

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association



**Access to leisure facilities
for guide dog owners**



Preface

This booklet contains information and advice for managers and staff of leisure facilities regarding how they can help make the use of their facilities by blind and partially sighted people including guide dog owners as enjoyable and safe as possible. The booklet includes details of other organisations that also provide helpful information.

Access to a leisure facility is not just about being able to get in and around the facility but being able to take part in the leisure activities such as swimming pools; sports hall; fitness studios; therapy rooms and gym.

Introduction

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (Guide Dogs) aims to enhance the mobility, independence and quality of life of blind and partially sighted people by providing guide dogs and other services.

Guide dogs are working dogs, not pets, and their owners rely on them for both independence and mobility. Guide dogs have up to two years of intensive training and receive further training throughout their working lives. In addition, guide dog owners are given training on how to maintain the extremely high standards of grooming which the dogs require, and the dogs are checked regularly by vets.

In practical terms, guide dogs do not disrupt the everyday operation of businesses or premises. They are trained to sit at their owner's feet at all times, not to climb on furniture and not to bother other people.

Guide dogs and other assistance dogs are exempt from the rules that prevent other dogs from accessing areas where food is served, such as restaurants in leisure facilities.

“Because of their training and skills the Institute of Environmental Health Officers (now Chartered Institute of Environmental Health) has stated that assistance dogs are exempt from the usual hygiene rules that apply to dogs, including those that relate to areas where food is being served.” (SP8, DRC 2003 – see useful publications section).

The Disability Discrimination Act and duties on service providers

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and 2005 (DDA) is intended to protect the rights of disabled people.

Part 3 of the DDA places duties on all service providers, including owners and operators of leisure centres and other leisure facilities, not to discriminate against disabled people and to make reasonable adjustments to their services and premises to enable disabled people to access them.

These duties were introduced in three stages and apply to service providers of all sizes:

- Since December 1996, it has been unlawful for service providers to refuse to serve a disabled person, offer a lower standard of service or provide a service on worse terms to a disabled person for a reason related to his or her disability.
- Since October 1999, service providers have had to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people in the way they provide their services.

- Since October 2004, service providers have had to make reasonable adjustments to the physical features of their premises to overcome physical barriers to access.

Staff at leisure facilities should not refuse access to a disabled person or provide them with a lower standard of service because of their disability. Managers and staff may also need to make reasonable adjustments to the way in which they provide their services to make sure that they do not discriminate against a disabled customer.

A guide dog owner who wishes to visit the leisure facility with their guide dog should not be refused due to the fact that they are blind or partially sighted, or that they have a guide dog with them. It is the service provider's responsibility to provide the same level of service to disabled people that they would provide to other members of the public, and to make any necessary reasonable adjustments in order to be able to do so.

Reasonable adjustments under Part 3 of the DDA

'Reasonable adjustments' is a phrase used within law to give some flexibility and allow different solutions in different situations. Reasonable adjustments may vary according to the:

- Type of service provided;
- Nature of the service provider and its size, finance and resources;
- Effect of the disability on the individual.

Reasonable adjustments may include

- Providing information in alternative formats such as Braille, audio or large print
- Reading out information that may change regularly
- Providing a tactile plan of the facility to aid orientation
- Providing a sighted guide and assistance

When considering reasonable adjustments it is recommended to ask individual guide dog owners, and other blind or partially sighted people, what assistance they would require to be able to use the leisure centre or facility.

This may include:

- Training staff to work with disabled people and to provide appropriate adjustments e.g. a 'gym buddy' to assist a blind or partially sighted person with setting up and using the equipment in the gym
- Providing a sighted guide when required by the guide dog owner to areas where the guide dog owner would prefer not to take the dog.
- Providing a safe secure place where a guide dog can be left should the guide dog owner wish to use leisure facilities without their dog.

Religious considerations

Religious grounds cannot be used to exclude guide dog and assistance dog owners:

Religious or cultural beliefs have often been cited as a reason for non-admittance of assistance dogs in various premises. However, it should be noted that there is a legal requirement to permit access to assistance dogs and such beliefs are not a defence against non-compliance. However, this is a sensitive aspect of the access issue and tact should be used by all involved. The Disability Rights Commission (now part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission) successfully reached an agreement on this issue with a number of religious groups including the Muslim Shariat Council. (SP8, DRC 2003)

Making general provision for blind and partially sighted people within the leisure facility

To make your premises more accessible to blind and partially sighted people:

Externally,

- Ensure the entrance is clearly signed and highlighted from the surrounding walls
- The route to the entrance is clear and easy to find and follow, with any potential obstructions removed, or clearly highlighted if they cannot be removed

- Tactile paving surfaces may be required to provide warning at a dropped kerb road crossing or at the approach to steps encountered along the route; or to provide guidance for instance if the entrance is not on the direct route. The appropriate tactile paving should be used - see 'Guidance on the use of tactile paving surfaces' in useful publications section
- Provide appropriate taxi / car drop off point near the entrance to enable blind and partially sighted people to find the entrance easily

Internally

- Choose décor with good colour contrast and lighting.
- Make sure that all the circulation routes are free of hazards, e.g. planters or umbrella stands.
- Ensure that glazed walls and doors have been highlighted appropriately.
- Display good signage which is legible. The signs should have contrasting features i.e. good contrast between the text and its background, in the recommended size and font. (See 'Sign Design Guide' in 'Useful publications' section). They should also contrast clearly with the surroundings in which they are positioned.
- Provide information in alternative formats for customers, e.g. Braille, audio and large print leisure facility guides.
- Provide audible alarms and systems.

Additional provision and assistance for guide dog owners and their dogs

- Change policy and practice to amend a ‘no-dogs’ policy to allow access for guide and other assistance dogs.
- Never distract or harass the dog. Check with the owner before any contact is to be made.
- Never feed the dog. Guide dogs are working dogs and are fed a strict diet at regular times; any additional food may cause the dog to be sick or adversely affect its health in other ways.
- Provide a water bowl for the dog if requested by the guide dog owner.
- In seating areas ensure there is sufficient space for a guide dog under a table or in a corner so that it can remain with its owner.
- Provide an appropriate relief (spending) area for guide dogs and other assistance dogs. Where this is located outside the centre staff support may be needed to guide the owner to the area. An advisory leaflet is available on the provision of spending facilities, and Guide Dogs’ staff can advise on the provision and location of suitable facilities.

The best place for a guide dog is with its owner, who will have both the skills and the relationship with their dog that ensures a high level of control. However, while they may need their guide dog to accompany them to the leisure centre, there may be leisure activities which guide dog owners may wish to take part in without their dog. Management practices should be in place to provide sighted guide assistance if required to areas where the dog is

not able to accompany the owner e.g. the swimming pool; and a suitable location identified and agreed with the guide dog owner where the guide dog can be safely left. This should be a room away from general visitors with a member of staff in or near the room to ensure the safety of the guide dog. This area should be quiet and at room temperature. If possible visibility between the guide dog and its owner is useful. Guide Dogs staff may be able to assist in identifying a suitable location.

Remember that a guide dog owner is no different from any other visitor to the facility. They should be treated with the same level of hospitality and courtesy afforded to all customers.

How to communicate with blind and partially sighted people and provide sighted guidance

- Staff should know how to communicate with blind and partially sighted people and provide sighted guide support. This should be addressed through disability awareness training for all current and new staff.
- Tell the blind or partially sighted person who you are and what your role is in the leisure centre/facility.
- When addressing a person with a guide dog, speak to the person, not the dog.
- Ask the person what assistance is needed rather than making assumptions as to what might be required.
- If the person asks to be guided to another part of the centre, stand by the person's side and allow them to take hold of your

arm/elbow in order to guide them along. Staff should not take hold of the person and drag or push them in a particular direction.

- When guiding a person with a guide dog, stand by the person's right hand side (usually the guide dog will be on the left) and adopt the same procedure as above. Never take hold of a guide dog's lead or harness and if the owner tells the dog to do something do not interfere as this may confuse the guide dog.
- When guiding a blind or partially sighted person through the centre or outdoors, tell the person where they are going and what obstacles or hazards might be approaching. They need to be told in advance about doors opening towards or away from them and about steps, kerbs or slopes going up or down to allow them time to adjust to their surroundings. This should prevent accident and injury.
- It is helpful, and may also be legally required as a reasonable adjustment, to explain the layout of the facility to a blind or partially sighted person and when doing this, remember to ask the person what information might be useful before bombarding them with too much detail. Explain room layouts (gym, swimming pool, changing room etc) in a simple way by asking the blind or partially sighted person to stand with their back against the entrance door and then talking them through the picture which is now in front of them. For instance: "The showers are to the left and toilets on the right hand side, the door leading to the pool area is straight ahead". If there are any potentially dangerous items, e.g. fire extinguishers or protruding radiators, tell the person where they are and what they are. Items which may cause a trip hazard (cables, rugs etc) should be removed where possible or placed against a wall to minimise risk.

- Good communication is vital for all visitors but even more so for blind and partially sighted people. Where possible, information should be provided in the requested format so that they are not excluded.

Emergency evacuation

Current legislation and standards state that all people should be evacuated if there is a fire. It is the responsibility of the management to ensure their safe escape by introducing suitable escape plans.

Emergency evacuation procedures should include:

- Ensure all fire exits are clearly signed and free of obstruction (internally and externally).
- Ensure an escape strategy is in place in your facility.
- Explain the emergency procedure to blind and partially sighted visitors on arrival, and make the information available in alternative formats.
- Train staff to deal with emergency procedures.

For more information see 'Means of Escape for Disabled People' (in 'Useful publications' section).

The advice in this information booklet relates to leisure facilities. Many leisure facilities have restaurants. A separate booklet is available on access to restaurants. This can be obtained from Guide Dogs' Access Information Officer.

The information given in this document was correct at the time of printing.

This document provides basic information and is not a substitute for legal advice.

The general information provided in this booklet about access for guide dogs and their owners, also applies to other registered assistance dogs.

Useful publications

'Know Your Rights! Assistance Dog Owners' (DRC SP8, January 2003)

'Making access to goods and services easier for disabled customers: a practical guide for small businesses and other small service providers' (DRC – Making rights a reality, 2004)

'Means of Escape for Disabled People' (Department for Communities and Local Government, endorsed by Disability Rights Commission, 2007)

'Fire Evacuation Briefing' (Disability Rights Commission publication, 06/02/2003)

'Guidance on the use of tactile paving surfaces' (Department for Transport, 1998)

'Guidance on the provision of spending facilities for assistance dogs' (Guide Dogs, 2008)

'Sighted Guide: How to help blind and partially sighted people' (Guide Dogs, 2008)

'Sign Design Guide: A guide to inclusive signage' (JMU Access Partnership, RNIB and the Sign Design Society) available from RNIB.

Contact details for Guide Dogs

Further information is available from Guide Dogs' Access Information Officer on 0845 241 2178.

Guide Dogs has 28 local district teams across the country. Details can be obtained from www.guidedogs.org.uk or by contacting our head office:

Guide Dogs

Hillfields
Burghfield Common
Reading
RG7 3YG

Tel: 0118 983 5555

Fax: 0118 983 5433

Other useful contacts

Equality and Human Rights Commission Disability Helpline
www.equalityhumanrights.com

England - disability

Telephone: 0845 604 6610

Textphone: 0845 604 6620

Fax: 0845 604 6630

Wales

0845 604 8810 - **Wales main number**

0845 604 8820 - **Wales textphone**

0845 604 8830 - **Wales fax**

Scotland

0845 604 5510 - **Scotland Main**

0845 604 5520 - **Scotland Textphone**

0141 228 5912 - **Scotland – Fax**

Northern Ireland

Telephone: 028 90 500600

Textphone: 028 90 500589

www.equalityni.org

RNIB Helpline

Tel: 0303 123 999

Email: helpline@rnib.org.uk

www.rnib.org.uk

Law Centres Federation

P.O. Box 65836

London

EC4P 4FX

Tel: 0207 842 0720

Email: info@lawcentres.org.uk

Community Legal Adviser

Tel: 0845 345 4 345

www.communitylegaladviser.org.uk

Contact details for assistance dog organisations

Assistance Dogs (UK)

C/o Hearing Dogs for Deaf People
The Grange
Wycombe Road
Saunderton
Princes Risborough
Buckinghamshire
HP27 9NS

Tel: 01844 348 100

Fax: 01844 348 101

Canine Partners

Mill Lane
Heyshott
Midhurst
West Sussex
GU29 0ED

Tel: 08456 580 480

Fax: 08456 580 481

Email: info@caninepartners.co.uk

www.caninepartners.co.uk

Dogs for the Disabled

The Frances Hay Centre
Blacklocks Hill
Banbury
Oxfordshire
OX17 2BS

Tel: 08700 776 600

Fax: 08700 776 601

Email: info@dogsforthedisabled.org

www.dogsforthedisabled.org

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People

The Grange

Wycombe Road

Saunderton

Princes Risborough

Buckinghamshire

HP27 9NS

Tel: 01844 348 100

Fax: 01844 348 101

Email: info@hearing-dogs.co.uk

www.hearing-dogs.co.uk

Support Dogs

21, Jessops Riverside

Brightside Lane

Sheffield

S9 2RX

Tel: 0870 609 3476

Fax: 0114 261 7555

Email: supportdogs@btconnect.com

www.support-dogs.org.uk/

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The text of this document is available on request in Braille, audio, large print and electronic formats from Guide Dogs' Access Information Officer on 0845 241 2178

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