

An inspection of how effective police forces are in the deployment of firearms. Response from Simon Foster, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.

Published on the 11th of July 2023, this inspection examined how effective police forces are in the deployment of firearms, including specialist munitions. Whilst West Midlands Police (WMP) was not one of the 9 forces inspected with a fieldwork visit, data was collected from all 43 forces in England and Wales in October 2022, which covered the period 1st April 2018 to 31st March 2022.

In addition to recognising commendable practices, the inspectorate pinpointed several areas for improvement, leading to the formulation of 12 national recommendations, with 8 relevant to local forces. Here, I outline the strategy for addressing these recommendations in WMP.

In numerous instances, achieving progress hinges on, or will be influenced by, regional and national initiatives and I will continue to press for sufficient financial support from the Home Office, to enable this to occur. This encompasses regional and national collaboration, as well as revisions to professional practice and national guidelines.

By 31 July 2024, chief constables should make sure there is access to both specialist strategic firearms commanders and specialist tactical firearms commanders, through a 24-hour rota covering their region (Recommendation 2).

I am advised that a national cadre is in place to guarantee 24/7 availability of this capability. WMP possesses a group of skilled specialist firearms commanders, and I am content that under the leadership of ACC O'Hara, it is actively involved in the national initiative to explore its expansion throughout the regions. The inspectorate noted that access to specialist commanders needs to be made easier. Specialist commanders receive additional training on how to respond to highly complex operations, such as those involving kidnapping or terrorist activity. To facilitate the fulfilment of this recommendation, both national and regional coordination are essential, and I will continue to support discussions regarding regional rota creation, where it is appropriate for me to do so.

By 31 October 2023, all chief constables should make sure the armed response vehicle asset tracking equipment, as provided by Counter Terrorism Policing, is available and used in their forces. They should train relevant staff in its use (Recommendation 3).

The inspectorate referred to the Kerslake Report, which reviewed the preparedness for and emergency response to the Manchester Arena attack in May 2017. A key finding within the report was that force control room inspectors were not monitoring the location of neighbouring force's armed assets, which would allow them to use the nearest Armed Force Vehicle (ARV), when dealing with an armed incident. There has since been new equipment introduced to combat this, but the inspectorate found that that control room staff within some forces didn't know how to use the new equipment or could not see the location of other forces'

armed assets. In WMP, I understand that this equipment is already in place and has been in use for some time.

By 31 December 2023, all chief constables should make sure that all strategic and tactical firearms commanders have observed the firearms tactics and the use of specialist munitions they can authorise, before being operationally deployed (Recommendation 5).

The inspectorate found that whilst forces provided opportunities to observe armed officers practising tactics and using specialist munitions, these were rarely attended by commanders. The main reason for poor attendance to these events being lack of time, outside of their 40 working hours per week. It therefore makes more sense for the information to be included within the annual accreditation process. Observing firearms tactics and the use of specialist munitions are of crucial importance for the skills and development of firearms commanders. Achieving the successful implementation of this recommendation relies, in part, on revisions to the national Authorised Professional Practice (APP).

By 31 December 2023, chief constables should make sure that the annual accreditation process for strategic and tactical firearms commanders includes familiarisation with any new weapons systems and observation of any new tactics or specialist munitions the force has introduced or is planning to introduce (Recommendation 6).

Similarly, to the previously mentioned approach to recommendation 5, I understand that planning is already in progress to establish this in WMP.

By 31 October 2023, the regional armed policing lead should share armed policing exercises with the National Armed Policing Portfolio (NAPP). This would allow opportunities for learning to be identified and shared (recommendation 7).

The inspectorate found that that there needs to be more exercising between neighbouring forces and with non-Home Office forces, including British Transport Police, the Civil Nuclear Constabulary and the Ministry of Defence Police. This will improve the ability of forces to work together in times of significant national demand. HMICFRS recommended that forces should share planned exercises at the NAPP, to share learning as a way to mitigate risks. I understand that WMP are assured that this information sharing is in place and that the recommendation will be signed off for closure forthwith.

With immediate effect, each assistant chief constable regional firearms lead should attend all National Armed Policing Portfolio meetings. If they are unable to attend, they should make sure another assistant chief constable armed policing lead from a force in their region attends on their behalf (Recommendation 8).

One of the key findings was that force engagement with national governance needs to improve. This includes better attendance of force lead officers at the NAPP meetings which take place three times a year. These meetings provide key opportunities for communicating how armed policing can be improved and so decision-making leads need to attend. I am assured that the WMP lead for firearms consistently participates in the NAPP meetings and communicates relevant updates throughout the region where appropriate and that the recommendation will be written up for closure with the relevant evidence provided.

With immediate effect, chief constables should improve senior officer oversight of their armouries, including an independent annual audit (Recommendation 10).

The inspectorate found that senior chief officers should test audit reports that are conducted of force armouries, due to the risks associated and that this should include an external or independent annual audit. Ongoing efforts are being made in collaboration between the Force's Strategy, Delivery and Assurance (SDA) team together with my Joint Internal Audit team, to establish a consistent system of audits that can offer independent oversight. I will monitor the successful outcome of these discussions.

With immediate effect, chief constables, through their armed policing governance structure, should make sure that all armed deployment records are stored and auditable (Recommendation 12).

Another key finding was that record keeping needs to improve. As part of the APP on armed policing, it is required that firearms commanders "...should ensure that all decisions are recorded, where practicable, in order to provide a clear audit trail". The inspectorate found that some forces were failing to comply, especially where the decision had been to decline the deployment of armed officers. Deployments are in place with an auditable system. Information contained in the system is already used to complete a number of data returns for annual data requirements and also returns for HMICFRS. I am assured that SDA will work to ensure that evidence is provided to write this recommendation up for discussion and recommendation for closure.

Conclusion

Overall, I welcome this inspection as it provides understandings into areas where deployment of firearms needs to progress and develop. Even though WMP was not one of the police forces inspected, it offers valuable insights into the present practices, which I will incorporate into my continuous efforts to ensure accountability and oversight of force operations and firearms. I observe that these responses pertain to established processes, actions currently in progress, and existing collaborative agreements, to ensure deployment of firearms in WMP meet the recommendations of the inspection.

Yours faithfully,



Simon Foster

West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner