



Northern  
Ireland  
Office

Consultation Document

## Young People and Licensed Firearms

A review of the relevant provisions of the  
Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004

Comments on these proposals are invited and  
should be made to the following address by  
29 December 2006:

Eric Kingsmill  
Northern Ireland Office  
Policing Division  
Firearms and Explosives Branch  
Room B4.16  
Castle Buildings  
Stormont Estate  
Belfast BT4 3SG

Telephone: (028) 9052 2738  
Facsimile: (028) 9052 0194  
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## *INTRODUCTION*

In the 2003 Report of its Inquiry into The Control of Firearms in Northern Ireland and the Draft Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 <sup>1</sup>, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee stated that:

“A single regime should govern young people’s access to firearms across the whole of the United Kingdom.”

This consultation is responding to that recommendation.

In Northern Ireland it is a requirement that young people must be at least 16 years old before they can have access to shotguns and air guns **under supervision**. This is unlike the rest of the United Kingdom where there is no minimum age limit.

Before reaching a final view on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee’s recommendation, the Secretary of State would welcome views from the community in Northern Ireland.

Comments should be submitted, in whatever format the sender chooses, to:

Eric Kingsmill  
Firearms & Explosives Branch  
Northern Ireland Office  
Room B4.16  
Block B, Castle Buildings  
Stormont  
BT4 3SG

Telephone: (028) 9052 2738  
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Text – phone: (028) 9052 7668

Comments should arrive no later than 5.00 pm on Friday 29 December 2006.

Further information about the consultation arrangements is given at paragraph 9.

1. Fourth Report of Session 2002-03  
Volume I HC 67-I

## *YOUNG PEOPLE AND FIREARMS IN NORTHERN IRELAND*

### *The Law at Present*

1. Article 3 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 requires that, apart from certain exemptions not relevant to the issue under consideration, anyone who possesses, purchases or acquires a firearm must have a firearm certificate. Article 5 provides that, subject to Article 7, the Chief Constable shall not grant a firearm certificate to anyone under the age of 18. Article 7 provides that a firearm certificate may be granted to a person under the age of 18 but who has reached the age of 16 in the following circumstances –

- (i) to purchase, acquire or possess an air gun, a shotgun or a .22 rimfire rifle for the purposes of pest control or livestock protection on agricultural land on which the person works and resides; or
- (ii) to purchase, acquire or possess an air gun or a shotgun for sporting purposes where, for a specified period of at least 12 months, the person's possession of the firearm is supervised by a person who has attained the age of 21 and has held a firearm of that type for at least 3 years.

### *Consultation*

2. This consultation seeks views on whether the status quo should remain in Northern Ireland or whether the law should be changed, as recommended by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC). Although the Committee recommended that the position in Northern Ireland be aligned with that in Great Britain, the Secretary of State is not convinced that this necessarily requires the removal of a minimum age limit and would welcome views on this point. In the consultation paper, we have therefore provided two alternatives which we believe would meet the spirit of the NIAC's objectives. These are: (i) reduce the age from 16 to 12 years; or (ii) follow the position in Great Britain where no minimum age limit applies. In both of these scenarios, eligible young people would not need a firearm certificate but the same strict supervision arrangements above would apply.

The options on which we would welcome views are:

- (a) supervised shooting remains with an age limit of 16 as at present;
- (b) the minimum age for supervised shooting is lowered to 12; or
- (c) the age for supervised shooting aligns with Great Britain where there is no minimum age limit.

### *The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's Consideration of the Issue*

3. NIAC heard various arguments for and against allowing young people access to firearms but concluded that they had not received any evidence to suggest that those who start young in the shooting community and become

committed shooters in later life pose any significant threat as a group to public safety. Evidence was given that the Association of Chief Police Officers believed that the [supervised] use of licensed firearms by young people in Great Britain produced almost no problems at all.

4. The Committee considered that all young people in the United Kingdom should have access to the same opportunities and that a single regime across the whole of the United Kingdom should govern their access to firearms. The Committee was not, however, in a position to say what that regime should be.

5. The Secretary of State at that time gave an undertaking to consider the matter in tandem with a review by colleagues at the Home Office of firearms controls in the rest of the United Kingdom. That review is ongoing but there are no plans in Great Britain at present to make any significant change to the controls in respect of supervised shooting by young people and the current position of **no minimum age limit** for supervised shooting there is likely to remain for the foreseeable future. In keeping with the commitment to address the issues raised by NIAC, the Secretary of State is now consulting widely on the current policy on supervised shooting in Northern Ireland in advance of the completion of the much broader Home Office firearms licensing review.

6. The consultation paper includes as one option a reduction in the Northern Ireland minimum age limit to 12. The reasoning behind this is that a reduction in the minimum age to 12 would allow young shooters the opportunity to develop their skills from an earlier age and to improve their ability to compete successfully in shooting competitions, including Olympic shooting events.

### *Costs and Benefits*

7. Any relaxation of firearms controls would not place any additional costs on the firearms business or on any other sector. There may be some benefits to firearms dealers.

### *Equality Impact*

8. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities to have due regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between groups of people. The alternatives for relaxing the age of supervised shooting have been subject to equality screening and, apart from the retention of certain controls and restrictions on young people's access to firearms and ammunition, there is no adverse effect on any section 75 group. Subject to the outcome of this consultation, we consider that any proposal for change would not need a full Equality Impact Assessment.

### *The Consultation Arrangements*

9. We will acknowledge receipt of all the comments that we receive and will try to answer any questions raised.

10. If you reply to this consultation in a personal capacity rather than as a post-holder of an organisation, you should be aware that the information you

provide may constitute 'personal data' in terms of the Data Protection Act 1998. For the purposes of this Act, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) is the 'data controller' and will process the data for health and safety purposes. The NIO may disclose this data to any person or organisation for the purposes for which it has been collected or where the Act allows disclosure. You have the right to ask for a copy of the data and to ask for inaccurate data to be corrected.

11. The Secretary of State is committed to making all consultation procedures as thorough and as open as possible. He acknowledges that sporting and country pursuits organisations in Northern Ireland will be keen for change but equally he recognises that others will have reservations and concerns about changing current firearms licensing laws that would give more people in Northern Ireland access to firearms. This consultation process provides an opportunity for the Northern Ireland public to exercise its right to comment on a matter where public health and safety issues must be considered and balanced against opportunities for young people to engage in controlled shooting activities aligned with sports clubs and with rural life and farming communities.

12. Responses to this consultation will be kept at Firearms and Explosives Branch at the above address after the close of this consultation period where they can be inspected by members of the public or copied to them. The information that you send may be passed to colleagues in this and other government departments and may be published in a summary of responses. More generally, all information in responses, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure under freedom of information law. Comments are invited on the basis that submissions are being handled in this way. A response, or parts of it, will be withheld only at the express wish of the person making it. Any such request should explain why confidentiality is necessary. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not be considered as such a request and, if you wish your response to be confidential you should include a request, with an explanation, in the text of that response.

13. If you have any concerns or complaints about the consultation process, you should contact the NIO's consultation co-ordinator, Donna Knowles, on (028) 9052 7015, or by e-mail at [donna.knowles@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:donna.knowles@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk). Alternatively, you may write to her at the Central Management Unit, Northern Ireland Office, Stormont House, Stormont Estate, Belfast, BT4 3SH.

### *Consultation Criteria*

14. The Government's general consultation criteria are:

- \* to consult widely, allowing a minimum of 12 weeks for written consultation;
- \* to be clear about the subject matter, who may be affected, what questions are being asked and the timescale for responses;
- \* to ensure that the consultation is concise and widely accessible;
- \* to give feedback on the responses received and how the consultation process influenced subsequent developments;

- \* to monitor the Department's effectiveness at consultation, including the use of a designated consultation co-ordinator; and
- \* to ensure that consultation follows better regulation best practice, including carrying out a regulatory impact assessment if appropriate.

15. A list of those being formally consulted is at **Annex A** but we should be glad to be informed, by any consultee, of anyone else who should be consulted.

## CONSULTATION LIST

Association of Chief Police Officers  
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland  
Attorney General London  
British Association for Shooting and Conservation (GB)  
British Association for Shooting and Conservation (NI)  
Belfast Solicitors' Association  
Chief Constable, Police Service of Northern Ireland  
Children's Law Centre  
Conservative Party – NI Spokesman

- David Lidington Esq MP
- Laurence Robertson Esq MP

Conservative Party of NI  
Countryside Alliance (Ireland)  
Crown Solicitor  
Church of Ireland  
Citizens' Advice Committee  
Committee on the Administration of Justice  
Community Relations Council  
DARD – Corporate Services  
Democratic Unionist Party  
Disability Action  
Duke of Abercorn  
Equality Commission for NI  
Green Party  
Gun Control Network  
Gun Trade Guild  
HOL – NI Spokesmen

- Con – Lord Glentoran CBE DL  
The Viscount Bridgeman
- Lib Dem – Lord Smith of Clifton  
Lord Shutt of Greetland

Home Office  
House of Commons/House of Lords  
Institute of Criminology QUB  
Judge D Rodgers (Hon Sec)  
    - Council of HM County Court Judges in Northern Ireland  
Justice  
Liberal Democrat Party – NI Spokesman  
    - Lembit Opik Esq MP  
    - Alan Reid MP  
Liberty  
Local Councils  
Lord Brookborough  
Lord Chief Justice  
MENCAP  
Methodist Church  
Natural Law Party  
NI Affairs Committee  
NI Association for Mental Health  
NI Commissioner for Children and Young People  
NI Council for Ethnic Minorities  
NI Human Rights Commission  
NI Policing Board  
NI Resident Magistrates' Association  
NI Tourist Board  
NI Unionist Party  
NI Women's Coalition  
Official Publications Office – QUB  
OFM/DFM  
PSNI Police Federation  
PSNI Superintendents' Association  
Presbyterian Church  
Progressive Unionist Party  
PPS  
Roman Catholic Church

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents  
Scottish Association of Country Sports  
Sinn Fein  
Social Democratic and Labour Party  
Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly  
The Bar Council  
The British Shooting Sports Council  
The Police Ombudsman  
The Director  
    - Institute of Professional Legal Studies QUB  
The Director – Law Centre NI  
The Director General  
    - Northern Ireland Court Service  
The Head of Department of Law - University of Ulster – Jordanstown  
The Head of School of Law – QUB  
The Office of Law Reform  
The Law Society of NI  
The Lord Chancellor  
Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association  
Ulster Farmers' Union  
Ulster Rifle Association  
Ulster Unionist Party  
United Kingdom Unionist Party  
United Unionist Assembly Party  
Youth Council for NI  
Youthnet  
Workers' Party