

Firearms Licensing: Guidance for Referees



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Being a referee

You have been asked to be a 'referee' for someone who is applying for the grant or renewal of a firearm or shotgun certificate.

Applicants for firearm certificates are required to propose two referees, whilst applicants for shotgun certificates are required to provide one referee.

As a referee you are taking on a very important role, as the applicant has identified you as someone that knows them well enough to provide a reliable and honest opinion of their character and suitability to hold a certificate which will allow them to possess firearms or shotguns. For the police, you will provide critical information which will be used to help determine whether the individual is granted access to guns. A certificate is valid for five years, and over that time the police may re-contact you as part of ensuring that the certificate holder remains suitable to continue to have access to guns. Ultimately, the role you play is an important one that helps ensure public safety.

The following information is designed to help you prepare you for your role and to explain what will be required from you.

What is your role as a referee?

The role of a referee is to provide support to the police, as the licensing authority, and to the applicant at the time of application. The referee must be someone of good character, who knows the applicant well enough to be able answer questions about their suitability to hold certificates under the Firearms Act 1968. If referees have any concerns about the applicant at a later date, they should contact the police.



Can I be a referee?

Yes. There is nothing that would prevent you from legally being a referee on an application for a firearm or shotgun application.

Is it my decision if they are to be granted a certificate?

No. You are expected to provide reliable information and honest opinion of the applicant. The information that you provide is taken into account along with all the other information that the police will gather when reviewing the application. The final decision on whether an individual is granted a certificate will always rest with the police.

Can I charge money to be a referee?

No. Referees must provide a reference freely and without any fee. If you are a professional acting as a referee for payment, the police would have to carefully consider whether you are an appropriate person to contact concerning the applicant.

I am a referee, but I have never been asked to sign anything?

The application form for a firearm or shotgun certificate does not allow you the opportunity to sign to confirm you are happy to be a referee. Though it asks a significant number of personal questions related to you, along with the capacity in which you know the applicant and for how long, there is no requirement in law for you to see the form. We would however recommend that the applicant speak to you in advance of submitting the application. The Firearms Licensing department will confirm that you are happy taking on the role as a referee when they make contact with you.



Can anyone be a referee?

There are some widely held beliefs that a referee must be a 'respected' member of society, such as a solicitor or a doctor, however that is not the case. However, not everyone can be a referee. A referee may be of any background or hold any occupation apart from a serving police officer, a member of police support staff or a firearms dealer. The most important factor, rather than their profession or status, is that the referee is of good character and has the ability to offer a reliable view of the applicant.

Members of the applicant's family cannot act as referees. Family, in this instance, is taken to mean the following: wife, husband, mother, father, son, daughter, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, grandparent and in-laws or step relations as above. Cousins are not regarded as immediate family, but co-habiting or civil partners or partners in a same sex marriage are considered as family for these purposes and would not be accepted.

Referees must also be resident in Great Britain, which for these purposes does not include Northern Ireland. In terms of being a referee, you should have known the applicant personally for at least two years. It is expected that this will be the most recent two years and would require you having had some reasonable degree of contact with the applicant during that period. You should have sufficient knowledge pertaining to the applicant, in order that the police can assess their suitability to have access to guns.

How much do I need to know about the applicant?

As mentioned, you must have known the applicant personally for at least two years. During this period, you should have had a reasonable amount of contact with the applicant, whether in a professional, business or social context. A referee need not have any knowledge of firearms or shooting sports, but you will be expected to be able to comment on the applicant's general character and background.



Knowing someone for two years, but not in a capacity that you have 'got to know' them, may mean you are not best placed to be a referee for them.

In terms of being involved with them, it would be hoped that there is ongoing contact or awareness between the applicant and their referee over the period of certification, though legally there does not have to be. It is when the applicant re-engages for his next application that you should ask yourself the question whether you know them well enough to take on such an important role for them, if you have not had regular contact.

What if I know them, but not as much as knowing where they live?

There will be lots of referees who are more than able to speak in detail about an applicant without knowing exactly where they live. Examples include a regular shooting partner, a work colleague, a friend, or a club member who engages with an applicant on a regular, ongoing basis. In this digital world, more and more friendships and associations are based on long distances. It is the quality of the contact you have with an applicant that will make that engagement pertinent to the role of a referee.

Am I held responsible if they do something wrong?

As a referee you are not required to guarantee the applicant's good behaviour. The role of the referee is to support both the police, as the licensing authority, and the applicant, through the application. Where any concerns are raised by you as to the suitability of the individual, those concerns will be treated sensitively and professionally. The police may wish to speak with you in greater detail should you have any concerns, so they can take the most appropriate action to minimise the risk to public safety or the peace.

Please be assured that the actions of the applicant would not reflect upon you as the referee.



I don't really know them. I am the secretary of the shooting club they are a member of. Can I still be a referee for them?

No. As explained above, the referee must be able to comment on the applicant's character and give opinion on their suitability, and for that reason, the referee must know them, rather than just being able to comment on their club membership status.

If the Chief Constable is satisfied that the application is for the grant of a firearm certificate, and the good reason for the firearm to be used is for target shooting, the Firearms Enquiry Officer will contact a principal officer (usually the police liaison or secretary) of the approved rifle or muzzle loading pistol club which was specified in the application. The purpose is to confirm that the applicant is a member; the regularity of their attendance; their shooting discipline being of an acceptable standard; and how they are complying with club rules and safety procedures related to their shooting.

This is not placing that individual as a referee.

I am the applicant's doctor, as well as their friend. Can I be their referee?

Referees are not expected to offer an "expert" opinion, regardless of their background or occupation. In this instance, a doctor could act as a referee, but should do so on a personal basis rather than as medical professional. A doctor, acting purely as a referee, would not be expected to offer any medical opinion as to the applicant's health. Doctors would not, in these circumstances, be expected to charge a fee for acting as referees.

The police will contact the applicant's GP separately as part of the application enquiry process.



What do you mean by saying I have to be of “good character”?

As the role of the referee is to offer advice to the police on the applicant's fitness to possess firearms, the police should be satisfied that the referee is honest, reliable and can be trusted to offer a fair and sensible view of the applicant.

Do police carry out background checks on me?

A referee should be open to an assessment of their good character by the police, which may mean the police will carry out some background checks on you. The police will wish to consider whether a referee has any criminal convictions, (an assessment will have to be made in the individual circumstances taking account of the offences and when they took place), is of intemperate habits or unsound mind, has had a firearm or shotgun certificate revoked due to their own misconduct, or might otherwise be considered unfit.

Please note that your information will be retained during the application process and certification period of the applicant.

I have been told that my nomination as a referee is not suitable. What do I do now?

There is no right of appeal where the police consider that a nominated referee does not meet the requirements.

If the police consider that a referee is unsatisfactory, on most occasions they will invite the applicant to put forward an alternative person, or persons. You do not have a further role within the application process.

Not meeting the criteria as a referee does not automatically mean the police has concerns about you. Sometimes, the proposed referee has insufficient personal knowledge of the applicant to provide an informed reference.



I have been asked to be a referee, but I live abroad. Can I still be a referee? What if I only live abroad part of the year, though my normal address is in Great Britain?

The law is very specific in terms of who can be a referee and it is clear that a referee must reside within Great Britain (not including Northern Ireland, unless for an air weapon certificate).

In terms of those individuals who spend part of their time living abroad, this could be looked at on a case-by-case basis. What will be asked is whether you are content being a referee when you do not have regular contact with the applicant.

Will Police come to my home to speak with me?

Before granting a certificate, the Firearms Licensing department will contact a referee. This will be done either by telephone or email.

There is nothing to prevent a Firearms Enquiry Officer coming to your home, possibly as they were passing, but for the most part, everything tends to be done remotely.

What will I be asked by the police?

The referee will be made aware of the application and provided the opportunity to inform the police of any concerns they may have. The referee will also be asked about any matter relating to the applicant's suitability to possess firearms.

There is no definitive set of questions, as the Firearms Licensing department will ask what they feel is appropriate to the application enquiry. You would not be expected to know any medical information, although you will be asked if you know of any reason that could prevent the individual being granted a certificate or using a gun safely.



More emphasis will be in terms of the applicant's character and background, and how they are as an individual.

You will also be asked if you understand your responsibilities as a referee and confirm you know who to contact should you have any concerns regarding the applicant's suitability in the future.

[I am no longer a referee but I have been contacted by the police?](#)

Upon the renewal of a certificate, an applicant will normally look to have the same referee. However, on occasion, possibly because of moving away, lack of contact or change of circumstances, there will be a new referee chosen. There is nothing wrong with that. However, the police will sometimes contact a previous referee to understand the reason for the change and to ensure there is nothing untoward in respect of why you were not chosen again.

[Who do I contact if I have concerns in the future regarding the applicant?](#)

Generally, the police find certificate holders to be very responsible when it comes to gun ownership and safety. However, it may be others, including referees, who see something that calls into question the applicant's suitability to continue to hold guns at that particular point in time. Medical issues, work related stress, bereavement, marriage difficulties, or financial worries may trigger the need to assess suitability. It is not always easy for a certificate holder to identify their own challenges or when they need support, and it is why family, friends, work colleagues, and more importantly you, as a referee, are aware of how to make the police aware of your concern.

If you have a concern about a firearm or a shotgun certificate holder, we will treat your information with confidentiality (including anonymity where appropriate) and investigate the matter in a sensitive manner. Information that is provided may lead to guns being seized by police for a short period whilst further investigation is carried out. It is understood that this may not be what was wished for when contacting the police, but the emphasis, as always, will be the protection of the



public and the certificate holder themselves. The police will not retain guns for a period any longer than is absolutely necessary and the certificate holder will be kept updated.

If you have any general questions or queries you should speak to your local Firearms Licensing department.

Where you have more immediate concerns you should consider the following:

Emergency Phone

Call 999 if:

- a serious offence is in progress or has just happened;
- someone is in an immediate danger of harm; or
- a serious disruption to the public is likely.

Non-Emergency Phone

Call 101 and ask to be put through to someone from the Firearms Licensing Department if:

- you have concerns relating to an applicant or weapon certificate holder and there is no immediate danger;
- you are seeking advice in respect of your role as a referee;
- you are needing support as a referee.

Online

Further advice and guidance is available from the [Devon and Cornwall Police firearms licensing website](#).



If you do not wish to contact the police directly, contact the independent charity Crimestoppers by calling 0800 555 111 or using their [online reporting form](#) and give information anonymously.