

Children's Services

Foster carers who possess firearms or other weapons (including replicas)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Dorset Council Children's Services welcomes fostering, adoption and special guardian applications from a range of people, including those who possess licensed guns.
- 1.2 Whilst Dorset Council acknowledges the rights of individuals to own licensed guns and other weapons not requiring a licence, our first duty is to the needs and safety of children who are in our care.
- 1.3 Research indicates that where guns are present, more people die, whether this is from accidents, suicides, assaults or crime.
- 1.4 Dorset Council acknowledges that guns are owned in both rural and urban areas for recreational, sporting and other legitimate reasons. Target rifle and pistol shooting is a well-established sport and recreation and is one of the top three participation sports in the UK. In addition, shotguns are owned for game shooting, clay pigeon shooting, vermin control and competition shooting. Individuals may apply to the Police for a certificate to possess a firearm or shotgun. Applicants must satisfy the Police they are fit to be entrusted with a firearm, have a good reason for possession, and they pose no danger to the public.
- 1.5 Safekeeping of shotguns and firearms is a requirement of the granting of certificates. Guns must be stored securely and separately to prevent as far as possible unauthorised people taking or using them. This should be in a locked gun cabinet or other secure container. Dorset Fostering Service also requires that all forms of ammunition be kept in secure storage.
- 1.6 The keys to any gun cabinet and ammunition safe must be kept by the carer so that they are not accessible to anyone else at any time.
- 1.7 Many other recreational activities may pose a risk to children and young people; horse-riding and skiing, for example, are relatively high risk pursuits but may also be valuable opportunities, so long as risks are properly assessed and managed. The same principles hold for firearms, although these present risks not only when they are used, but also when they are kept within the home.
- 1.8 This policy regulates the possession of licensed and replica firearms, and weapons that do not require a licence, by foster carers. For this procedure, the term 'foster carer' refers to foster carers, members of their households, and guests.

- 1.9 The possession and wearing of a ceremonial weapon solely for established religious purposes will not be taken as a reason to bar an individual from becoming a foster carer.

2. Policy

- 2.1 Dorset Council requires its foster carers to uphold the law. They may not possess or use without a licence any firearm that the law requires to be licensed.
- 2.2 Dorset Council considers that the possession by foster carers of licensed firearms and replica guns can pose a risk to the safety of children in that person's care. Therefore, where potential or existing foster carers, prospective adopters or prospective special guardians, or anyone else in the family household, have a certificate for the possession of a shotgun or firearm or have unlicensed weapons and replica guns on or near their premises, they must inform their supervising social worker of this fact.
- 2.3 Supervising social workers will advise foster carers seeking approval or re-approval that the recommended option is for any firearms and other weapons and their ammunition to be **always** stored away from the family home at an approved premises such as a gun club.
- 2.4 Dorset Fostering Service will only agree to foster carers keeping firearms and other weapons in their home if there is no other practicable alternative. If weapons (including replicas) are to be stored in the home, they must be kept in a commercially manufactured gun cabinet according to Home Office recommendations. Removal of the weapons from the cabinet must only be during secure transit to a gun club or for approved activities.
- 2.5 Where a shotgun is outside of its case and not immediately in use, it must be broken and unloaded at all times.
- 2.6 The supervising social worker will advise foster carers that children should not be involved with any activities involving weapons unless these are properly supervised and are part of an organised shooting/sporting activity (e.g. Army Cadets, shooting sports). The child's Social Worker and those with parental responsibility must always give permission in writing before a child or young person can be involved in activities involving weapons.

3. Procedure

Initial Assessment

- 3.1 As part of the initial assessment of a prospective foster carer's suitability, the assessing social worker will ask them whether they hold or have access to firearms, replica firearms or unlicensed weapons.

- 3.2 Where applicants confirm that they hold a firearm that requires a licence, the assessing social worker must view the certificate, confirm that it is valid and current, and place a copy on file. They will also check that the carer has advised the Fire Service that live ammunition is held on their property.
- 3.3 The assessing social worker must see where all items (including ammunition) are stored. They must be separately secured in such a way that they could not be accessed by children or young people (that is, in a secure site away from the home or in an approved gun storage cabinet).
- 3.4 Assessing social workers must be confident that applicants are fully aware of the risks of firearms and weapons and will only use them in a responsible manner. The holding of firearms or other weapons must be recorded in the assessment report and reported to the fostering panel or the appropriate manager for special guardians.
- 3.5 The assessing social worker will complete a thorough risk management plan for firearms and weapons as part of the assessment of the carer's suitability, and this will be added to the carer's Safer Care plan. Where a foster carer who is already approved proposes to keep licenced firearms, replica guns or unlicensed weapons on or near their premises, they should notify their supervising social worker, who will carry out a risk assessment to determine whether the foster carer's approval can continue once the weapon(s) is installed. If the assessment is positive, this will be added to the carer's Safer Care plan.

Matching and placement

- 3.6 Before placing a child with the foster carer, the child's social worker will view the weapons risk management plan for the foster carer and carry out their own assessment as to whether the weapon(s) present any risks to the child. They will agree with the foster carer and supervising social worker any additional risk mitigation measures that the child requires.
- 3.7 It may not be appropriate to place children who have experienced violence in their family of origin in a home where there are guns on the premises. In all cases an age appropriate discussion must take place with the child prior to placement assuring them of the purpose and safety arrangements for keeping firearms or other weapons.

Reviews

- 3.8 As part of the foster carer's annual review, the security of guns, weapons and ammunition and the ownership of a **current** firearm certificate must be verified (certificates last for 5 years).
- 3.9 Anyone who has concerns about the use or storage of firearms, or lack of a certificate (whether at the review or at any other time) must report these

immediately to the Head of Service, Children in Care, and the Fostering Service Manager. The supervising social worker must inform the social workers for all children in placement of any such concerns.

- 3.10 The Police will be notified where applicants are found to have breached firearms legislation (for example, where they have no current certificate). Dorset Fostering Service will regard this as a serious breach of policy which may result in a recommendation for removal of the children in placement and de-registration of the foster carer.
- 3.11 Where Dorset Fostering Service has concerns about the mental ill-health or safety of a foster carer (or member of their household) who has a licence to hold firearms, it will report this matter to the Police (Firearms Licensing Authority).

4. Information About Licences

4.1 Applying for a Firearms/Shotgun Certificate

Applications should be made to the local Police force through the Firearms Registry. All details regarding this process can be found on the [Dorset Police website](#).

Useful information can also be found on [Ask the Police](#).

Acknowledgement

Thank you to Wirral and Swindon Fostering Services for publishing their policies on foster carers and firearms. Their work has informed the development of this policy.