Access to Veterinary Practices
for guide dog owners and other blind and partially sighted people
All guide dog owners will visit their veterinary surgeon on a regular basis (at least once every six months). Other blind and partially sighted people may also visit from time to time with a family pet.

This document contains advice for veterinary practice staff on how to make their premises and services more accessible to blind and partially sighted people and in particular to guide dog owners.

It sets out the legislative duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the Disability Discrimination Act in Northern Ireland which require entry to these premises for guide dogs (and other assistance dogs). Further, that staff must not treat the guide dog owner less favourably because of their impairment.

The document goes on to provide advice on how to communicate with and assist guide dog owners, as well as contact details for more information.

**Introduction**

Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (Guide Dogs) aims to enhance the mobility, independence and quality of life for 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 both independence and mobility. Guide dogs undergo up to two years of intensive training and are monitored closely throughout their working lives.

**What the law says**

Disabled people including guide dog owners and other blind or partially sighted people have important rights under the Equality Act 2010, or Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 in Northern Ireland as extended by the Disability Discrimination Order (NI) 2006). The Equality Act 2010 consolidates and replaces previous discrimination legislation including the Disability Discrimination Act in England, Wales and Scotland.

The Equality Act and DDA in Northern Ireland provides for blind and partially sighted people to have the same right to services such as veterinary practices just as everyone else.

It includes a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled people can access services. Reasonable Adjustments is a phrase used with in law to give some flexibility and allow different solutions in different situations.
Considerations for guide dog owners

Veterinary practice staff may need to make reasonable changes to the way in which they provide their services to ensure that they do not discriminate against a disabled customer. For example:

- Identifying customers with a visual or vision impairment and checking on their preferred format of communication. This may be large print, tape, Braille etc.
- Ensuring that information is made available to customers in alternative formats upon request (e.g. correspondence, information packs, medication advice, information and advice leaflets available to sighted people). The availability of these alternative formats should be promoted. See List of Useful contacts for guidance on producing accessible information and alternative formats.
- Providing a sighted guide or other assistance.
- Being aware that additional time, effort and skills are sometimes needed when providing services to blind and partially sighted people, for example, taking time to explain what you are doing.

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

- Choose décor with good colour and tonal contrast and lighting.
- Make sure that all the circulation routes are free of hazards.
- Ensure that glazed walls and doors have appropriate demarcation.
- Provide audible alarms and systems.
- Display good signage which is legible. The signs should have good contrasting features i.e. the text should contrast against its background, in the recommended size and font. It should also contrast against the surroundings in which it is positioned. It is useful for information signs to have tactile embossed text and Braille. (See ‘Sign Design Guide’ in ‘Useful publications’ section for advice on font and text size; and the use of tactile text and Braille).

Additional provision and assistance for Guide Dog Owners and their dogs

- Ensure all staff are aware of the need not to distract or harass the dog when working. Check with the owner before any contact is to be made with their dog.
- Never feed the dog. Guide dogs are working animals and material reward may be used as a training aid, please always check before offering the dog food/treats etc.
• Explain what you are doing when examining the dog or carrying out any treatments.

• If you need to remove the dog from the owner – request that you can take the dog’s lead and explain what you are doing. Ensure that the owner has sighted assistance back to the waiting area etc.

• If the dog requires treatment, investigations or anaesthetic which may make the dog unable to work discuss this with the owner to ensure that alternative methods of getting home etc can be made. A guide dog should not be worked for a minimum of 24 hours following a general anaesthetic, sedation etc. If you have concerns about the safety of the dog working in relation to any treatment or procedure please discuss with the owner or contact your local Dog Care and Welfare Advisor if advice or clarification is required.

How to communicate and provide a sighted guide

1. Ensure staff awareness which could be addressed through disability awareness training for all current and new staff.

2. Staff should know how to meet and greet a person who is blind or partially sighted and have some knowledge of how to guide a person who requires sighted guide.

3. When meeting a blind or partially sighted person, introduce yourself and explain your role. When addressing a guide dog owner speak to the person, not the dog.

4. Ask the blind or partially sighted person what assistance is needed before making assumptions as to what might be required.

5. If the blind or partially sighted person asks to be guided to another part of the practice/surgery, stand by the person’s side and allow them to take hold of your arm/elbow in order for you to guide them along. Do not take hold of them and drag or push them in a particular direction. When guiding them through a building or outdoors, remember to tell the person where you are going and what obstacles or hazards might be approaching. Tell them 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 will make ‘sighted guide’ travel much more enjoyable for both of you and should prevent accident and injury.

6. If you are 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. Do not take hold of the 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.

7. Offer help with the bill, paying, giving change, etc.

8. Good communication is vital for all customers but even more so in the case of blind and partially sighted people. Where possible provide information in the requested format, so that blind customers are not excluded.
Contact details for Guide Dogs

For further information, please contact Guide Dogs
Tel: 0845 241 2178

Guide Dogs
Hillfields
Burghfield Common
Reading RG7 3YG
Tel: 0118 983 5555
Fax: 0118 983 5433

List of useful contacts

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

Equality Advisory Service (EASS) for England, Scotland and Wales
Telephone: 0800 444 205
Textphone: 0800 444 206

Northern Ireland (Equality Commission)
Telephone: 028 90 500600
Textphone: 028 90 500589
www.equalityni.org

Royal National Institute of the Blind RNIB

RNIB Legal Rights Services
Tel: 0303 123 9999
Email: LegalRights@rnib.org.uk

RNIB Helpline
Tel: 0303 123 9999
Email: helpline@rnib.org.uk
www.rnib.org.uk
Useful publications


‘Assistance dogs – A guide for all businesses’ (EHRC, 2013)

‘What equality law means for your business’ (EHRC, 2011)

Guidance for Businesses
‘Your role as a service provider under the Equality Act’ (EHRC)
http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/publications/guidance-currently-being-updated

Guidance for Service Users: ‘Your rights to equality from businesses providing goods, facilities or services to the public’ (EHRC)
http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/publications/guidance-currently-being-updated

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


The advice in this information booklet relates to veterinary practices.
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 information provided in this booklet about access for guide dogs and their owners also applies to other assistance dogs.

Assistance Dogs UK (ADUK)
http://www.assistancedogs.org.uk

The Grange, Wycombe Road, Saunderton, Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire, HP27 9NS. Registered charity no: 1119538

Assistance Dog organisations include: Canine Partners, Dog A.I.D., Dogs for Good, Guide Dogs, Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, Medical Detection Dogs and Support Dogs.

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, Hillfields, Burghfield Common, Reading RG7 3YG
Registered charity in England and Wales (209617) and in Scotland (SC038979) 12/08
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