

Women in Firearms Attachment (WiFA) programme to increase female representation in firearms roles

The Women in Firearms Attachment (WiFA) is designed to increase female representation in firearms roles through an immersive attachment programme, which empowers women considering firearms careers through mentoring, coaching, and support.

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Key details

Does it work?	Promising
Focus	Organisational
Topic	Diversity and inclusion Leadership, development and learning Operational policing
Organisation	Metropolitan Police Service
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Region	London
Partners	Police
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.

Key details

Start date	November 2023
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Women Workforce

Aim

The Women in Firearms Attachment (WiFA) programme seeks to increase female representation within Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) firearms commands while strengthening trust and confidence internally and externally. Through an immersive experience, participants gain authentic insight into firearms roles, enabling informed career decisions.

The programme delivers mentoring, skill development, and networking opportunities, while capturing valuable feedback and data to inform future strategies. This investment supports individual growth and contributes to building a more inclusive, skilled, and trusted firearms workforce.

Intended outcome

The Women in Firearms Attachment (WiFA) programme is designed to deliver measurable and sustainable impact across the MPS. The extended outcomes include:

- enhanced gender diversity – a significant increase in female representation within firearms commands, contributing to a more balanced and inclusive workforce
- improved trust and confidence – strengthened relationships and credibility within the MPS, with the public, and among internal and external stakeholders, reinforcing the professionalism and integrity of firearms units
- informed career decisions – participants gain authentic insight into firearms roles, enabling them to make well-informed career choices based on real experience rather than perception
- actionable data and feedback – collection of valuable insights and feedback to inform future recruitment strategies, training programmes, and diversity initiatives

- skill development and personal growth – investment in officers through new skills, experiences, and networking opportunities, fostering confidence and readiness for specialist roles
- long-term cultural change – promotion of an inclusive culture within firearms commands, challenging stereotypes and creating pathways for future female leaders

Description

The Women in Firearms Attachment (WiFA) was introduced to address the long-standing underrepresentation of women in firearms roles within the MPS, where female representation had stagnated at around three percent. Misconceptions about firearms roles, cultural barriers, and confidence issues were identified as key deterrents. Previous recruitment campaigns had limited success, prompting the need for an immersive programme that would provide authentic insight, build confidence, and enable informed career decisions.

WiFA is a two-week structured attachment combining accredited training, mentoring, and operational exposure.

Week one focuses on insights and skill development, including but not exclusively Ballistic Emergency Life Support (BELS), Public and Personal Safety Training (PPST), Job Related Fitness Test (JRFT) coaching, National Decision Model (NDM) and live firing range sessions at the Metropolitan Police Specialist Training Centre (MPSTC).

Week two provides rotational deployments across four firearms commands:

- specialist firearms command (MO19)
- royalty and specialist protection (RaSP)
- parliamentary and diplomatic protection (PaDP)
- aviation policing

Participants also receive cultural transparency sessions, recruitment guidance, and access to a dedicated SharePoint hub for ongoing support.

Implementation requires early senior leadership buy-in, which was secured through evidence from the pilot programme and formal approval by the Commissioner and management board.

Resources include a dedicated project team, firearms instructors, training facilities, kit, and logistical support for transport and scheduling. Costs are largely absorbed within existing budgets, with additional expenditure for logistics. Cohorts of 18–22 officers are optimal for engagement, and formal openings and closings by senior leaders reinforce organisational commitment.

Key steps include:

- securing governance approval
- designing programme content
- managing applications and Professional Standards checks
- delivering training and deployments
- evaluating impact through surveys and debriefs

Continuous feedback informs improvements, such as maternity sessions and modular options. For replication, organisations should anticipate high demand, engage leadership early, plan for resource allocation, and embed robust communication and evaluation processes.

WiFA is now fully booked until 2027 and has been recognised nationally for improving diversity in specialist policing roles.

Evaluation

The Women in Firearms Attachment (WiFA) underwent a formal evaluation conducted by the Metropolitan Police Strategic Insight Unit (SIU), a multidisciplinary team specialising in behavioural science, data analytics, and social research.

The evaluation focused on understanding how WiFA influences behaviour change among female officers considering firearms roles. Specifically, it examined the programme's effectiveness in removing barriers to application, improving confidence, and delivering wider organisational benefits beyond recruitment.

The SIU assessed the following:

- behavioural impact – changes in capability, opportunity, and motivation to apply for firearms roles
- barrier removal – misconceptions, cultural concerns, confidence gaps, and lack of role insight
- secondary outcomes – broader career confidence, retention, and positive cultural perceptions

- remaining barriers – factors still preventing applications, such as flexibility concerns and psychological risk perceptions

Data was gathered through:

- surveys (n=45 responses from ~140 participants)
- interviews (n=10)
- direct observations of cohort three
- feedback analysis from final debrief sessions

Results

The findings concluded that WiFA has been an effective intervention:

- Behavioural Change Drivers: Nine core components which collectively removed key barriers:
 - realistic experience
 - role clarity
 - welcoming environment
 - skill development
 - networking
 - confidence-building
 - easy participation
 - cultural transparency
 - signalling value
- impact – participants reported increased confidence, improved perceptions of firearms culture, and greater clarity in career decisions, many shared positive experiences with colleagues, influencing wider organisational culture
- recruitment outcomes – 94% of FIA participants indicated intent to apply, WiFA achieved a 47.5% conversion rate to applications

- wider benefits – officers who did not apply still reported enhanced morale, renewed trust in the organisation, and improved retention intentions
- remaining barriers – flexibility challenges (long commutes, early starts), family considerations, and perceived physical/mental demands persisted for some

WiFA not only met its objectives but demonstrated measurable behavioural and cultural impact. The SIU evaluation provides evidence that immersive, insight-driven programmes can dismantle systemic barriers and foster inclusion.

Overall impact

The Women in Firearms Attachment (WiFA) has delivered transformative results since its inception. Initially designed to increase female representation in firearms commands, the programme has exceeded expectations, becoming a cornerstone of cultural change within the MPS and as such has been highlighted in the Commissioners New Met for London plan.

- WiFA has engaged 401 female officers across 21 cohorts
- 47.5% of attendees have progressed to apply for firearms roles, a remarkable shift from historic application rates
- female representation in the four main armed commands has grown from 3.2% in 2022 to 8.3% in 2025

The success of WiFA has driven wider adoption. 17 police forces across the United Kingdom (UK) have been briefed, with several launching their own programmes inspired by WiFA.

WiFA has fostered collaboration between firearms commands, introduced innovative recruitment practices, and created a blueprint for similar initiatives. The programme has also influenced policy reforms, including modular assessments and improved candidate support.

Staff feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with one attendee describing WiFA as “the best two weeks of my career” and crediting it with restoring faith in the organisation. Participants report increased confidence, clarity in career decisions, and a renewed sense of belonging, outcomes that extend beyond firearms recruitment to overall morale and retention.

Learning

What went well

- High engagement and impact – WiFA has attracted over 600 Expressions of Interest and delivered 401 attachments across 21 cohorts, with a 47.5% conversion rate to firearms applications. Representation in armed commands increased from 3.2% to 8.3%, demonstrating tangible progress.
- Strong cultural shift – the programme successfully challenged misconceptions about firearms roles, improved confidence among female officers, and restored trust in policing culture.
- Scalable model – the programme's structure, combining immersive experience, mentoring, and skill development, proved replicable. It has now influenced 17 UK forces, with several launching their own versions.
- Positive leadership support – direct involvement from senior leaders, including the Commissioner, was pivotal. Their presence at cohort openings and closings signalled organisational commitment and helped overcome cultural barriers.
- Added value for participants – beyond insight, officers gained accredited training (e.g., Ballistic Emergency Life Support), networking opportunities, and practical skills transferable to frontline policing.

Challenges and barriers

- Initial buy-in – securing approval required strong evidence from the pilot and direct engagement with senior leadership. Early scepticism around resource abstraction and optics was a hurdle.
- Funding and resources – while the programme leveraged existing training infrastructure, costs for logistics, kit, and additional training (Taser) required negotiation. A decision to remove Taser training was later overturned by the Commissioner, highlighting the need for clear strategic alignment.
- Data tracking limitations – recruitment systems lacked functionality to track candidate progress efficiently, requiring manual monitoring, a process that was time-consuming and unsustainable.
- Operational abstraction – releasing officers for two weeks posed challenges for some basic command units (BCUs). This was mitigated through proactive engagement with senior leadership teams and flexible cohort planning.
- Cultural resistance – some line managers discouraged participation, viewing it as disloyal or career-diverting. Addressing this required clear communication and endorsement from the management board.

Key lessons for future implementers

- Secure Chief Officer Team sponsorship early – visible support from top-level leaders is essential to overcome cultural resistance and resource concerns.
- Plan for resource allocation – identify training facilities, instructors, and logistical support well in advance. Consider modular or shorter attachments to reduce abstraction impact.
- Communicate widely and consistently – use multi-channel communications (intranet, blogs, videos) and leverage ambassadors from previous cohorts to build momentum. The ripple effect of word and mouth is more important than any publication.
- Anticipate policy and compliance issues – engage with governance teams early to avoid challenges around training standards and equipment use.
- Build a feedback loop – continuous improvement based on participant feedback is vital. Survey monkey and independent debriefs were instrumental in refining delivery.
- Prepare for demand – interest may exceed capacity quickly; WiFA is now fully subscribed until 2027. Plan for scalability from the outset, respond quickly to enquiries, and manage expectations.
- Measure impact beyond recruitment – track cultural change, confidence levels, and retention to demonstrate broader organisational benefits.
- Hook and investment – offer participants development and skills in return for giving up their time and stepping outside their comfort zone.
- No hard sell – informed and raw reality of roles and culture.
- The right people – select and build a project and delivery team that is passionate, driven and invested in supporting people.

WiFA's success lies in its ability to combine practical experience with cultural transformation. Organisations adopting similar initiatives should expect initial challenges around buy-in, resourcing, and data tracking but can achieve significant impact with strong leadership support, clear communication, and a commitment to continuous improvement.