



Guiding principles: Ensuring excellence in dog welfare

Best practice for assistance
dog professionals



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Executive Summary

This paper provides an overview of the requirements that should be met in respect of ensuring the welfare of guide dogs. It covers explanations of the high-level principles that are used to inform the design of services and operational practice in the care and training of our dogs and has drawn upon legislation and best practice guidance from various countries, and international standards frameworks such as that of the International Guide Dog Federation, Assistance Dogs International and European Standard EN17984 Assistance Dogs.

It explains the strategic commitment of how Guide Dogs positions itself as a best-in-class provider of assistance dog services, and why the welfare of our dogs is as important to us as the wellbeing of the people we serve.

In short, we recognise that the two are intrinsically linked and experience a mutual inter-dependency – this is best represented through our commitment to the principle of partnership.



What is animal welfare?

Animal welfare is a complex and evolving concept, and the term can mean different things to different people. Whilst we all agree that dog welfare is important, the term is ill-defined and even experts have very different views as to what 'good' welfare is and how we can achieve it.

The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) has produced some useful guidance and a definition:

- Animal welfare means the physical and mental state of an animal in relation to the conditions in which it lives and dies.
- There is a critical relationship between animal health and animal welfare.

- Animal welfare assessments should consider what an animal needs and what an animal wants – i.e., the apparent strength of preferences and aversions.

Perspectives on animal welfare are influenced by 'values', 'science' and are often specific to the 'culture' of different nations or indeed organisations. However, this simple definition may cover most elements:

Animal welfare is about ensuring the wellbeing of an individual animal from the animal's point of view. It includes animal health and encompasses both the physical and psychological state of the animal.

Contemporary thinking in animal welfare science has evolved from a concept of minimising suffering to one of promoting positive experiences, termed positive animal welfare (PAW). Public perception aligns with the importance of ensuring positive experiences in animal welfare. Accordingly, Guide Dogs aligns to the definition of PAW as follows:

- Ensuring that the dog flourishes through predominantly positive mental states, competence, and resilience.
- Recognising that good physical health alone does not equate to PAW.
- Appreciating that positive mental states arise from rewarding experiences, choices, and opportunities tailored to species-specific capabilities and needs.

Since 2017, recognising changing societal expectations, Guide Dogs embraced the need to create and embed our dog assisted services within an ethical framework that moved the organisation from a utilitarian approach towards our dogs (describing them by their function) to one that better balanced their value to a customer with their intrinsic value as a dog. In 2017 we stated:

“

We want to get to a stage where the relationship between our dogs and our people (all our handlers but especially our customers who should have the longest and deepest relationship of all) is as good as it can be for both parties. Our aspiration, for our dogs, is that we provide them with opportunities to thrive both as individuals and within their role. If we get this right, we can best assure that our dogs have a good quality of life, whilst also supporting our customers' needs and our supporters' expectations.

”

To achieve this goal, we delivered systemic changes to the guide dog service, standardising our approaches to the principles and practice of puppy raising, dog training the creation of new partnerships and completed extensive and intensive staff training.

We have based our approach on contemporary, science-based approaches to dog training, behaviour and animal agency. We place an increased emphasis on our handlers (volunteers, service users and staff) on building a human-dog relationship based on trust; treating every interaction with our dogs as a conversation – where our people are asked to listen to and importantly respond to what the dog is 'telling' them.

This direction of travel is very much representative of the best of the professional dog sector and where Guide Dogs must position itself. However, as people learn more about animal ethics, increase their recognition of the sentience of animals and how this relates to the human-dog relationship, they may become challenged when trying to meet the needs of our customers whilst also ensuring the welfare and wellbeing of our dogs. This document is intended to help with this thinking.



Lifetime Welfare

The starting point in developing this document is recognition that dogs are sentient beings who can perceive their environment and experience sensations such as pain, fear and discomfort or pleasure, happiness or enjoyment and can give expression to these sensations.

In terms of definitions, welfare and wellbeing are often used as synonyms; however, they are distinct from each other. Whilst welfare is defined as the physical and mental state of an animal in relation to the conditions in which it lives and dies, wellbeing is defined as the animal's subjective internal state in response to its physical and psychological perception and interpretation of internal and external stimuli. The treatment that an animal receives is covered by other terms such as animal care, animal husbandry and humane treatment.

By ensuring our dogs achieve a good state of health and welfare they are most likely also to have a good sense of wellbeing – but individual dogs will perceive their situation differently and thus may experience a different sense of wellbeing, even when in the same situation as others. Of course, determining 'wellbeing' is subjective as it is impossible to know for certain how any other living being is feeling about their situation.

Lifetime welfare encompasses the whole life course of the dog from pre-birth to old age and death. Accommodating the welfare

of the dog is a legal requirement but fundamental to the ethical basis of being a responsible guardian. As a guide dog experiences several changes of caregiver in their lifetime, the same core principles and practice must apply equally to all the individuals responsible for the care of the dog, either temporarily or permanently.

We can limit any negative consequences of change, as dictated by the nature of our business, by good management of the dog's environment, ensuring that dogs build secure bonds with people as soon as possible and then have standardised processes that ensure that unnecessary and unpredictable change is reduced to an absolute minimum.

Having a standardised 'dog journey' underpinned by an easy-to-understand framework that is then applied across a whole life course is essential. The following sections summarise the high-level principles upon which we develop and apply operational practices to achieve dog welfare and wellbeing.

One Welfare

One Welfare is an international concept that serves to highlight the interconnections between animal welfare, human wellbeing, and our shared physical and social environment.

One Welfare extends the approach of the One Health theme used for human and animal health and asks us to consider the direct and indirect links between animal welfare, human wellbeing and environmentally friendly animal-keeping systems.

We must be cognisant of the impact of our activities on humans, other animals and the environment. For example, our use of preventative medications for parasite control (a risk to human and animal health

and necessary for public acceptance of assistance dogs) is increasingly being challenged due to the impact on the environment and other species.

One Welfare presents a useful framework for Guide Dogs when thinking through changes to operational practice, based as it is on encouraging an interdisciplinary and evidence-based approach to human, animal and social welfare – and our commitment to environmental sustainability.



The Five Domains Model of animal welfare

In defining, advising about, and assessing welfare, current legislation in the EU relies heavily on the Five Freedoms, namely freedom from: hunger and thirst; discomfort; pain injury and disease; fear and distress and the freedom to express normal behaviour.

However, ‘freedom from’ a negative state is a limiting factor when considering the overall wellbeing of our dogs. Whilst the Five Freedoms recognises animal sentience, it focuses on the avoidance of negative states; this may simply allow a dog to survive but not necessarily thrive.

A more contemporary model is The Five Domains Model (2020), developed by Professor David Mellor, and we use this as our framework for assessing welfare by evaluating both negative and positive experiences. It includes four physical/functional domains—Nutrition, Environment, Health, and Behaviour Interactions which all combine to influence the fifth domain, the dog’s Mental State. The model emphasises that welfare is not only about minimising suffering but also about promoting positive experiences, like comfort, pleasure, and positive social interactions. This holistic approach supports more compassionate and ethical animal care practices.

At Guide Dogs we believe that welfare must be seen from the animals’ perspective. Dogs in the same situation may have different perceptions of their experience than their peers and good wellbeing depends upon the dog experiencing positive emotions, not just avoiding negative states.

For example, it is better to provide the dog with a choice of comfortable places to rest, not just a basic means to avoid actual discomfort such as exposure to cold or heat. We want our dogs to find the act of eating food pleasurable and enriching, not just a means to avoid hunger or maintain physical body condition and health. (Appendix 1).

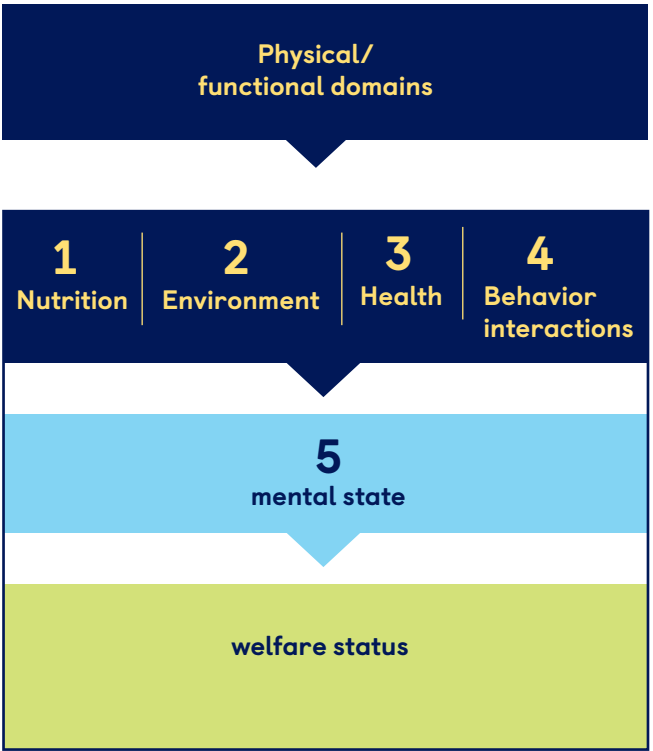


Figure 1, The Five Domains Model

The Least Intrusive and Minimally Aversive (LIMA) Principle

Progressive dog trainers and organisations such as Guide Dogs support the use of the LIMA principle when approaching behaviour modification and training. The same principle should be used in other interactions with our dogs, such as health treatments.

Dog training practices evolve over time and attract debate and sometimes strong differences of opinion. At Guide Dogs we base our approach on modern and ethical principles, strongly supported by evidence. Given the previous explanation of The Five Domains Model, it is necessary to align our dog training and management practices, especially in the domain of Behaviour Interactions, to ensure that our dogs have primarily positive experiences in their interactions with the people in their lives.

LIMA requires that practitioners use “the least intrusive, minimally aversive technique likely to succeed in achieving a (behaviour change) objective with minimal risk of producing side effects”. It is also used as a competence criterion, requiring practitioners to be adequately taught to apply the LIMA principle in their interactions with dogs.

Whilst not expressly preventing use of punishment in training or behaviour modification, the use of positive reinforcement techniques is emphasised as being the most humane, and certainly the primary intervention to achieve an effective outcome.

To support the practical application of the LIMA principle we also use The Humane Hierarchy, which provides an ethical ‘road map’ of interventions which might be used when working with our dogs. This stresses the importance of providing the dog with as much choice and control as possible, with due consideration to meeting their individual or species’ typical needs.

Guide Dogs has made a commitment to avoid the use of physical punishment (previous conventional techniques may have included applying a jerk on the lead or harness to ‘correct’ an undesired behaviour such as a work error or distraction) and we have an Ethical Training Policy that emphasises the need to avoid use of positive punishment whenever possible.

There is plenty of evidence to support this approach in terms of efficacy of learning and the maintenance of desirable behaviours over time.

This means that our dogs are trained and managed primarily with the use of positive reinforcement (rewards) and are proactively taught behaviours that we want rather than ‘corrected’ for behaviours that we don’t want. We manage the dog’s environment to help avoid undesirable behaviours and do all that we can to set them up for success.

In making this commitment we appreciate that positive reinforcement training is an acquired skill for our trainers and handlers and one that takes time and practice to perfect.

The LIMA principle itself is attracting some criticism (as it remains permissible to use punishment), but we remain confident that for Guide Dogs it remains a valuable framework. As with all we do, this may change considering new evidence and insight.

Ethical breeding

Guide Dogs is the largest breeder of working dogs in the world. We are responsible for over 350 breeding dogs and deliver up to 1400 puppies each year – this number ensures that there are sufficient guide dogs to partner in approximately 2 years’ time. Our objective is to establish widespread and permanent improvements of desired traits in temperament and health, and we have an ethical breeding code of practice to ensure that we consider the welfare of every dog.

We monitor and manage genetic diversity within the breeding population and the respective coefficients of kinship for individual breeding pairs. We use Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs), DNA tests and professional judgement to carefully select breeding pairs. We use our deep knowledge of health, temperament, behaviour and genealogy (we have data on all our dogs over many generations, including extended family members) to minimise the risk of inherited diseases and behaviour issues and produce puppies with genetic potential to be successful as guide dogs. Ultimately, success depends upon genetics and how these are influenced by life experience and the environment (nature and nurture).

We believe that dogs thrive in a secure family home, and all our breeding dogs live permanently with a dedicated volunteer. As ethical breeders we prioritise each dog’s physical and psychological well-being and provide the resulting puppies with thorough early socialisation. Our broods do not have more than four litters of puppies and are retired by their seventh birthday, whilst our studs retire at some point during their ninth year. However, dogs may retire at any age; this decision is principally influenced by their health, vitality and welfare.

Most retired breeding dogs are adopted by the dedicated volunteers who have cared for them during their breeding careers.

Transparency, responsible rehoming of dogs unsuitable for service, and long-term care commitments are also key aspects of responsible dog breeding practices.



A holistic approach to achieving dog welfare

To achieve optimal dog wellbeing it is essential to identify and align all activities that interact to produce a state of physical, psychological, and emotional wellness. We must deliver a quality Dog Health and Welfare service for a population of over 8000 dogs and their people, at an affordable and sustainable cost to the charity.

This responsibility begins before the pups are born and extends into retirement and ultimately end-of- life. We know that if a guide dog is not healthy and happy then the customer will be impacted, and the partnership placed at risk. Our Dog Health and Welfare system operates using a network of internal experts (including two in-house veterinary clinics), first opinion community-based veterinary practices and external veterinary consultants who can advise on complex conditions such as dermatology, ophthalmology, orthopaedics, and clinical veterinary behaviour.

We have established several Advisory Panels (such as the Animal Welfare and Ethics Panel, the Veterinary Advisory Panel, The Lead Practitioner Panel and the Canine Research Planning Panel) which include a balance of internal and external experts who provide

appropriate checks and challenge, advise on operational practice, and horizon scan to ensure that our operational protocols are current, evidence-based and future proofed.

The link between health, pain and behaviour is increasingly well evidenced and so we encourage our training and behaviour team to work closely with our dog welfare and veterinary teams to resolve issues. Delivering the necessary care required can however result in interventions that dogs may find aversive and so we seek to identify a management solution that best meets our welfare principles.

Co-operative care is an important illustration of our different specialist staff working together to achieve dog welfare and wellbeing. Co-operative care involves teaching the dog several behaviours that provide them with agency, control, and the ability to actively participate in their own care. Whilst cooperative care may be considered the ‘Gold Standard’ to aim for, especially in offering the dog agency and control of what happens, there are times when it is necessary to complete a health care or veterinary procedure as and when this is required – the dog has little choice in the matter. For this reason, we also teach our dogs to accept veterinary holds/restraints. Sensible and pragmatic discussions between handlers and veterinary staff must take place to ensure an appropriate health investigation or treatment plan is completed in the dog’s best interest.



Our centres and fostering

Significant effort has been put into ensuring that the design for our centres create the infrastructure to deliver ideal opportunities for providing education and enrichment activities for our dogs.

When they are in training our dogs may live at one of our centres or in the community in the home of one of our Volunteer Fosterers – attending the centre daily in much the same way as some children may board at their school or attend as a day pupil. Both options are appropriate when dog-centred decisions are made, and the individual needs of each dog are met. Dogs thrive on consistency, so this is a consideration when deciding on centre-based or community-based care.

At our centres, dog accommodation is designed to provide a safe space for dogs to rest and relax. Management of these spaces is critical to ensure dog wellbeing and may include activities such as grooming, massage, co-operative care and enrichment delivered by dog health and welfare technicians and specialist volunteers. Consistent care routines (such as a lunch time nap!) are important for dog welfare and useful to support effective learning and development of appropriate behaviours.

Other dog facilities provide a range of indoor and outdoor spaces for education and enrichment. In these spaces dogs and handlers have access to a variety of themed zones to target desired outcomes such as:

- **Mind Zones:** for training activities such as developing task behaviours and non-guiding behaviours.
- **Body Zones:** for fitness and conditioning activities such as low-level agility courses, proprioception exercises and confidence building.
- **Spirit Zones:** for sensory enrichment, sand pits, water play, social play, and one to one play sessions.

Fostering of our dogs with a trained volunteer is a common practice and is a similar model to that of puppy raising. As the dog is generally in training, there is less of a requirement for the volunteer to get their foster dog 'out and about' and more of a requirement to develop the social skills required of a guide dog in a typical home. Our volunteer fosterers also support working guide dogs and on occasions retired dogs, dogs awaiting rehoming and even those who require palliative care.



Education and knowledge sharing

Education in this instance is to be understood in its broadest sense. It encompasses education in formal and academic settings as well as providing knowledge and training relating to dog care and dog welfare in less formal ways to our staff, volunteers & service users. It involves raising cultural consciousness about the importance of dog welfare and wellbeing.

Different skills are needed to deal with individual dogs during their lifetime. People involved in breeding and rearing puppies need different skills and knowledge to those involved in training and these are different again to those involved in husbandry, alternative careers or rehoming. However, the dog's whole life experience is important to ensure that the dogs are equipped for life and especially can cope better with and recover from any unexpected adverse events.

With many of our dogs being cared for through a volunteer model, and all of our dogs being required to adapt to different people and homes at key life stages, it is critical that dog guardians/carers/ handlers understand and acknowledge that they bear primary responsibility for ensuring the welfare of the dogs under their care.

Guide Dogs' responsibility is to ensure that everyone is provided with the necessary knowledge and skills. We are constantly improving the learning materials that are available for staff and volunteers, but it is our professional staff who are key enablers for dissemination of knowledge to our stakeholders and for the standardisation of the way that we do things at Guide Dogs.

Our professional staff are key to transferring knowledge and skills to volunteers and service users – and, when necessary, adapting some traditional practices that are no longer fit for our purpose.



The Guide Dogs framework

We adopt a simple model that helps frame our interactions with our dogs to gain the best outcomes for both dogs and their people – volunteers, staff, and clients:

1. Know

We need to understand dogs as a species, get to know our dog as an individual; understand the stages of puppy development and how these stages impact on behaviour; and understand that health (especially pain) and behaviour are intrinsically linked.

2. Manage

Management of environments, situations, and the dogs themselves is important to keep everyone safe. Careful, thoughtful, and consistent management helps prevent undesirable behaviours and supports development of desirable behaviours that will become habits over time. However, there are times when life is not perfect, and it may be necessary to interrupt undesirable behaviour in the moment. When this is necessary, we aim to do this in a neutral (without emotion) fashion and this intervention should be instructive rather than corrective.

3. Teach

We base how we raise and train our dogs upon ethical principles especially using positive reinforcement reward-based methods to teach and establish desired behaviours. Positive reinforcement (PRT) is accepted as the most ethical way to teach behaviours, produces the best outcomes in terms of learning and creates a strong human-dog relationship. We want our dogs to be happy and healthy dogs but also confident and capable in their role as guide dogs. We do not use physical punishment or techniques which cause fear or stress to modify behaviour. Such methods do not meet our ethical

standards and are increasingly unacceptable to the public. In the event when undesirable or dangerous behaviour needs to be stopped, we may verbally interrupt inappropriate behaviour and then redirect the dog towards a more appropriate one which can then be positively reinforced.

4. Partner

We are here to help people with sight loss to live actively, independently, and well. We treat our dogs as partners and co-workers and seek to balance the needs of people against the needs of our dogs when making decisions.

However, no one (humans or dogs) has full autonomy and choice in their daily lives – and all of us may sometimes be required to do things that we may not enjoy. Wherever possible, we seek to work with our dogs and teach them through PRT to choose to engage in these activities. If that is not possible, we continue to apply our ethical principles so that overall our dogs enjoy a good quality of life.

This framework applies to all our dogs throughout their life journey, regardless of their role. The four elements – knowing, managing, teaching, and partnering – are concepts that can be applied by all our volunteers, staff and ultimately our clients and rehoming. This means that all our handlers 'speak the same language' and apply the same thought process in their interactions with their dogs.

This approach provides the dog with predictability and consistency, ultimately producing strong human-dog partnerships based upon a shared understanding of meeting each other's needs.

Our social license to operate

Guide Dogs, as with most assistance dog organisations throughout the world, relies on the generosity and support of the public to fund and deliver our work. Without funding and volunteers, we simply would not be able to provide our services to the people who benefit from them.

We need to be constantly aware of how society at large may be changing and whether these changes may affect how we are viewed. There are many animal-related industries that are being challenged on their animal welfare credentials and thus their social license to operate. The public may not be able to articulate either the Five Domains or the LIMA model, but they are certainly increasingly educated and aware about animal welfare and recognise when something 'just doesn't feel right or fair'.

In recent years animal welfare scientists and other theorists have begun to explore the concept of 'animal work' – especially in relation to the animal's experience. Most people appreciate that work necessitates a focus on the task rather than other 'non-work' activities which – in some cases – may be preferred. The challenge for employers (of people) is to set fair expectations (e.g. work that is within the ability of the person to complete) to try to make this work enjoyable but at the very least fairly recompense the person for its completion. These same principles may be useful to consider within the guide dog/handler relationship – and it may be helpful to consider this relationship as one of co-workers. At Guide Dogs, we have no objection to the concept of our dogs being described as workers – and firmly believe that their work-life is enriching and is well balanced with rest and recreation.

However, our dogs are not valued or defined solely by their role – we also value them as individuals in their own right.

When dogs are in partnership with a person with sight loss, our staff are required to support the development of the partnership in ways that work for both person and dog. Sometimes, the dog may be in a less-than-optimal situation because an intervention such as withdrawing the dog from partnership would place the person in an even worse position (e.g., not being able to travel independently and therefore provide for their basic needs).

Management of partnerships to achieve an appropriate outcome for both person and dog needs a pragmatic but empathetic approach, where there are advocates for both parties round the table. Placing or leaving a dog in a compromised welfare position presents a significant risk to our reputation and is ethically questionable. Withdrawing a dog from a vulnerable person does likewise. These cases are always complex and difficult, given the need to consider to what degree welfare and wellbeing are compromised to either party.

This complexity highlights how practical and ethical dilemmas can arise when attempting to deliver our charitable purpose, maintain our dog's wellbeing and protect our reputation. Decisions are made much

easier by having robust processes in place and ensuring that we can offer an alternative service to dog-assistance alone.

However, if we get this right, we can robustly defend the many benefits of our guide dog service, not just for the people we serve but our dogs too.

Our dogs are bred well, with low incidence of painful and/or life limiting health conditions. They are raised and socialised in a nurturing environment, which means that they are more likely to be included in family life and less likely to experience a lifetime of fear and anxiety through poor socialisation. This is as important for our dogs that do not enter partnership as those that do.

Training and care are based upon positive reinforcement, humane methods, provision of choice, behaviour management and cognitive enrichment through learning. Our dogs are partnered with people who are taught how to build strong and reciprocal relationships with their dogs, based upon mutual trust and respect. Our dogs get to accompany their human partner on their daily travels and activities, meet other people and dogs and rarely get left alone for significant periods (a very common welfare issue for 'pet' dogs). They get plenty of opportunities to be a dog and to retire at a time when 'work' (a human concept) is no longer the best option for them, either physically or psychologically. They then have a secure retirement in a loving home. We should be proud about this!



Conclusion

Guide Dogs is proud of the way in which we embrace high standards of welfare and training for dogs. However, the global 'welfare bar' is being raised and societal expectations in the UK and elsewhere continue to present a challenge to some traditional practice.

Guide Dogs has risen to the challenge, developing what we believe to be the first welfare strategy of any assistance dog organisation in 2017 and followed this with significant investment to evolve our ways of working. We are now recognised as a global leader in dog welfare. However, there is never a time to suspend the evolution of new thinking, innovation and practice. In simple terms: when we know better, we can do better.

Going forward, we aim to increasingly demonstrate our leadership and expertise in:

- Creating and nurturing strong relationships between people and dogs
- Ethical breeding, puppy socialisation and dog training
- Championing the welfare and wellbeing of dogs in everything we do



Appendix 1: The Five Domains Model

The Table below has three columns and seven rows

Provision	Animal Welfare Aim	Application at Guide Dogs
1. Good nutrition: provide ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.	Minimise thirst and hunger and enable eating to be a pleasurable experience.	Provision of good quality diets, appropriate to life stages and provided free of charge. Use of food to provide enrichment, encourage species typical behaviour and reinforce desirable behaviours.
2. Good Environment: provide shade/shelter or suitable housing, good air quality and comfortable resting areas.	Minimise discomfort and exposure and promote thermal, physical and other comforts.	Defined dog to space ratio that matches DEFRA guidelines. Provision of comfortable bed spaces. Provision of comfort in offices and vehicles. Options for in-home foster or centre- based care for dogs in training. Policies on safe working practices in extreme weather.
3. Good Health: prevent or rapidly diagnose and treat disease and injury, and foster good muscle tone, posture, and cardiorespiratory function.	Minimise breathlessness, nausea, pain and other aversive experiences and promote the pleasures of robustness, vigour, strength and well-coordinated physical activity.	Excellent breeding programme producing low prevalence of congenital health conditions. Excellent veterinary care provided free of charge. Immediate access to quality professional advice and guidance.

Provision	Animal Welfare Aim	Application at Guide Dogs
4. Behavioural Interactions: provide for expression of agency, sufficient space, proper facilities, congenial company, and appropriately varied conditions.	Minimise threats and unpleasant restriction on behaviour and promote choice and engagement in rewarding activities.	Careful selection of volunteers and defined eligibility for service that includes providing for dog wellbeing. Commitment to positive reinforcement training. Use of the humane hierarchy & LIFE model. Teaching cooperative care and low stress husbandry skills to all dogs and handlers. Teaching of volunteers, staff and service users in dog-centred approaches, recognition of the dog’s preferences and then how to meet their needs.
5. Positive mental state: provide safe, congenial and species (breed/age) appropriate opportunities to have pleasurable experiences.	Promote various forms of comfort, pleasure, interest, confidence, and a sense of control.	Building enrichment activities into every day. Retirement is based upon a holistic assessment of the dog and their lifestyle rather than solely chronological age. Providing sufficient rest and recreation and ‘time to be a dog’.

Appendix 2:

The Dog Journey – supporting welfare at every stage

The breeding programme

Our breeding programme involves the planned breeding of dogs that are physically and temperamentally capable for working as a guide dog. The breeding programme is responsible for the selection of suitable breeding animals, the care and wellbeing of breeding dogs (studs and broods), the selection of appropriate pairings of studs and broods to produce healthy puppies with appropriate temperaments for their intended role, the breeding process itself, the whelping, care, and socialisation of puppies for the first 8 weeks and finally the preparation of puppies for their transition to their volunteer puppy raiser families. Guide Dogs support natural mating whenever possible, however collection, storage, and use of semen for artificial insemination, especially with other breeding programmes, is essential to ensure genetic diversity, overall health status of the guide dog population and insure against catastrophic loss of genetic material.

The puppy development programme

What a puppy learns in their first 12 months has a direct impact on the likelihood of them going on to be a successful guide dog, and regardless of their future, we have a duty of care to every dog we breed. During this early period, the puppy raiser nurtures the pup's physical and emotional development so that they enter formal training with the best possible chance of meeting the specific needs of customers. Our commitment to reward-based training means that our dogs need to experience the same approach at all stages of their life. We are supporting our puppy raisers to move away from the concept of 'training' the puppy and towards a concept of 'teaching skills for life' that will set the young dog up for a confident transition to working life.

The training programme

By harnessing the power of positive reinforcement, we are continuing to evolve how we train, care for, and manage our dogs, resulting in a better learning experience for our dogs and ultimately a better quality of service for guide dog owners. We have a standard training pathway for our dogs and a standard way for staff, volunteers and guide dog owners to handle and train the dogs using positive reinforcement at the foundation of every interaction. We are one of the few (maybe the only) assistance dog organisation to establish a team of training and behaviour specialists who advise our operational staff and teach proficiency in positive reinforcement techniques and progressive dog training and behaviour methodology. This group of specialist staff helps to ensure currency in our approaches but theory is always tested in practice before being included in our standard training pathway.

Partnerships

Partnering a dog with a person with vision impairment and then supporting that partnership for life is the core element of our guide dog and buddy dog services. Our service users must also receive support in adapting to changes to operational practice so that they too develop the skills necessary to get the best out of their partnership with their dog. As with our staff and our volunteers, adapting to this 'new' welfare orientated landscape is not always easy for our service users, given that many of them have been taught traditional and conventional handling techniques (such as dominance theory and corrections), sometimes for decades. Explaining the responsibilities of dog ownership, and especially the high welfare ethos of Guide Dogs, to service users at each stage of the customer journey ensures that people have the required potential to be a full partner to their dog and thus we mitigate the risk of compromised welfare to dog, and the emotional, functional and (for Guide Dogs) financial impact of a 'failed' partnership. Finding ways that enable service users to develop skills and knowledge pre-and post 'class' is essential and offers much scope for peer-peer learning and group-based activities (with all the benefits of social networking).

Retirement

A guide dog typically works for between 7 and 8 years but may need to retire at any age for either health or behaviour reasons. Retirement of a working guide dog is an example of when an inter-disciplinary approach is required; one that considers the person and dog as the partnership they are. It is necessary to consider physical, psychological, and emotional elements and what demands are being asked of the dog. It is especially necessary to consider the welfare advantages and disadvantages of retirement from the dog's point of view; without being influenced by anthropomorphic attitudes towards the human concept of retirement. A dog's welfare needs may best be met by a graduated reduction in work and exercise demands over an extended timeframe, assuming they are cognitively and physically able to perform what is asked and remains a willing partner in guiding activities. Alternatively, retirement of a dog at a set age (e.g., ten years of age) may force a separation of an established and mutually beneficial relationship (if the client cannot keep the retired dog) or worse, a service user needing to choose between a commitment to their present dog or the benefits of re-partnering with a successor. Clearly, maximum longevity of every partnership has a financial benefit to the charity and a functional/social benefit to the service user.

Retirement may place the dog into a situation where they have a reduced quality of life due to a reduction in exercise, stimulation and even increased social isolation if the owner re-trains with a successor. The only valid justification for fixing a 'standard' retirement age is one of reputation and the public perception of a clearly elderly dog still working.

Adoption and rehoming

Guide Dogs finds alternative pet homes for approximately 900 dogs per year of all life stages, including those requiring end of life care. People seeking a dog from Guide Dogs often have assumed that our dogs will be 'easier' than one sourced from another rehoming organisation but our dogs may also have special needs in relation to their health or behaviour, but if these needs are met will be very well suited to a non-working family home. It is essential for us to consider how we best meet the needs of those dogs who no longer have a role within the guide dog service or the wider organisation; we still have a moral obligation to them, and they too deserve our best efforts to provide them with a good life.

Appendix 3: The Animal Welfare and Ethics Panel

At the heart of Guide Dogs' mission is a deep commitment to the wellbeing of the special dogs who make our work possible. The Animal Welfare & Ethics Panel plays a vital role in ensuring that we uphold our responsibilities through independent, expert and ethical oversight.

The panel brings together respected professionals in fields such as veterinary science, animal behaviour, welfare and ethics, who advise Guide Dogs on our dogs' health, welfare and wellbeing at every stage of their lives.

The panel members are:

- Tim Stafford, BSc (Hons), MA who chairs the panel and brings four decades of professional experience with Guide Dogs. As Principal Officer for Canine Affairs, Tim advocates strongly for evidence-based practices and the development of robust industry standards.
- Dr Helen Zulch is a veterinarian and recognised specialist in Veterinary Behavioural Medicine. Helen is Associate Professor at the University of Lincoln, where she teaches on the MSc in Clinical Animal Behaviour.
- Denise Laughlin RVN, MSc is a veterinary nurse who worked nationally and internationally in animal welfare and conservation before joining Guide Dogs, where she leads the national Dog Welfare Operations team.

- Flo Hillen B.SocSci, BVMedSci, BVMBVS, PGCHE, FHEA, MRCVS is a veterinarian working as the clinical assistant professor at the University of Nottingham and is involved in research, teaching, and ethical review within veterinary education and practice.
- Colonel Mark Morrison VetMB, MA, MSc, MRCVS is a veterinarian who serves as Chief Veterinary and Remount Officer for the Armed Forces. Mark is responsible for setting and assuring veterinary and remount policy, clinical standards and training of both Service personnel and animals.
- Dr Hannah Wright has a PhD in dog behaviour and a strong background in both research and charity operations. Hannah is Guide Dog Programme Lead at Guide Dogs and brings a science-led but practical perspective to training and service delivery.

From shaping policy to supporting investigations, and a requirement to report to the Audit and Risk Committee, the panel's work helps Guide Dogs maintain the highest standards and ensures that our approach evolves with the latest knowledge and ethical thinking.

Appendix 4: Useful references

Guidance on Animal Welfare: Link here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/animal-welfare>

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