

Firearms investigation team

A dedicated team of officers and police staff investigating all firearm discharges and recoveries.

First published
16 October 2024

Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Prevention
Topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-social behaviour Criminal justice Intelligence and investigation Neighbourhood crime Offender management Operational policing
Organisation	Merseyside Police
HMICFRS report	PEEL 2022/23: An inspection of the north-west regional response to serious and organised crime
Contact	Phil Atkinson
Email address	2046@merseyside.police.uk
Region	North West

Key details

Partners	Police Business and commerce Community safety partnership Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Education Government department Local authority
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	January 2020
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Communities Families General public Offenders Victims

Aim

- To keep Merseyside Communities Safe.
- Effectively investigate the criminal use of firearms, pursue offenders, and ensure justice for victims.
- Reduce firearm discharges.
- Prevent the criminal use of firearms.

- Improve confidence in policing, building trust.

Intended outcome

- Increase the detection of firearm related matters and achieve positive outcomes for victims.
- Secure significant custodial sentences for offenders.
- Improve community confidence and build trust through sharing developments, charges, and convictions.
- Decrease the incidents of firearm discharges through partnership with local policing and the intelligence unit to mitigate threat, harm, and risk.
- Contribute to the Regional and National firearms picture.

Description

In recent years, Merseyside has suffered from a significant number of firearm discharges. In 2019, the force experienced 83 such incidents which, although a decrease on previous years, still set itself apart from most similar forces. Senior officers commissioned the introduction of a dedicated Firearms Investigation Team (FIT) to investigate all firearm discharges and recoveries.

The lead responsible officer (LRO) for firearms investigations is responsible for ensuring the implementation of the 4 P Plan (Prepare, Prevent, Pursue and Protect). The officer contributes to strategic, regional, and national governance working with National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NABIS), Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU), and neighbouring forces.

The department is co-located at the Operational Command Centre, situated alongside armed response and matrix teams. The team initially comprised of a detective chief inspector, a detective inspector, two detective sergeants, six police staff investigators and 12 detective constables. A member of police staff is dedicated to processing all recovered firearms and ammunition.

The team's core shifts are day shifts but are regularly amended to facilitate the progression of arrests, warrants and other forms of disruption.

The team take responsibility for all firearm discharges and recoveries. During core hours, they attend all incidents and provide the initial investigative response. Outside this, they can be called upon to provide advice to maximise evidential opportunities.

The force holds monthly strategic governance meetings to review the work of FIT. This meeting is attended by NABIS, ROCU, Intelligence, Matrix, and Firearms Licensing. The meeting focuses on discharges to date with comparison to previous years, linked series offences, successes, firearm recoveries and forensic identifications alongside the progress of current investigations.

There are dedicated analysts that bring together information surrounding previous firearm related criminality, including discharges and recoveries. This helps with identifying linked series matters (locally and nationally) and supports the progression of investigations. This joint approach helps to keep the team focused according to threat, harm, and risk.

The team has established strong working relationships throughout the force leading to outstanding evidence capture, safeguarding and timely progression of investigations. There is strong governance at a strategic level chaired by senior management. FIT has a footprint in regional and national governance, contributing towards best practice, highlighting thematic, and supporting others with intelligence and investigation advice.

Regional governance and enhanced partnership work with NABIS, NCA, and ROCUs has helped the force to understand the scope of firearms use and distribution, nationally and worldwide. This information has benefited investigations and upskilled staff.

Merseyside Police chair the Regional (Northwest) firearms meeting which provides an opportunity for information sharing with forces that have lower recorded firearms criminality. This is particularly pertinent when discussing criminality migrating from Merseyside into bordering forces.

Overall impact

FIT continues to attain real success with numerous significant convictions over the past few years.

The team has developed a good knowledge of firearms, benefiting from enhanced working relationships with partners in Force Intelligence, NABIS, ROCUs, Matrix, Covert, Investigations and National Crime Agency (NCA).

The team has solved more discharges this year than previous years. To date, out of 29 discharges, 8 have been detected by FIT. The team has progressed recently with two successful trials, one relating to an attempted murder and another relating to Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH) which were firearms related.

FIT has had significant successes with the investigation of firearm related criminality. They have attained more successful outcomes for victims than previous years. Many significant firearm nominals have been convicted and sentenced, and these have undoubtedly contributed to safer communities, preventing further offending, and increased confidence in policing.

Learning

A dedicated FIT is key to attaining success with investigating firearm-related criminality. A consistent approach helps with recognising links, themes and patterns which would be lacking when retained in separate hubs.

The team benefits from an officer dedicated to the processing of firearms and ballistics through internal forensic examination, to external examination with Cellmark and NABIS.

Consistency and expertise in this field of investigation helps with timely progression of investigations, from the initial evidence capture to successful prosecutions.

Strong strategic governance supports a collaborative approach to addressing firearm related crime. It promotes accountability and buy in from external partners and it is essential that all partners play an active part.

The provision of advice is essential in supporting inexperienced staff as well as ensuring that as a force the best response is provided to this type of criminality.

Having a dedicated officer to process all recoveries has helped to support consistency and collaboration with NABIS and Cellmark. The force is recognised for strong compliance, which supports the expedition of investigations.

Copyright

The copyright in this shared practice example is not owned or managed by the College of Policing and is therefore not available for re-use under the terms of the Non-Commercial College Licence. You will need to seek permission from the copyright owner to reproduce their works.

Legal disclaimer

Disclaimer: The views, information or opinions expressed in this shared practice example are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or views of the College of Policing or the organisations involved.