



Supply and trafficking

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This revised advice has been produced and approved by the NABIS and the National Criminal Use of Firearms Group. It has been approved by NCOCC and VPP portfolio lead. The operational implementation of all guidance and strategy will require operational choices to be made at local level in order to achieve the appropriate police response and this document should be used in conjunction with other existing Authorised Professional Practice (APP) produced by the College of Policing. It will be updated and re-published as necessary.

Any queries relating to this document should be directed to either the author detailed above or the Head of Knowledge and Communications at NABIS on 0121 626 7114

1. Supply and Trafficking

Key points

- **Status weapons are more likely to be subject to greater re-use and movement across individuals, groups and police force areas.**
- **NABIS provide a firearm tracing service.**
- **Understanding the history of a weapon can help investigators.**
- **Certificate holders may only purchase weapons in a face-to-face transaction.**
- **Individuals and registered firearms dealers may import firearms from outside the UK with a firearms specific import licence.**
- **Police should seek to establish information-sharing protocols with local registered firearms dealers.**
- **Border Force monitor the movement of parcels passing through UK ports.**
- **Controlled deliveries must be managed by an SIO experienced in crimes in action.**
- **SIOs investigating illegal firearm importation should always check flagging via the NCA to ensure that any CT, or other interest, can be de-conflicted.**
- **It is imperative that the National Crime Agency (ICT) and NABIS are notified of any action taken relating to an intercepted weapon, part or indicative part.**

1.1. Trafficking – general

While no one can be certain exactly how many illegal firearms are in existence in the UK, during the 12 months leading to August 2015, NABIS identified that there were 190 inferred weapons in criminal hands (those used but not recovered).

Illegally held firearms comprise:

- original lethal purpose weapons trafficked into and throughout the UK
- blank-firing weapons that have been illegally converted either inside or outside the UK
- deactivated weapons that have been reactivated
- lawfully owned firearms/shotguns that have been stolen/lost or otherwise fallen into criminal hands
- home-made firearms
- antique weapons supported by home-made ammunition
- 3-D printed guns.

In addition to illegally held firearms, there are those guns that are currently held lawfully but in circumstances which render them liable to misuse. This might be, for example, because of a vulnerability associated with the certificate holder themselves or an issue around security and storage of weapons by a licensed holder.

The systems and processes sitting behind the supply of firearms into and within the UK are complex and undoubtedly involve rogue sellers and buyers, intermediaries, oversea networks, transport companies, corporate organisations and even states (Rothe and Collins 2011).

At the most complex end of trafficking outside the UK, it involves organised crime groups, registered firearms dealers and corruption amongst officials (Arsovska 2014: p 296). The less complex end of trafficking, both within and outside the UK, often involves simple theft or burglary.

In the UK, it would appear that criminals currently have little difficulty in obtaining firearms, given that a significantly large number appear to be treated as a disposable commodity. NABIS (2014) reported that: 'once a firearm has been discharged, it has an 86% chance of not being used again.'

This disposability may be aided by the relatively low cost of antique, converted or reactivated weapons. Recent research showed that a third of guns examined by police were blank-firing, modified or reactivated weapons that had been converted (Gibson 2014: p 49).

Conversely, so called 'status weapons', such as sub-machine guns, are re-used disproportionately more often and are subject of greater movement, showing them to be a far less disposable commodity (Gibson 2014: p 50). Where such guns are seen to move across force boundaries, however, it remains unclear what precipitates that movement 'whether it is for a specific crime purpose or because it simply follows an offender e.g. with a house move.' (Gibson 2014: p 36).

It is suggested that it is the restrictive UK firearms legislation that significantly constrains the ability of offenders to access original lethal purpose weapons and ammunition (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone 2006: p 114), which has given rise to a seemingly growing trend in the use of home-made or improvised ammunition and cheaper alternative firearms, along with the retention and movement of re-useable 'status weapons'.

Understanding the life of a weapon from the point of manufacture to point of sale through to disposal can help forces understand the nature of firearm trafficking in their area. It allows for more effective intelligence sharing with those forces where links are established.

Tracing service

NABIS provides a firearms tracing service in relation to all weapons submitted to them that have a serial number. Checks are made across numerous databases including those populated overseas. This can be especially useful in trying to understand, for example, the point at which a weapon moved from being in lawful possession and into criminal hands. This may provide investigators the opportunity to intervene and prevent further weapons taking the same path and identify and prosecute those involved. In addition, it helps all forces better understand the national picture in relation to trafficking networks and routes into and around the UK.

In some circumstances, NABIS will also undertake work to restore serial numbers that have been removed from a gun to enable its history to be searched in the same way.

Where a weapon is discovered or intercepted while being trafficked, this is undoubtedly a significant success. It is important, however, that when forces make such recoveries they consider both a retrospective investigation (to determine where the weapon has come from) and also an investigation to find where the firearm was likely to be going and submit any resulting intelligence to help UK law enforcement understand and tackle trafficking. The retrospective investigation will help tackle supply while the investigation into the destination will help investigate links to the criminal use of firearms.

1.2. GB and Northern Ireland domestic firearms purchases only

Within GB and NI, firearms certificate holders can only purchase weapons (section 1 firearms & section 2 shotguns under the Firearms Act 1968) in a person-to-person/face-to-face transaction. The consequence of this is that they cannot buy a weapon (eg, over the internet) and have it delivered directly to their home address. Where a certificate holder buys a weapon online, for example, the process can be quite complicated. The purchaser must send their certificate to the seller, who must endorse and return it. The seller then has to arrange for the gun to be posted to a registered firearms dealer in the locality of the purchaser (using legal postal means) where the transaction can be completed face-to-face. If a private seller so wishes, instead of posting it themselves, they can take the gun to a local registered firearms dealer for that dealer to then courier it (using a registered carrier) to the second registered firearms dealer local to the purchaser, where the transaction can be completed face-to-face.

It is also lawful for a firearms certificate holder (where that certificate is suitably varied) or a shotgun certificate holder to order a firearm from overseas which will be subject to a declaration at the UK frontier and held by Border Force pending confirmation via the national

firearms licensing management system (NFLMS) and police firearms licensing that the importer is authorised to acquire it. Following satisfactory confirmation, the firearm may be released for onwards delivery to the certificate holder's private address.

1.3. Importation/purchase of firearms from outside the UK

Firearms imports to the UK normally require a Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) import licence. Private firearms imports are subject to import licence requirements. An administrative concession, however, allows the use of an appropriate firearms or shotgun certificate to be used in lieu of the BIS licence. BIS issue import licences only to those who can demonstrate the necessary UK authority to acquire and possess the types and quantities of firearm that are to be imported. [See [BIS ILB Notice to Importers June 2012](#)]

Each commercial import from a non-EU country is required to be declared to HM Revenue and Customs on an import entry. This entry will specify the importer, the consignor, the declarant, the source of the goods, the commodity being imported, the value of the goods, their licence status and whether the import is for home use or to a conditional or temporary import relief. All persons concerned in whatever way with commercially imported goods are required to maintain and produce records as may be required by HMRC officials [Sections [75B](#), [77](#) and [77B](#) of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979]. Private importers of accompanied firearms are required to declare these to Border Force who have revenue and customs powers at the port of entry.

Firearms imported from an EU member state are not subject to an import declaration at the inter-EU border but must comply with the provision of the EC [Weapons Directive](#).

Commercial and privately purchased firearms acquired from another EC member state must obtain, and produce as required, a valid EC transfer licence covering all such firearms transfers. The transfer licence is issued by the member state of despatch and the original travels with the goods. In the case of transfers involving 'prohibited weapons', a UK BIS import licence ('UK prior consent') must be in place before the movement can commence. If the member state of destination is the UK, copies of all EC transfer licences are forwarded to the firearms and explosives officer network Border Policing Command of the National Crime Agency for assurance purposes.

A privately held firearm, held on certificate by an EU resident, may be transferred between member states under the authority of an EU firearms pass issued by the member state in which the individual is resident. EU and non-EU residents must additionally obtain the

appropriate UK visitor's permit from a UK police firearms licensing bureau to lawfully possess firearms while visiting the UK.

All UK-registered firearms dealers are required to maintain a register of transactions. The register lists specified details of all firearms acquisitions and disposals including those imported or exported to and from the dealership.

Unlike domestic purchases, importations can be conducted online, with firearms being delivered directly to a registered firearms dealer's or an individual's address without any face-to-face transaction.

In respect of personal importation, and in lieu of an import licence, the individual may present their firearms certificate (with the additional authority to acquire) or shotgun certificate to Border Force. This allows the gun to be delivered directly to the individual's address. The police are then informed so that the certificate can be updated to show that the firearm has been acquired and is now in the holder's possession.

1.4. Fast parcels and parcel post

Hundreds of thousands of parcels enter the UK via the ports every day. This makes the process of identifying and intercepting illegal firearms a challenge.

There are generally four methods of firearms, both legal and illegal, coming through the UK ports:

- **Unofficial courier** (eg, man in a van): for example a person living in the UK but formerly from another European country may take a van from the UK containing parcels from friends, family and associates also now living in the UK back to their former home country. Before returning to the UK, the driver will do a round of parcel collections for friends, family and associates and bring these back to the UK. No parcel tracking.
- **Postal system, parcel post**: a parcel is handed into the country of origin's postal service, usually paid for using stamps, and comes into the UK and into the Royal Mail postal delivery system. Often no parcel tracking.
- **Fast parcels**: these tend to be express parcel delivery companies including, for example, DHL, UPS, FedEx and TNT. The parcels tend to be intercontinental and the sender and receiver can usually track a parcel's progress online.
- **Other parcel courier**; these tend to be those offering principally UK and European parcel delivery. For example, Hermes and DPD. Some parcel tracking.

Parcels coming into or out of the European Union, through either parcel post, fast parcels or other parcel couriers offering the service, must be accompanied by a declaration that should include a description of the goods, their value and whether they are gifts or commercial items.

Parcels moving around the European Union, including those coming into the UK, do not require a declaration.

In certain cases, Border Force receive a manifest of parcels coming into the UK from outside the EU. This manifest contains additional details from the formal declaration and allows Border Force staff to identify items listed as firearms or firearm parts. This allows Border Force staff to check for the relevant import licence and, where appropriate, to check the NFLMS to ensure the recipient of the firearm holds the required certificates.

Where the illegal smuggling of firearms is discovered, a seizure is made and reported to the National Crime Agency ICT (International Crime Team).

If the seized firearm is accompanied, eg, by the person owning/intending to own the item, then the appropriate NCA Border Investigation Team is advised of the case for investigation.

In cases of unaccompanied detections, the NCA ICT assess the circumstances and intelligence and determine where primacy for any subsequent investigation should sit. If not with the NCA, then it is sent to the relevant regional intelligence unit (RIU) that covers the intended destination address. The RIU should then refer it to their regional organised crime unit (ROCU) or to the relevant territorial police area's force intelligence bureau (FIB) for appropriate allocation.

When a referral is received by a police force there are a number of options including:

- assess and file within the FIB
- allocate to a serious crime investigation department
- allocate to the local policing unit.

Whatever action is taken, the NCA ICT and NABIS must be informed so that progress can be monitored.

A subsequent investigation may take a number of routes including:

- a firearms licensing visit if the person is a certificate holder but it is suspected that they are attempting to import firearms they were not entitled/licensed for
- an immediate firearms warrant where there is additional supporting intelligence
- undertaking a controlled delivery.

1.5. Controlled deliveries

A controlled delivery might be used where there is investigative imperative to identify the intended recipient or purchaser. Where a controlled delivery tactic is to be deployed, an experienced major crime SIO must be appointed to ensure all the associated tactics and plans are correctly authorised and recorded (not including any firearms authorities as this is the responsibility of a tactical firearms commander). An SIO must consider the safety of the officers and staff engaged in the operation but also, importantly, any possible future risk to courier drivers if suspects believe they may have assisted the police.

An SIO considering making a controlled delivery must consult with their covert authorities bureau beforehand.

Using the actual intercepted parcel for a controlled delivery should be avoided in all possible cases. This is to prevent loss of the item but also to secure and preserve trace evidence that may be recovered from the packaging. Where there are exceptional circumstances for doing so, an SIO must consider all possible ways of ensuring the weapon is not lost or does not present a risk of harm. Any decisions must be properly considered by applying the national decision model.

There are generally two methods for a controlled delivery, but many more scenarios could exist.

- An undercover officer knocking on the door, with or without a nondescript parcel, to simply secure a response and get confirmation from the occupier that they are the person named on the parcel (although the name may be fictitious) and that they were expecting a delivery. This is then usually followed by the immediate execution of a search warrant.
- An undercover officer purporting to be from a courier firm, deployed to deliver the actual or substituted parcel, with no other immediate action other than capturing evidence of the recipient. This may be supported by other covert tactics.

1.6. Indicative parts

The Border Force also has the ability to check manifests for indicative parts. These are generally those items which, while not illegal themselves, might suggest that the intended recipient is already in possession of illegal weapons.

Examples might include a Glock® handgun holster, pistol grips or the component parts for making ammunition which can be legally purchased by non-licensed persons. In the example of the Glock® handgun holster, reasons for possessing it beyond holding a Glock firearm may be limited, and it might therefore be indicative of the intended recipient illegally possessing a firearm.

In such cases, The Border Force can, and does, check the NFLMS to establish if the recipient is a licensed firearms holder or dealer, in which case the suspicion may be allayed. In other cases, they might hold the item and make a referral to the National Crime Agency (ICT) which may then transfer the matter to the relevant regional intelligence unit and onwards to a particular police force.

It should be borne in mind that there may be a lawful reason to possess an indicative part. For example, the person may be involved in acting or military re-enactments and requires the item for that reason.

Where there is suspicion that the item is indicative of the recipient's connection to illegal firearms, then any of the courses of action for an intercepted firearm might be applicable.

Whatever action is taken in respect of such a referral, both the NCA (ICT) and NABIS must be notified so that they can monitor and track progress.

1.7. Forensic strategy for intercepted parcels

SIOs should consider a detailed forensic strategy in relation to parcels that have been intercepted. This should consider not only trace evidence in the form of fingerprints and DNA, but also the possibility of other evidence being present such as pollen and soil. This might provide an opportunity for investigators to link previous or subsequent seizures and/or narrow the parameters in terms of identifying the source of the package.

1.8. Notification of action and outcomes

In all cases where the police or other agency receive a referral from the National Crime Agency (ICT), they must notify both the NCA and NABIS of what action they intend to take, even if the decision is to take no action.

In all cases where the police or other agency take action in relation to a National Crime Agency (ICT) referral, they must update both the NCA and NABIS with the outcome at the conclusion of the investigation.

1.9. Serious and organised crime investigations

There may be occasions where a pre-existing investigation is aware that criminals are bringing firearms into the UK. It may be that the courier, the method of transport and destination are already known and tactics are in place to intercept and or make arrests. In such circumstances, the SIO must check flagging with the National Crime Agency and Border Force to ensure any CT or other interest can be de-conflicted.

SIOs should also give serious consideration to notifying the UK Border Agency at an appropriate level, if they have such an operation running through a port. This may prevent inadvertent disruption or compromise to the investigation, which might occur if a subject vehicle/person is stopped unwittingly by Border Force staff.

All operations where firearms are knowingly allowed to pass through ports and to cross force boundaries must be managed by an SIO experienced in major crime, subject of recorded safeguarding measures to prevent harm and be properly authorised.

1.10. Registered firearms dealers

In the US and Australia, research appears to show that most trafficking of firearms involves corrupt registered firearms dealers. It is believed that this is because they have ready access to firearm collections and they understand firearms legislation along with the loopholes that can be exploited. They also understand the vulnerabilities within lawful distribution networks (Arsovska 2014: p 297). It might, therefore, be hard to imagine that UK registered firearms dealers do not possess the same degree of knowledge and expertise. What remains unclear, however, and should be explored with extreme caution, given that most registered firearms dealers are undoubtedly lawful business owners (Squires 2012: p 110), is whether any UK registered firearms dealers, like those in US or Australia, also exploit this knowledge/expertise for illegal purposes.

Research also shows that significant numbers of registered firearms dealers in the US failed to properly challenge a transaction that had the hallmarks of a 'surrogate' or 'straw' purchase, ie, a person legally able to purchase a gun clearly doing so on behalf of a third party (Wintemute 2010: p 872). It is unknown whether any such purchases are made in the UK and, if they are, whether registered firearms dealers would be alert to the warning signs or indeed know what action they would take.

It may be that resource limitations impede greater scrutiny of UK registered firearms dealers and could, therefore, be exacerbating gun crime (Koper 2013: p 595). More frequent visits, including unannounced spot checks, establishing independent advisory groups and information-sharing protocols between registered firearms dealers and the police might help

provide a better picture of lawful gun ownership and usage in a particular area. This may also provide an opportunity to educate registered firearms dealers about such things as 'purchase risk factors' (Wright, Wintemute and Webster 2010, pp 361) and, in turn, this might empower them to both challenge and report suspicious purchases/attempted purchases.

One such 'purchase risk factor' is multiple purchases of the same weapon. Evidence shows that there is an increased risk of firearms falling into criminal hands where the purchaser is seen to buy multiple numbers of the same weapon (Wright, Wintemute and Webster 2010: p 361). While this might be difficult to do in the UK in respect of licensed weapons without raising suspicion, there is some very recent evidence that the multiple purchase of legal antique weapons has been a feature in recent criminality with these weapons falling into criminal hands and subsequently used in crime (Wright, Wintemute and Webster 2010, pp 361).

The of the NCA's Border Policing Command is active in the import supply chain and operates inland, visiting registered firearms dealers who are known to import firearms. FXOs may, therefore, be a resource in addition to domestic police firearms licensing bureaux in respect of firearms material suspected of being imported.

1.11. Internet/dark web

The growth in use of the 'dark web' to acquire illegal commodities is yet to be fully understood. It is important, therefore, that whenever illegal trafficking is discovered, investigators consider consulting with their hi-tech/cyber crime teams for advice on securing and preserving computer-related equipment/material

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