

In Confidence

Office of the Minister of Police

Cabinet Social Wellbeing Committee

Report back on progress made on processing firearm licence applications

Proposal

- 1 This paper reports back on New Zealand Police's (Police) progress in processing firearms licence applications, including identifying where improvements can be made, following the passing of the Arms (Licence Holders' Applications for New Licences) Amendment Act 2022.

Issue Identification

- 2 On 19 September 2022, the previous Minister of Police advised Cabinet that there were more than 11,000 firearms licence applications awaiting processing and more than 2,000 of these applicants were holding an expired licence while waiting for their application to be processed. This delay was impacting the firearms community's ability to lawfully hold firearms and conduct business.
- 3 At this time, Cabinet invited the Minister of Police to report back to Cabinet in March 2023 on progress in processing licensing applications, including where improvements can be made [CAB-22-MIN-0396].

Relation to government priorities

- 4 The improvements to the firearms licensing system contribute to the Government's priority: 'Support healthier, safer and more connected communities'.

Executive Summary

- 5 The Arms (Licence Holders' Applications for New Licences) Amendment Act 2022 (the Amendment Act) was passed in November 2022 to enable firearms licences to be treated as current until such time as Police has had time to determine the new application, provided the licence holder applied before the previous licence expired.
- 6 Over the last year, considerable effort has been made by Police to reduce the backlog of applications, especially for those who have been waiting longer than 90 days for their application to be processed. As at 1 July 2022, there were 11,096 applications in the licensing pipeline, 5,767 of which had been with Police for more than 90 days. As at 24 March 2023, this number has reduced to 2,227. Police are working towards processing all applications that have been in the pipeline for more than 90 days by 30 June 2023.
- 7 Change to the Arms Act 1983 (the Act), which terminated lifetime licences and required firearms owners to apply for ten-year licences, creates large peaks and troughs in the demand cycle. The next peak will occur between 2024 to

2027 and Police expects to meet this increase in demand through its investment in processing capacity and system improvements.

- 8 To continue with their progress in processing the backlog of licence applications, Police has identified two improvements that can be made – the rolling out of the Targeted Renewal Approach, and workforce increases.

Background

- 9 As at 1 July 2022 there were more than 11,000 applications for firearms licences awaiting Police action. Over 2,000 applicants were holding an expired licence while waiting for their application to be processed. This means that those who had licences expire whilst their application was in the pipeline had to transfer their firearms to another current licence holder or continue to possess their firearms unlawfully.
- 10 On 19 September 2022, Cabinet noted that the demand for firearms licences is outstripping the ability of Police to process applications. It agreed to amend the Arms Act to enable a previously held firearms licence to be considered current until a decision is made on an application, provided that application is made before the previous licence expires. Cabinet invited the Minister of Police to report back to Cabinet in March 2023 on progress in processing licensing applications, including where improvements can be made [CAB-22-MIN-0396].
- 11 On 29 November 2022, the Arms (Licence Holders' Applications for New Licences) Amendment Act 2022 was passed allowing firearms licences to be treated as current where applications are made but cannot be processed before expiry.
- 12 The Amendment Act has mitigated the impact on licence holders by ensuring they can continue to lawfully possess firearms while waiting for their new licence. It also addresses future demand peaks by allowing Police to stagger licence issuing and expiry without jeopardising licence holders' ability to lawfully possess firearms.

Over the last year there has been significant investment in service delivery

- 13 The overall investment in additional resources and process improvements over the last year are driving significant improvements in service delivery. Initiatives include:
- 13.1 greater detection of the potential risk of an applicant's non-compliance as Police develops its centralised intelligence-informed triaging and ongoing monitoring of the fit and proper status of existing licence holders
 - 13.2 enhanced recruitment, training and resourcing of operational staff
 - 13.3 education and information campaigns directed at licence holders to assist them to understand and meet their responsibility to act in the interests of personal and public safety, as defined in the Arms Act's purpose statement
 - 13.4 the development of information and intelligence systems to support intelligence-led triaging of licence applications (the Targeted Renewal Approach)

- 13.5 a strengthened resolution team, and enabling near real-time monitoring of licence holders and nationally consistent revocation processes
- 13.6 bolstered community engagement. This includes the creation of additional guidance material, developed in close consultation with firearms community representatives.

Improvements in service delivery has resulted in a greatly reduced backlog

- 14 Police has established a goal of processing all applications within 90 days. The table below shows the improved licence processing activity between 1 July 2022 and 24 March 2023 against the 90-day standard. It also shows that the number of incomplete applications is dropping, which makes overall processing smoother.

Category	Total as at 1 July 2022	Total as at 24 March 23	Difference
Applications received, but incomplete and not yet ready for processing	3,026	1,104	-1,922 (-63.5%)
Processed under 90 days in pipeline	2,303	3,170	+867 (+37.6%)
Processed over 90 days in pipeline	5,767	2,227	-3,540 (-61.4%)
Total in pipeline	11,096	6,501	To (-41.4%)

- 15 Additionally, since July 2022 there has been:
- 15.1 a 77 percent increase in firearms licences and dealer's licences issued from July 2022 to February 2023 compared with the same period in 2021/2022
 - 15.2 a 51 percent increase in refusals from July 2022 to February 2023 compared with the same period in 2021/2022
 - 15.3 a 77 percent increase in processing of historical applications (applications in the pipeline for longer than 120 days), as well as a 37 percent reduction in the number of applicants in the licence application pipeline compared with the same period in 2021/2022.

Further improvements will be made to increase firearms licence applications processing

- 16 Police has identified two areas for improvement: targeted renewal for licences and work force increases.

Targeted Renewal Approach

- 17 The Targeted Renewal Approach is a triage model which enables a more streamlined response to licence renewals. This enables Police to identify and prioritise high complexity applications and allocate the amount of work required to process the application proportionate to its risk level.
- 18 This approach requires vetting the applicant and reviewing their circumstances since their previous fit and proper assessment. The factors that Police must consider in the review include health, compliance with law including association, safe possession and handling of firearms. The Targeted Renewal Approach is currently being rolled out.
- 19 Police is further reviewing their processes and investigating other opportunities for taking a risk-based approach, such as reviewing how Police issues expired and deceased licence notifications.

Workforce increases

- 20 Te Tari Pūreke (the Firearms Safety Authority) has already grown its workforce by 225 FTEs in the past year and will be fully established by 31 December 2023. It is continuing to recruit across the country, including District Arms positions, a dedicated Registry and Compliance Team and Regulatory Service Improvement team. These additional resources will increase Police's capability to reduce the backlog of licence applications and allow Police to proactively manage increasing demand.

Expected upcoming peak in demand

- 21 While Police has made improvements to its firearms licensing throughput, applications remain at a low point in the demand cycle. The cycle is the legacy of the 1992 change to the Act which terminated lifetime licences and required firearms owners to apply for ten-year licences. Because the Act does not provide Police with ability to stagger applications large peaks and troughs in demand occur.
- 22 The next peak in demand for firearms licence applications is expected between 2024 and 2027. Police's investment in processing capacity will ensure there is no deterioration in performance whilst the Amendment Act will ensure that firearms users remain lawful throughout this processing period.

Financial Implications

- 23 There are no financial implications for this paper as no policy decisions are being sought.

Legislative Implications

- 24 There are no legislative implications for this paper as no policy decisions are being sought.

Impact Analysis

- 25 There are no impact analysis requirements for this paper as no policy decisions are being sought.

Regulatory Impact Statement

- 26 There are no regulatory impact statement requirements for this paper as no policy decisions are being sought.

Climate Implications of Policy Assessment

- 27 There are no climate implications for this paper as no policy decisions are being sought.

Population Implications

- 28 On 1 July 2022, there were 240,465 firearms licence holders in New Zealand. Approximately 92 percent of firearms licence holders are men, and 74 percent are currently aged 40 years or older. Of the 59 percent of firearms licence holders that have their ethnicity recorded by Police, 90 percent identify as Pākehā and seven percent as Māori.
- 29 The process improvements made by Police described in this paper will impact positively on all firearms licence holders as they will have their applications processed in a more timely and reliable manner.

Human Rights

- 30 There are no human rights implications for this paper as no policy decisions are being sought.

Consultation

- 31 The following agencies were consulted: the Treasury, the Ministry of Justice, the Department of Conservation, the Ministry of Primary Industries, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Parliamentary Counsel Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Te Puni Kōkiri, Te Arawhiti, and the Ministry for Culture and Heritage.

Communications

- 32 As this is a report back, no communications will be required.

Proactive Release

- 33 This Cabinet paper will be published within 30 working days of the Cabinet decision.

Recommendations

The Minister of Police recommends that the Committee:

- 1 **note** that on 29 September 2022, Cabinet invited the Minister of Police to report back in March 2023 on Police's progress in processing licensing applications, including identifying where improvements can be made [CAB-22-MIN-0396];
- 2 **note** the significant improvement in the performance of Police in processing firearms licence applications across a range of measures since 1 July 2022
- 3 **note** that Police are working towards processing all applications that have been in the pipeline for more than 90 days by June 2023;

- 4 **note** that changes to the Arms Act 1983 (the Act), which terminated lifetime licences and required firearms owners to apply for ten-year licences, will create a peak in demand in applications for firearms licences and Police expects to meet this increase in demand through its investment in processing capacity and system improvements.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Ginny Andersen
Minister of Police