



# St Helens Borough Council Dog Policy 2024

## Introduction

This Chapter is based closely on the BAAF Practice Note of the same name (Practice Note 42) which can be accessed on the Members Area of the BAAF's website.

Many foster carers own dogs. The practice note states:

"Adopting rigid policies in relation to households which have dogs could exclude many potential substitute families which have much more to offer children in need of family placements".

The Practice Note continues:

"Potentially dogs pose a numbers of dangers to children and this need to be acknowledged and guarded against. Sensible hygiene arrangements and appropriate adult supervision will eliminate or significantly reduce most risks, but there is never room for complacency".

The policy in St Helens is based on the principal that the presence of a dog in a household may often benefit children placed in a number of ways. However, potential or approved foster carers must be able to demonstrate that they are responsible dog owners, and must be committed to placing the welfare of any child in their care above all other considerations.

## 1. Policy

The Policy of the Department is:

- To safeguard and promote the welfare of the child and to ensure that this is of paramount importance;
- To objectively assess what the risks are from a specific animal;
- To identify and verify the owner's arrangements for the care of the animal and the extent to which they guard against potential risks and accidents;
- To seek evidence from observations and information provided by the owners, supported by evidence wherever possible, that they are responsible in their attitudes and actions as dog owners;
- To identify the owner's intended actions if problems around pets were to arise once a child is placed;
- To advise potential carers that they will not be registered or approved for the care of children if they own a dog listed as dangerous in legislation, and therefore banned. Further information on banned dogs can be found in [Appendix A: What is a Banned Dog?](#)
- To understand that all animals present potential risk and to ensure that owners have strategies for managing these if and when they arise.

It will be appropriate in some circumstances to seek information and advice from a specialist pet assessor.

## **2. Risk Assessment of Dogs**

The general principles to be applied when assessing risk are as follows:

- A child must never be placed in a household with a dog listed in the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, but in the case of other breeds the approach should be to assess the individual animal's temperament and characteristics, taking into account a variety of issues;
- Although some dogs are defined as "dangerous" in terms of legislation and are banned, it is clear that any dog of whatever breed has the potential to be unpredictable, act on instinct or react to the way it is treated;
- Workers should be cautious about ascribing general characteristics to a breed;
- Workers are not expected to carry out in-depth assessments of dogs, but it will be useful for them to obtain information on certain key areas.
- Information from bodies such as the Kennel Club and relevant dog owners associations on the suitability and compatibility of children and different breeds of dogs may help in worker's assessments;
- In addition to the assessment carried out on the animal, it is also important to assess the owners in terms of their ability to control the dog and the practical steps they take to minimise any potential health and safety issues relating to owning a dog;
- If a more detailed assessment is considered advisable, the worker should consider approaching other organisations for further help.

## **3. When should assessments be undertaken?**

Assessments will be required in the following circumstances:

- When a request is received to be considered as a foster carer;
- Whenever a new dog is introduced to the household of a foster carers who have already been approved;
- Every year as part of the foster carers annual review and/or sooner if there are any dog incidents that would require a review.

## **4. Fostering Social Workers Assessment**

Social workers need to make an informed assessment of each animal in the household and to identify the role the dog plays in relation to its owners.

- Is the dog kept as a family pet, working dog, for breeding, guard dog etc? This may affect the owner's attitude towards the dog;

- Confirm what breed the dog is or what is known of the animal's ancestry if a cross-breed;
- How did the family acquire the dog? (e.g. from a breeder, pet shop, rescue centre etc);
- Older dogs acquired from rescue centres often have a history of neglect, ill treatment or abandonment. This may have affected the dogs behaviour;
- How long has the dog lived with the family? Is this the first home? Dogs with persistent difficulties may have been re-homed more than once. A recently acquired dog may not yet have displayed the problems which led to the re-homing;
- Who looks after the dog and is seen by the dog as "pack leader"? This person will need to be responsible for maintaining the dog's routine as far as possible when family life changes as a result of a child being placed;
- Feeding arrangements - 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 humans are eating?
- Sleeping arrangements - where does the dog sleep? For reasons both hygiene and safety it may be inadvisable for the dog to sleep at the end of the child's bed or in the child's bedroom;
- Exercise and toileting - how and when is the dog exercised? Where is the dog allowed to relieve itself and what are the "cleaning up" arrangements?
- Physical space - is there enough space within the home and garden to comfortably accommodate the dog/s and child/ren? Which areas are out-of-bounds for dogs?
- How is the dog's health addressed? Is it vaccinated and wormed regularly? Is it treated for fleas etc regularly?
- Does the home appear hygienic and free from the odour of pets?
- Observe how the dog behaves when you visit. Is it overly defensive, nervous or aggressive? Is it excessively friendly, excitable and demanding of attention? How do the owners manage this? Does the dog respond to the owner's commands? How does the owner describe the dog's temperament, its behaviour to other visitors, children other dogs?
- Has the dog ever bitten any person or other animal, and in what circumstances?
- Clarify the dog's age. Older dogs may find it more difficult to cope with young children running around; younger dogs may still be unruly and boisterous;
- Explore how the family would cope if it became necessary to re-home the dog. This is of particular importance in those households where there are no children and the dog is seen as a "family member";

## **5. Implication for placement**

Social workers also need to encourage potential carers to consider the following:

- Is the child used to dogs? What breed/s?
- Does the child's culture view dogs in a certain light? (e.g. are they considered "unclean"?)
- Does the child have a fear of dogs? All dogs or specific dogs?
- What associations do dogs have for the child?
- Has the child been known to mistreat animals?
- Does the child have any mobility difficulties, know allergies or other health issues which might make it unsafe or unsuitable for them to be placed in a dog-owning household?
- The age and vulnerability of the child at time of placement should be taken into consideration.

## **6. Conclusion**

The approach of the Fostering Service to placing children within dog-owning households will be based in comprehensive assessments of:

- The potential risk posed by a specific animal;
- The owner's attitude and approach to owning a dog;
- The child's capacity to live in a household where there is a dog.

**Appendix A: Banned dogs** [Controlling your dog in public: Banned dogs - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/controlling-your-dog-in-public#banned-dogs)

In the UK, it's against the law to own certain types of dog.

These are the:

- Pit Bull Terrier
- Japanese Tosa
- Dogo Argentino
- Fila Brasileiro

XL Bully dogs are banned in England and Wales.

It's against the law to:

- sell a banned dog
- abandon a banned dog
- give away a banned dog
- breed from a banned dog

Whether your dog is a banned type depends on what it looks like, rather than its breed or name.

For example, if your dog matches many of the characteristics of a Pit Bull Terrier, it may be a banned type.