

Fact Sheet 1

TASERS

What are Tasers?

Taser is the brand name of the Conducted Energy Devices that police forces across the UK use. Tasers can be used in a number of ways to de-escalate a potentially violent or dangerous situation without excessive force.

It was a NASA researcher, Jack Cover, who in 1974 first patented the device designed to immobilise a living target without serious trauma or injury. Sometimes referred to as Conducted Energy Devices (CEDs), a Taser is designed to provide frontline officers with an ability to restrain potentially dangerous individuals without the use of excessive force.

By 1976 the first Taser device had been manufactured and by the mid-2000s they had become common-place throughout many police forces across the world.



Officer with an Axon Taser device

In the UK a Conducted Energy Device/Taser is classified as a 'prohibited weapon' in Section 5 of

Purpose

The Strategic Police Plan commits to the provision of Policing for a safe, protected and resilient Scotland. This requires designing and maintaining services which meet rising and evolving demands in a constantly changing environment. To meet these demands now and in the future Scotland's police service must adapt and proportionately adopt the necessary technologies which will enable them to protect the safety and wellbeing of our communities (as outlined in the Policing Principles - Section 32 of Police and Fire Reform Act 2012).

This series of public focused and user-friendly factsheets has been developed to provide an overview of the benefits of emerging technology and upcoming developments within policing, the policies that will govern them, and the ethical, privacy and human rights implications.

the Firearms Act 1968 and it is an offence for any member of the public to possess or use such a weapon. Police officers whilst acting in their capacity as such, are exempt from the requirements of the legislation.

Tasers have been used in the UK by police forces since 2004¹. Research suggests that when a Taser is drawn by frontline officers there is an 85% compliance rate, with no need to discharge the device².

Why are Tasers used in policing?

When confronting potentially dangerous or violent individuals, frontline police officers have a duty to minimise the risk of injury or death to the individual themselves, the immediate community, and other officers.

Use-of-force options can vary from verbal de-escalation methods to physical restraints or holds. If warranted, a baton may be used to protect against or restrain a potentially harmful individual.

Any use of force by an officer must be the minimum amount necessary to accomplish the lawful objective concerned³.

It is recognised that a baton may cause injury to a potentially harmful individual, another member of the public or police officer. Instead of

using a baton to control situations where the threat of violence is high, technologies such as a Taser may be used instead.



Taser device being used in officer trainer

A Taser device can be used by an officer as a deterrent by pointing a laser beam at a dangerous individual (known as "red-dotting"). This is often enough to de-escalate a situation. On the occasion when red-dotting does not resolve an issue, the Taser can be discharged with one of two functions: 'fired' or 'drive stun'. When a Taser is fired, this means that the trigger is squeezed and the cartridge is deployed from a distance.

By contrast, drive stun is when the Taser is applied by hand directly to somebody in close quarters who is displaying serious threats of violence. Both approaches can be used to control a situation whilst minimising injury and harm. Tasers are one of several tactical options that can be used when dealing with

¹ <https://www.humberside.police.uk/taser>

² Kroll, M.W., Brave, M.A., Pratt, H.M.O. et al. Benefits, Risks, and Myths of TASER® Handheld Electrical Weapons. Hum Factors

Mech Eng Def Saf 3, 7 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41314-019-0021-9>

³ <https://www.scotland.police.uk/spa-media/fxhkdzem/use-of-force-sop.pdf>

an incident that has the potential for conflict.

In Police Scotland, the carrying of Tasers is limited to that of specially trained police officers to ensure that its utilisation is proportionate, ethical, transparent, and only used as a method of harm reduction when absolutely necessary.

Police Scotland implementation and use of the technology

In 2018 Police Scotland introduced a new cadre of Specially Trained Officers (STO) who are personally qualified to use a Taser device⁴. There are approximately 520 STOs currently working within Police Scotland. In order to qualify to use a Taser, officers must undergo rigorous training (the Police Scotland CED User Course totals 24 hours, exceeding the minimum UK requirement of 18 hours contact time).



Officer in Taser training

STOs must also take part in yearly refresher training in order to continue to be issued with a Taser device.

Since their introduction in June 2018, STOs have been deployed to 1,355 incidents. During this time period, Tasers have been used on 782 instances, although they have only been discharged 90 times in this period (11.5% discharge rate per use).

The University of the West of Scotland conducted a study which assessed the extended use of Tasers for STOs. The research project evaluated the first six months of Taser deployment in the latter half of 2018. The results of the study confirmed that both the public and officers were in general support of the controlled use of Tasers in Police Scotland.

Police Scotland's Taser Tactical Group maintains an overview and scrutiny of the STOs. Its aims include identifying best practice and looking for opportunities to share learning. Police Scotland also has a Taser Monitoring Group which provides strategic oversight of Taser use by frontline officers.

What safeguards are in place?

Police Scotland follows the College of Policing's Code of Practice on Armed

⁴ <https://www.spa.police.uk/spa-media/312dstfc/item-6-4-tasers.pdf>

Policing and Police use of Less Lethal Weapons⁵. This guides and informs how officers throughout the country utilise Taser devices in certain scenarios.

Every time a Taser is used by a Police Scotland officer, a Use of Force report is completed to document the need for its use and enable auditing of Taser deployment. In Scotland, Tasers have been used by Armed Policing Unit since 2015. In the past six years, Tasers were discharged 25 times by the Armed Policing Unit⁶.

Assurance for citizens

Police officers are required to operate in dangerous and challenging situations when carrying out their role to protect the public. Access to STOs carrying Tasers helps to manage these risks and protect the public.

Compared to other uses of force such as PAVA spray (a safer alternative to pepper spray), baton use, or firearms; Tasers are least likely to cause long-term harm. Taser devices are mainly used to control individuals in situations where the risk of violence is high. This is done to mitigate any further harm (i.e. injury or death) to that

individual, as well as protect bystanders and police officers.

Analysis undertaken by Police Scotland shows that Tasers significantly reduce officer and subject injury rate compared to conventional police defence tools:

- Baton used - 28% officer injury rate, 52% subject injury rate
- PAVA Spray used - 24% officer injury rate, 16% subject injury rate
- Taser used - 0.2% officer injury rate, 0.6% subject injury rate (2 officers and 3 subjects injured from the 620 times that Taser has been drawn)⁷

Despite the clear benefits of STOs carrying Tasers, it is recognised that there are risks associated with Taser use and these must be carefully controlled. There is some evidence to suggest that Tasers can trigger the 'weapons effect'⁸ – the psychological phenomenon in which the visual cue of a weapon in public-police interactions can lead to the increased aggression from both parties.

It is also important to recognise that in some countries there have been concerning reports of Taser over-use in relation to vulnerable and minority groups (such people with mental

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<https://library.college.police.uk/docs/appref/CCS207-CCS0120853800-001-Code-of-Practice-on-Armed-Policing.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.scotland.police.uk/spa-media/t31gtqxx/armed-policing-quarterly-report-q4-2020-21.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.spa.police.uk/spa-media/3l2dstfc/item-6-4-tasers.pdf>

⁸ Ariel B, Lawes D, Weinborn C, Henry R, Chen K, Brants Sabo H. (2019). The "Less-Than-Lethal Weapons Effect"—Introducing TASERS to Routine Police Operations in England and Wales: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*. 2019;46(2):280-300.

health issues, problem drug users, and ethnic minorities⁹).

It is vital that Taser use in Scotland is limited to specially trained police officers; is proportionate, ethical, transparent, and is utilised only as a method of harm reduction when necessary.

In order to ensure ethical and proportionate use of Tasers the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner (PIRC) investigate all Taser discharges as a matter of course. PIRC supported the operational introduction of Tasers by Police Scotland within their annual report 2018-19.

They affirmed that “in the vast majority of incidents where Tasers were used by STOs, it has allowed them to resolve incidents swiftly, increasing officer and public safety, which is very reassuring.

Moreover, our findings show a large number of occasions where officers have used Tasers in order to limit or prevent self-harming by people suffering from mental health issues, and in some cases have potentially prevented deaths.”

Looking forward

Police Scotland aim to increase the number of officers specially trained and with access to Tasers from 500 to 2000 over the next 3 years. This means that through a greater geographic distribution of Tasers

more local police teams will be able to use Taser as a tactical option when police are called to control situations where the threat of violence is high.

There is currently no intention to expand beyond 2000 trained officers.

Keeping up to date

To keep up to date with our work, please keep an eye on the Scottish Police Authority’s [website](#) where you can find papers and watch livestream committee discussions, and follow us on Twitter:

@ScotPolAuth @policescotland

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⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uk-public-should-resist-drum-beat-calls-all-police-carry-taser>