

Responses to the Consultation Document

“Young People and Licensed Firearms” (October 2006)

The responses to the Consultation Document are summarised as follows according to which of the three possible options they favoured:

Option (a) Supervised shooting remains with an age limit of 16 as at present.

This option was supported by five local Councils, Armagh, Omagh, Lisburn, Down and Strabane and by the Committee on the Administration of Justice. One Council, Banbridge, did not reach a conclusion. Concerns expressed were:

- that supervision might not be strict enough, particularly when Northern Ireland’s high suicide rate was considered;
- about the growing incidence of teenagers carrying guns and increasing numbers of firearms offences in GB;
- about young shooters in the agricultural setting, where supervision might not be as strict as it would be in the carefully controlled environment of a gun club;
- that 16 is too young; and
- about the increase in the numbers of young people who would have access to firearms and that harmonisation across the UK is not in itself a reason to change the law.

Option (b) The minimum age for supervised shooting is lowered to 12.

This option was supported by Down District Policing Partnership and one individual, Mr Anthony Crawford. Comments included:

- Strict supervision arrangements should be clearly communicated to and understood by those involved and that they should be rigorously enforced.
- It is too late to take up shooting at age 16.

Option (c) That the age for supervised shooting aligns with Great Britain where there is no minimum age

This option was supported by the Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party; Ballymena, Ards and North Down Borough Councils; the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (GB and NI); The Countryside Alliance (with 755 members in a postcard campaign); the Ulster Rifle Association; Scottish Association for Country Sports (NI Region); the Ulster Clay Pigeon Shoot Association; the Gun Trade Guild NI; the NI Small Bore Shooting Union; the Pony Club NI (whose members compete in the tetrathlon with air pistol shooting); Comber Rifle Club; North West Gun Club; Foxmore Lodge Shooting School; Mr Ken Davies; Mr Brian Swann; Mr Roy Calderwood; Mr John Leggett; Mr Martin McDaid; and Mr J O'Brien. The main arguments that they put forward are:

- The 16-year age limit is arbitrary and unreasonably disadvantages young people in Northern Ireland compared with those in Great Britain, who cause no problems whatsoever.
- The concept of a minimum no touch age for firearms use – even under supervision – is one espoused by fundamentalist anti-gun pressure groups, apparently in the belief that exposure to firearms is a corrupting influence, but who have never produced any evidence to support it.
- The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee said that they had not received any evidence to suggest that those who start young in the shooting community and become committed shooters later in life pose any significant threat as a group to public safety.

- In 2000 the Home Affairs Committee recommended that there should be a minimum age limit below which a child should not be allowed to handle a lethal firearm, even under supervision, and the age limit should be at least twelve, and possibly 14. However, Charles Clarke, then a Home Office Minister, rejected it and said:

“The Government’s main interest is to protect public safety and we do not believe that a ban on supervised shooting by young people would improve this. We are not aware of any evidence that supervised shooting activities pose a particular danger to public safety, or that young people who take part in such activities are more prone to misuse firearms than those taking up shooting sports as adults. We would wish to encourage a responsible attitude to firearms handling. As with many other issues, we believe that this is one on which parents should decide the age at which their children take up shooting sports.”

- That the Home Office Guidance on Firearms Law says that “It is in the interests of safety that a young person who is to handle firearms should be properly taught at a relatively early age.”
- The current legislation allows young people under the age of 16 to have supervised access to bullet-firing firearms in authorised firearms clubs and there have never been any problems.
- GB international teams routinely include young people aged between 14 and 17, including Charlotte Kenwood who won a Commonwealth Gold Medal at the age of 15. All of them started shooting before the age of 12. It is unlikely that Northern Ireland will be able to produce such young stars as the law stands.
- ACPO told the NI Affairs Committee that supervised shooting by young people in GB caused almost no problems at all.

- That the only conceivable way that the NIAC recommendation of a single UK regime for young shooters can be implemented is by bringing Northern Ireland legislation into line with that in GB.
- Lowering the age limit to 12 would merely perpetuate the unfair discrimination against young people in Northern Ireland.
- The young person's age is not the most important matter; the responsibility would be with the supervisor/firearm certificate holder who would be directly supervising the young person.
- Two of Northern Ireland's four main political parties canvassed (by the Countryside Alliance) on the matter support the abolition of the minimum age and the other two said that they would not have time to develop a party policy. There is, therefore no opposition from any of the main political parties.
- Supervisory arrangements should be flexible to allow talented persons to be supervised by various qualified coaches as well as the firearm owner/keeper.