as follows:

1) target shooting with full or small-bore rifles should be an authorised school activity;

2) all aspects of shooting at the school must be under the control of one experienced person who is nominated by and responsible to the Head Teacher. This person must have personal experience of shooting with the firearms used by the club and at least one year’s experience of exercising control of the age group of pupils concerned;

3) the school must have regular use of ranges which are suitable for the categories of firearm to be used;

4) the security arrangements for storing the school firearms and ammunition must be satisfactory;

5) all shooting activities, including the handling of firearms and ammunition, must be supervised at all times either by the responsible adult at the school, or by at least one other equally experienced person nominated by the Head Teacher, or by someone who is a coach with a qualification recognised by British Shooting and governing bodies;

6) shooting is normally available only to pupils and staff of the school, visiting teams from schools which have also been approved by the Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers under section 15 of the 1988 Act, full members of rifle clubs approved under that section, members of Cadet Corps or individuals who hold a personal firearm certificate and shoot in accordance with the terms of that certificate;

7) the school does not allow shooting by guests on more than twelve days each year. On such occasions, only parents, guardians and other relatives of pupils of the school or other adults known to the person responsible for shooting, may handle firearms and ammunition. Guest members must be under constant one-to-one supervision when handling firearms and ammunition either by the responsible adult at the school, or another equally experienced person nominated by the Head Teacher, or someone who is a coach, or Range Conducting Officer with a qualification recognised by British Shooting and other governing bodies. The Head Teacher or the responsible adult at the school must notify the local police about guest days at least 48 hours in advance;

8) the Head Teacher must appoint a person to act as liaison officer with the police and the chief officer of police must have confidence that this person can provide the police with such information as they require to ensure that shooting is conducted properly and gives no cause for concern;

9) the school will maintain a register of the attendance of all members together with details for each session of the firearms which they used and the competitions, if any, in which they took part;

10) the school will inform the police of any holder of a firearm certificate who has ceased to be a member of the club;

11) the school will inform the police if any member who holds a firearm certificate has not attended a meeting for a year; and

12) there is nothing else that would make the school unsuitable for approval.
Disclosure of information

18.25. Under the terms of their approval, clubs are obliged to notify the police of any applications for membership, giving the applicant’s name and address and the outcome of any application. The notes on the criteria for Home Office approved club status indicate that clubs should make their own arrangements for assessing whether members or prospective members are of good character and that a chief officer of police should not be asked to disclose whether or not someone has a criminal record. Nevertheless, notification will enable the police to take prompt action where the applicant is found to be a prohibited person or is considered not to be a suitable person to be issued with a firearm certificate.

18.26. Current legislation/common law does not allow for the disclosure by the police to a shooting club of personal details of a member, or prospective member, unless the information is needed to prevent (or detect) a crime, or to enable the apprehension or prosecution of an offender. If, for example, an applicant is a prohibited person, an offence could have taken place and the club’s full co-operation would be required to provide evidence for any prosecution under section 21 of the 1968 Act. If it is necessary to disclose the prohibition in order to investigate the matter it would be lawful to do so. If an individual is judged to be unsuitable for other reasons, the club liaison officer should be formally so notified in a timely manner. If a club is not advised of unsuitability, it is unlikely to refuse or terminate membership until after an incident has occurred. The club liaison officer or other club official may then inform the applicant that the police consider him to be unsuitable as a firearm certificate holder, and may refuse the application. In doing so the applicant should be given the contact details of the police firearms licensing department to enable them to make representations.

18.27. The police must notify a club if a member’s firearm certificate is revoked or refused. In addition, clubs should be told in general terms of the reason for the revocation or refusal in order that they can make an informed decision whether to allow the member to continue shooting as a member of the club.

Grant of approval

18.28. If an application for the Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers’ approval is granted, a letter of approval will be sent to the applicant (club secretary). A copy of the approval will also be sent to the chief officer of police. A decision to withhold approval will be notified in the same way.

Free firearm certificates for approved clubs

18.29. Although a fee is payable for the grant or renewal of the Secretary of State or Scottish Ministers’ approval under section 15 of the 1988 Act (as amended), no fee is payable for a firearm certificate granted to the responsible officer of any club approved by the Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers and relating to firearms and ammunition to be used solely for target shooting by members of the club (section 32(2) of the 1968 Act). Similarly, no fee is payable for the variation or renewal of such a certificate. The exemption does not extend to certificates given for firearms not mentioned in a club’s approval. Responsible officers of approved clubs who are granted firearm certificates should be reminded of the necessity for strict compliance with the law confining the exemption allowed to members.
18.30. The notes to the Secretary of State and the Scottish Ministers’ letter of approval state that the chief officer of police must be informed if the club wishes to use an alternative range or to use an additional range regularly (this does not apply to regular competitions between approved clubs). Changes of club secretary or club title must also be notified.

18.31. There is no need for the Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers to be kept informed of the ranges being used by an approved club. It is sufficient for the chief officer to inform the Home Office or the Scottish Government when a club loses the use of a suitable range and consideration might have to be given to the withdrawal or variation of the Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers’ authority.

18.32. Letters of approval are issued in the name of the club and state the club secretary’s name and address. Where a change of club secretary has occurred details of the new secretary, giving their full name and address, should be notified to the Home Office and Scottish Government as soon as possible. Members of the club can continue to shoot using only those firearms held on their personal firearm certificates. Any firearms owned and held on the club firearm certificate cannot be used until a new approval letter has been issued. New approval should be issued as soon as possible, if possible with no gap in the change over dates, in order that competition deadlines can be met.

Subsequent checks on approved clubs

18.33. Rifle and muzzle-loading pistol clubs approved by the Secretary of State or the Scottish Ministers are required by section 15(7) of the 1988 Act (as amended) to allow any constable or civilian officer duly authorised in writing to enter any premises occupied or used by the club and to inspect those premises and anything on them to ascertain whether the provisions of section 15 and any limitations or conditions in the approval are being complied with. Inspections might include whether or not the ranges used by the club remain safe, both for members and for the general public, and that the standard of the organisation and membership of the club remains satisfactory.

18.34. The club’s attendance register should also be checked to ensure that all members with personal firearm certificates are regularly attending and that the club’s return of members who have not shot with them for twelve months is accurate. The frequency of use of ranges will vary depending on the club’s individual circumstances. These will include the proximity of the nearest suitable range and the ease with which bookings can be made. Target shooters may be expected to use their firearms regularly, at least three times a year. This is not the case for firearms held for other reasons such as collecting or deerstalking. Historic arms may be held for occasional use, in order to avoid excess wear on old artefacts.

18.35. Where problems arise with the running of a club, which are not resolved by local discussion, and which might result in the withdrawal of the club’s approval, the facts should be reported without delay to the Home Office or the Scottish Government. In most circumstances, representations on the matters raised may be invited from the club secretary by the Home Office or the Scottish Government.

Extension of club approval

18.36. Applications for the initial approval of a club under section 15 of the 1988 Act to be extended to cover additional categories of firearm should be submitted on form 124 under the same procedure as set out in paragraphs 18.6 – 18.9 and 18.28. No fee is payable on the extension of an approval.
Club renewals

18.37. Section 15(5) of the 1988 Act (as amended) provides that an approval under that section shall, unless withdrawn, continue in force for six years from the date on which it was granted. The approval may be renewed for a further six years on application, for a fee, as per section 15(6). Form 124 is available for this purpose and should be submitted under the same procedure as set out in paragraphs 18.6 – 18.9.

Police records

18.38. Chief officers of police should maintain an index of all clubs situated in their police force area approved under section 15(1) of the 1988 Act. Details of the club’s secretary and police liaison officer should be recorded and maintained. The index can be used as a reference point when dealing with applications for personal firearm certificates though this will not remove the need to contact the secretary or other officer in all such cases.

Combined Cadet Force, Sea Cadet Corps, Army Cadet Force and Air Training Corps

18.39. Cadets are regarded as Crown Servants for the purposes of the Firearms Acts and are exempt from the requirement to possess a firearm certificate when shooting as a member of the corps. Furthermore, firearms may be acquired for the corps by a responsible officer duly authorised in writing by the unit’s commanding officer without the need for a firearm certificate (section 54(2)(b) of the 1968 Act).

Retention of club members’ records

18.40. Clubs should retain members’ details/records for six years following cancellation of membership.