



# Closer ties

## A new study looks at how two force's firearms units could work more closely together.

Two North-East police forces have started a study which they say could set a precedent for the way firearms teams throughout the country are organised in future.

The Home Office has provided £446,000 for them to investigate ways in which firearms officers from Cleveland and neighbouring Durham can work closer together.

At present, Durham and Cleveland each have 100 firearms officers who are trained at the joint centre in Urray Nook, near Stockton, which is in the Cleveland force area.

The study will examine whether or not to reduce the number of officers authorised to carry guns. Whatever the exact figure decided upon, the change would see the joint strength remaining in the region of 100 between the forces, each officer able to operate in both areas. Although a formal merger of the forces' firearms officers into one unit is one of the options under investigation during the two-year study, both Durham and Cleveland are at pains to point out that no decision has been made and that the result could just as easily be closer working relationships.

The move comes two years after proposals to formerly merge the Durham and Cleveland forces were dropped. Durham Assistant Chief Constable Michael Banks said: "Now that merger of the two forces is off the agenda, we are looking at other ways of closer collaboration. This is part of a whole host of things we're doing.

"For years, our firearms teams have trained together although they have had different weaponry, different

vehicles and different armour. What has been happening is more joint initiatives and this study will investigate the best way to continue that.

"Cleveland and Durham both have 100 officers accredited to use firearms, who in order to retain that accreditation need to undergo twelve days training a year. That is twelve days away from policing duties and for the 100 officers, a loss of 1,200 days.

**"I can also see advantages in that if we, for example, cut our firearms team by ten, that is 12 days training each that is freed up which means those officers can go back onto the frontline, which is beneficial for the public..."**

"In addition, the equipment for each officer costs in the region of £1,900 before you even talk about weaponry and vehicles. The project will investigate whether it makes sense to streamline the process.

"We are looking at having teams of approximately 50 each who can cover jobs in each other's areas. To me, it makes sense that if I need a firearms resource and the Cleveland team are the nearest then we call on them. "We believe we can make savings on training costs, money that can go into frontline policing without damaging our firearms capacity.

"This idea has enormous potential and other forces have also shown interest in what we are doing."

Mr Banks said that, despite negative publicity about police firearms incidents in the UK, the service remained as popular as ever. "We have no problems recruiting people to fill our places," he said.

Outgoing Cleveland deputy chief constable Ron Hogg, who retired at the end of May, said: "We are keen on the project and it is really a case of resolving the details. We believe it is possible to reduce the number of firearms officers across the force."

Mr Hogg can see the sense of officers from each force being able to cover jobs in both areas.

He said: "We have already been carrying out joint training at Urlay Nook and standardising the way we work.

"If we get the training right, whose officers they are, and



Photography: KJB-Photography

who commands them, matters not one jot. For instance, if Durham have an incident which starts in their area and contact us to say 'it is heading your way' it makes sense for them to retain command of it because they have the intelligence on the incident."

He can see economies in closer working, agreeing that there is sense in standardising the type of weapons, equipments and vehicles the teams use.

"I can also see advantages in that if we, for example, cut our firearms team by ten, that is 12 days training each that is freed up which means those officers can go back onto the frontline, which is beneficial for the public. It also frees up time to sell the centre's services to other forces, which would bring in income.

"I am confident that we can deliver benefits from this joint working and there is a willingness within the forces to make it work."

He agrees that being a firearms officer remains as popular as ever, saying: "I think these officers are to be commended. They are prepared to volunteer to do the work, and to command such operations, in the knowledge that if it goes wrong, the consequences are extreme."

## Training matters

The armed officer training his pistol on the car is aware of two threats, the man turning away from fixing the engine on the roadside and the one slumped in the seat of the vehicle.

Suddenly, the man repairing the car turns to reveal a shotgun, giving the officer a fraction of a second to react. As the officer's gun fires, the man in the car reveals his own weapon, only to be shot down. As the officer starts to relax, a third man emerges from the bushes firing his gun. He, too, is shot by the officer.

It's only a scenario, one of the films shown in the simulator at Urlay Nook, and hooked up to a computer which assesses how well the officer reacted.

The simulation room is typical of the scenarios played out every day at the centre, which also includes Europe's only 100m indoor range with a drive-on capability and a house in which officers can be tested in realistic surroundings.

Head of centre Inspector Andy McGregor-Taylor said: "Each force may use different equipment but that really does not really make a lot of difference because we have been giving officers from Durham and Cleveland joint training for some time.

"There is a really positive atmosphere in the place and the officers from both forces mix freely. We give them the same training and ensure that we also give the same training to the command officers from both forces.

"All our instructors are operational firearms officers, which gives them operational credibility."

He said officers were still keen to volunteer: "Nobody wants to shoot anybody because officers know that if it goes wrong, it can affect people's lives. A lot of our training is to about tactical negotiation to bring incidents to an end without a shot being fired. Our work is to ensure that the officers can respond to situations and I have certainly not seen a sea change in officers not wanting to do the job."

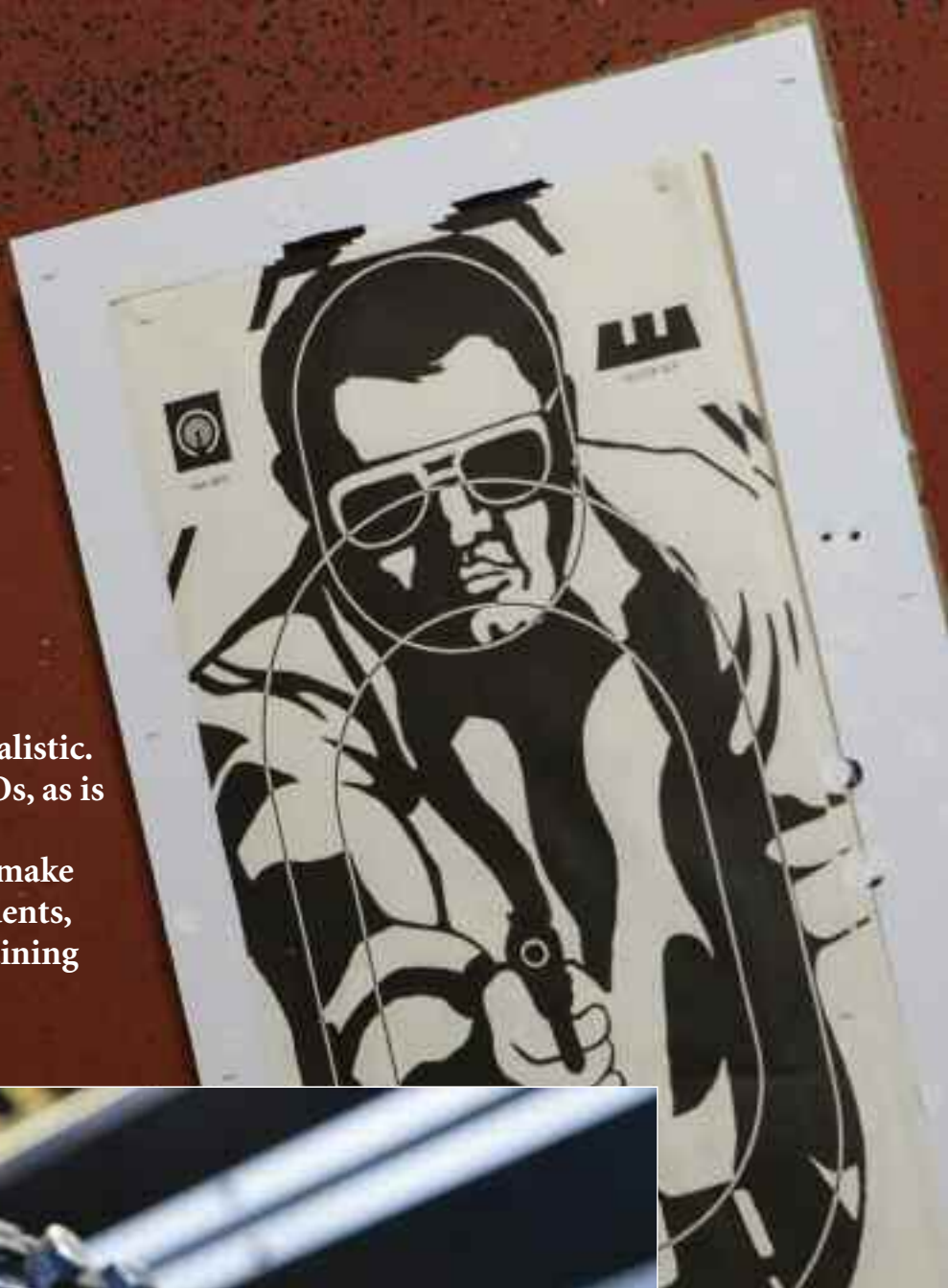
PC Will Cousins, of Durham, an Authorised Firearms Officer (AFO) for more than ten years, said: "The training is thorough and realistic. That realism is essential for AFOs, as is the fact that it happens in real-time.

"I have been on a lot of firearm jobs and the judgement training we receive at the centre is essential. We are trained in how to make judgements at the scene of incidents, which is the most important training of all for an AFO."

Cleveland officer PC John Roberts, a firearms officer since 1994, said: "For me, it is important that when I am called to the scene of an incident, I have control of all the weapons, lethal and non-lethal, in my possession. The training means that I know what to do. When you attend these kinds of incidents, you have the law and tactical parameters but at the end of the day the decision is down to yourself and you need to know your capabilities."



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Clockwise from left: Photos taken at the Durham and Cleveland Firearms unit.

