

Deployment of authorised firearms officers (AFOs)

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An authorised firearms officer (AFO) is a police officer who has been selected, trained, accredited and authorised by their chief officer to carry a firearm operationally. There is a range of specialist roles for which AFOs receive specific tactical training and accreditation.

AFOs are considered as being deployed when they are required to conduct a specific task during which the possession of a firearm, with appropriate authorisation, is a required element. This includes when they self-deploy as provided for under this guidance.

Criteria for the deployment of AFOs

The deployment of AFOs should only be authorised in the following circumstances:

- where the officer authorising the deployment has 'reason to suppose' that officers may have to protect themselves or others from a person who:
 - is in possession of, or has immediate access to, a firearm or other potentially lethal weapon, or
 - is otherwise so dangerous that the deployment of armed officers is considered to be appropriate, or
- as an operational contingency in a specific operation (based on the threat assessment), or
- for the destruction of animals which are dangerous or are suffering unnecessarily.

Reason to suppose

Use of the words 'reason to suppose' sets the level of knowledge required (about the existence of a threat justifying the deployment of AFOs) at a far lower level than that which would actually justify the use of firearms.

Destruction of animals

The destruction of an animal is a duty which may fall to the police service if:

- the animal represents a danger to lives or property; or
- if the animal is in such a condition that it must be destroyed to avoid unnecessary suffering, and no veterinary surgeon or licensed slaughterer is available to perform the task or they are otherwise unable to do so

Suitable calibre weapons should be used. Where time permits, a firearms [tactical advisor](#) must be contacted.

For further information see HOSDB (1998) The Humane Destruction of Animals by Police (available on request from [Dstl](#)).

Authority to deploy AFOs

Chief officers must ensure that there is an officer immediately available in their force area to consider and authorise the deployment of AFOs where one or more of the criteria for deployment have been met.

The authorisation of the deployment of AFOs in this context relates to the decision that the criteria for such deployment has been met and not to the associated approval and authorisation regarding the tactics or tactical plans to be implemented if required.

The initial authority for the deployment of AFOs can be given by an accredited Strategic Firearms Commander (SFC) or a Tactical Firearms Commander (TFC), depending on the circumstances and nature of the incident or operation. Where practicable, any subsequently authorised armed deployment must be subject to appropriate tactical advice.

In spontaneous incidents, where the initial authority is given by a TFC, an SFC should be contacted as soon as practicable and informed that an incident requiring the deployment of armed officers is taking place. Where the SFC is in a position to take a command role, and make command decisions, they should ratify or rescind the initial authority.

Where it has not been practicable to inform the SFC while the armed deployment is ongoing, it will still be necessary to inform the SFC as soon as practicable thereafter. This will enable the SFC to

review the incident and either confirm that there is no continuing requirement for the AFOs to be deployed in order to minimise risk to the public, or authorise their continued deployment and set tactical parameters where appropriate. It will also provide an opportunity for the SFC to identify any other relevant issues, such as related incidents, trends or community considerations.

In planned armed operations, the deployment of AFOs must be authorised by an SFC, having reviewed the associated tactical plan developed by the TFC, prior to the deployment. In developing the tactical plan, the TFC must consult a firearms tactical advisor.

It is the responsibility of the officer deploying AFOs to ensure that an appropriate command structure is instigated as soon as is practicable. Authorising officers should be aware that AFOs may deploy with a range of firearms, specialist munitions and less lethal options. Chief officers should decide on the types of firearms, specialist munitions and less lethal options that are available to officers undertaking differing roles. This decision should be based on the force's Armed Policing Strategic Firearms Threat and Risk Assessment and in accordance with the Code of Practice on Armed Policing and Police use of Less Lethal Weapons 2020.

Unless there is an immediate and overriding risk to public safety, the use of specialist munitions must be authorised in accordance with authority levels agreed by the chief officer of the force.

Self-deployment

Should AFOs encounter a situation where they believe that the criteria for deployment of AFOs have been met, and delay in seeking authority to deploy would be detrimental to public or officer safety, officers should deploy and take the necessary and proportionate action in accordance with their training.

Where this occurs, the AFOs should inform the force control room as soon as practicable so that a TFC can be informed.

The TFC should assess and review the actions of the AFOs in line with the National Decision Model and determine whether continued deployment is appropriate.

The TFC should also consider what further resources may be required and inform a SFC as soon as practicable.

Review of AFO deployment

In all cases where AFOs have been deployed, commanders must regularly review the need for their continued deployment.

This is particularly relevant when any update of intelligence relating to the threat is available.

Where a review is undertaken, the outcome and reasons for decisions made should be recorded.

Armed support to covert operations

Armed support to covert operations, when performed by covert officers, is grouped into three operational response types:

- armed surveillance
- mobile armed support to surveillance
- operations to counter threats to life

There are common national standards in terms of training, equipment and resourcing which enable police forces and law enforcement agencies to make accurate assessments of the capability and capacity of their firearms resources to manage identified threats within covert operations including counter-terrorism.

Armed surveillance

This response will include armed surveillance staff within the covert operation. Their primary function is in the provision of covert surveillance and they must be accredited and competent in the relevant national role profile.

The common national standard for armed surveillance requires every surveillance officer within the deployed team to be armed. This enhances the capability of the team to effectively mitigate a threat that may emerge during the surveillance operation, particularly where the threat occurs spontaneously.

Mobile armed support to surveillance

Covert surveillance operations requiring additional armed support for foreseeable contingencies or planned interception need a higher level of tactical capability than that required to conduct armed surveillance.

Such surveillance operations will require the deployment of armed resources in support of armed or unarmed surveillance, with the appropriate tactical capabilities to offer effective control measures to mitigate the assessed threat. This support is called mobile armed support to surveillance (MASTS). MASTS is not a tactic, it is a platform from which a range of proportionate tactical options can be operationally implemented should it be necessary. It should not therefore be considered a predetermination that any specific tactical option, including interception or intervention, will take place.

Officers providing a MASTS capability operate in covert vehicles, or on foot and in plain clothes. The minimum standards, which must be met, are contained in the [National Police Firearms Training Curriculum \(NPFTC\)](#).

It may be appropriate to provide overtly armed officers in support of surveillance. Where covert operations are supported solely by an overt response, however, this will not be recognised or described as MASTS.

Operations to counter threats to life

When conducting covert police operations involving an identified threat to life and the potential risk is identified as high, there is a requirement to provide dynamic and highly effective control measures to mitigate the risk.

Commanders should ensure that the AFOs deployed on such operations have the appropriate enhanced tactical capability, in accordance with the NPFTC.

Officers providing such enhanced tactical capability may operate in covert vehicles and dress appropriately, enabling them to operate discreetly and effectively in support of a covert police operation.

Tags

Armed policing