

# Management of firearms and other weapons in productions

## HSE information sheet

### Entertainment Information Sheet No 20

#### Introduction

This information sheet is one of a series produced in consultation with the Joint Advisory Committee for Broadcasting and the Performing Arts. It gives guidance on the management of weapons that are part of a production, including firearms, replicas and deactivated weapons.

#### Legislation

The use and possession of firearms, replicas and deactivated weapons in productions is covered by:

- Firearms Acts (particularly FA 1968) - it is an offence for any person to have in their possession a firearm, shotgun or ammunition without holding a valid firearm or shotgun certificate or certificate of registration and complying with its terms and conditions. The Firearms Act 1968 (as amended) sets out strict terms and conditions that must be followed to allow actors who do not have a firearms certificate to hold and use firearms in rehearsal, performance or production; and
- the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and subsequent regulations including the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (the Management Regulations).

You must consult employees on health and safety matters, either directly or through elected safety representatives.

This information sheet only deals with matters relating to health and safety. For issues relating to the Firearms Acts contact the Home Office.

#### Definitions

For the purposes of this guidance the following terms are used:

- **a weapon** means any object which is designed for the purpose of inflicting bodily harm;

- **firearm(s)** includes not only those weapons which are controlled by the Firearms Acts but also includes those that discharge explosive gases (blanks), pellets by compressed gasses (air pistols/rifles), starting pistols, or any form of projectile including shotgun pellets, bullets, musket balls;
- **other weapons** include crossbows, catapults, sharp-edged instruments used in a fight sequence (swords and knives) or martial arts weapons (such as rice flails) and police batons, battering rams;
- **replica weapon** means a prop designed to look like a weapon which, depending upon the material of construction, may or may not be capable of inflicting bodily harm;
- **deactivated weapon** means one in which the mechanisms to cause harm have been removed or permanently disabled and has been certified as deactivated by a proof house - see Home Office guidance *Firearms Law: Guidance to the police*, listed in 'Further reading';
- **weapons expert or competent person** is someone who has the necessary knowledge, experience and training to advise on the use of the weapon. These may include armourers, swordmasters, fight arrangers or martial arts experts;
- **armourer** means a Registered Firearms Dealer (RFD) or their agent or a member of the emergency or armed services allocated to the task by their commanders, eg a police armourer (see following section for more detailed guidance);
- **'Section 5 Authority'** is issued by the Home Office. The Authority is in two sections - section one refers to the weapons and section two refers to prohibited firearms, eg sawn-off shotguns, metallic cartridge pistols, machine guns and sub-machine guns.

#### Armourers

An armourer must be engaged where a firearm is to be held or used by someone who is not working within the privileges of their own licence, such as an actor. The armourer must be competent and experienced in such work. An armourer may also be

required for other recording or filming activities. To summarise:

- an armourer must be engaged when weapons are used for a reconstruction or scripted sequence for dramatic portrayal;
- an armourer may be needed, depending on the activity, where weapons are displayed or used for other types of programme, such as an observational documentary about a firearms licence holder or at an event organised by others (eg a shooting club or a sporting event). An armourer may not be needed if the person in control of the weapon is operating under the privileges of their licence or the weapon is exempt from such certification requirements;
- where filming with the police, military or armed services in the course of their profession or training (eg for news programmes or documentaries), the armourer must be allocated to the task by their commander.

Holding licences or shotgun and firearm certificates does not qualify a person to be an armourer. The privileges of each licence will determine the limits on the firearm's storage, transportation and use. The holders are only allowed to operate within their privileges of licence, eg at a shooting club or as part of an organised event.

### **Hazards associated with firearms**

- Blast injury caused by burning gases, unburned propellant, wadding and debris discharged from the barrel
- Noise from both blank and live rounds can be very high, often in excess of 100 dB (A)
- Flying objects, eg spent cartridge ejection, especially from automatic and semi-automatic firearms. Spent cases can be hot and can travel several metres
- Burns, smoke inhalation
- Police armed response to use of weapons in a public area (eg dramatic sequence not notified to the police)
- Failure of security arrangements resulting in theft or loss
- Public distress and breach of the peace, eg if seen on location
- Inexperienced users, eg artistes, extras etc

### **Hazards associated with other weapons**

- Flying objects, eg arrows
- Penetration or puncture wounds
- Cuts and abrasions
- Bruises/concussion/fractures

- Inexperienced users, eg artistes, extras etc
- Physical exertion
- Failure of security arrangements resulting in theft or loss

### **Risk assessment**

The Management Regulations require a suitable and sufficient risk assessment to be carried out by employers (or self-employed people) to:

- assess the risk to employees and others who may be affected by their activities; and
- determine the control measures necessary to avoid risk or reduce it to acceptable levels.

### **Responsibilities**

Responsibility for health and safety rests with the employer, which normally means the production company but it could also be the broadcaster. In this information sheet, the term producer is used to represent the employer, organisation or person in overall control of the production activity.

In programme making, it is the producer who has overall control of the production and who must ensure that there are arrangements to:

- co-ordinate safety;
- direct action sequences safely;
- exchange information with others including the person in control of the weapon and other contractors, premises managers, freelancers and the self-employed.

The producer should ensure that the person directing the action:

- is competent;
- has assessed the risks of the sequence to be filmed and agreed controls needed with the fight arranger, the weapons expert, the actors and the crew;
- knows which filming methods to use to reduce the risk to people involved (using correct lens, angles and camera height);
- has scheduled time for rehearsals, safety briefings and reassessment of the hazards and risks if any changes are proposed.

The producer should also ensure that the person in control of any weapon:

- is competent and holds the necessary licences, eg an armourer is an RFD and they have provided a copy of their certificate;

- is provided with adequate information about the sequence to be recorded;
- has provided a written assessment of the risks of the weapons and identified the controls needed; and
- has agreed to specify and/or supply the protective measures identified in the assessment.

The producer also needs to ensure that:

- the controls identified in the assessment are put in place and communicated to those who may be affected;
- there is co-operation and communication with the owners of the premises or location being used;
- there are adequate arrangements for emergencies.

The **armourer** should advise the producer on the legal requirements of the relevant Firearms Acts and the safe use of weapons for the production. They should provide details of the hazards and risks of the weapon and how these will be controlled in a written risk assessment. The person in control of a weapon (the armourer or certificate holder) is responsible for:

- **the weapon** - its security in transport, storage and use (eg in the case of Section 5 firearms the requirements are detailed in the Home Office Authority, which the armourer must have in their possession along with their RFD certificate);
- **the safe use of the weapon** - they should provide an assessment of the risks and controls for the safe use of the weapons to the producer;
- **the competence** of the people who will handle the weapon, eg ensuring training is provided to actors;
- **safe areas and distances** to be followed for the sequence so that no one is at risk from discharge;
- **clear communication** about the sequence and the safe arrangement of people and equipment, ie providing the briefing to all who may be affected; and
- ensuring that **the protective measures** identified are fit for purpose and used, eg screens, protective clothing and ear defenders.

## Precautionary measures

All weapons must be under the control of a competent person. There must be:

- a full written risk assessment;
- rehearsal of the action;
- information on the dangers of such weapons and training in the use of the weapons provided to those affected.

## Firearms

Every firearm, including those firing blanks, must be treated as a lethal weapon, whether loaded or unloaded. There have been fatalities as a result of accidents with firearms that were assumed to be unloaded. Every firearm must be:

- under the direct control of the person holding the appropriate certificate or an armourer;
- only handled and used by a certificate holder unless an actor is using it under an armourer's direction for a rehearsal or performance;
- stored and secured against access to all but the armourer or certificate holder when not in use.

## Optical effects

Film and TV action may allow sequences to be broken down into segments so cutaways can be used to build excitement and allow safe distances between weapons and people. Similarly, the choice of camera height, angles and the lens can also make a difference. For example, the foreshortening effect of a telephoto lens makes objects appear closer together than they actually are and can be used to exaggerate danger. Reverse motion is another invaluable tool.

## Competence

The person in control of the weapons in the production must be competent. The expertise needed will depend on the weapon but may require, for example, an armourer, a swordmaster, a fight director or a stunt co-ordinator (see the Equity register). Equity has compiled a list of fight directors commonly known as the Equity Theatre Fight Directors Register. The fight directors on the Equity Register have undertaken a programme of training and assessment. Currently Equity recognises two organisations as being training and assessment providers - The British Academy of Dramatic Combat and the British Academy of Stage and Screen Combat.

Individuals should be assessed to see whether they have the expertise needed for the particular weapon(s) and the production activity. It is important to remember that the supplier of the weapon(s) may not be competent in the use of the weapon(s).

Any weapon must be under the control of the person who has legal possession and in accordance with the terms of that person's licence. Only the competent person may load ammunition into a firearm, eg an armourer or their agent. The armourer or another competent person should inspect firearms, ammunition or projectiles before they are used.

## **Controls**

The controls that are needed to ensure safe use of the weapon and ammunition will depend on when, where and how the sequence will be shot.

## **Live ammunition**

The use of live ammunition is normally prohibited unless used under Home Office or Ministry of Defence regulations or under the privileges of the licence or approval and permission from the police, eg on a firing range.

## **Blank ammunition**

Blank ammunition is dangerous and can inflict serious injury as the wadding and debris can cover considerable distances. There is a lethal risk from the pieces of brass crimping or the wadding from an open-ended cartridge being projected/ejected. The armourer will advise on ammunition that is suitable.

## **Training and briefing**

The experience, skills and competence of the performers using the weapons must be considered. The armourer or relevant weapons expert must ensure, through the producer, that adequate information, instruction and training is given to all those involved with, or affected by, the use of the weapon. All production personnel must follow the instructions.

## **Recording/filming sequence**

The person in control of the weapons and sequence should assess the risks and provide a written assessment to the producer. The arrangements should ensure that:

- people are kept out of the line of fire, away from the path of debris, projectiles, arrows, spears etc and at a safe distance when blades and other weapons are being used (this includes the use of blanks);
- the armourer/weapons expert is able to observe the use of the weapon and monitor the action to ensure that their instructions are followed;
- if the sequence requires a camera to be in the line of fire or projectiles, arrows, spears etc, it should be locked off and operated by remote control to reduce the risk to people. For moving sequences other arrangements may be needed to protect the

camera operator and these must be detailed by the weapons expert/armourer.

There must be arrangements in place to ensure that all those involved know when a weapon is about to be used. In addition, detailed information on the controls must be explained to anyone who could be affected by the action. It should cover:

- the position of crews;
- the desired lines of trajectory and the extent of the safety zones for misfires, wind-carry effect etc;
- the performers' positions, the action sequence and the controls needed to address:
- the ground surface, eg wet conditions, contours and inclines may affect the risk of slips, trips and falls;
- the environment, eg lighting levels, weather conditions;
- the props/items that could pose trip or fall risks;
- stairs and other change of levels;
- the performers' costumes (see the section on 'Costumes');
- the preparation of those involved in strenuous exercise.

It is important to ensure that the artistes/performers who may be carrying out physically strenuous action have 'warmed up' beforehand, as any athlete would. Adequate rest time will be needed to reduce the risk of performer error due to fatigue.

Once the action has been choreographed, an adequate time for a 'walk through' and rehearsal is essential. The action should be established before the artiste needs to provide a performance.

## **Exchange of information**

The person in control of the premises where a firearm is to be used must be informed of the use of weapons and the controls that are to be in place. The police must also be informed if a firearm is to be used within sight/hearing in a public place.

## **Faults and misfires**

If any weapon develops a fault, it must be withdrawn from use until repaired or replaced. If there is a misfire or fault, the weapon should be treated as loaded and pointed in a safe direction.

Under no circumstances should any person other than the person in legal possession attempt to correct or adjust the weapon, ie an armourer or relevant competent person.

## Noise

Firearms can produce very high levels of noise. All those who may be affected must have and use ear protection. The protection will be needed for those behind, as well as in front of, the camera. The armourer, or relevant competent person, must ensure that ear protection is adequate, provided and worn.

## Security and storage

- All weapons and ammunition must be accounted for at all times and kept secure.
- The security of weapons is the responsibility of the person in legal possession of them. Firearms may only be transported in accordance with the licence.
- Weapons, except when in actual use, must be kept secured. Ammunition and firearms must travel in separate, locked containers. This includes blank ammunition and replicas. The person in legal possession of the weapon is responsible for the safe and secure keeping of all firearms and ammunition at all times, including rehearsal, recording, filming or transmission.
- The suspected loss of a firearm, ammunition replica or deactivated weapons must be reported to the person in control of the premises and also to the police immediately. No person will be allowed to leave the studio or the location until the completion of an investigation by the police.

## Screening

- Firearms should never be pointed at people unless the armourer has confirmed that they are not loaded.
- Weapons may only ever be pointed at another person when an armourer controlling the activity has confirmed, through a written risk assessment, that there is no risk from projectiles or debris.
- Where the risk assessment identifies the need for a protective clear screen, eg for the artist or cameraperson, the material must be fit for purpose. Eye protection alone will not normally be adequate.

## Notification to the police

The general administration and powers of the Firearms Acts are entrusted to the police. The chief of police in any area is responsible for licensing the people living in that area.

If a firearm, replica or deactivated weapon is to be used or seen in or from a public place or where the

public have right of passage, the producer must ensure that the police have been informed and that a point of contact for them is nominated, eg the armourer. The police will allocate a CAD (computer-aided dispatch) reference number. The point of contact and the person responsible for safety co-ordination on location should be informed of the detail.

It is an offence to hold a weapon without authority. The police regard any person with a weapon as a potential threat so all instructions given by any police officer must be followed.

## Replica (props) and deactivated weapons

Props and deactivated weapons should not be capable of discharging a projectile but could still inflict bodily harm if used to hit someone. However, the main hazards are theft or loss, public distress, breach of the peace or if the police respond to an apparent emergency. The police must therefore be informed.

The producer must ensure that the security arrangements for storage and transportation are adequate, in other words:

- there is a dedicated and named person responsible for the security of the weapon at all times (including the collection, storage, transportation and safe return);
- the named person will accompany the weapon if it is to be moved, for example a courier cannot collect it on behalf of the production;
- when not in use, the deactivated weapon is locked in a secure case, which is stored in a locked room with restricted access.

## Choice of weapons

The competent person must ensure that all weapons are inspected before use, during breaks and after use. The visual inspection should look for defects such as loosening of components, rivets etc and damage such as hairline cracks, indentation in the blades etc. A 'ringing' test can be carried out on most blades.

The weapons choice will depend on the sequence and here are some points to consider:

- There is rarely a need to have a sharp weapon. All weapons should be blunt unless there is a specific action sequence that requires a cutting action.
- The shape, weight etc of replica swords needs to be correctly balanced and they should be of sound construction.

- In fight scenes, the blades being used should both be made of the same material, eg a steel sword should not be used against an aluminium one.
- Points may need to be visually realistic but may still be 'blunt'. It is worth noting that wood, plastic or rubber weapons may be hazardous if used in a stabbing or lunging mode, so soft-tipped weapons may be more appropriate.
- Splinters may be created if the action calls for the destruction of wooden axe handles.
- Weapons designed to be retractable will need to have a smooth operation and lubrication.

## Safe zones

No one should be allowed to stand in front of a crossbow or longbow. The 'landing zones' and 'side safety zones' must be clearly defined for any missile-type weapon before these are launched. Suitable marking and policing of exclusion zones must be used to ensure no one enters these areas.

## Costumes

Costumes may impede the use of the weapons and the following points need to be addressed:

- it is important to address **movement restriction** in the choreography;
- garments must fit the individual performer. If they are too tight or too loose they could distract, impede, or cause slips, trips and falls;
- items worn on the head, such as armour, should not restrict the performer's vision, including their peripheral vision;
- footwear should fit correctly and have slip-resistant soles.

## Further reading

*Management of health and safety at work. Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. Approved Code of Practice and guidance L21* (Second edition) HSE Books 2000 ISBN 0 7176 2488 9

*Health and safety in audio-visual production: Your legal duties* Leaflet INDG360 HSE Books 2002 (single copy free or priced packs of 5 ISBN 0 7176 2551 6)

*Home Office Firearms Law: Guidance to the police* The Stationery Office 2002 ISBN 0 11 341273 8. Also available on: [www.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk)

## Further information

HSE produces a wide range of documents. Some are available as printed publications, both priced and free, and others are only accessible via the HSE website, [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk).

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**This document contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.**

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