



Date: 18/04/2024
Our ref: 01/FOI/24/012319/B

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST REFERENCE NO: 01/FOI/24/012319/B

I write in connection with your request for information dated 15/04/2024, received by Greater Manchester Police (GMP) for the following information:

How many incidents involving the discovery and seizure of 3D-printed firearms have been made since 2020 to present?

Please can you break these figures down by year.

Result of Searches

Following receipt of your request searches were conducted within Greater Manchester Police to locate information relevant to your request. I can confirm that some of the information you have requested is held by Greater Manchester Police. However, I am not obliged to supply all the information you have requested as exemptions apply.

When refusing to provide such information because an exemption applies, Section 17(1) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires GMP, to provide you - the applicant - with a notice which: (a) states that fact, (b) specifies the exemption in question and (c) states (if that would not otherwise be apparent) why the exemption applies.

The requested information is exempt under **Section 21 – Information accessible to applicant by other means**. Some information on seizures of 3D-printed firearms by GMP is available in the public domain.

Additionally, GMP can neither confirm nor deny that we hold any further information relevant to your request by virtue of the following exemptions:

Section 23(5) - Information supplied by, or relating to, bodies dealing with security matters, s24(2) National Security and s31(3) – Law Enforcement.

Evidence of Harm:

Confirmation or denial that information is held would identify local level activity regarding the use and/or seizure of 3D printed weapons. In turn this risks identifying the level of police awareness of such weapons in the force area. When the request is made to multiple forces, there is a further risk in that confirmation or denial would reveal information which could be used to build a picture as to where national and local investigations and operations are taking place, and perhaps more pertinently where they are not, to combat the supply, distribution and use of these weapons. This mapping effect, created by forces either confirming information is held and citing a substantive exemption or, conversely, stating 'no information held', would undermine the effective delivery of operational law enforcement by revealing the intelligence picture of the force in respect of 3D printed firearms as well as compromising potentially ongoing investigations, some of which may be covert.

Disclosure of information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) is considered a release to the world at large and not a private transaction. Whilst not questioning an applicant's motives in this case, by making a public disclosure under FOI, it must be considered that as well as members of the public, criminals, including terrorists will be able to access the data released. It is widely known that organised criminal gangs and those involved in terrorist related activity monitor FOI disclosures closely for any information they can use to further their criminal activity.

The threat from terrorism cannot be ignored. It should be recognised that the international security landscape is increasingly complex and unpredictable. The UK faces a sustained threat from violent terrorists and extremists. Since 2006, the UK Government have published the threat level, based upon current intelligence that threat level to the UK currently is 'substantial, meaning an attack is likely.

<https://www.mi5.gov.uk/threat-levels>

Any information identifying the focus of policing activity that could be used to the advantage of criminal organisations, serious and organised crime groups and terrorists to undermine the operational integrity of policing will adversely affect public safety and have a negative impact on, not only law enforcement at a local level, but policing and operations at a national level the impact of which risks the national security of the UK.

Public Interest Considerations

Section 24 (2) National Security

Factors favouring complying with Section 1(1)(a)

Any information that would increase public knowledge in showing how resources are allocated in response to events would favour disclosure. This would also support the fundamental purpose of the Freedom of Information Act, which is to be more open and transparent in the way in which the police perform, making them more accountable for their actions. Releasing any details regarding the seizure of 3D printed firearms would provide reassurance to the public that the police are appropriately resourced in this area and would be in a position to respond to any National Security threats or incidents. Any information which would allow for more accurate public debate would be a positive factor for disclosure.

Factors against complying with Section 1(1)(a)

Whilst there is a public interest in providing reassurance that the police are appropriately and effectively dealing with threats posed by terrorist organisations, there is a strong public interest in safeguarding national security and the welfare and safety of the general public. Any disclosure (including confirming or denying information is held) has the potential to undermine ongoing and future operations to protect the Security of the United Kingdom, e.g. counter terrorism activity. The risk of significant harm or even death to the community at large would be increased.

The cumulative effect of terrorists gathering information from various sources would build a picture of potential vulnerabilities at a local level. The more information disclosed over time will provide a more detailed account of the investigative focus of not only a force area but also the country as a whole. Any incident which results from such a disclosure would by default affect National Security.

Section 31(3) Law Enforcement

Factors favouring complying with Section 1(1)(a)

There is media reporting concerning the increase of these weapons, which in itself is a factor supporting confirmation or denial.

To confirm or deny that this information is held would make members of the public more aware of the threat of certain offences and the forces ability to deal with them. Improved public awareness may lead to more intelligence being submitted to police about possible further instances of 3D- printed firearms use and any acts of criminality or perceived terrorism as members of the public will be more observant to suspicious activity which in turn may result in a reduction of crime.

Factors against complying with Section 1(1)(a)

To confirm or deny that the requested information is held could compromise law enforcement tactics which would hinder the Police force's ability to prevent and detect crimes. Whilst such information on its own may be perceived as not harmful, any further information that may be already in the public domain or any that may be asked for in the future could be detrimental to forces and can contribute to the mosaic effect. The 'mosaic' effect is attune to the building up of a jigsaw, from public disclosures and other information, gradually filling in the pieces to form a complete picture. For criminals, including serious and organised crime groups and terrorists to gain easy access to such information would not only undermine the police's primary function of law enforcement but also place the public at significant risk of harm.

Balancing Test

To confirm or deny that any such information is held or not held would indicate levels of policing activity at force level which could allow individuals to evaluate levels of activity across individual force areas and exploit what may be considered as less active or resourced areas. If this information is disclosed it continually drip feeds in the pool of information publicly available to criminals and terrorists who will use it to complete a full picture on how and where to undertake their criminal pursuits without fear of detection or apprehension.

The security of the country is of paramount importance. The police will not divulge any information that would place the safety of officers or the public at risk or undermine national security. Whilst there is a public interest in the transparency of policing, and in this case providing assurance that the police service is appropriately and effectively engaging with the threat of activity involving weapons, there is a very strong public interest in safeguarding both national security and the integrity of police investigations and operations. It is not in the best interests of the security of the country, individual forces or the public in general to put such information into the public arena where it could be used by those wishing to cause harm. It is our opinion that for these issues the balancing test for confirming or denying that this information is held, not made out.

No inference can be taken from this refusal that information does or does not exist.