

# WHAT DOES YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILE **SAY ABOUT YOU?**

Honorary Solicitor **Laura Saunbury** gives advice on the pitfalls of social media and how not to put your shotgun certificate at risk.

It is widely accepted now that you should be cautious about what you post on social media sites, because you cannot safely assume it will never come to the attention of your employers or prospective employers. However, it may not have occurred to you that your local police force may similarly assess your social media activity to judge your behaviour and attitudes, and whether this makes you a suitable person who can safely be permitted to possess firearms or shotguns.

I am not suggesting that police firearms licensing departments routinely monitor every certificate holder's social media activity. However, if concerns are brought to their attention about what you have been posting, or they have more general concerns about your behaviour or opinions you have expressed, be aware that the police may start to investigate your social media persona. In that event, the police will consider not only material which you have written yourself but also posts by others which you have re-posted or 'liked'.

Unsurprisingly, the police will be concerned if your social media activity includes threats of violence or expressions of support for serious violence, or in particular circumstances, for example, "I don't see what's wrong with shooting burglars". However, I have also seen plenty of cases where shotgun and firearm certificates have been refused or revoked through posts which it never occurred to the individual could

have any relevance to their suitability to hold guns.

Bear in mind that what you viewed as a bit of harmless fun or an innocent joke, which you never intended anyone to take seriously, may not necessarily be received by others in the same way. It could be interpreted by the licensing authority as an indicator that you will

not cooperate with them or comply with your obligations as a certificate holder, that you may be mentally unbalanced or harbour extremist views which are incompatible with gun ownership. Some examples of social media mistakes I have seen in the past which have cost individuals their certificate are:

- Expressing views about the law relating to firearms which is either incorrect or does not accord with accepted views on the subject.
- Suggesting or implying the police are stupid and do not understand firearms law.
- Expressing or supporting strong racist, homophobic or other intolerant views.
- Being 'friends' on social media with others who have serious criminal convictions or who post material which would be a cause for concern.
- Photographs and videos of shooting in circumstances which the police might deem to be unsafe.
- Posts which suggest you engage in drug use or excessive alcohol intake.
- Information which identifies you as a certificate holder with your location, risking the security of your firearms.
- Inflammatory remarks about your partner, especially in the context of you going through a relationship breakdown, such that there is an increased risk of further tension.

Nobody would wish to restrict free speech, the police and the courts included, and often they will recognise that what is said on social media has to be taken 'with a large pinch of salt', but unfortunately it can be all too easy to give the wrong impression. The reality is that such posts are handing the police a reason to take your certificate away from you, and the court might well agree with the concerns voiced by the police. Keep in mind that posting any item which could attract complaints from others who may see it is itself a risk if they might complain to police.

So, the next time you are tempted to react in haste to what others have posted, pause for a moment to consider what your post may say about you. Once posted, its going to be very difficult to take back that controversial remark.



**Laura Saunbury** is a consultant solicitor with a leading London law firm and has ten years experience as the Association's Honorary Solicitor and shotgun licensing advisor.



I have seen cases where firearm certificates have been revoked through posts

