Assistance Dogs UK

Quick Guide

Assistance Dogs in GP surgeries – information for Practice Managers

www.assistancedogs.org.uk

Assistance Dogs UK

Assistance Dogs UK (ADUK) is a coalition of assistance dog charities that have been accredited by one of the two leading global authorities in the assistance dog industry, namely Assistance Dogs International and the International Guide Dog Federation. We also work with a range of organisations that are working towards the same accreditation that our members have achieved.

What is an assistance dog?

An assistance dog is a dog that has been highly trained to carry out a range of tasks and alerts that support a disabled person or person with a long-term medical or health condition.

Examples include a guide dog that guides a visually impaired person, a medical alert dog that alerts a person to an oncoming medical episode, or an assistance dog that alerts someone with a mental health condition to take medication.

Photo credit: Canine Partners

The Law

In the UK, disabled people have important rights under the Equality Act 2010 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Northern Ireland). It is unlawful for service providers, including GP practices, to treat disabled people less favourably, e.g. refusing a service or offering a lesser service because a disabled person has an assistance dog.

In the context of the law, when it comes to providing access, a highly trained assistance dog should be treated as an auxiliary aid e.g. wheelchair or white cane, rather than as a pet dog.

It is important to remember that not every person with an assistance dog has a visible disability and not all assistance dogs will look the same.

Reasonable Adjustments

The Equality Act 2010 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Northern Ireland) state that service providers must make reasonable adjustments for disabled people so that they can access their venues, goods, and services.

In most healthcare settings, including GP surgeries, health clinics and mental health suites, assistance dogs should be welcomed. While there are a few exceptions, for example sterile environments such as surgical theatres, this does not apply to standard clinical areas. If a specific space, such as an X-ray, is not appropriate for an assistance dog, the practice must offer reasonable adjustments to ensure the handler can still access care.

In requesting a reasonable adjustment a disabled person may choose to share information with you about their impairment or health condition. However, this information is shared at the individual's discretion, and it is not appropriate to question or challenge someone about their disability.

Staff and Patient Allergies and Phobias

To ensure fair and equitable access to venues and services, it is good practice to discuss and identify any potential barriers that may prevent staff from providing the best possible service to disabled patients accompanied by assistance dogs. Proactively addressing these issues supports confidence, consistency and inclusive practice.

Allergy to dogs is sometimes given as a reason for not admitting assistance dogs to a GP Practice. If a specific risk is identified, reasonable steps should be taken to reduce that risk, e.g. separate consultation rooms or adjusting appointment times. Refusing access to an assistance dog based solely on the possibility that other people may be allergic is unlikely to be considered a justifiable response.

Practices are responsible for maintaining appropriate cleaning protocols, as they would for any patient. Disabled people should not be expected to bear the cost of any additional cleaning, staffing or other measures required to reduce risk. Similarly, refusing access to a disabled person with an assistance dog due to fear of dogs among staff or patients is unlikely to be considered a justifiable response.

What to Expect

Assistance dogs should have been prepared and trained in a variety of environments so that they are capable and confident when out and about. An assistance dog is highly trained so will not pose a public nuisance.

Not all assistance dogs are trained by an ADUK member charity, but all assistance dogs should be highly trained by whoever does train them, whether that be a charity, a professional trainer or an individual.

The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission states that trained assistance dogs are

- likely to sit or lie quietly on the floor next to their owner
- unlikely to wander freely around the premises
- unlikely to foul in a public place

Service Providers can be confident that highly trained assistance dogs from an ADUK member organisation will be

- trained to behave well in public
- safe with a reliable temperament
- healthy and will not constitute a hygiene risk
- fully toilet-trained
- recognisable by the harness, organisation-specific coat, lead slip or ID (though this is not a legal requirement).

Unexpected Behaviour

No assistance dog, no matter how highly trained and experienced is going to be perfect 100% of the time. Whilst they are trained to focus on their partner, from time to time they may be distracted. However, there are some behaviours that you would not expect to see such as

- dogs that have been not trained to behave well in public e.g. barking, lunging, or jumping up or pulling strongly on a lead (please note though that these may sometimes be alert behaviours)
- dogs with aggressive or very fearful temperaments e.g. cowering or showing aggression
- poorly cared for dogs that constitute a hygiene risk or dogs that are not toilet trained

Identifying Assistance Dogs

Although most assistance dogs are recognisable by their jacket, harness, lead slip or bandana there is no legal requirement for them to wear these. Some people may choose not to use these visual cues for their assistance dog and legally, they are within their rights.

This lack of visible identification can create challenges for service providers in easily distinguishing assistance dogs from pet dogs.

Photo credit: Hearing Dogs

If an individual asserts that they are disabled and that their dog is a highly trained assistance dog, and the dog behaves as expected, it may be unlawful to deny them access. If it becomes evident that the dog is not behaving in line with the list of expected behaviours outlined by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, it may be appropriate to raise a concern in a respectful and proportionate way and, if a dog is consistently displaying these behaviours, it may be reasonable to revoke or refuse access to meet the practices duty of care to other patients.

‘Proof’

People with assistance dogs trained by an ADUK member organisation are issued with an ADUK booklet or card containing details about the dog and the charity that trained it. Some may use the Assistance Dogs International App on their phone to show that the organisation that trained their dog is accredited.

Not all disabled people who are partnered with an assistance dog will have trained their assistance dog through a charity so may not carry a specific ID, nor are they required to by law. There is no official registration or certification process for assistance dogs in the UK so there is no legal ‘proof’ that you can ask for from someone who is accompanied by an assistance dog.

While practices may enquire whether an assistance dog is up to date with vaccinations or covered by public liability insurance, there is no legal requirement for either of these two things and no legal requirement for handlers to provide documentation if they have it. Access must not be made conditional on providing this kind of proof.

Assistance Dogs in Training

In order to prepare a dog for life working as a happy and healthy assistance dog, it's vital that they are exposed to a wide range of different environments and situations. To do this, many charities rely on the good will of service providers to allow them access.

Assistance Dogs in training are not referenced in either the Equality Act 2010 or the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Northern Ireland). As such it is ADUK's understanding that service providers are not legally obliged to give access to someone with an assistance dog in training in the same way that they would do a disabled person with a highly trained assistance dog.

ADUK members can take up to two years to prepare and train an assistance dog. Whilst there is nothing in law about the age a highly trained assistance dog must be, it would be unlikely that a dog under a year old would be adequately prepared for the role.

Photo credit: Service Dogs UK

Emotional Support Dogs

An assistance dog is a highly trained dog that is prepared and trained to carry out tasks and alerts to mitigate for an impairment or health condition. An emotional support dog is a dog that offers comfort and companionship by being present, which requires no specialist training.

Emotional support dogs are not referenced in law, so it is ADUK's understanding that service providers are not legally obliged to allow access to someone with an emotional support dog.

Emotional support dogs and highly trained psychiatric assistance dogs are not the same thing. A disabled person with a highly trained assistance dog that mitigates a mental health condition should be given access to venues, goods and services.

Additional Sources of Information

For further details about welcoming disabled people who rely on assistance dogs see the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Assistance dogs: A guide for businesses and service providers

Other ADUK Quick Guides and Resources

ADUK has produced a range of Quick Guides and resources which provide information about the legal obligations anyone who provides a service has towards assistance dog partnerships.

Although many of the resources are aimed at service providers, venues and businesses they all contain information about the rights of disabled people and are designed to be of use to many different audiences.

All of our guides and resources can be found at our Information Hub.

ADUK Quick Guides provide general information and best practice regarding assistance dogs and, where relevant, ADUK's interpretation of applicable legislation. The content is intended for information sharing purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. If you require advice on a specific legal matter, we recommend seeking independent legal advice.

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Find out more about ADUK, our work and our members

www.assistancedogs.org.uk

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