



## **HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL POLICY ON PETS IN FOSTER CARERS HOMES**

The presence of animals in foster homes can be of real benefit and in certain cases have a therapeutic effect on children. Some pets, however, can also pose a risk to children. Hertfordshire County Council, together with foster carers, need to ensure that the children's welfare is protected at all times. The possible implications caused by any pets will therefore be assessed on their own merits.

It is important for this document to provide guidance regarding any household pet situation other than the normal or standard type of pet that a family is likely to have. Where required, specialist advice is to be sought.

Normally, pets in the household will be considered at the time of the Health and Safety inspection by means of a separate pet assessment. There is an ongoing duty, however, to ensure children's safety, and household circumstances can quickly change, for example looking after another person's pets or your own pet being unwell. The ultimate responsibility is always on the Foster Carer to ensure that their household (and other households they visit) remain safe. This is not only a requirement at the time of approval, but an ongoing responsibility.

In all cases, pets are expected to be well cared for and fully up to date with their inoculations.

All pets are to be looked after in a hygienic way; their food and water must be fresh and not contaminate human food preparation areas. All faeces and litter trays must be cleaned regularly and not present any risk to humans. Some animal faeces can cause disease which leads to blindness.

Households should not have any offensive odours resulting from owning pets. Any animal hair, feathers or other mess coming from animals should be regularly cleaned, swept or vacuumed.

Cats and dogs need to have regular worming and flea treatments.

Hertfordshire County Council will not tolerate any incidents of cruelty to animals and will not assess any potential fostering applicants who have been convicted of cruelty to animals. Any existing Carers who receive such a conviction will need to undergo a full review of their approval.

If the Foster Carer finds or believes that the child/young person is being cruel to the pet(s) in the household, then the child/young person's Social Worker will need to be informed as well as the Foster Carer's Supervising Social Worker. In most cases it is the temperament of the animal which should be assessed. This assessment should take into consideration whether or not the animal is protective of their owners and if they are aggressive all the time or only at certain times such as when protecting food or property.

Some animals are likely to enter children's rooms and sleep on their beds. As well as hygiene considerations, there is an additional risk of suffocation to small children, particularly by cats and small dogs. Strategies must be in place to prevent this. If an animal poses any risk, the Foster Carer must have a strategy to either reduce or remove the risk. This must always be considered when assessing the risk to children, but no compromises can be made on their safety.

#### Dangerous Dogs Guidance Notes

*See also BAAF Practice note 42*

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.

Applications to foster will 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. These are:-

- Pit Bull Terriers
- Japanese Tosa
- Dogo Argentines
- Fila Brazillieros

A safety assessment of all dogs in applicants' homes will be carried out. Special caution will need to be taken when assessing households containing an Alsatian/German Shepherd, Rottweiler, Doberman, Bulldog or more than two dogs of any breed, as these have been identified by the RSPCA as breeds with a tendency and capacity for aggressiveness.

The assessment should contain a separate report addressing the following issues:-

- Confirmation of what breed the dog is. 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.
- 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?
- 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.

- 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!
- 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.
- Find out who is mainly responsible for looking after the dog. It is important that the two legged "pack leader" is identified and that s/he maintains the dog's routine as far as possible in the midst of the change a new child will inevitably bring.
- 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?
- 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 advisable.
- 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, other dogs?
- 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.
- 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.

Further information on these issues may be obtainable from referees who will often have visited the applicant's home, perhaps even with their own children

and who may prove to be a valuable source of objective comment on any risks the dog/s may present.

It should be noted that any dog who is not properly trained and/or controlled by the owner may present a risk to a young child

Subsequent Foster Carer Reviews should reconsider the issue of dog/s within the foster home.

### **HCC POLICY**

Hertfordshire County Council will not permit Foster Carers to either be assessed or remain approved as Foster Carers, if they have a Dangerous Dog as classified under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. (See list above)

Since 1<sup>st</sup> August 2010, Hertfordshire County Council no longer approves new Foster Carers for the age group 0-5 years, if they have animals which are perceived to pose a risk and are therefore on our "caution list" This includes

Bull Terriers, Dobermans, Rottweilers, Bullmastiffs, German Shepherds and Rhodesian Ridgebacks.

If Hertfordshire Foster Carers who were approved before this date and have a breed considered to be a risk for children of 0-5 years then the transitional arrangements are that they will need a new pet assessment undertaken at every annual carers review. In addition the temperament/circumstances of the pet will be reviewed at the point of any placement change.

Eventually, Hertfordshire County Council envisages that, once this transition period is completed, no Foster Carers will be approved to care for children of 0-5 years if they own any of the aforementioned breeds of dogs.

### **Updated September 2013**

With Reference to:-

RSPCA

Kennel Club

BAAF Practice Note 42 – Placing children with dog owning families