



Pet Policy and Guidance for Fostering Households

This policy and guidance document refers to both Dogs and other animals, there are some sections specifically concerned with dog ownership, but this document equally applies to ownership of all pets in a fostering household.

Milton Keynes Council recognises that pets can form a valuable part of a foster carer's household and can help Children in Care to form positive relationships within the foster family.

However, our first and paramount consideration is to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child throughout their stay with a foster family and ensure their needs are prioritised in a safe and nurturing environment. Where applicants keep animals the implications for children will need to be considered as part of the household health and safety assessment.

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1. Dangerous Dogs

Milton Keynes Council will not register or approve foster carers who own any breed of dog listed under the Dangerous Dogs Act (DDA) 1991 (amended 1997) and Anti Social Crime and Policing (ASBCP) Act 2014 or where there is a pet which comes under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976.

Applications to foster will also not be considered from anyone who owns any breed of dog that is registered or required to be registered under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991/1997/ASBCP 2014. These are:

- Pit Bull Terriers (type)
- American Staffordshire Terriers (Am Staffs);
- Irish Staffordshire Bull Terrier (ISBT);
- Irish Blue or Red Nose;
- Japanese Tosa
- Dogo Argentines
- Fila Brazillieros
- XL Bully

On December 31st 2023, XL Bully dogs were added to the list. Descriptions of banned types, related breed issues and further guidance can be found via RSPCA or from Defra (Department of Environment and Rural Affairs). Details re certification of exemption can be found below:

[Apply for a Certificate of Exemption to keep an XL Bully dog - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/certificate-of-exemption-to-keep-an-xl-bully-dog)

If an applicant owns any of the above dangerous dogs, they cannot be assessed to become a foster carer. If an approved foster carer acquires one of the above dogs, their approval will immediately be terminated if s/he is not prepared to cease ownership.

The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 has been amended by the Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014 (ASBCP ACT 2014) and the changes will have far reaching implications for both owners of dogs and those in charge of them.

The ASBCP became law in 2014 and amended the DDA 1991 and extend the offence of a dangerously out of control dog to ALL PLACES (England and Wales) and extended police powers to impose injunctions, Community Protection Notices (CPN), Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN), Criminal Behaviour Orders (CBO) and Public Space Protection Orders (PSPO).

Other Potentially Dangerous dogs:

A safety assessment of all dogs in applicants' homes will be carried out. However, an independent expert assessment (RSPCA, Kennel Club, Vet) will be required in households containing the following breeds or two (or more) dogs of any breed, as these have been identified by the RSPCA as having a tendency towards and capacity for aggressiveness:

- Alsatian (German Shepherd);
- Rottweiler;
- Doberman;
- Bulldog;
- Or a 'pack' of dogs (two or more dogs of any breed).

If, after a risk assessment, it is considered that a child could safely be placed in a household with one of the above dogs or a 'pack' of dogs, the Fostering Team Manager must be

consulted, and endorsement obtained from the Head of Corporate parenting before the general assessment of the prospective carer continues. This is to ensure that the assessing social worker has management support in a situation where a potential risk may still be present and to establish that the continuation of the assessment is an effective use of scarce social work resources.

If an approved foster carer acquires one of the above dogs or their dog ownership is increased from one to two or more, the above professional risk assessment must also be undertaken immediately. The Team Manager should be consulted regarding how the Fostering Panel may view such an application prior to obtaining endorsement from the Agency Decision Maker if the carer's approval is to continue.

Further information on the issues in the assessment may be confirmed by referees from outside the household such as friends who have visited the applicant's home; a verbal reference may prove to be a valuable source of objective comment on any risks the dog/s may present.

Fostering Network guidance considers that the issue of dog safety should be approached from a health and safety perspective, and that a risk assessment must be conducted.

The safety of the child to be placed should be paramount. It is the responsibility of the prospective foster carer dog owner to demonstrate the dog's ability to cope with children and that s/he has a responsible attitude and good understanding of the issues involved. Responsible dog owners will not object to a check being made in relation to the dog, in addition to a check on their suitability to be carers.

The department's Pet Questionnaire should be completed as part of the assessment of prospective foster carers. When there are any concerns, the Social Worker should also complete a Comprehensive Dog Assessment

2. Number of Dogs in a Foster Home

Two dogs will be the maximum in a foster home:

- a. Because of the likelihood for a pack instinct to develop;
- b. More than two dogs require a great deal of attention and time when looked after appropriately.

3. Assessments

Assessments will be required when there is a request to be considered as a prospective foster carer and whenever a new dog is introduced to an existing fostering household.

For prospective applicants the initial recruitment process will consider pet ownership and pet management. Where there is concern e.g. banned breed/dangerous animal as defined in the legislation, applications will not be taken forward.

The Dog Ownership Questionnaire should be completed as part of the assessment of prospective applicants. The questionnaires require the dog owner(s) to take responsibility for providing details of why their dog has the appropriate temperament to accommodate foster children living safely within the family home and is compatible with the fostering task.

Staff should ask for any supporting evidence which can assist with reassurance on pet behaviour and management including their own observations.

Consideration should be given to the impact of any changes in routine to the pet; issues of territory and protective factors in pets towards their owners.

If there is any doubt about the suitability of an animal expert opinion should be sought from a vet or the RSPCA.

The Fostering Service should be informed of a new or first dog entering the fostering household and the Dog Ownership Questionnaire completed.

Any change in circumstances regarding pets should be updated at the next foster carer Annual Review.

No Child in Care should be left alone at any time with a dog or any pet until the foster carer is confident that there is a positive relationship between the child and dog to ensure the child's safety. The foster carer must inform the child's social worker they are proposing to do this.

4. Matching

Matching considerations before a child is placed within a foster family must include a risk assessment. This should include the child's attitude/experience of pets, any allergies, and any other risks and the child's capacity to live in a household where there are pets. For example, is the child fearful of dogs; does the child's culture view dogs in a certain light; has the child been known to mistreat animals?

5. Size of Dog/Pets

It is recognised that dogs and other pets can attack children. While the size of a dog is important, especially where vulnerable children are involved, the breed of the dog may indicate the tendency or capacity for aggressiveness. Small dogs may attack, but it is larger dogs that have the strength to maim or kill. Therefore, when assessing a family this should be taken into consideration when making the final recommendation to the Panel.

The Fostering Panel should take into account any dogs or pets when approving a family and address the minimum age of child to be placed. The assessments must include the potential risk posed by a specific animal and the carer's attitude and approach to owning a pet(s).

Foster carers should be asked as part of stage 1 of the Form F assessment and when a new dog comes into their home, for any details of dog training/obedience classes undertaken.

6. Working Dogs and Animals in Rural communities

Where prospective foster carers have working dogs i.e. Police dogs/Farm dogs/Sheep dogs, these must be kept in a secure area outside the home where children cannot gain access. The assessing social worker will need to see the area and satisfy themselves that children could not gain access.

A report or letter from the family vet detailing the type of work undertaken by the animal should be referenced and confirmed in the Dog Ownership Questionnaire and included in the presentation to the Panel.

7. Animals/Dogs Kept for Breeding

Households who keep animals for breeding purposes will require individual assessment and not distract from the fostering task. As with working dogs, the assessing social worker will need to be satisfied that the animals are kept in secure, separate areas where children cannot gain access. It is important to note that even the most placid animals can become aggressive when they are protecting their young.

If the foster carer is breeding five dog litters or more the household will need to be formally registered under the Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999.

8. Looked after children having their own pets

It is acknowledged that some looked after children and young people may bring pets with them when they are looked after by foster carers, they may also want to look after domestic animals. This can demonstrate a good sense of responsibility for a child and increase their sense of security and self worth. This should be actively encouraged wherever possible, subject to the health and safety checks which would apply to any pet mentioned in this policy.

9. Health, Safety and Hygiene

It is important to be aware of the health risks that can be associated with pets and all vaccinations should be up to date. Health risks include:

- Cat scratches, bites and litter trays which can cause Toxoplasmosis;
- Toxocara canis, a parasite that lives inside dogs' bodies and Campylobacter a bacterial infection;
- Psittacosis, sometimes called Parrot Fever, although relevant to other birds.

Dogs and cats should be wormed and flea'd regularly. Carers should be able to support this with a certificate or letter from their vet and this should be noted on the Pet/Dog Questionnaire and updated at the foster carer Annual Review.

All outside areas should be kept free of fouling. Pets in cages must be kept clean and gloves should be worn when cleaning. Gloves should also be worn when cleaning litter trays.

Where cats are kept, babies should be protected by the use of a net on prams and pushchairs and cat litter trays should be unable to be accessed by crawling babies/toddlers.

Fish tanks/other tanks containing pets should be placed carefully where children cannot gain access.

If chickens are kept, they should be secured appropriately, and vet checked.

10. New Pets

If following approval of a carer the family decide to get a dog or other pet, they must consider taking the following actions first:

- Consider carefully what sort of dog/pet would fit approval;
- Seek background information on the dog/pet e.g. age, history etc.
- Seek expert advice on how to handle/manage the pet given the fostering tasks undertaken and the possible behaviour of Children in Care;
- Consult with the Fostering Social Worker once all information is known. The Fostering Social Worker can then take further advice from an expert or refer to Panel for approval/review.

11. Dogs/Pets Currently in Placement

Where existing carers have either more than two dogs or a large dog, Fostering Social Workers should visit each carer to look at their approval and registration i.e. if a carer is registered for babies and toddlers but has a large dog, their approval will need to be formally reviewed. Where more than two dogs are in the foster home, this too will need to be formally reviewed. It is important to note that by reviewing each case individually, both the needs of the child and addressing the pet within the family will ensure safety for all.

Carer supervision visits should include observations of pets within the home and how they are managed.

The management of visitors to the house should also be explored with attention given to how, for example, contact within the home is managed.

12. Emergency, Remand, Short Break and Respite/Day Care Foster Placements

It is more likely that emergency or remand placements may have any age of child arriving at any time of day or night. It is therefore particularly important that carers who provide this service do not have pets who pose a risk to a particular child i.e. large dogs as it is not known what age/size of child may be placed.

The introduction of pets to children on day care, respite or short break placements should be risk assessed.

13. Visiting Animals

It is important to note that where foster carers have friends/relatives with pets visiting their house this Policy would apply.

14. Actions in the Event of Injury to a Child by a Pet

If a dog or other pet in the household bites, scratches or in any way injures a fostered child the foster carer must take the following actions immediately:

- Remove the animal from the house;
- Give the child first aid and seek medical advice/attention as soon as possible;

- Notify the Fostering Social Worker or Team Manager
- Notify the child's Social Worker or Team Manager.

Following this an individual written risk assessment needs to be undertaken considering the following: the circumstances and severity of the injury, the age and vulnerability of the child, the impact on the child, the carer's response to the incident and ability to work within policies and procedures, does the animal need to be removed from the home on a temporary or permanent basis.

The outcome will depend on each individual situation and clearly a severe injury may result in child protection procedures, the removal of the animal and a move for a child to an alternative placement. However any injury however minor should be followed up by:

- Work with the child re any long term impact
- Reflection/work with the carers about the incident
- A review of safer caring policy and practice within the home
- Review of pet assessment
- Consideration whether an independent expert assessment on the pet is required.

15. Other Dangerous Pets

As well as dogs, other animals may be kept by prospective foster carers, and these will be considered on an individual basis during the assessment. Applications to foster will not be considered from anyone who owns a pet that is registered or required to be registered under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976.

APPENDIX A

Pet Ownership Assessment – Guidance Notes:

An ownership assessment needs to address the following issues:

Dogs:

Confirmation of the breed of the dog. If the dog is not pure-bred, ask the applicant/s if anything is known of the animal's ancestry. Many dogs are wrongly identified as breeds to which they have only a passing resemblance.

It is recognised that dogs can attack children. The real risk is not usually related to the breed of dog but to the size. Small dogs may attack, but it is large dogs that have the strength to seriously maim or kill. Therefore, when assessing a family this should be taken into consideration when making the final recommendation to the Panel.

Establish if the dog was acquired from a reputable breeder, from commercial kennels, a pet shop, a rescue centre or some other source. Most responsible breeders will know the characteristics and histories of their stock, will have used breed-specific health screening schemes to check for hereditary conditions, and will have provided guidance on rearing and training the dog. Establish what dog training/obedience classes have been undertaken with each animal.

Older dogs acquired from rescue centres often have a history of neglect, ill treatment or abandonment. They may have established behaviour patterns as a result and careful consideration will have to be given to how the family will deal with a child who may have an insecure pattern of attachment, alongside a dog dealing with similar issues!

Obtain some information on health care. Is the dog vaccinated and wormed regularly? In extremely rare cases, children can sustain eye damage if they are in direct contact with dog faeces containing the eggs of the toxocara canis worm. Regular worming eliminates this risk entirely. Coat care should also be a regular feature of the dog's management and routine preventative treatment against fleas and lice is required.

Find out how long the dog has lived with the family and whether this is its first home. Dogs with persistent difficulties are often re-homed more than once. A recently acquired dog may not yet have begun to show the problems which resulted in re-homing in the past.

Clarify the dog's age. An elderly animal may be less able to cope with young children or may be less amenable given the aches and pains of ageing. A young dog may still be unruly and boisterous and any child joining the family will have to be prepared for this.

Find out who is mainly responsible for looking after the dog. It is important that the identified person maintains the dog's routine as far as possible in the midst of the change a new child will inevitably bring.

Observe how the dog behaves when you visit. Is it overly defensive, nervous, aggressive or excessively friendly and demanding of attention? Does it respond to the owner's commands? How does the owner describe the dog's temperament, its behaviour to other visitors, children and other dogs?

Has there ever been an incident where the dog has bitten or shown aggression to anyone?

How does the dog respond to children and is it used to having children around?

Determine the feeding arrangements for the dog. Is dog food kept out of reach of a child? Are dog utensils and human utensils kept separately? Is the dog allowed to beg when the humans are eating? Although the risk of infection from dogs is minimal, sensible hygiene procedures should be in place at all times, particularly if a crawling infant or toddler is being placed.

Be clear about where the dog sleeps. Dogs need a special, safe place where they can be left in peace. Allowing a dog to sleep at the end of a child's bed or even in the child's room is inadvisable for reasons of both hygiene and safety.

Check on exercise and "toileting" routines. Does the dog receive enough exercise to prevent boredom and any possible destructive behaviour that may result? Where is the dog permitted to relieve itself and what are the "cleaning up" arrangements?

Prospective foster carers must develop a clear written procedure with regard to the introduction of foster children to dogs (or other pets where applicable). (This must be included in the Pet Questionnaire report and brought to the attention of the fostering panel.)

No child in care should be left alone at any time with a dog or pet until the foster carer is confident that there is a positive relationship between the child and pet to ensure the child's safety.

Explore how the family will cope if, after placement, the combination of dogs and children proves untenable. Having to re-home a loved family pet can be upsetting for everyone, including the incoming child who may already have suffered from losses in the past.

It should be borne in mind that all dogs have the potential to be dangerous and that children can provoke attacks from dogs. Foster carers must be able to supervise both the child and dog at all times, to prevent dangerous situations arising.

Positive Aspects of Dog Ownership

Whilst carrying out a risk assessment of a prospective carer's dog, the obvious potential benefits of a dog matched appropriately with a child in placement should also be taken into account, which include:

- A source of companionship and unconditional affection;
- An element in a secure family base;
- Exploring taking responsibility and caring;
- Emotional repair work for some children who have experienced rejection, neglect or abuse.

Pets

Carers who are pet owners should be asked about the measures they will take to ensure a child's safety. There is a clear expectation that should a child be considered at risk, the child's safety must come first, even if this means making alternative arrangements for the pet.

- If following approval as a foster carer/s the family decides to get any pet they must consider taking the following actions first.
- Consider carefully what sort of pet would fit approval.
- Seek background information on the pet e.g. age, history etc.
- Seek expert advice on how to handle/manage the pet given the fostering tasks undertaken and the possible behaviour of children in care.
- Consult with Fostering Social Worker once all information is known.
- The Fostering Social Worker can then take further advice from an expert or refer to Panel for approval/review.
- Is there is an expectation/advice that any new pet should have recognised training?

Emergency/Respite Foster Placements

It is more likely that emergency foster carers may have any age of child arriving at any time of the day or night, it is therefore particularly important that foster carers who offer this service do not have pets who may pose a risk to a particular child, i.e. large dogs as it is not known what age/size of child may be placed.

PET OWNERSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PROSPECTIVE CARERS

This questionnaire applies to both dogs and any other pets in the household.

SECTION 1: Dogs

1. How many dogs do you have (specify animal type)?
2. If you keep dogs are they kept as a pet, or is it for working or breeding?
3. If you breed dogs, can you describe how this affects the household?

SECTION 2: Dogs and all other pets

1. Breed of pet(s) and size (e.g. small, medium, large)
2. Age of pet(s).
3. Male or female.
4. Have they been neutered?
5. When and where from did you acquire your pet?
6. What training has your pet(s) received and who by?
7. Is your pet in good health?
8. Is your pet vaccinated/protected against worms/fleas regularly/in receipt of any other treatments?
9. Are there any restrictions to where your pets are allowed in the house, or any areas exclusive to them

10. Does your pet have a place to sleep, and a place where it is fed?
11. How would you describe your pet's temperament?
(e.g. boisterous/placid/nervous/protective)
12. If your pet uses the home/ garden area for toileting, what arrangements are made for disposal?
13. How much exercise does your pet receive daily? Where does this take place, and who normally exercises them?
14. Does/do the pet fight with other animals?
15. How does your pet react to people visiting the house?
16. Has your pet ever snapped, snarled at or bitten anyone?
If yes, give details, e.g. circumstances/whether treatment was needed?
17. Are all members of the household able to gain control of and command respect from your pet.
18. What contact/experience has your pet had of children?
19. Could you envisage any possible conflict between your pet and child? What do you think your pet's reactions would be to inappropriate treatment from a child such as climbing into its bed, taking its food away, teasing, shouting, hitting, kicking, pulling or being over-affectionate?
20. In the event of serious conflict what would you do?
21. Any other information you consider to be relevant:
22. Give the name and address of the vet who sees the animal regularly. If necessary, would they be willing to provide an assessment of your pet's likely safety around children?

SOCIAL WORKERS ANALYSIS:

Overall Assessment

Evidence-based comment.

Reference

- Can a reference be provided from someone outside the household?

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