

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association



**Employing a guide dog owner:
- access requirements**



Introduction

This booklet provides information and guidance relating to employing a guide dog owner.

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 animals, not pets, and are relied on by their owners for independence and mobility. Guide dogs undergo up to two years of intensive training and receive additional training throughout their working lives. In addition guide dog owners are trained to maintain the dogs' extremely high standards of grooming 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 owners' feet at all times, not to bother other people and not to climb on furniture.

Every blind or partially sighted person is different in terms of their skills and abilities. A little understood fact about a person registered blind is that they will often retain a level of restricted but useful vision that in certain circumstances and lighting conditions can enable them to move around unassisted. Additionally they may be able to visually locate and identify people and objects, read normal print and engage in other 'sighted' activities. The important thing is not to assume the level of ability that exists. It is perfectly acceptable to talk to a blind or partially sighted employee about their level of vision and to try and

establish and understand what they are able to do for themselves and which tasks they may find difficult. This will help the employee to feel empowered and will help everyone else appreciate and understand the extent to which they need to help or make adjustments.

Disability Discrimination Act and Employment

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 (and subsequent amendments) provides legislation to protect the rights of disabled people in relation to employment:

Under the DDA Part II, it is unlawful for employers to discriminate against disabled people in their employment or when applying for a job. Employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments and provide auxiliary aids so that a disabled person is not at “a substantial disadvantage in comparison with persons who are not disabled”. This duty is not anticipatory, but the employer’s duty is to make reasonable adjustment when a disabled person applies for a job or an existing employee becomes disabled.

Who is covered by the Act?

If an employee is registered as blind or partially sighted then they are automatically covered by the Act. Even if they are not registered, blind and partially sighted people still have rights under the Act.

Employees covered by the Act include permanent, temporary, part-time, and contract staff. For voluntary work it would be advisable to get professional advice.

Types of discrimination

- direct discrimination
- disability related discrimination
- victimisation
- harassment
- failure to make reasonable adjustments

Direct discrimination: when a person is treated less favourably because of their disability. For example, if a blind or partially sighted person is not offered employment because of their sight loss, despite the fact that the person is the most suitable for the job. This may be considered to be discrimination.

Disability related discrimination: when a disabled person is treated less favourably for a reason relating to their disability, or where an employer has failed to make a reasonable adjustment.

Victimisation: when a disabled employee is treated less favourably because they have asserted their rights under the DDA.

Harassment: The DDA also makes it unlawful for employers to subject disabled employees to harassment

Failure to make reasonable adjustments: when a disabled person is at a substantial disadvantage due to the lack of reasonable adjustments on the part of an employer. This may relate to the physical working environment or the employer's criteria or practices.

Some adjustments to be considered:

- providing application forms, employee information etc in alternative format e.g. audio tapes, large print, Braille
- providing alternative arrangements where a written test is required at interview
- providing a reader or adapted computer for a blind or partially sighted employee
- providing time off when an employee needs to train or re-train with a guide dog
- re-allocating some duties to other colleagues.

General provisions for blind or partially sighted employees

The work environment.

- It should be noted that an employee who is blind or partially sighted may have additional impairments such as hearing loss, which will also need to be considered. The employee should be able to inform you regarding their key needs.
- A new employee who is blind or partially sighted should be given an orientation guide around the workplace. This may also be required if an existing employee's workplace office or workstation moves within the premises. For information on providing sighted guidance please see Guide Dogs publication on this referenced in 'useful publications' list.
- Make sure that all the circulation routes around work areas are free of hazards that could cause a trip or unexpected bump.

- Provision of information in alternative format such as large print or Braille may be necessary for the employee.
- Good signage which is legible, leading to and within the office environment. The signs should have good contrasting features i.e. the text should contrast against its background, in the recommended size and font. The sign should also contrast against the surroundings when positioned. Braille and tactile signs are also useful for key facilities. (See ‘Sign Design Guide’ referenced in ‘useful publications’)
- Good colour/tonal contrast and lighting is required. In addition enquire from the employee if they require additional lighting to assist with tasks, navigation and orientation. For information on task lighting please see the Reading University publication on lighting in ‘useful publications’ section.
- A blind or partially sighted employee may need additional desk space when compared to others. This is to enable them to organise equipment and possibly large print papers as they wish.
- If the employee is located near a window and their eye condition means they suffer from glare, it will be necessary to provide blinds or some shade and adjust the position of the computer screen if they are using larger text.
- It may be helpful to ask the employee if there are any additional adjustments that would help them. These might include a reference point, land mark or locating device at or near the entrance and at key locations; and providing a tactile plan of the premises to aid orientation.

Other Issues

- Ensure a Personal Emergency Egress Plan is in place for the employee in the case of an emergency.
- Provision of audible alarms and systems.
- Staff awareness which could be addressed through disability awareness training for all current and new staff. This would include briefing staff such as reception and security staff to always greet the person verbally and say who they are.

Access to work

Access to work (ATW) is a scheme which provides advice and practical support to disabled people and their employers to help overcome work related obstacles. ATW may also pay a grant towards any extra employment costs that result from a disability. There are a number of ways in which ATW can help a blind or partially sighted employee:

- Aids and equipment
- Support workers
- Travel to work
- Awareness training for colleagues
- For more information on Access to work, contact your local jobcentre plus

Additional provision for guide dog owners and their dogs

- Space in a draught-free position near the owner's desk or workstation where the dog can rest undisturbed. The owner will provide a dog bed or blanket for the dog.
- The owner will provide a water bowl which will need to be placed in an appropriate position near the dog and located where it would not be a trip hazard for anyone.
- If the employee is located near a window it may be necessary to ensure that the dog can lay in shade rather than direct sun light.
- There should be something solid that the dog can be secured to such as a desk leg. Desks with side screens that go down to the ground often have nowhere suitable.
- If the owner's workspace is unsuitable for a dog, for example because of industrial machinery, a Guide Dogs staff member will advise on a suitable place for the dog, and Guide Dogs may be able to help with providing a kennel and run if this is needed. Your employee will be able to provide the contact details of their supporting team.
- A secure area where the dog can spend (relieve itself) will be required. The guide dog owner and a Guide Dogs staff member will help identify a suitable place. A leaflet on the provision of a spending area is available from Guide Dogs.

Guide dogs and other assistance dogs are exempt from the rules that prevent other dogs from accessing premises and other areas where food is served including restaurants in employment premises.

“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)

Occasionally the employee may attend work without the dog in which case additional assistance getting into and around the workplace may be necessary.

Staff awareness

It maybe useful to brief staff when a new employee who is a guide dog owner is due to start.

An employer should anticipate that most colleagues will value the presence of a dog in the workplace. The leaflet ‘A guide dog in the workplace’ available from Guide Dogs may help to address any questions or concerns that colleagues have.

If there are unresolved concerns such as fear of dogs or concerns about allergies, please contact Guide Dogs staff who could help address this. Religious or cultural beliefs can raise sensitive issues relating to dogs. However, the Disability Rights Commission (now the Equality and Human Rights Commission) successfully reached an agreement on this with a number of religious groups including the Muslim Shariat Council. (‘Know Your Rights! Assistance Dog Owners’ DRC, 2003). Guide Dogs staff can also advise on this.

Colleagues and other staff or visitors should not feed a guide dog as they require a carefully balanced diet; and should not distract the dog when it is working. However, when the guide dog is not working it may appreciate some attention. It is best to enquire from the owner when any contact with the dog is intended.

Some dogs get distressed by loud noises such as thunder, fireworks and Christmas Crackers so consideration should be given at such times.

Time for training

Guide dog owners undertake training when they first acquire a guide dog, and when the dog is replaced.

The working life of a guide dog is about 7 years. As the dog reaches its retirement age the owner is likely to be in discussion with Guide Dogs regarding the need for a replacement dog. Once a suitable new match has been found, the owner will then need to undergo a 2 to 3 week period of intense training so that they and their new dog learn to work effectively with each other. Granting time off work during this crucial period is appreciated as the success of this training will ensure your employee is able to enjoy many more years of stress free independence.

Time may also be required for occasional 'aftercare' training.

Emergency

The employee should be asked to provide the phone number of the nearest Guide Dogs District Team for use in the case of an emergency.

The guide dog owner and dog should be included in any fire drills etc.

Dispute procedure

The employer should be prepared to contact, with the owner's permission, Guide Dogs if the issue concerns the dog.

Useful publications

'A guide dog in the workplace' (Guide Dogs, 2006)

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

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

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

'Lighting for Visually Impaired People in a Non-Uniformly Lit Office Environment' Reading University, January 2004.

'The Accessible Office' RNIB 2005

'Sign Design Guide: a guide to inclusive signage' JMU and Sign Design Society, 2004

List of useful Contacts

Equality and Human Rights Commission Disability Helpline

Website: www.equalityhumanrights.com

England - disability

Telephone: 08457 622 633

Textphone: 08457 622 644

Fax: 08457 778 878

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 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

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

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

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