

Strengthened controls to protect the public from medically unfit gun holders

Strengthened controls for licensed gun owners will be in place from this week to better protect the public from those who are medically unfit to own a firearm.

A new digital marker is being rolled out across GP surgeries in England which, once applied to a patient's record, will flag that they have a firearms licence and automatically alert doctors if there has been a relevant change in their medical situation.

This could include a change in their mental health, diagnosis of a neurological condition or evidence of substance abuse.

The new system will mean GPs can alert the relevant police force, who can then ensure licensed gun holders who may no longer be fit to own a firearm are swiftly identified, their licence reviewed and, if deemed appropriate, their firearm seized.

Minister for Crime, Policing and Probation, Kit Malthouse said:

We have some of the strictest gun control laws in the world and we will not hesitate to bring in even stronger processes where we see the need for them.

The imminent inquest into the tragic shootings in Sussex and impending first anniversary of the horrific shootings in Plymouth are a stark reminder of how much we owe it to the public to take these matters seriously.

We are focused on making our streets safer and it is absolutely right that the police be told about changes in the medical circumstances of anyone licensed to own a gun. This move is yet another example of us giving the police the tools they require to protect the public.

The digital marker system bolsters recent statutory guidance, brought into force last November, that set out that the police cannot grant a firearms licence until they have reviewed information from a suitably qualified doctor regarding the applicant's medical history.

The digital marker will streamline the way doctors can keep track of patients who have applied for, or been granted, a firearms certificate – which was previously something done manually. The marker has been developed by NHS Digital and is being rolled out in GP practices across England, with 98% of practices able to access it from this week.

Minister for Patient Safety and Primary Care, Maria Caulfield, said:

These new measures make it easier for GPs to identify any concerning medical issues with gun holders or applicants, before passing this vital information on to relevant police forces, helping ensure public safety.

The new system was agreed following extensive cooperation with the British Medical Association (BMA) and comes after they agreed a Memorandum of Understanding in July 2019 with the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs Council about the role of doctors in the firearms licensing system.

NHS Digital CEO, Simon Bolton, said:

The addition of this marker to GP records is a prime example of how a digitally enabled healthcare service benefits patients and the public.

This new system will also reduce the administrative burden for GPs, giving them more time to deliver care.

Dr Peter Holden, BMA lead for firearms licensing policy and a GP in Matlock, Derbyshire, said:

As advocates for their patients and communities, family doctors support the need for scrutiny and proper safeguards when it comes to owning a weapon that can be used with lethal outcomes.

For decades now, the BMA has been pushing for an active flagging system within patients' records that is robust, clear and standardised across the country, and the new digital marker is a positive step in the right direction of improving the contribution GPs make to the licensing process.

However, the public should be under no illusion that this will be an overnight solution. This new scheme will apply only to new applicants or people renewing their licences, so it will take up to

five years before all licensed gun owners are included within this framework.

Of course, when there is a diagnosis of concern, GPs will continue to use all of the information in front of them and where there is a danger to the wider public or the patient themselves, they will alert authorities.

The introduction of the marker though must not imply that the buck for public safety stops with the GP; as the police have acknowledged, they themselves are ultimately responsible for firearms licensing.

But as this new marker is rolled out, we encourage GPs to build on existing relationships with local forces to help further protect public safety.