

British Shooting Sports Council

Submission to the Home Affairs Committee's Inquiry into Firearms Controls.

1. Summary:

- a. It is more effective to legislate for the person than the gun.
- b. Shooting is a well-established, popular and safe participation sport.
- c. There is no long-term good quality data on firearms misuse, but gun crime is decreasing.
- d. Firearms legislation is enabling as well as preventative.
- e. A consolidating act is desirable: a full review of legislation is not.
- f. 'Tagging' of medical records raises security and effectiveness issues.
- g. Airgun crime has been very significantly reduced by existing legislation.

The BSSC

2. The BSSC is an umbrella body, bringing together the twelve major Associations for target shooting, quarry shooting and the gun trade to achieve consensus on issues affecting the shooting sports and is a non-profit making body financed by members' subscriptions.
3. These Associations are:

Association of Professional Clay Target Shooting Grounds
 Association of Professional Shooting Instructors
 British Association for Shooting and Conservation
 Countryside Alliance
 Clay Pigeon Shooting Association
 Gun Trade Association
 Institute of Clay Shooting Instructors
 Muzzle Loaders Association of Great Britain
 National Rifle Association
 National Smallbore Rifle Association
 Sportsman's Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
 United Kingdom Practical Shooting Association

4. The objective of the BSSC is to promote and safeguard the lawful use of firearms and air weapons for sporting and recreational purposes in the United Kingdom amongst all sections of society. The foundation of the Council's stance is that the more effective and efficient approach is to legislate for the person, not the gun.

A brief overview of shooting in Britain

5. Shooting is one of the most popular participation sports. An estimated one million people in the UK shoot and the number of young people entering the sport is

increasing. 1,200 entered BASC's Young Shots scheme in six months in 2007, while the Scout Association's annual rifle competition grows annually, attracting nearly 800 competitors. The National Smallbore Rifle Association has over 12,000 registered instructors on its Sport England funded Youth Proficiency Scheme. National Rifle Association Open Days are so successful that the numbers applying to take part have had to be limited.

6. Shooting is enjoyed by young and old, men and women, and the disabled.
7. Target shooting is a very popular Olympic and Paralympic discipline. Its first Royal patron was Queen Victoria. Of our 12 Associations, two have HM The Queen as Patron (one with HRH The Prince of Wales as President), a third has HRH The Duke of Edinburgh.
8. Hunting with firearms is a £1.6 billion industry, supporting 70,000 jobs, (2006 PACEC Report). Shooting providers spend an estimated £250 million a year on habitat and wildlife management, five times the annual income of Britain's biggest conservation organisation, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.
9. 480,000 people shoot game, wildfowl, pigeon and rabbits, accounting for almost 19 million head of game in 2004.
10. 150,000 people regularly shoot clay targets. 'Corporate days' are very popular in the business world, and provide an excellent introduction to this sport.
11. 250,000 people regularly enjoy target shooting with rifles, muzzle loading pistols and airguns.
12. C. 1,000 clubs are affiliated to the NSRA, the NRA has over 700 affiliated clubs and the Clay Pigeon Shooting Association has c. 420 affiliated clubs. There are at least 1,000 unaffiliated clubs. This bespeaks a flourishing sport.
13. 23 of the UK's 116 medals in the 2006 Commonwealth Games were for shooting. Only swimming exceeded this with 24. England's most decorated Commonwealth medal winner is Mick Gault, with 15 medals. In 2008 he was awarded an OBE for his contribution to shooting-with a pistol.
14. British shooters consume c. 190 million shotgun cartridges a year.
15. Britain's deer population continues to increase and deer stalking is a well-accepted contributor to deer management.
16. There is no relationship between gun crime and legitimate gun ownership. For example, gun crime fell by 6% in Scotland in 2005-6, 28% lower than nine years previously. Compare this to an increase in privately-owned firearms, currently at a five-year high in the country. Home Office figures from May 2006 for gun crime in England and Wales show a similar pattern. 2004-2005 saw gun crime fall by 8% but the number of privately-owned weapons rose 8% from the previous year.

17. Shooting is among the safest of sports, particularly in the UK. According to UN statistics, the UK figure for accidental firearms fatalities is one of the lowest at 0.02 per 100,000, a figure which includes military and police fatalities. In England and Wales twice as many people are hospitalised by mishaps with cotton buds than accidents with guns.
18. The British Association for Shooting and Conservation provides the following insurance cover for all shooting categories to all its members: £10 million Legal Liability Cover, £10 million Employer Liability Cover and £10 million Product Liability cover at a cost of c. £10.50 a member. Both the CPSA and the NSRA provide similar insurance schemes. So much cover for so small a premium demonstrates the inherent safety of the sport.

The use of legally-held guns in crime and the relationship between gun control and gun crime.

19. Until very recently, with the creation of NaBIS (the National Ballistics Intelligence Service) little good quality data has been available. Such official statistics as have been published, for instance 'Firearms homicide-circumstances of offence by whether firearms legally held' (1995-1997), show a very low level of misuse of legally held firearms. For the seven years covered, *no* legally-held firearms were identified as having been used in the category 'Organised crime, drugs related, contract killings, etc.'
20. The BSSC draws attention to the following written response:

Tony McNulty (Minister of State (Security, Counter-terrorism, Crime and Policing), Hansard 2nd June 2008 in response to a question from James Brokenshire MP.

"The potential requirements for the sharing of information between the National Ballistics Intelligence Service Database (NABIS) and the National Firearms Licensing Management System was examined, and discussed, in detail by key stakeholders (including forensic and investigatory professionals) throughout the lifetime of the project management process.

It was found that the potential crossover between the data held by the systems was very small, due to the very low instances of legally held firearms being used in gun crime and the small overlap in information shared between the two applications. Furthermore, the data descriptors of 'firearms recovered at Scenes of Crime' and 'firearms being licensed' may be somewhat different and, as a result, inquiries would be passed from NABIS to expert firearms officers in the Licensing Departments. As a consequence, it was agreed that any risk of legally held firearms being used for criminal purposes was so low and the difficulty of automating a matching process between systems that the cost of building such an interface would outweigh any perceived benefits."

21. Statistics collected over the past quarter-century leave much to be desired, particularly in regard to the misuse of legally-held firearms. The potential value of official statistics has been greatly reduced by frequent changes in reporting criteria. To quote Mr McNulty on the 25th July 2006:

“From 1986 to 1996-97 firearm offences data collected centrally did not include reference to whether weapons were held legally or illegally. Attempts were made between 1997-98 and 2003-04 to collect these data, but there were concerns over their quality. There is a difficulty for the police being able to identify whether a firearm used in an offence was legally or illegally held, particularly if that firearm was not retrieved. As a result the data from this period were not published. Because of these concerns, and following consultation with police force representatives, the data ceased to be collected centrally from one April 2004”

22. The creation and analysis of a database of all recovered firearms was long championed by shooting representatives, despite official indifference. The growth of gun crime strengthened our case, however, and we hope that the deliberations of the Committee will be facilitated by clear and accurate data from NaBIS and that such data will be made available to interested parties.
23. Doubtless many submissions will highlight the link between drugs crime and gun crime. The BSSC takes no stance on the de-criminalisation of the supply of recreational drugs, but does suggest that the Committee consider this connection and what further might be done.
24. Firearms are simple technology and the advent of CAD/CAM (computer aided design/computer aided manufacture) systems has facilitated illicit manufacture. Criminals will manufacture firearms if no other source is available. Japanese Yakusa have supplied themselves with firearms made illegally in Danao in the Philippines. When police and customs activity made import more difficult, they invited Philippino gun-makers over for working holidays in Japan. Firearms availability is a matter of supply and demand, and success is more likely to come from reducing criminal demand, an approach already actively pursued to reduce knife crime, since a few hundred guns and a few thousand cartridges would keep Britain’s criminals going for many years. Illegal import will never be entirely stemmed and it may be more cost-effective to educate potential or former perpetrators than to pursue small numbers of firearms. The recent Channel 4 Dispatches programme ‘Gun Runners’ made play with the recovery of seven pistols and 1,200 rounds of ammunition illegally imported from Holland during ‘Operation Greengage’. This modest recovery was an *unplanned* benefit from a major international operation targeting illegal drugs. Fifteen other ‘runs’ by the gang had not been stopped.
25. We understand that hundreds of Russian ‘Baikal’ gas pistols, converted to fire conventional .380 ammunition, have been illegally imported into this country. Perhaps NaBIS could comment on this.

26. Besides being intended to prevent the access of criminals to firearms through legal channels, firearms legislation is an enabling mechanism to facilitate access to and use of firearms by law-abiding citizens. This function should focus on the person, not the gun, and should be structured to minimise bureaucracy and free police resources for other activities.

The fitness for purpose of current laws governing firearms

27. The present much amended legislation is difficult to use. A consolidating Act, which would have considerable practicable benefits for day-to-day administration, would be more cost-effective. A number of useful minor changes already proposed by ACPO would simplify the law and make it easier to administer. These could be achieved by a Regulatory Reform Order.
28. In contradistinction to a consolidating Act, this Council would not now support a full review of legislation as it would be 'incident-led'. This has resulted in ineffective and misdirected legislation, for instance Dangerous Dogs legislation and the 1997 Firearms (Amendment) Acts. Any aspect of potential legislative change that can be established as relevant to the shootings in Cumbria should be considered first.
29. This Council would wish to be involved in detailed discussion of any proposed change to the law, its administration, or guidance on its application.

Improvement of information-sharing between medics and the police

30. Since before the Cumbria shootings, the BSSC has been discussing tagging of medical records. Little progress has been made because concerns about security, confidentiality and effectiveness have not been allayed. A robust set of guidelines for GPs would be essential. The Council notes the BMA's recent website statement that 'Doctors must make it clear that they are in no position to judge the 'future dangerousness' of any applicant.' It also notes the lamentable inability of trained professionals to detect child abuse in recent high-profile cases.
31. The NHS employs 1.5 million people and an estimated 300,000 might have access to tagged records. Can this data ever be secure?
32. We have concerns over General Practitioner liability and over the impact of such tagging on shooter health. Tagging could discourage help being sought by those fearing the loss of their sport. A substantial number of people, especially middle-aged men, never go near their GP and this proposal would probably add to that number. Safeguards would need to be provided for disable shooters and those benefitting from the therapeutic aspects of the sport through the 'Help for Heroes' initiative.
33. The number of revocations for mental health reasons has been raised as an issue, and the Home Office does not hold information on this. The Council would support the future collection of reasons for revocations, provided that the types of reason are clearly defined and the right of appeal against revocation is retained.

Information-sharing between police and prisons in assessing the risk of offenders who may have access to firearms

34. The BSSC has no stance on this, but observes that the language used does imply tacit acceptance of the continuing access of criminals to firearms.

The danger presented by, and legislation regulating, airguns.

35. Airguns provide the traditional means of training for young people entering the sport. Trade figures indicate that about 5 million people own 7 million airguns for target shooting and vermin control. Violence against the person with airguns has been *falling* for 25 years, despite overall increases in violent crime. In 1983, the total number of crimes of violence against the person was 111,000, by 2007-08 this was 961,000. Over the same period violence against the person with airguns *almost halved* from 2,377 to 1,311. Over this period, the figures for criminal damage with an air gun have increased from 2,977 in 1983 to 10,496 in 2002-03 and *decreased* to 5,756 in 2007-08. What this really reflects is economic inflation. The threshold for a record in the criminal damage statistics is £20, but the real value of £20 had halved between 1980 and 1990. The introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard in 2002 also changed the way statistics were recorded and inflated the overall number of violence against the person and criminal damage offences. In real terms airgun crime has been *substantially reducing* over the years. To continue this beneficial effect the two-pronged attack advocated by Paul Boateng MP in 1999 must be maintained: education and the enforcement of *existing* legislation, particularly Section 37 of the Antisocial Behaviour Act which came into force in 2004. This makes it an offence to have an airgun in a public place. It would also be sensible to allow the Crime and Security Act 2010 to take effect before contemplating further controls.

36. In view of the present debate concerning firearms legislation, the BSSC considers it inadvisable to proceed with devolution to the Scottish Parliament of powers to legislate on airguns.

Recommendations for inclusion in the Select Committee's Report:

- a. The Firearms Act should be consolidated.
- b. ACPO recommendations for a Regulatory Reform Order should be acted upon.
- c. The collection of data on the reasons for revocation of certificates should be undertaken.
- d. There should be no further legislation on airguns until the effect of the Crime and Security Act has been established, but the application of existing legislation and education to discourage misuse should be robustly pursued.
- e. Power to legislate on airguns should not be devolved to the Scottish Parliament.