



**Strategic Policing and Crime Board**

**28<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

**Police and Crime Plan Priority:** where appropriate

**Title:** West Midlands Firearms Operations Unit

**Presented by:** ACC O'Hara

**Purpose of paper**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide assurance to the Police and Crime Commissioner and the wider public that West Midlands Police Firearms Operations Unit (FOU) acts in accordance with the Equality Act 2010, including in relation to protected characteristics, preventing unlawful discrimination, the public sector equality duty and use of equality impact assessments.
2. Consideration has been given to the outcome of all relevant external and internal enquiries and findings to capture opportunities for all appropriate organisational learning.

**Overview and Structure**

3. West Midlands Police (WMP) FOU is the busiest armed policing unit outside of London. Activity in relation to firearms has remained steady over the last 12 months with 2717 armed authorities granted between January 2022 and January 2023, with the vast majority across the Birmingham areas.
4. The FOU within WMP is led by a Chief Inspector and is configured into three sections:

5. Armed Response Vehicle (ARV) Teams. There are five teams within the ARV function, each of which has an establishment of 1 Inspector, 3 Sergeants and 31 Constables. The ARV teams are made up of ARV role profile with some officers being trained as National Protection Officers.
6. Tactical Firearms Team (TFT). The TFT is led by an Inspector, with a Sergeant as Deputy, along with four teams, each having an establishment of 1 Sergeant and 13 Constables. The TFT is made up of Counter Terrorism Specialist Firearms Officers (CTSFOs) and Specialist Firearms Officers (SFOs) on the pathway to qualify as CTSFOs. In addition to this, ARV officers on the pathway to first become SFOs then CTSFOs are posted to the team as Support Officers. This means they can avail themselves of development opportunities and operational exposure (in accordance with their role-profile) while they wait for their pathway courses.
7. The Training Team/Instructors Office. This team is led by Police Staff Chief Firearms Instructor (CFI) and Police Staff Deputy Chief Firearms Instructor (DCFI), along with a policy manager, five Sergeants; 22 Constables; 9 Police Staff NFIs (7 x ARV and 2 x CTSFO) and a Chronicle support team. These figures include 2 Sergeant and 7 Constable CTSFOs as well as 2 Police Staff who deliver the training for the TFT, with the remainder delivering ARV training, as well as specialisms such as Close Protection, Armed Support to Public Disorder and intermediate Method of Entry (MOE).
8. The Training Team provides all in-force training, from initial training to refresher training across all specialisms, including Command Training. In addition, the Team provides the following national courses: Operational Firearms Commander (OFC), Specialist OFC, Firearms Tactical Advisor, Initial Tactical Firearms Commander (TFC) & National Firearms Instructor.

### **Culture and the WMP Response**

9. In times where police legitimacy is being regularly challenged nationally by the behaviours of some (now) ex-Police Officers, policing as a profession is now at a cross roads and concerted efforts must be made to demonstrate our determination to drive out discriminatory and unlawful behaviour.

10. WMP has been at the forefront of work nationally to ensure that we value difference and work together to create an inclusive culture where everyone is respected and does the right thing at all times and where everyone can flourish, feel valued and supported.
11. The Employment Tribunal and grievance involving a former WMP Firearms Officer identified their experience of concerning behaviour and attitudes pertaining to an underlying culture within the FOU between 2012 and 2021.
12. As a result of the concern regarding behaviour and the mounting reputational risk from media reporting, a Gold group was stood up – Operation Alma.
13. The strategic intention of Operation Alma is to ensure that the WMP FOU is a department where *'the highest standards of behaviour are demonstrated by every member of staff at all times'*. There are eight strategic objectives that outline how this strategic ambition will be delivered.
14. Key in developing the WMP response was ensuring a 'cultural audit' was conducted. The first strategic objective within the Operation Alma Gold strategy is – *'Through an independent cultural assessment gain a better understanding of the current behaviours, values, beliefs and assumptions of the FOU in an effort to provide a clear picture of strengths, what needs changing and recommendations'*.
15. In December 2022 a cultural assessment was commissioned and a terms of reference developed which provided a framework for the independent team to undertake the assessment. This work relied upon the support and hard work of an independent senior police leader and WMP's Assistant Director of Diversity and Inclusion and members of his team.
16. This review was completed alongside proactive work to address recommendations from an internal grievance process and supported Operations' Senior Leadership Team (SLT) in their assessment of the culture and standards of behaviours of officers within the Unit.
17. The cultural assessment used a mixed method approach to develop a holistic understanding of the values, goals and behaviours within the unit.
18. In an effort to understand the culture within WMP FOU the approach to the cultural assessment used Edgar Schein's model of organisational culture and explored three distinct layers:

**Artefacts** – collectively this relates to those elements within the FOU that can be viewed, heard and felt by individuals. The team inspected the buildings, office space, changing rooms, vehicles, uniform, kit, equipment and the broader demographic make-up of the department.

**Espoused values** – this relates to how the FOU formally/openly behaves, what their approach to business is and their goals and strategies. The team reviewed training products, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) plans, team building exercises, core policies and processes.

**Assumed values** – this relates to underlying (and often hidden) values and beliefs of the individuals in the FOU which cannot be measured, but make a big difference to the culture of the teams. To explore this, they facilitated specific focus groups designed to understand key values, goals and social norms. A series of one-to-one interviews were also conducted with officers who had left the department to understand reasons for leaving and their sentiment towards the department now.

19. WMP recognises that an optimum and inclusive culture in specialist units not only separates high performing teams from the rest, but it also shapes why people behave in a certain way. Staff are motivated, teams are high performing and people want to join the team. But when it deteriorates performance drops, bad habits creep in and recruitment becomes a challenge. A culture that is not seen as inclusive within a policing unit has a significant impact on public trust and confidence.

## **Key Themes**

20. Operation Alma and the cultural assessment have improved WMP's understanding of the culture, standards and behaviours of officers within the FOU and therefore creates an opportunity to drive real and meaningful change for the good of the service and the community.
21. This work has been provocative and generated a number of core recommendations that seek to tackle a range of issues, which, if not addressed, could allow the proliferation of poor cultural practice and deteriorating performance.
22. In total, there were 40 core recommendations and a number of other observations and recommendations arising out of broader work with the Operations SLT. All

recommendations have been consolidated and categorised into the following 10 themes:

- Culture
- Use of the gym
- Workforce strategy
- Leadership
- Training, policies, training assessment, and development opportunities
- Continuous professional development
- Recruitment and assessment
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Working environment
- Uniform and equipment

23. Under the response garnered by Operation Alma, officers and staff in the FOU have worked hard over the past 18 months with a specific focus on improving culture, standards and the working environment. Significant progress has been made.

24. The FOU has seen positive changes to the working environment, leadership development, improvements in training and development opportunities and the provision of female-specific uniform and equipment.

25. A summary of some of the progress being made is as follows:

### **Recruitment and Progression**

26. The important learning from Operation Alma is helping the FOU to attract and retain the best and most diverse people in firearms policing (and benefit those already working in this critical area) and the public they serve. The below table illustrates the composition of the FOU over the three preceding years;

FOU	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Total	245	248	258
Male	235 96%	241 97%	248 96%
Female	10 4%	7 3%	10 4%
BAME	15 6%	22 9%	26 10%

27. The department has grown in its understanding with regards to diversity, equality and inclusion. Operations SLT recognise the importance of a diverse workforce and have reviewed how firearms officers are recruited to increase the diversity of people who apply and remove barriers to recruitment.
28. FOU staff have held familiarisation sessions and have proactively visited student officer training, and a range of teams and departments across the organisation to promote the roles within the department .
29. Firearms open days are designed to provide details of the unit and what will be required of any applicant. Within any recruitment process a number of open days take place that focus on underrepresented groups.
30. Open days are also used as an opportunity to discuss barriers to recruitment; e.g. fitness and working hours. They promote the inclusivity and flexibility of the firearms unit both in training and operationally.
31. Improving the representation of women and those from minority ethnic backgrounds in FOU's nationally continues to be a challenge. That said, WMP FOU has seen an increase in recruitment from ethnic minority officers and are working with Staff Associations and colleagues nationally to increase female representation at both an operational and command level which is a national challenge.
32. Once an officer is on the firearms unit there are a number of different career routes they can take such as an ARV officer, close protection officer, counter terrorist special firearms officer (CTSFO), or firearms instructor. All officers are encouraged to follow their preferred route with any reasonable adjustments made.

### **Training and Continuous Professional Development**

33. When officers apply to join the unit, they are provided with advice and support to pass the fitness test which is a National Armed Policing requirement. All training plans have been subject to our Equality Act (EA) process in order that they are fair and do not disadvantage any group.

34. FOU have carried out testing and there are a number of modifications available to accommodate students if required. For example, handguns have a number of different size grips for officers with smaller hands.
35. Many reasonable adjustments can be accommodated (including specific support for officers who attend training with Reasonable Adjustment Passports). An example of this is where officers are neuro-diverse and have dyslexia, they can be provided with different coloured sights on firearms to assist them with shooting.
36. Firearms Training is a high-risk area of police business and is subject to compliance under the Home Office Codes of Practice on Armed Policing and the Police Use of Less Lethal Weapons 2020. Every Force is mandated to submit annual self-inspection documentation and then every 4 years a full detailed, intrusive licensing inspection is carried out by the College of Policing led by the Specialist Operations Manager and their team of inspectors.
37. In 2023 the firearms training team completed their quadrennial licence renewal with the inspection team from the College of Policing. The inspection was a detailed process that looked into every element of WMP FOU training delivery, as well as the audit process that underpins it for all Authorised Firearms Officers (AFOs) and Firearms Commanders. As part of this, multiple Firearms Instructors, Commanders and operational officers were interviewed. This was to ensure all officers and staff understood and complied with the Codes of Practice on Armed Policing, the Use of Less Lethal Weapons (2020) and the National Police Firearms Training Curriculum (NPFTC).
38. Following the inspection, the Armed Policing Portfolio Holder – ACC O’Hara - received feedback that in the 17 years of licensing of Firearms Training the submission and inspection was as “*close to perfection*” as they had seen, adding that the Instructional dept and wider management were to be congratulated.
39. To ensure that a career in armed policing is accessible to a wide range of applicants WMP FOU has separate training modules for the initial firearms course for handgun, carbine and tactical phases, which assists officers with their work/ life balance, resulting in a more inclusive approach to training.

40. The training department have reduced the requirement for officers to be away from home for training internally and are working with national training teams to do the same. This ensures that officers with caring responsibilities are not disadvantaged.
41. The FOU training team have received additional EA training from the Force Diversity and Inclusion team. All training plans go through the EA process before any plan is signed off.
42. The training team have robust processes in place to review and assess training venues to ensure they are equipped with suitable changing and toilet facilities. As a result, all training for both internal and external courses has access to appropriate changing and toilet facilities. If the training venue is a disused building, which are commonly used, portable facilities will be placed on site for the duration of the training event.
43. The Chief Firearms Instructor is part of the force Menopause Steering Group and has used this knowledge to ensure that officers experiencing the menopause are supported with uniform, course allocation and additional breaks during the training day. Officers experiencing menopause symptoms have supportive RAPS in place and the FOU has seen that this has contributed to officers successfully passing their training courses.
44. AFOs are highly skilled officers and at the conclusion of their 12-week training programme, they are then mandated to complete tactical refresher training in accordance with their role.
45. ARV officers undergo a further four weeks of tactical refresher training throughout the year, including medicals, fitness tests and qualification shoots.
46. CTSFOs are mandated to complete over 200 hours of training due to the specialisms of the role. Other responsibilities such as Close Protection and Operational Firearms Commanders require additional time for CPD.
47. The allocation of additional training is completed using a skills matrix and the course allocation Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). This allows managers to identify any

skill/role gaps across the department and ensures that courses and training are allocated in a fair, open and transparent way.

48. All training and AFO status are documented on the Chronicle system.
49. In addition to tactical refresher training a number of CPD days have taken place over the past 18 months that have focused on leadership and standards. These have included inputs about workforce and welfare support, and inputs from the Prevention and Intervention team from the Professional Standards Department. All inputs were designed to develop supervisors, managers and broader leadership across the firearms teams.
50. Alongside this, the FOU have started to rotate Sergeants from within the department into Local Policing Areas for periods of at least three months to support and enhance their development and understanding of community policing.
51. The FOU are currently in the process of recruiting a number of new Sergeants into the department, the majority of whom have not previously been firearms officers. This will broaden the knowledge, experience and diversity of the supervision and support delivery against force priorities.
52. As part of the cultural assessment, quarterly tactical refresher training was observed, together with a day off-site observing the training for new ARV officers. Feedback from observers was that they were impressed with the supportive style of the training.
53. The observers stated that instructors showed empathy and were inclusive when giving feedback to candidates. The training facilities are impressive with adequate welfare and hygiene provisions. There is clear evidence of reasonable adjustments for officers attending training which includes the provision of laptops and extra time being allocated to officers with dyslexia.

## **Policies**

54. A range of policies from the FOU have been reviewed as part of the cultural assessment. This included training plans and standing operating procedures within the unit. Feedback states that it was evident that the unit was considering any equality impacts when formulating lesson plans and SOPs. However, despite a positive

approach to comply with the national requirement, it was felt that additional training regarding the EA would be beneficial.

55. Instructors and policy writers have now all received additional training from diversity and inclusion specialists regarding the Equality Act 2010. EA training has also taken place to ensure policies and training plans now have more detailed equality assessments.

### **Uniform and Equipment**

56. There are national standards of uniform for ARV and CTSFOs, but forces have their own procurement processes. WMP FOU uses National Uniform Management Services. The department recognises that previously there have been issues with uniform and equipment for female officers. This is not unique to the West Midlands and there is a national issue with manufacturers making 'unisex' items rather than gender specific kit and equipment. WMP are heavily involved in supporting work that is ongoing by the National Uniform and Equipment Group to improve the availability of gender specific uniform and equipment.

57. All required uniform and equipment required for ARV officers is listed on their personal scales of issue. This consists of all standard items that can be purchased via NUMS/DHL and that are required for the role. The scales of issue were drawn up in consultation with the firearms uniform and equipment user group and the facilities manager.

58. In 2022, WMP FOU introduced new arrangements to procure female specific uniform and equipment. This involves, where necessary, making purchases outside of the NUMS process. As a result, all female firearms officers have been issued with equipment specific to their individual needs, including formed ballistic protection.

59. The process to review scales of issue, uniform and equipment comes in via the FOU user group, who assess the user requirements and any health and safety standards and understand what is available on the market should an item need replacing. This is then placed into a business case to present to the force uniform and equipment board, requesting permission to purchase the relevant items for user trials. Following user trials there is further consultation with the facilities manager, procurement (if required)

and then back to the force uniform and equipment board for formal sign off. Where necessary, this process can be deviated from where there is an urgent or essential requirement; e.g. smaller ballistic helmets not available with the current supplier. Female officers are part of the firearms uniform and equipment user group and are included in all of the trials for new uniform and equipment.

60. For CTSFOs there is a national scale of issue, however this is a direct purchase to the manufacturer when required, any change of uniform and equipment for the CT network goes via a national uniform user group, which WMP has representation on.

### **Equipment, weaponry, ammunition and specialist munitions**

61. Ammunition and specialist munitions are dictated via the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL), which is forecasted on an annual basis, based on staffing numbers and training requirements.

62. Weaponry used by CTSFOs is set by the national CT network to ensure standardisation across all of the CT network hubs. This is all funded nationally, but ordered on a regional hub basis. As previously highlighted, the current handgun has various sized grips that can be adapted for the officers' preference.

63. Weaponry used by the ARVs is currently an individual force choice, but can only be purchased via licensed companies within the UK. The current ARV handgun comes with three different grip sizes again for individual preference. The current carbine is being replaced over the next 4 years due to the manufacturer no longer making the current model. WMP have completed user testing on the back of Greater Manchester Police (GMP) securing the Daniel Defence onto the Blue Light framework for procurement. This weapon has been tried by a range of staff and is our favoured choice as it is a smaller/lighter weapon supporting staff around carriage and injury.

### **Performance Leadership and Culture**

64. Operations SLT have changed and bolstered the leadership of the FOU. The unit is overseen by a Chief Inspector and up until 2022 all Inspectors were AFOs. Whilst this supported the operational supervision of staff the time spent away from teams to complete annual refresher training took away from their core role as leaders. There is now a blend of both AFO and non AFO Inspectors on the unit with a strong focus on leadership of teams rather than being a deployable firearms officer.

65. As part of the cultural assessment focus groups took place that focussed on team values and behaviours using social identity theories to discuss concerns about division of teams and a perceived 'in groups and out groups' culture.
66. In order to address a number of these perceptions, a great deal of work has gone into ensuring there are fair practices which include allocation of courses, overtime and promotion opportunities.
67. An enhanced internal CTSFO/SFO pathway has increased interaction of teams across the FOU. This has resulted in an increased number of planned firearms operations being delivered by the ARV teams working alongside the Intervention Response Team (IRT) and has improved the working relationships across the ARV and CTSFO teams.
68. Being a firearms officer is voluntary and carries an additional burden on officers' welfare. As a result, there is a documented approach to withdrawing officers from armed duties ('Withdrawal of Firearms' Standard Operating Procedure), which clearly outlines responsibilities and procedures for both the individual and the organisation.
69. All reasonable adjustment requests and occupational health requirements are considered on an individual basis taking into consideration the needs of both the individual and the organisation. If a manager in FOU is unable to accommodate an individual's needs, the requests are forwarded to the Operations workforce strategy meeting for a decision to be made by the Operations Superintendent. This also includes flexible working requests.
70. The workforce health of each team is regularly reviewed by the head of unit. This includes a review of skills and performance information, but also workforce health data including attendance, overtime and professional standards information. All shift rotas including crew pairings are determined up to two weeks in advance by ARV Sergeants utilising a spreadsheet that is accessible via Microsoft TEAMS.
71. All vacancies within the department that require an 'acting' position are subject to Operations workforce strategy agreement. Once authority has been granted, the criteria for the role is specific and published across the whole of the FOU requesting expressions of interest. All candidates must have previously identified an aspiration to perform the role as part of their WMP conversation.

72. All processes conducted for acting opportunities are allocated to a manager who is supported by the Operations Human Resources Business Partner (HRBP). This approach is subject to internal verification, process standardisation and quality assurance to ensure the fairness of the process. The overseeing manager is confirmed by the FOU Chief Inspector or the Chief Firearms Instructor.

### **Culture and standards**

73. There has been a continued focus on ensuring awareness and compliance with the Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Behaviour to ensure all staff are aware of the standards of behaviour expected of them on and off duty. This has been supported with specialist training from Professional Standards. This ensures the highest standards of behaviour are maintained and the FOU has an inclusive and respectful environment where everyone can be the best they can be in everything they do. Training has included inputs regarding the use of social media and how to challenge and report behaviour that falls below the standards expected.

74. Action has been taken to root out those who have disrespectful attitudes and behaviours. This is not only due to the proactive work of investigators, but the professionalism amongst the vast majority of officers and staff within the FOU who challenge and report any wrong doing. Any incidents of behaviour that have been reported have been dealt with quickly and appropriately, giving staff the confidence that if they report this, they will be listened to and action taken.

### **Integration into Local Policing**

75. Operations SLT have changed how our firearms officers work to support the new local policing model. This ensures FOU officers and staff support the neighbourhood and response teams more effectively and are better connected with local communities.

76. As part of the reviewed patrol strategy and tasking process and stronger performance management, firearms officers are now more integrated with force and LPA priorities and this is monitored via the Operations performance meeting.

This goes some way to addressing some of the specialist/elitist culture that has been an underlying issue or pervades specialist units nationally and within WMP.

77. When firearms officers are used as part of an armed policing operation, FOU and Operations SLT better understands the impact that this has on communities. FOU officers regularly return to communities where operations have taken place and engage with Independent Advisory Groups (IAGs) and youth projects to explain the role of firearms officers, discuss the impact of violent crime and increase trust confidence and legitimacy in policing.

### **Next Steps**

78. The action plan that was developed through Operation Alma is still being used by the Operations SLT to respond proactively to the recommendations and observations documented.

79. The Operation Alma Gold, Silver, Bronze structure will be retained to support the governance and oversight of the range of activity flowing from the action plan.

80. Strong progress has been made in response to some very acute challenges within the FOU. Operation Alma ensured an effective and immediate organisational response to the identified behaviours, the negative press coverage and the reputational damage locally and nationally.

81. The original Operation Alma gold strategy developed in November 2022 has been reviewed and it is still fit for purpose. It remains a strong, effective and robust foundation to deliver the necessary cultural change within WMP FOU (and beyond).

82. The outcome that ultimately needs to be achieved is to deliver against this gold strategy and *'ensure that the FOU is a department where the highest standards of behaviour are demonstrated by every member of staff at all times'*

83. The board is asked to note the contents of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'ACC O'Hara', written in a cursive style.

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