

Annex A: Information and checklist for referees

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

The checklist below summarises the requirements for referees for firearm and shotgun certificates. You must ensure you meet all of these requirements:

Requirement	Met?
You must be resident in Great Britain.	☐
You cannot be a family member of the applicant as a spouse or partner, parent, sister or brother, aunt or uncle, grandparent, or in-laws or step-relatives as above.	☐
You cannot be a registered firearms dealer, a serving police officer or a police employee, a Police and Crime Commissioner or a member of their staff, or a member of the Scottish Police Authority, or a member of its staff.	☐
You must be of good character and open to the police carrying out background checks as necessary, for example, to establish whether you have any criminal convictions.	☐
You must have known the applicant personally for at least two years, including the most recent two years.	☐
You must have had a reasonable amount of contact with the applicant over the most recent two years.	☐
You must be willing to provide a reliable and honest opinion about the applicant's character and suitability to hold a firearm or shotgun certificate.	☐
You must act as a referee freely and without receiving any fee.	☐
You must be willing to contact the police if, following the grant of a certificate, you become concerned about the certificate holder's ongoing suitability to possess a firearm or shotgun during the five-year validity of the licence.	☐

The role of a referee

As a referee you are taking on a very important role, as the applicant has identified you as someone who 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 and/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 contact you again 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 to ensure public safety.

The following information is designed to help you prepare 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. As a referee you must be someone of good character, who knows the applicant well enough to be able answer questions about their suitability to hold a certificate under the Firearms Act 1968. If you develop concerns about the person at any time after the certificate has been issued, you should contact the police to let them know.

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 provided you meet the requirements above.

Is it my decision if they are granted a certificate?

No. You are expected to provide reliable information and an 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. A Firearms Enquiry Officer will confirm that you are happy taking on the role as a referee when they make contact with you.

Can anyone be a referee?

It is not the case that you need to be a member of any specific profession in order to be a referee. It is your knowledge of the applicant that is most important. 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, a Police and Crime Commissioner or a member of their staff, a member of the Scottish Police Authority or a member of its staff, or a registered firearms dealer. The most important factor, rather than 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. And 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 of the applicant, in order that the police can assess their suitability to have access to guns.

How well do I need to know the applicant? Do I need to be involved with them a lot?

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. You do not need to have any knowledge of firearms or shooting sports, but it is expected that you will 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 well, may mean you are not best placed to be a referee for them.

In terms of ongoing involvement with the applicant, it is to be expected that you will have ongoing contact with the applicant after a certificate has been granted, although there is no legal requirement for you to do so. This only becomes an issue if the applicant approaches you again at the end of the five years duration of their certificate. If that happens, you should ask yourself whether you still know them well enough to act responsibly as a referee again.

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

It can be that you are suitable to act as a referee without necessarily knowing exactly where the applicant lives. For example, you may be 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 the applicant does 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 that 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 that 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.

In circumstances where the application is for a firearm certificate and the applicant's stated good reason for the firearm is for target shooting, the police will contact a principal officer (usually the police liaison officer 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.

As part of the police consideration of the application, the applicant's GP will be contacted 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 a shotgun or firearm, the police will need to be satisfied that you are honest, reliable and can be trusted to offer a fair and sensible view of the applicant.

Do police carry out background checks on me?

As a referee you should be open to an assessment of your 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 you have any criminal convictions and, if so, they will make an assessment about whether this has an impact, based on individual circumstances including the nature of the offences and when they took place. The police will also assess whether you are of intemperate habits or unsound mind, whether you yourself have had a firearm or shotgun certificate revoked due to your own misconduct, or whether there is anything else to suggest that you are unfit to act as a referee.

Please note that information about you 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 have 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.

In terms of those individuals who spend part of their time living abroad, this will 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 police will contact you. You will be contacted by telephone, by an online video call or by a home visit.

What will I be asked by the police?

You will be told that your name has been provided by the applicant as a referee, and you will have the opportunity to tell the police about any concerns you may have. You 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 police will ask any questions that they consider to be 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 might prevent the applicant being granted a certificate or using a gun safely.

You will also be asked if you understand your responsibilities as a referee and confirm that 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, different referees may be named. 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?

There are all sorts of issues that can impact on whether a certificate holder continues to be somebody who can continue to have safe access to guns. As a referee, something may come to your notice that you consider might be relevant. Medical issues, work related stress, bereavement, marriage difficulties, or financial worries may trigger the need for the police to consider again whether the person remains suitable. It is not always easy for a certificate holder to identify their own challenges or when they need support, and this is why family, friends, work colleagues, and you, as a referee, should know how to make the police aware of any concerns.

If you have a concern about a firearm or shotgun certificate holder, the police will treat your information in confidence (including anonymity where appropriate) and investigate the matter in a sensitive manner.

If you have any general questions or queries you should speak to your local police force's 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

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.