

An Expert Analysis of the Main UK Political Parties' Stances on Firearms

The Labour Party

OVER ALL: Seeks to make legal gun ownership more restrictive via a financial barrier.

The Labour Party's manifesto does not propose a fundamental overhaul of UK firearms law but instead focuses on a specific change to the licensing system. The party has committed to a policy of "full recovery of the cost of firearm licensing".¹ The stated purpose of this measure is not to restrict gun ownership but to generate revenue for a separate policy goal: funding youth workers and mentors in urban areas to combat violent crime, particularly knife crime.¹ Rural advocacy groups, such as the Countryside Alliance, have criticized this approach as a "gun tax".² They argue that it unfairly burdens law-abiding, rural people with the financial responsibility for tackling urban issues for which they are not responsible. The Countryside Alliance further notes that if the fee is based on the costs of an inefficient police force, it could "skyrocket to £400 or more," a cost that could put legal gun ownership out of reach for many, especially those who require a license for their livelihood, such as deer stalking.² This policy is perceived by the shooting community as a measure that will make legitimate firearm ownership more difficult and expensive.

The Conservative Party

OVER ALL: Largely supportive of the existing regulated system; maintains a status quo stance.

The Conservative Party's manifesto contains no direct or explicit policy statements concerning firearms or the UK's regulated shooting community.³ This absence of a stated position is a significant political signal. The Conservatives, as the party that has historically been in power and overseen the current legal framework, appear to be conveying an implicit endorsement of the status quo. The only policy mentioned that could have a tangential effect

on the shooting community is a proposal to introduce further powers to ban face coverings, a measure that could be used to help combat "shoot saboteurs".³ This single, indirect policy can be interpreted as a subtle nod of support to the shooting community without engaging in a broader, more high-profile debate on firearms. The party's position, therefore, is one of strategic silence, signaling that the current strict legal framework is considered effective and does not require legislative change.

The Liberal Democrats

OVER ALL: No direct policy, but proposes environmental policies that negatively impact shooting.

The Liberal Democrat manifesto, like that of the Conservative Party, does not contain any direct proposals regarding firearms regulation.⁴ However, their policy platform includes measures that would have a significant, albeit indirect, negative impact on the shooting community and the rural economy. The most notable of these is their proposal to ban the "routine burning of heather on peatlands".³ While framed as an environmental initiative, this policy would directly affect grouse shooting, as the practice of "muirburn" is a vital land management tool used by gamekeepers to create the biodiverse moorland habitats required for various bird species and to establish firebreaks.³ This policy ignores scientific research that supports the practice and, according to critics, could undermine the economic viability of rural communities that rely on grouse shooting.³ The Liberal Democrats' stance, therefore, is not a direct one on firearms but rather a consequence of their broader environmental agenda, which has a de facto restrictive effect on key shooting-related activities.

Reform UK

OVER ALL: Advocates for a more permissive and pragmatic approach to firearms for law-abiding citizens and police.

Reform UK's stance, articulated by party leader Nigel Farage, blends a "tough on crime" agenda with a libertarian-leaning view on civilian gun ownership. Historically, Farage has called for a relaxation of gun laws, describing the post-Dunblane handgun ban as "ludicrous" and a "kneejerk" reaction, stating that "if you criminalise handguns then only the criminals carry the guns".⁶ The party's public rhetoric has also focused on empowering police, with a Kent council leader from Reform UK stating that officers should have the "proper backing" to "shoot people if necessary" if there is a "real and present danger".⁷ The party's position is that police who discharge their firearms in good faith should not be "dragged through the courts".⁷ This position is supported by the party's relationship with pro-gun and hunting lobbies, such as the Countryside Alliance and the British Association for Shooting and

Conservation (BASC), which have sponsored Reform UK events.⁸ This strategic alignment and Farage's public appearances at shooting events, where he has been photographed handling firearms, signal an underlying support for the regulated shooting community.⁹

A Comprehensive Analysis of UK Political Parties' Positions on Firearms

Introduction: The UK Firearms Context

Firearms ownership in the United Kingdom is a fundamentally different legal and political issue than in many other nations, most notably the United States. Unlike jurisdictions where the right to bear arms is constitutionally enshrined, the UK's legal framework operates on the principle that gun ownership is a privilege, not a right, and is therefore subject to strict control and licensing by the state.¹¹ The Firearms Act 1968, and subsequent legislation enacted in the wake of tragedies like the Dunblane and Hungerford massacres, has led to a near-total prohibition on many types of weapons, including handguns, automatic firearms, and certain semi-automatic rifles.¹¹ Consequently, the political discourse in the UK is not focused on the liberalization of gun laws. Instead, the debate revolves around the administration, funding, and potential tightening of the existing regulatory regime.

This analysis identifies a significant and unstated consensus among the main political parties. While their platforms contain nuances and indirect policies that impact the regulated shooting community, none of them propose a radical departure from the UK's established legal framework. The debate is confined to secondary issues, such as the financial cost of licensing, the administrative efficiency of the police, and the effects of broader environmental or social policies on rural activities. A full understanding of each party's position therefore requires looking beyond explicit manifesto pledges and considering the strategic omissions, indirect consequences, and underlying political dynamics that shape their approach.

The Labour Party: An Indirect Path to Restriction

The Labour Party's policy on firearms, as outlined in their manifesto, is not a direct prohibition but an indirect, financially driven mechanism. The party has pledged to implement "full recovery of the cost of firearm licensing" to generate revenue for a specific urban crime prevention initiative.¹ The funds raised from licensing fees for shotguns and firearms would be

used to place youth workers and mentors in Accident and Emergency (A&E) units and Pupil Referral Units.¹

The Countryside Alliance, a prominent rural advocacy group, has been highly critical of this policy, labeling it a "gun tax".² Their objection is twofold. First, they argue that it is inequitable to use licensing fees paid by law-abiding, predominantly rural gun owners to fund schemes aimed at reducing urban knife crime.² This approach is seen as a financial penalty on one demographic to solve a problem in another, creating a significant urban-rural policy divide. Second, the group expresses concern about the potential for licensing fees to "skyrocket," noting that some police forces are highly inefficient in their licensing procedures and that a "full-cost recovery" model based on these forces could make legal gun ownership financially prohibitive for many.² This would disproportionately affect those who rely on firearms for work, such as deer management. The policy thus presents a contradiction: by making deer stalking more difficult, Labour could be doing a "disservice to the environment" and "deer welfare," which runs counter to its own stated goal to "deliver for nature".² The party's approach appears to view firearms licensing as a convenient revenue source rather than a core public safety service, a perspective that highlights a fundamental lack of understanding of rural life and its economic underpinnings.

The Conservative Party: A Stance of Strategic Ambiguity

The Conservative Party's position on firearms is best defined by what is not said in its manifesto. The party's platform contains no direct policy proposals or references to firearms, shooting, or hunting.³ This silence is a deliberate and telling political strategy. As the party responsible for the existing firearms legislation, the Conservatives are signaling that they are comfortable with the current regulatory environment.

Rather than proposing new laws, the Conservatives offer a minor policy that indirectly supports the regulated shooting community. The manifesto includes a proposal to introduce further powers to ban face coverings, which is presented as a measure to combat "shoot saboteurs".³ This single policy, while not a grand statement on gun rights, serves as a subtle assurance to the shooting community that the party is aware of their concerns and is willing to protect their activities from disruption. The absence of a broader policy debate, combined with this small gesture, suggests a position of maintaining the status quo. The Conservative Party is implicitly signaling that the current system is both effective for public safety and workable for law-abiding firearm owners, a position that avoids the political pitfalls of a high-profile debate on the issue.

The Liberal Democrats: Indirect Restriction via Environmental Policy

Similar to the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats' manifesto does not contain any direct policy on firearms or licensing.⁴ However, their broader policy agenda, particularly on environmental issues, has a significant and direct impact on the rural shooting community. The party has proposed a ban on the "routine burning of heather on peatlands".³

The practice of "muirburn," or controlled burning of heather, is a crucial land management tool for gamekeepers. It is essential for maintaining the diverse moorland habitat that supports red grouse, curlews, and other bird species.³ This practice also serves as a critical measure to create firebreaks and prevent large-scale wildfires.³ Critics argue that the proposed ban ignores scientific evidence and would have serious negative consequences for the rural economy and the delicate moorland ecosystem that is sustained by grouse shooting.³ The Liberal Democrats' stance, therefore, is not a direct one on firearms but rather a consequence of their broader environmental agenda, which has a de facto restrictive effect on key shooting-related activities.

Reform UK: An Explicit Focus on Law and Order and a Latent Support for Civilian Gun Ownership

Reform UK's stance on firearms is a complex blend of populist rhetoric and a more nuanced, ideologically-driven approach. The party's public platform, as articulated by its leader Nigel Farage, is a "tough on crime" agenda that advocates for empowering police to use force to combat crime. A Reform UK council leader, Linden Kemkaran, stated that police should have the "proper backing" to "shoot people if necessary" if they feel a person presents a "real and present danger".⁷ The party also advocates for greater legal protection for officers who discharge their firearms, arguing that they should not be "dragged through the courts" when acting in good faith.⁷ This position aligns with Farage's pledge to make Reform UK "the toughest party on law and order and on crime that this country has ever seen".⁷

This "tough on crime" messaging is complemented by a consistent, if less publicized, alignment with the pro-gun and hunting communities. Historically, while leading UKIP, Farage publicly called for a relaxation of the UK's gun laws, specifically describing the post-Dunblane handgun ban as "ludicrous" and a "kneejerk" reaction.⁶ He argued that "if you criminalise handguns then only the criminals carry the guns".⁶ This position is supported by the party's relationship with powerful lobby groups, as evidenced by the sponsorship of Reform UK conferences by the Countryside Alliance and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC).⁸ This symbiotic relationship suggests that while the public-facing message is focused on law enforcement, there is an underlying, enduring support for a less restrictive firearms regime for private citizens, a stance that is further reinforced by Farage's public appearances and photo opportunities at shooting events.⁹

Insights and Comparative Analysis

The analysis of the four main UK political parties' positions on firearms reveals a complex landscape of political strategy, indirect policy, and a clear urban-rural divide.

Party	Explicit Manifesto Policy	Indirect Policies/Impact	Overall Stance
Conservative	None mentioned. ³	Proposal to ban face coverings to combat "shoot saboteurs". ³	Maintain Status Quo.
Labour	Full-cost recovery for firearms licensing. ¹	Funds for urban crime prevention from rural license fees; perceived as a "gun tax". ²	More Restrictive via Financial Barrier.
Liberal Democrats	None mentioned. ⁴	Proposal to ban heather burning on peatlands; impacts moorland grouse shooting. ³	Indifferent/Restrictive via Environmental Policy.
Reform UK	Empowering police with greater legal protection to use firearms in the line of duty. ⁷	Historical comments advocating for the relaxation of the handgun ban and relationships with pro-gun and hunting lobbies. ⁶	Advocates for a more permissive and pragmatic approach.

The table above illustrates the distinct approaches. Labour's strategy is to use an indirect financial mechanism to achieve a policy goal, a move perceived as hostile by the shooting community. The Conservatives employ a strategy of strategic silence, implicitly supporting the status quo and the regulated shooting community by not proposing change. The Liberal Democrats' position is a consequence of their broader environmental platform, demonstrating how a party's core values can inadvertently affect a community they do not directly address.

Reform UK's position is dual-pronged, combining a populist, "tough on crime" stance with an implicit, and at times explicit, support for relaxing restrictions on law-abiding civilian gun owners.

The recurring theme is a discernible disconnect between urban-focused policy priorities and the practical realities and economic interests of rural communities. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats propose policies that, while not explicitly targeting firearms, have significant, and in some cases, negative ripple effects on the rural economy and the activities of the regulated shooting community. This dynamic highlights that for many UK political parties, the debate about firearms is not a standalone issue but is subsumed within broader discussions of public safety, environmental protection, and economic development.

Conclusion

The positions of the main UK political parties on firearms are nuanced and cannot be easily summarized. While there is a general consensus to maintain the UK's strict firearms laws, the parties' approaches to the issue differ significantly. The Labour Party's policy of full-cost recovery for licensing represents an indirect, financially restrictive measure that is met with strong opposition from rural advocacy groups. The Conservative Party's deliberate silence on the matter signals a commitment to the status quo, effectively supporting the current regulated system without engaging in a political debate. The Liberal Democrats' stance is not a direct one on firearms but is a consequence of their environmental policies, which would negatively impact shooting-related activities. Finally, Reform UK's position is multifaceted, combining a firm stance on empowering police to use firearms with a long-standing, personal belief from Nigel Farage that civilian gun laws should be relaxed. Ultimately, understanding each party's position requires looking beyond explicit manifesto pledges and considering the indirect consequences of their broader policy platforms, the influence of advocacy groups, and the strategic importance of what is left unsaid.

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