

GUIDE
DOGS



Access All Areas



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Introduction

“Each refusal is crushing, confidence shattering, rejecting, and traumatic. I always feel that I don’t want to go out after - but work dictates I must.” Guide dog owner, Stevenage

Assistance dogs are trained to support the independence of their owner and the Equality Act 2010, or Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 in Northern Ireland (as extended by the Disability Discrimination (NI) Order 2006 (DDO)) confirms their rights to have equal access to places, businesses and services. However; despite this, some owners have reported that they have been refused access to a place, business or service because they have been accompanied by their assistance dog. Recently several of these cases have attracted significant media attention.

Guide Dogs has conducted a survey of assistance dog owners from across the UK to investigate positive and negative experiences when accessing businesses and services with an assistance dog.

A shocking three quarters (75 per cent) of all assistance dog owners surveyed have been refused access at some point because they had an assistance dog with them. This evidently shows there is still much work to be done before assistance dog owners can **Access All Areas**, as is their right.

“(Access refusals make me feel) awful. Very much like a second class citizen who is not wanted by society no matter who or what the business is. It’s as if we should be stuck away and never seen again. I absolutely abhor the feeling of being useless and made to feel inadequate.”

Guide dog owner, Hove



Executive Summary

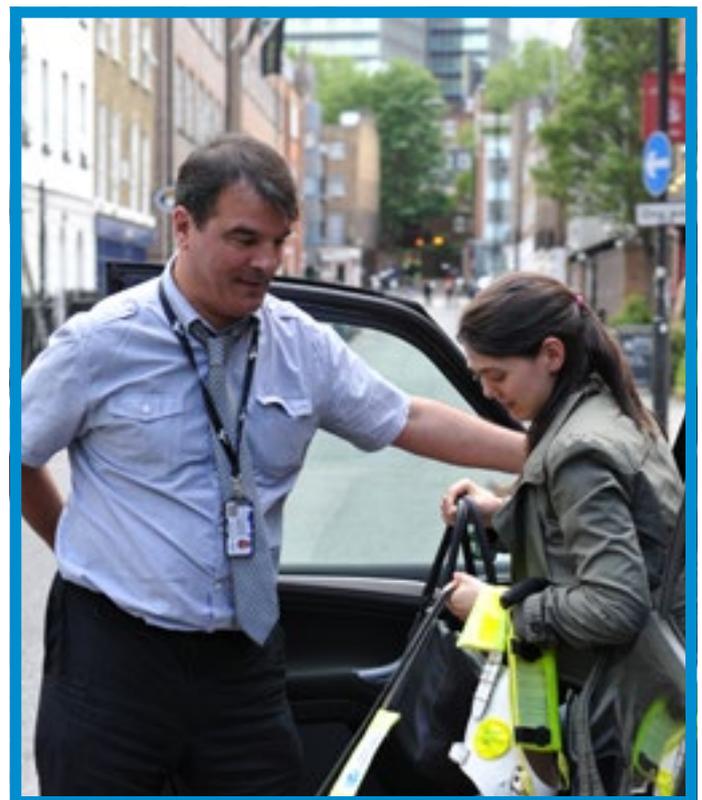
“In the end it is events such as these, rather than my visual impairment per se, which make me disabled - building a barrier between those liable to be refused and everyone else.” Guide dog owner, London

An assistance dog is a dog trained to aid or assist a person with a disability or medical condition. The Equality Act 2010, or Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 in Northern Ireland (as extended by the Disability Discrimination (NI) Order 2006 (DDO)) confirms their rights to have equal access places, businesses and services. The ‘Access All Areas’ survey yielded responses from 1118 assistance dog owners between January and March 2015 some of which give cause for concern.

A shocking three quarters (75 per cent) of all assistance dog owners surveyed have been refused access at some point because they had an assistance dog with them. Nearly half (49 per cent) had been refused access in the past year, and a third (33 per cent) within the last six months. This evidently shows there is still much work to be done before assistance dog owners can **Access All Areas**, independently and with dignity as is their right.

Refusal of access to a service is commonly reported amongst all types of assistance dog owners. Taxi refusals were specifically the most frequent type of refusal for guide dog owners, with this being experienced by 44 per cent of all those who had encountered at least one refusal within the last year. The high reliance on taxis as a mode of transport for guide dog owners is a possible reason for the high frequency of refusals.

The most commonly cited reasons were religious or cultural reasons, concerns the guide dog would shed hair, be dirty, or damage the car in some way, allergies, and simply stating ‘I don’t carry dogs’. The locations of individual taxi refusals for guide dog owners were reported from almost every corner of the UK too, from Glasgow to Yeovil.



This is clearly a widespread issue which needs addressing on a UK wide scale.

Other frequent sites of access refusals included restaurants, newsagents or convenience store, cafés and high street shops. The most frequent reasons given were that food is being served and so a dog is not welcome (27 per cent of all those who experienced a refusal within the last year) and that the business or its customers did not like dogs (24 per cent).

Nearly half of all those who had experienced a refusal over the last year felt they were more likely to be refused when on their own rather than with friends, relatives or colleagues (47 per cent). This potentially has serious repercussions for the independence of an assistance dog owner.

The most frequent response (57 per cent of survey respondents) is to complain to the company directly. Over half (52 per cent) of all assistance dog owners said they hadn't returned to a business that had refused them access within the past year, (47 per cent said they had). Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) had advised others not to use a business or service after they experienced an access refusal and others had contacted the media (9 per cent) or written on social media (20 per cent) about the incident. All these activities have the potential to really impact the level of custom a business or service receives; therefore there is a very clear economic case for providers to offer an inclusive service as well as the legal imperative for them to do so.

When asked whether they had considered taking legal action the majority (69 per cent) of assistance dog owners who experienced an access refusal within the last year had not. Only eight assistance dog owners said they had brought forward a legal case that had led to a successful prosecution. Although the law does support the access rights of assistance dog owners these responses clearly show there are significant barriers to successful prosecutions, therefore preventing this law from having the teeth to be an effective deterrent.

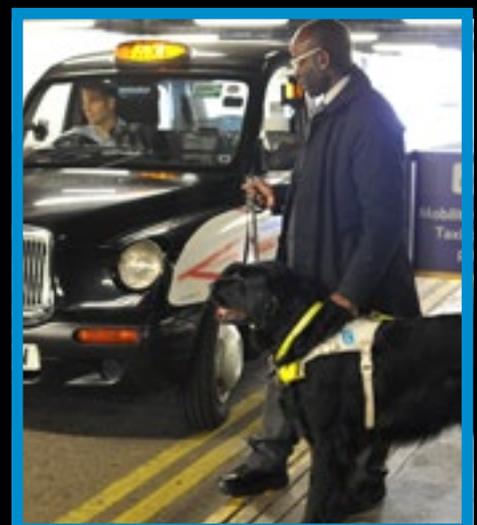
The survey also asked respondents about positive experiences with businesses and services. The most frequently named types of businesses welcoming assistance dog owners included high street shops, food outlets, restaurants, cafes, and pubs.

Many supermarkets had trained staff to assist with shopping trips, from helping guide an assistance dog owner around the store, to assisting at the checkout. One very simple way a business can make assistance dog owners feel welcomed is to offer water to their dog. Whilst not a legal requirement, the offer of water or a dog bowl was mentioned as an example of good practice was mentioned 49 times by respondents.

Recommendations

1. Mandatory disability awareness training for taxi and private hire vehicle drivers across the UK.
2. Better enforcement of access refusal cases by relevant authorities, for example through mystery shoppers, and tougher sanctions against non-compliant drivers
3. Greater awareness and staff training in all public facing businesses and services
4. Magistrates to issue an appropriate level of fine so as to act as a deterrent in cases where taxi drivers are found guilty of refusal to carry assistance dogs. To support this Sentencing Council to issue magistrates with sentencing guidance for taxi access refusal cases in England and Wales.

Please visit:
[www.guidedogs.org.uk/
AccessAllAreasResources](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/AccessAllAreasResources)
for more information.



Methodology

An assistance dog is a dog trained to aid or support a person with a disability or medical condition.

The **Access All Areas** survey was conducted between January and March 2015. 1118 assistance dog owners responded; including 737 guide dog owners (66 per cent), 340 owners of a different type of assistance dog (31 per cent), and 40 previous assistance dog owners¹ (4 per cent). Of those owners of a different type of assistance dog 264 were hearing dog owners (254 of which currently have a hearing dog), 29 dogs for the disabled owners, 19 dog A.I.D (Assistance in Disability) owners, 15 canine partners owners (14 current), and 4 medical detection dog owners.

An access refusal is when an individual has been refused access from a place, vehicle or service because you have an assistance dog with them on which they depend. For the purposes of this survey we were also interested in hearing about occasions when an assistance dog owner had initially been refused access and then been later allowed entry.



¹ who do not currently have an assistance dog

If you are interested in findings for a specific area or group of respondents then please email: campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk. More information about the campaign is available at: www.guidedogs.org.uk/AccessAllAreas

Access refusals

“My biggest problem with refusals comes from taxi drivers. I used to have a very tough two hour commute to work. The taxi part of the journey was the shortest bit travel wise, but it always ended up being the bit that held me up the most because I was having to spend time facing drivers who wouldn’t take me with my dog. It made an already stressful situation really stressful and upsetting...it’s good that my contract was flexi hours otherwise I’m sure I would have been sacked for being late all the time - it happened so often.”

Guide dog owner, Daventry

The rights of assistance dog owners to access places, businesses and services with their dog are clearly set out within the Equality Act 2010². The Act makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person with a disability, and requires service providers to make “reasonable adjustments” to accommodate people. The Act also makes it a criminal offence for a taxi or private hire driver to refuse to carry an assistance dog. Medical exemption certificates can be issued by a council licencing office if drivers have genuine health reasons and that this supported by a letter from a GP or other qualified medical practitioner.

Despite this three quarters of survey respondents (75 per cent) said they have been refused access at some point because they had an assistance dog with them. Nearly half (49 per cent) had been refused access in the past year, and a third (33 per cent) within the last six months.

Guide dog owners and access refusals

Although most results from the survey are broadly consistent between guide dog owners and other assistance dog owners, there are some minor differences when it comes to the places or services to which they are most frequently refused access.

Taxi refusals for guide dog owners

When asked for the specific places or services from which they had been refused within the last year, for guide dog owners taxi refusals were by far the most frequent, with this being experienced by 44 per cent of all those who had encountered at least one refusal within the last year. Startlingly, over three quarters of these taxi refusals (77 per cent) were experienced within the last six months.

The high reliance on taxis as a mode of transport for guide dog owners is a possible reason for this type of refusal being less frequent for other types of assistance dog owners.

Guide dog owners who responded to the survey cited a wide range of reasons given for refusing their guide dog access to a taxi. These are shown in the below table.



² www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/chapter/2/crossheading/adjustments-for-disabled-persons

The high reliance on taxis as a mode of transport for guide dog owners is a possible reason for this type of refusal being less frequent for other types of assistance dog owners.

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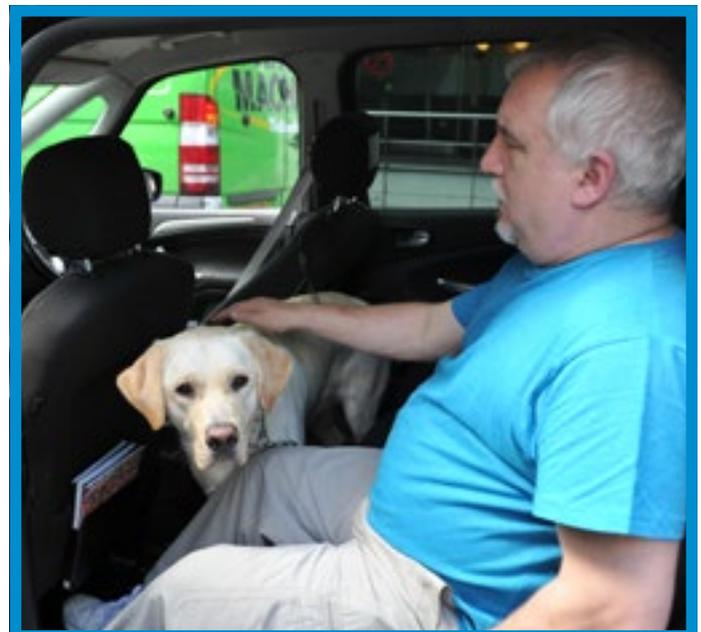
Table 1: Reasons for taxi drivers refusing guide dogs access

Reasons given for refusing access	Number of respondents reporting reason
Religious or cultural reasons	33
Concerns the guide dog would shed hair, be dirty, or damage the car in some way	16
Allergies	15
'I don't carry dogs'	13

Eight guide dog owners said they were refused access to a taxi despite informing the operator they were a guide dog owner when the vehicle was booked. In addition 14 guide dog owners said they had experienced a taxi simply driving off as soon as they saw the guide dog, one respondent said a taxi driver had done this with their luggage already loaded into the vehicle. These types of refusals are harder to confirm and often happen at taxi ranks or with black cabs.

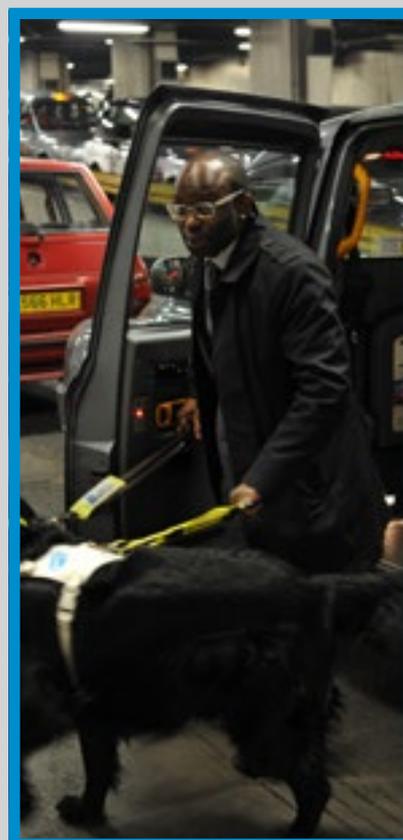
Even if an outright refusal doesn't occur guide dog owners have highlighted a number of problems they still face with substandard customer service from taxi drivers. For example, drivers had or attempted to charge extra for carrying their dog, drivers tried to carry the assistance dog in an inappropriate area of the car such as in the boot, and drivers had allowed guide dogs access but made it clear they were unhappy doing so. Concerningly, five guide dog owners said a driver had been abusive towards them. Other guide dog owners said they felt they had been made to wait longer for a taxi because they mentioned when booking that they had an assistance dog and fewer drivers were willing to take their booking. Again this is harder to confirm.

Thirty respondents detailed complaints they had made as a result of a taxi refusal, but the results were very mixed, ranging from drivers being taken to court and found guilty, and companies apologising and retraining drivers through to no action being taken (as far as is known). It appears the current laws around assistance dog owner access are not being applied consistently or as robustly as they could be. There was similar mixture in views on whether refusals stemmed from individual taxi drivers or whole taxi firms. **The locations of individual taxi refusals for guide dog owners were reported from almost every corner of the UK too, from Glasgow to Yeovil. This is clearly a widespread issue which needs addressing on a UK wide scale.**



Case study: Guide dog owner, Daventry

“The business in question was a Birmingham taxi firm that I used to use as part of my commute to work. My work and the firm had a deal on transport funding so I had no choice but to keep going back to them even after refusals. My returning experiences were hit and miss. Always drivers were aware in advance that I would have a guide dog with me. Sometimes the drivers would be fantastic and really helpful. Other times they would complain about taking the dog, or make up excuses why they couldn't take her “I'm fasting at the moment”, “other customers don't like dog hair in the car”...etc. On the odd occasion (according to sighted companions around me) my driver would signal to me, pull up as if to let me in, suddenly register the dog and then drive straight off without a word. I've had similar experiences with other taxi firms too.”



Other frequent refusals for guide dog owners

Other frequent sources of access refusals for guide dog owners included restaurants, newsagents or convenience stores, cafes, and high street shops. Table 2 below shows the frequency of access refusals from these five most frequent places for guide dog owners.

Table 2: Five most frequent places for guide dog owner refusals³

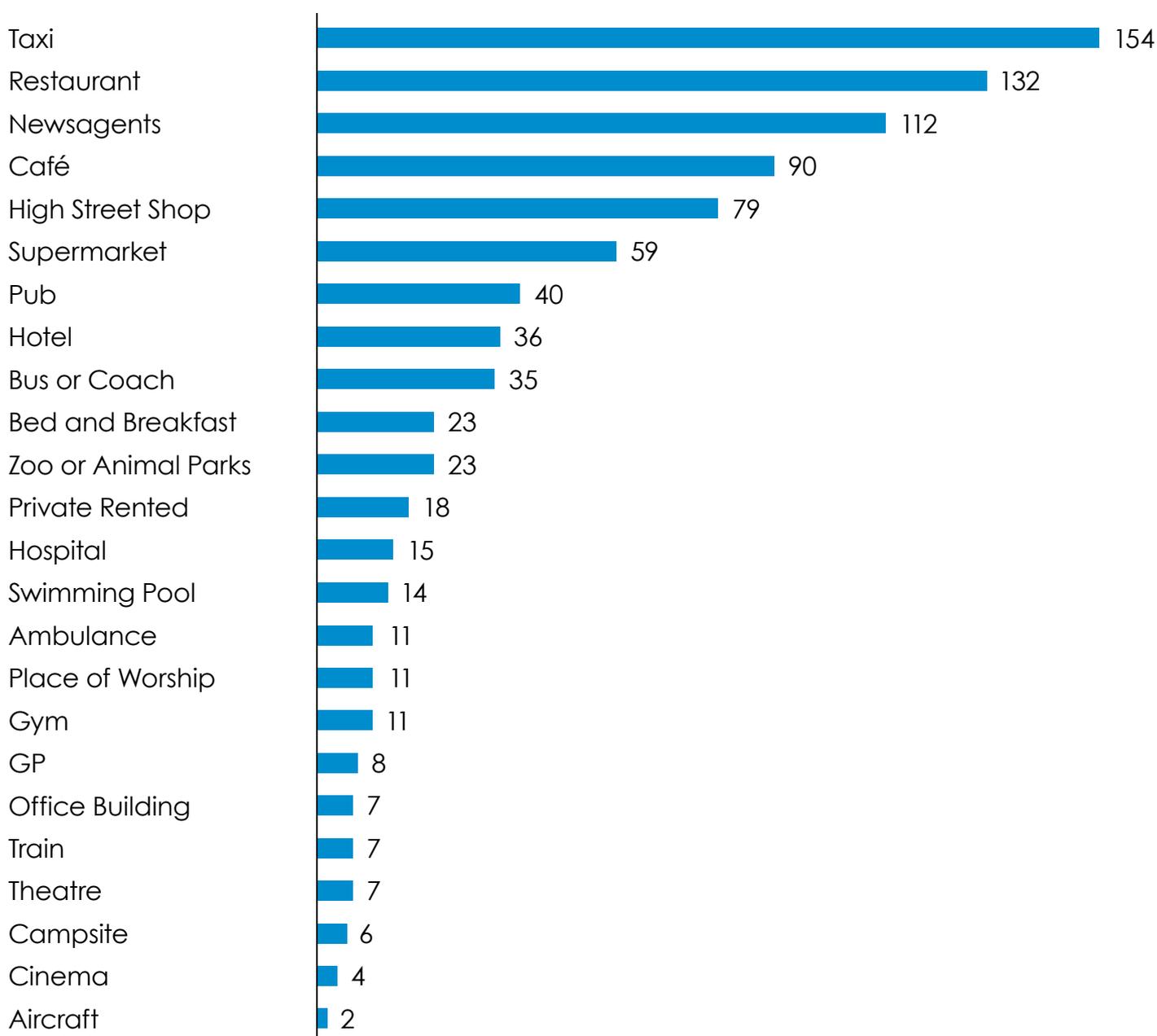
Type of refusal	Within last 6 months	Within last year
Taxi	34 per cent	44 per cent
Restaurant	24 per cent	37 per cent
Newsagents or convenience store	23 per cent	32 per cent
Café	17 per cent	25 per cent
High street shop	18 per cent	22 per cent

³ Percentages extrapolated from answers of guide dog owners who had experienced any type of access refusal within the last 12 months.

“(On a) meal out with my family, my sister was organising a family gathering at the curry house. When she mentioned about the guide dog the person on the phone said ‘We don’t allow dogs including guide dogs.’ I was new to being a guide dog owner at the time and never knew what the rules were regarding guide dogs. When my sister challenged him about refusing a guide dog he just said I am not interested.”

Guide dog owner, Stockport

Chart 1: Places, businesses and services that guide dog owners have experienced access refusals over last year, shown by frequency



Number of guide dog owners who have experienced this type of refusal over last 12 months

Other assistance dog owner refusals

Similar results can be seen for other types of assistance dog owners, as shown below in table 3.

Table 3: Five most frequent places for other assistance dog owners to be refused access

Place of refusal	Percentage of assistance dog owners who have experienced a refusal from place in last 6 months or less	Percentage of assistance dog owners who have experienced a refusal from place in last year or less
High street shop	25 per cent	38 per cent
Newsagents or convenience store	12 per cent	36 per cent
Café	24 per cent	36 per cent
Restaurant	22 per cent	35 per cent
Supermarket	15 per cent	24 per cent

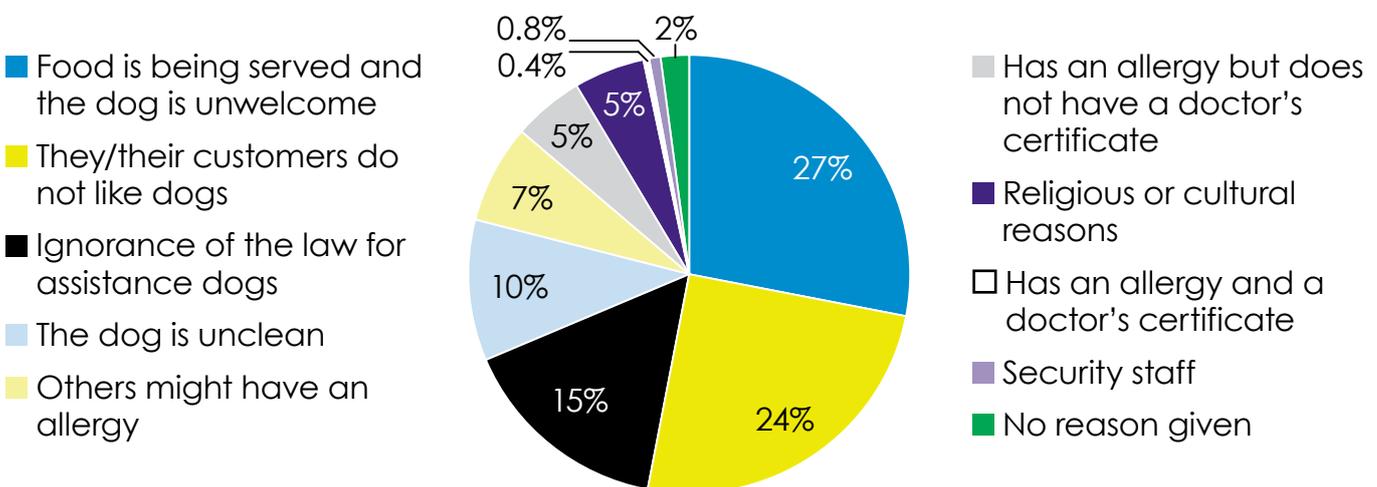


Why do refusals happen?

There are a wide range of reasons that assistance dog owners (including guide dog owners) told us about why they were told they were being refused access to a place, business or service. According to the Access All Areas survey the most frequent reason given is that food is being served and so a dog is not welcome (27 per cent of all those who experienced a refusal within the last year). A quarter said they were most frequently refused because either the business or their customers did not like dogs (24 per cent). Considering verbatim responses to this question another frequent reason appears to be ignorance of the law surrounding access for assistance dog owners, including many who simply state 'no dogs are allowed' without understanding the distinction (15 per cent).



Chart 2: Most frequent reasons for access refusals⁶



It seems a lack of awareness amongst some staff and businesses is a significant barrier to access. It is not just shop floor staff who are sometimes unaware of the role an assistance dog plays, 41 respondents highlighted issues with security staff who could be contracted from external companies.

The Access All Areas survey also asked questions to ascertain if refusals were affected by who was accompanying the assistance dog owner at that time. Nearly half of all those who had experienced a refusal over the last year felt they were more likely to be refused when on their own (47 per cent) and nearly a quarter felt more likely when accompanied by another assistance dog owner (24 per cent).

In stark contrast a quarter felt they were less likely to be refused when accompanied by friends (25 per cent) and over a fifth when with family (23 per cent). The potential for this to hinder blind, partially sighted or other disabled people from participating in community life should not be underestimated. This in turn is bound to have a negative effect on their confidence and wellbeing.

“We (my assistance dog & I) don’t go out shopping much unless there someone else with us. I don’t have confidence to go alone.”

Hearing dog owner, Burton on Trent

⁴ Excludes data from guide dog owners

⁵ Percentages extrapolated from answers of other assistance dog owners who had experienced any type of access refusal within the last 12 months.

⁶ (of all assistance dog owners who have experienced a refusal over the last 12 months)

Impact

“Access refusals have both an immediate and longer term effect. In the immediate aftermath I feel shaken, upset, despondent and stressed. Often I have been left physically shaking, unable to concentrate, or to hold conversations. In the longer term each episode eats away at one’s self confidence and sense of self-worth, as well as making one (as well as friends or relatives) increasingly unwilling to put oneself into situations where a refusal is more likely - such as certain types of restaurant, shops that haven’t been visited before, or taxis. I personally avoid taxis because of a fear of being refused and left stranded. In the end it is events such as these, rather than my visual impairment per se, which make me disabled - building a barrier between those liable to be refused and everyone else.” Guide dog owner, London

Assistance dog owners told us that access refusals make them feel angry, upset and embarrassed. Worryingly several respondents explain that following an access refusal they feel less confident and reluctant to use that type of service or business again in the future. Some assistance dog owners said they are considering giving up their assistance dog due to the emotional impact of frequent access refusals.

“Disgusted, humiliated, angry, wanting to give up the dog - too stressful, too hard to do anything about it...”

Hearing dog owner, Hampshire



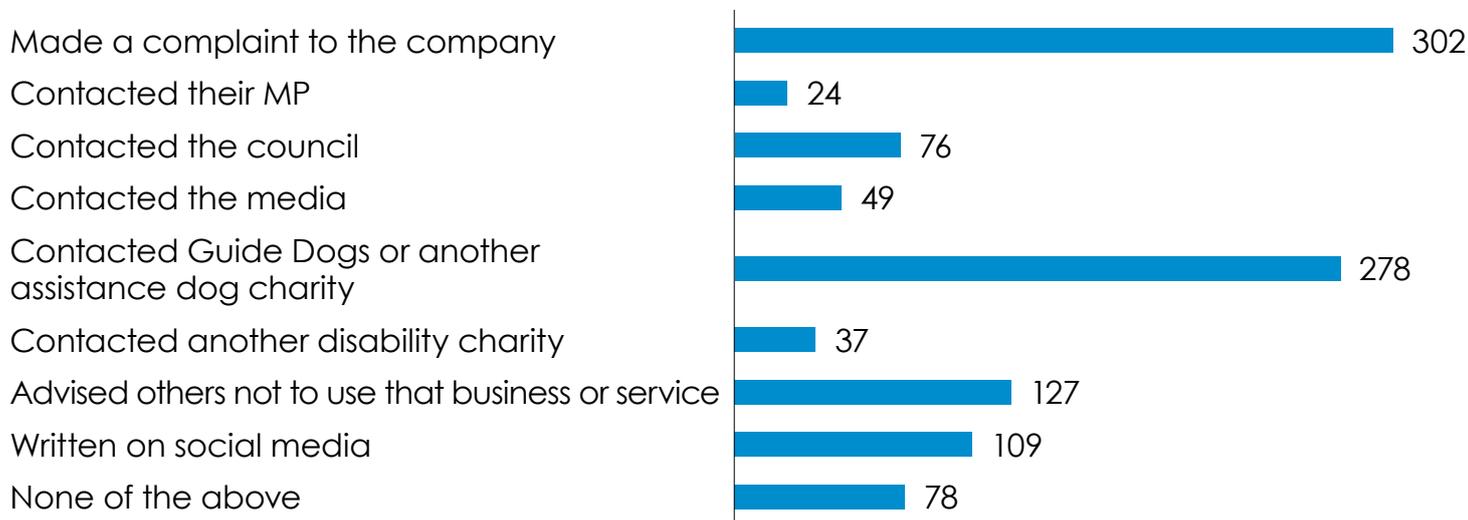
Responding to an access refusal

There are a variety of ways in which an assistance dog owner may respond to an access refusal. The most frequent response (57 per cent of survey respondents) is to complain to the company directly. Assistance dog charities offer support for those who experience an access refusal and 53 per cent said they had made contact with Guide Dogs or another assistance dog charity following a refusal, meaning nearly half don't. Guide Dogs would urge any guide dog owners who experience an access refusal to report it to their mobility team, even if it is resolved at the time as it is important for the frequency of refusals to be monitored. Guide Dogs can follow up with businesses and services to make sure they are aware of the law and do not refuse access to another assistance dog owner in the future. 16 respondents said they made the conscious decision to not take any action in response to a refusal with some saying they 'didn't want to make a fuss'. A full break down of the different responses to access refusals is set out in Chart 3.

“If I feel strong I educate them telling them it is against the law for them to refuse me, if I am with family or friends I do not want to make a fuss and go away, it embarrasses me and I am very upset at their attitude and lack of knowledge.”

Guide dog owner, Hunstanton

Chart 3: Assistance dog owner responses to an access refusal⁷



“(Access refusals make me feel) unhuman and I don’t want to give them my business. It’s often done publicly and I’m humiliated! They never publicly apologise though!”

Canine partner owner, Cornwall

⁷ Based on responses from all assistance dog owners who have experienced an access refusal within the last year (527)

Result of access refusals

Access refusals can hamper a person's independence and are bad for business. In fact, over half (52 per cent) of all assistance dog owners said they hadn't returned to a business that had refused them access within the past year, (47 per cent said they had). Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) had advised others not to use a business or service after they experienced an access refusal and others had contacted the media (9 per cent) or written on social media (20 per cent) about the incident. In fact, 45 per cent of guide dog owners under thirty years old who experienced an access refusal within the last year wrote about it on social media. All these activities have the potential to really impact the level of custom a business or service receives; therefore there is a very clear economic case for providers to offer an inclusive service as well as the legal imperative for them to do so.

“A café refused me entry due to having a guide dog so I challenged them and they backed down, but I never went again, why should I spend my money in a place that doesn't want us?” Guide dog owner, Stoke on Trent



“I stood up in a burger place and let all other people in there know what was happening and asked them to leave with me and cleared the place.” Guide dog owner, Brighton

When asked whether they had considered taking legal action the majority (69 per cent) of assistance dog owners who experienced an access refusal within the last year had not, with 29 per cent saying no because it would be too difficult or time consuming. Of those who had considered taking legal action, 87 per cent didn't progress a case for reasons such as cost of legal fees. This is unfortunate as cases can be taken at no personal cost and there are also mediation services available to those who have been refused access which can help resolve a case before it reaches court. In fact, only 8 assistance dog owners said they had brought forward a legal case that had led to a successful prosecution. 3 of these 8 people who had a successful prosecution said they received more than £500 in compensation. **Although the law does support the access rights of assistance dog owners these responses clearly indicate a reluctance amongst assistance dog owners to take legal action and that there are significant barriers to successful prosecutions. This state of affairs is preventing this law from having the teeth it needs to be an effective deterrent.**



“I have had two fantastic Hearing Dogs for Deaf People (HDFDP) over 17 years - they are my life line! I cannot cope with a HDFDP anymore. After all these years, I would have expected to become immune to the abuse, but I never have. It is appalling when the public - even the dog-lovers - are listening and watching with their mouths tightly shut whilst I try my utmost to explain the joy and the necessity of my HDFDP and other assistance dogs. At one place, I wrote out and explained all the colours and the names of the main Assistance Dogs. The managers of this establishment ordered me out 3 times. There comes a time when 3 times is just too much. Enough is enough and I will never then darken their door again. Go to court on top of all that??? NEVER!”

Hearing dog owner, Wrexham

Businesses and services welcoming assistance dogs

“All the shops that I go in are very accommodating and ask how Ziggy is. That always makes me feel happy for the rest of the day :)” Guide dog owner, Liverpool

The survey also asked respondents about positive experiences with businesses and services. There were a large quantity of verbatim comments on the subject of good practice, and particularly positive was the fact 125 respondents stated they felt welcomed in most or all businesses and services. The top ten most frequently named types of business are displayed in table 4 below.

Table 4: 10 most frequently named types of businesses welcoming assistance dog owners⁸

Type of business or service	Number of assistance dog owner mentions
High street shops (including 73 department stores)	231
Food outlets (including 209 supermarkets)	230
Restaurants	172
Cafes	160
Pubs	119
Hospital/GP/dentist (including 41 hospitals)	87
Hotels	75
Theatre/concert hall/music venue	41
Taxi	40
Bus and coach or bus station	34

Local or chain businesses?

Based upon the verbatim comments of assistance dog owners there seems to be a division in opinion on whether local or chain businesses are best for access. Some larger chain stores are mentioned repeatedly, for example Marks and Marks and Spencer is referenced 58 times for being welcoming, Costa coffee received 42 positive mentions as well as all the major supermarkets (Sainsbury's 54, Tesco 50, Asda 33, Morrisons 27, Waitrose 23, Co-op 13, Aldi 7 and Lidl 7). It should however, be noted that all of these chains were also mentioned as sites of at least one refusal, with Tesco being the most divisive having been mentioned 30 times as a site for an access refusal.

Local small businesses were also well represented in the positive feedback. Of all the cafés positively mentioned 64 were described as locally run and 56 were chains, similarly of the restaurants 66 were locally run and 61 were chains. Far more local pubs received positive feedback with 63 specifically mentioned compared to 21 chain pubs.



⁸ Extrapolated from all responding assistance dog owner verbatim comments

Assistance dog owners said the reasons for good service in larger, chain businesses was down to good quality staff training, whilst those with positive feedback for local businesses cited their frequency as customers as a major reason.

Good practice

Several modes of transport were also highlighted for positive feedback, with taxis (40 mentions) and buses or coaches (34) both being within the top 10 most frequently mentioned. Trains also were mentioned as positive examples a total of 33 times along with ferries (4 mentions) and airlines/airports (11). Many respondents talked about using the same taxi company whom they were confident would welcome them and their assistance dog. On all of these modes of transport positive feedback included offering sighted guiding help, giving adequate room to their assistance dog, and waiting until the assistance dog owner was sat safely down before driving.

“East Coast Trains and staff are particularly welcoming. They allow me to pre-board and also do not push assistance giving me total independence.” Guide dog owner, London

Many supermarkets had trained staff to assist with shopping trips, from helping guide an assistance dog owner around the store, to assisting at the checkout. Restaurants and cafés singled out for praise often offered assistance dog owners tables with plenty of room for their dogs. Perhaps the most detailed of positive feedback was that from those who visited theatres. Several respondents described how theatre staff would look after dogs during performances to ensure the animal was comfortable and not alarmed by loud music from the stage.

“West End theatres are very guide dog friendly. They look after the dog during your visit. They take care of all their needs. Come and bring them back at interval. They must have training as the staff in ALL the West End theatres have gone beyond their duty to take care of me, my dog and my family. Last time we went my guide dog was taken for a long walk to Buckingham Palace and unfortunately her majesty was out walking the corgi’s (Joke).”

Guide dog owner, Oxfordshire



“Asda, Church Rd, Liverpool. Staff bend over backwards to help, offer to get items for me to save me walking around the shop. Nothing is too much trouble. TSB Bank, Smithdown Place, Liverpool 15. Friendly, helpful but without being patronising.”

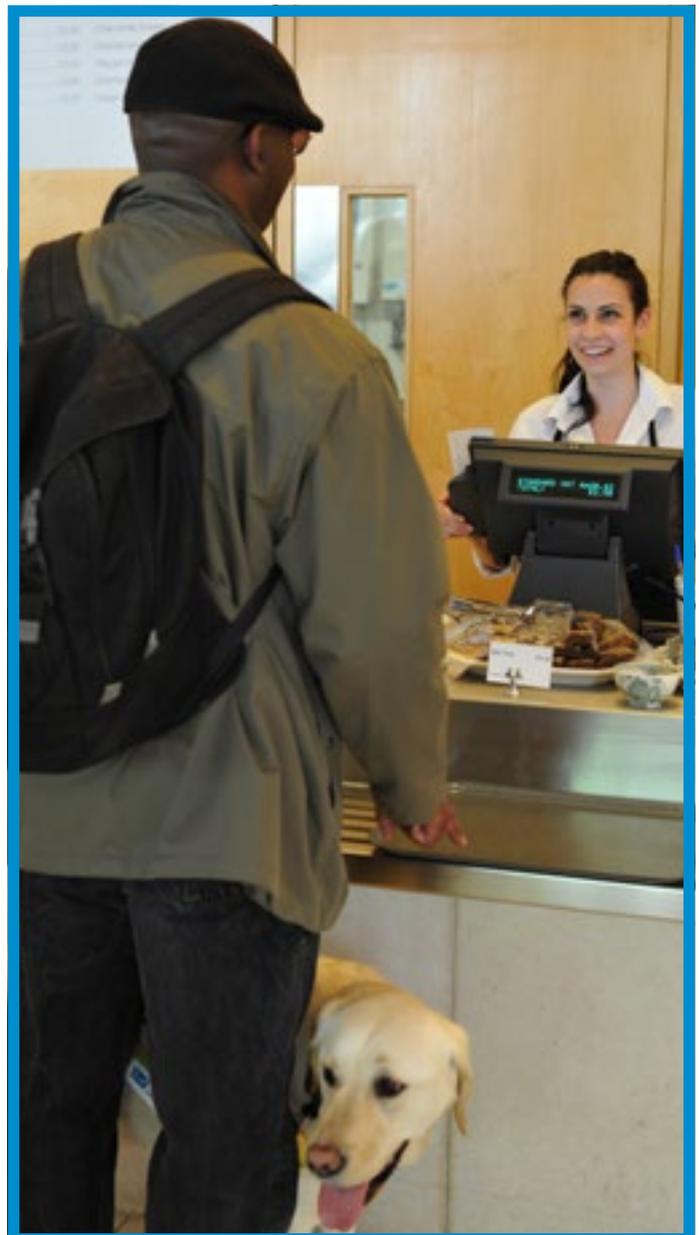
Dog A.I.D owner, Liverpool



One very simple way a business can make assistance dog owners feel welcomed is to offer water to their dog. The offer of water or a dog bowl as an example of good practice was mentioned 49 times by respondents.

“Marks and Spencer restaurants are good and offer to carry my tray for me. First Great Western trains to South Wales when the ticket inspectors have offered to go to the restaurant to get my coffee for me. There are so many kind, helpful, welcoming people and businesses around.”

Guide dog owner, Hemel Hempstead



Conclusion

“It can also spoil enjoyment when you are constantly having to explain the law. It would be lovely to be able to book a break and just enjoy it without having to justify why you are blind and need the support of a guide dog.”

Guide dog owner, Staffordshire

The 'Access All Areas' survey has clearly shown that access refusals are not only frequent, but also have a significant impact on the independence of assistance dog owners, severely undermining the role of the dog.

Even though the law supports an assistance dog owner's rights to access this obviously is not having the desired effect, and the number of successful prosecutions for those refusing access is so woefully low as to be an ineffective deterrent for future refusals. Although on many occasions these refusals can be successfully dealt with simply by explaining the purpose of the dog and the distinction between a trained assistance animal and a pet, this largely depends upon the individual feeling confident. Even after a successful conclusion to a refusal many assistance dog owners have expressed an unwillingness to either use that particular service or business again or avoid using that type of service on their own again.

Taxis are a major problem for guide dog owners in particular, which is especially difficult when this is a mode of transport relied upon by a large number of those with a vision impairment who are unable to drive. For other assistance dog owners shops and food suppliers are the biggest issue. However; regardless of the type of business or service refusing access, common reasons are given which generally amount to a lack of awareness of the law and the role of assistance dogs.



“It's horrible, like I'm not a real person. I feel angry, frustrated because I have to explain about what an assistance dog is and what my disability is. All I wanted was a coffee but I'm stressed out and embarrassed. Public are very good at coming to the rescue and backing me up saying I am allowed in...” Guide dog owner, Essex

Despite these negative experiences there are also a large number of businesses and services in the UK who already provide good quality customer service to assistance dog owners. 125 assistance dog owners explained most or all businesses welcome them and positive feedback has been received for both small and chain businesses. The common thread running all through this positive feedback is awareness of the role played by assistance dogs, whether that has been provided at a national company level through staff training or on a local level through direct contact with assistance dog owners in the area. Even though taxis are the most frequently encountered access refusal from guide dog owners, taxis were also named as the ninth most frequent type of business welcoming assistance dog owners. It is therefore clear that there is a large amount of good practice already in existence from which others can learn from.

“The twelve tellers pub in Preston. It is a new pub and when we went on the opening weekend they asked if the dog needed water or anything else. I thought that was very nice as they were very busy and she was probably the first assistance dog to visit. It shows that the staff have been trained. “

Hearing dog owner, Lancashire

“On entering small local shops and some restaurants, I’ve been told that dogs are not allowed on premises, but when I point out the harness, I am welcomed. It seems only a dog is seen first, and people react to that very quickly. Dare I say that there does appear to be a pattern of misunderstanding, lack of awareness and poor tolerance...”

Guide dog owner, Newark

Recommendations

1. Mandatory disability awareness training for taxi and private hire vehicle drivers across the UK.
2. Better enforcement of access refusal cases by relevant authorities, for example through mystery shoppers, and tougher sanctions against non-compliant drivers
3. Greater awareness and staff training in all public facing businesses and services
4. Magistrates to issue an appropriate level of fine so as to act as a deterrent in cases where taxi drivers are found guilty of refusal to carry assistance dogs. To support this Sentencing Council to issue magistrates with sentencing guidance for taxi access refusal cases in England and Wales.

Guide dog owners who experience an access refusal should inform the Guide Dogs Mobility team responsible for the area in which the incident took place so that the refusal can be recorded and advice offered. Owners of other types of assistance dogs should contact their assistance dog charity so that they can respond and support you.

There are resources available on our website that all assistance dog owners who might find useful, including advice on what to do if you are refused as well as awareness raising leaflets and posters to spread the word locally. There are also resources for businesses wanting to offer a positive customer experience to all those using their services and to ensure that they stay on the right side of the law. Please visit: www.guidedogs.org.uk/AccessAllAreasResources for more information.

For more information about how to contact your local Guide Dogs team please go to: www.guidedogs.org.uk/aboutus/local-to-you/mobility-teams

For more information about Assistance Dogs UK please go to www.assistancedogs.org.uk