

Assistance Dogs in Public



A detailed guide



Assistance dogs are not pets and are classed as auxiliary aids.



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1. What Are Assistance Dogs?

Aiding disabled people

Assistance dogs are trained to aid disabled people to allow them to carry out their day-to-day activities. Assistance dogs often allow their handler independence, by benefiting a person with a disability/alleviating a symptom of a disability. These dogs can be trained by an organisation, private trainer, or the owner alone.

In other countries, the definition for assistance dogs also applies to service dogs.

Examples of how assistance dogs help

Behaviours an assistance dog can perform include:

- Helping the person navigate or interact with the environment around them.
- Alerting to an environmental change that the person cannot identify for themselves.
- Alerting to a change in medical condition.
- Responding to a symptom of a medical condition.

What are the types of assistance dogs?

There are many types of assistance dogs that perform different tasks, including:

- Guide dogs
- Hearing dogs
- Medical alert and response dogs
- Allergy detection dogs
- Mobility assistance dogs
- Autism assistance dogs
- Psychiatric assistance dogs

Some dogs may be trained to cover multiple types of assistance dogs, so these dogs are called multi-purpose assistance dogs. All types of assistance dogs are valid and as important as each other.

What are the laws?

Assistance dogs are fully protected under the Equality Act 2010 and are allowed into public places. Public places an assistance dog has access rights into include shops, cafes, restaurants, hospitals, medical clinics, and public transport.

They do not need to be trained by an organisation, or state funded, to have these protections.

2. What Are the Other Types of Working Dogs?

Service Dog

These are dogs that are aligned with an organisation and trained in tasks to protect the public/provide a service for the public's safety. This includes police, body detection, fire, and drug detection. This does not include privately owned 'protection dogs'.

Service dogs have their own set of laws protecting them and are only allowed in public areas when accompanied by the associated organisation.

A great example of service dogs here in Shetland is



the “Dogs Against Drugs”. These dogs have specific handlers and are trained to seek the detection of drugs to prevent the use of illegal drugs across Shetland.

Therapy Dog

These are dogs that have been through special training that allows them into traditionally no-dog areas to aid those inside. They can provide comfort and support to those who need it. This can be in a hospital, a care home or a therapist's office for example.

They are not allowed in public places like shops and restaurants. They are traditionally only allowed in places with prior agreement from the business or organisation.

Emotional Support Dog

Emotional support animals are not legally recognised in the UK. Therefore, a dog cannot be classified as an emotional support animal in the UK. If a dog is trained to aid a disabled person, they are classed as an assistance dog and an auxiliary aid.

In other countries, an emotional support animal can help people with their passive presence by giving comfort and confidence to their owner. This is different from assistance dog as they are not trained to specifically aid a disabled person.

3. How to Identify an Assistance Dog?

Behaviour

Assistance dogs are highly trained which means they are trained to be safe and responsible in public. Some of the highly trained behaviours required for public access include:

- Not wandering freely away from the handler (unless under emergency circumstances).
- Settling in public, which means the dog will sit or lie quietly on the floor next to their handler.
- Toilet trained, so they should not foul in a public place.
- High level of lead training to prevent pulling, lunging, or tripping.
- Not interact with other members of public, especially if ignored.

The assistance dog should always be in control by the handler and corrected when a mistake is made. It is not the place of a member of the public or staff employee to assess or 'test' an assistance dog's training or classification as an assistance dog.

Equipment

Most assistance dogs are recognisable by a harness or vest, often having lettering or patches on that equipment that state such. The law, however, does not require the dog to wear a harness or vest to identify them as an assistance dog.

It is also not a legal requirement for assistance dog users to provide an ID book for their assistance dog. There is no legal registration for assistance dogs in the UK.

In Training

You may see some assistance dogs marked as 'in training'. There is no legal definition for this, however it often refers to one of two situations:

- It is an assistance dog that has little experience in public areas, thus is training to a high standard. These dogs are classed as assistance dogs and have full public access rights.
- It is a puppy given to foster humans from an organisation, and they are allowing the puppy to become accustomed to public places. These puppies do not have access rights if their handler is not disabled, thus can be asked to leave

4. What Are the Laws Around Assistance Dogs?

Assistance dogs are auxiliary aids

Assistance dogs are covered by the Equality Act 2010 and are legally protected. Assistance dogs are not pets and are classed as auxiliary aids. It is illegal to discriminate against a disabled person, including their aids such as an assistance dog. It is also illegal to harm, assault, harass, or otherwise interfere with an assistance dog.

Discrimination

If a handler is treated unfavourably due to their disability and their aid (e.g., assistance dog), it is classed as discrimination which is illegal.

The best way to not discriminate or harass an assistance dog or the handler is to treat them as you would any other disability aid. You would not stare at a prosthetic limb or touch a wheelchair; do not do these actions towards an assistance dog or their handler either.



Not all disabilities are visible, do not judge a person on their apparent capability.



5. How Should I React Towards an Assistance Dog?

Ignore and respect

The best thing you can do is ignore the assistance dog. This includes no eye contact, staring, talking, touching, feeding, taking photos, or trying to distract the dog in any way.

Distracting an assistance dog can potentially be dangerous for the handler as the dog could miss a critical task, such as alerting to an oncoming seizure or guiding a handler around an obstacle.

Petting an assistance dog

You can ask permission to pet an assistance dog, but the handler can refuse this. If you are given permission, the dog may be given a command to temporarily release them from their 'work mode'. Once a handler has refocused the dog back to working, do not then attempt to pet or distract the dog again. It is illegal to harm an assistance dog, such as pulling their tail, kicking, or hitting the dog.

Addressing an assistance dog user

If you do talk to the handler, speak to the human and not the dog. It can be very dehumanising for the handler and distracting for the dog to be directing the attention towards the assistance dog instead of the human. Be aware that while you may have questions about the assistance dog, the handler is in no way required to explain their disability to you.

Leading by example

Children can be a huge distraction for an assistance dog, as they can be loud and often unpredictable. It is important to teach children not to run up to assistance dogs, to not shout at them, or touch them. Let children learn by example, by showing them how to interact with assistance dogs and their handlers in public.



6. What to Do If You See an Assistance Dog Tasking?

Most tasking is not obvious

Assistance dogs can perform a wide range of tasks for a wide range of disabilities. While some dogs are tasking almost constantly - such as guiding or aiding mobility - some are trained in more specific tasks - such as alerting or responding to a symptom of the disability.

Conditions that cause notable changes in the disabled person's ability to function can be seen in public, such as a seizure or fainting.

A disabled person on the floor with an assistance dog

If you see a person on the floor with an assistance dog, stay back and do not disrupt the dog. If you are in a business such as a shop or restaurant, it can be helpful to inform an employee about the handler and the dog, directing them to where they are.

A dog may be lying on top of the person (partially or fully) or sit beside them. Even if it looks as if the situation is potentially dangerous or that the dog is not responding, most of the time this is a known condition that the dog has been trained to respond to.

DO NOT attempt to remove the dog or separate the dog from the handler. This could be detrimental for both handler and dog.

Is it a medical emergency?

Although the condition may look like a medical emergency, such as a seizure, most are known conditions, and do not require an ambulance. If you feel they need medical attention though, do call for first aid and/or an ambulance.

If you are unsure whether a handler needs help, look around them for identification or information on this symptom. This can be in the form of cards, jewellery or on the dog's vest.

An assistance dog may also be carrying medication on them in a pouch attached to their vest. These can include in case of emergency equipment, such as EpiPens and inhalers.



DO NOT attempt to remove the dog or separate the handler from the dog in any situation.



7. Assistance Dog Alerting to a Medical Emergency?

An assistance dog barking?

An assistance dog may be heard barking repeatedly in public. This is a task trained to assistance dogs when their handler is needing help from another person. It could be due to a medical emergency whereby the handler is injured or incapacitated in such a way that they cannot seek help for themselves.

If you hear a dog repeatedly barking, especially in a place that normally does not allow dogs, follow the sound to assess the situation.

An assistance dog alone?

It is rare to see an assistance dog without their handler. In the UK, a handler must always be in control of their assistance dog.

If you see an assistance dog alone, follow the dog. Some assistance dogs are trained to seek help for their owner in medical emergencies.

8. When Should I Stay Away from An Assistance Dog?

Young children

If you have a young child with you, it may be best to avoid interacting with an assistance dog. Some children can be frightened by dogs, or they can be over excited when interacting with a dog. A loud, jumping child can be very distressing for the assistance dog and their handler.

Pets interacting with assistance dogs

If you have a pet with you and run into an assistance dog and the handler, stay away from them. Although assistance dogs are highly trained to ignore other assistance dogs, a pet can easily distract an assistance dog causing a potentially dangerous situation for everyone involved.

A pet that is seen to be attacking or endangering an assistance dog is seen as a criminal offence, just as it would be if your pet attacked a wheelchair.

Phobias or allergies

You may also have phobias or allergic reactions in relation to dogs. This is not viewed as a legally valid reason to not allow assistance dogs into public spaces. If you, an employee, or other members of the public are medically averse to dogs, it is best to give assistance dogs and their handler a wide berth.

Enclosed spaces

In enclosed spaces, such as aeroplanes, a handler travelling with an assistance dog will have to inform the airline of such beforehand. To avoid a reaction or unpleasant interactions if you are averse to dogs, it is best to inform the airline beforehand as to your medical needs also.



Further Information

Equality and Human Rights Commission

There is information on assistance dogs' rights and treatment on their website. There are also leaflets detailing assistance dogs in relation to businesses and tourism.

www.equalityhumanrights.com

Ability Shetland

Ability Shetland supports the efforts of disabled people to realise their full potential in all areas of life.

www.abilityshetland.com

Dogs Against Drugs

Dogs Against Drugs is a registered Scottish charity and community led project by Shetland people to help to safeguard the islands from the growing problem of illegal drugs.

www.dogsagainstdrugs.co.uk

