

# Paws for thought

You may choose not to welcome pets, but assistance dogs can make perfect guests and also open up a whole new market. We explain your obligations under the law and discover how important such dogs are to their owners

**I**f you display a sign saying 'no dogs', you might want to consider changing it. It's one thing to be unwilling to accommodate noisy, boisterous pets, but assistance dogs are neither of these. These highly trained animals provide a priceless service to their owners and it takes minimal effort to welcome them.

Even so, the charity Hearing Dogs for Deaf People is notified of about 70 cases a year where people with assistance dogs are refused access to hotels and guesthouses. A similar number of people report that they were allowed into the accommodation but refused access to restaurants or dining rooms with their canine helper. There are sure to be many more cases that go unreported, as there are currently about 6,500 assistance dog users in the UK.

That may not sound like many, but these assistance dog owners rarely travel

alone, and they're likely to return to any hotel, B&B or guesthouse that welcomes them and their canine companions.

## A TRAINED HELPER

Assistance dogs are professionally trained to help a disabled person. Six organisations in the UK provide this training, including the Guide Dogs for the Blind Organisation, Hearing Dogs for Deaf People and Dogs for the Disabled.

Assistance dogs perform many important roles for a wide range of people, including those who are blind, partially sighted, deaf, hard of hearing or suffering from epilepsy. In addition to these roles, "they improve the emotional and social wellbeing of their owners," says Philip Biggs, Access & Inclusion Manager at Hearing Dogs for Deaf People. "The dog becomes part of the person, affording them increased confidence and, more importantly, independence."

Assistance dogs are selected for their temperament, trainability and, in some cases, their size. The dogs are trained to be unobtrusive and will sit or lie quietly when their owners don't need them. These are working dogs, not pets that will get under people's feet. There's no need to worry about health issues, either. The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health says assistance dogs should be allowed access to food shops and restaurants because they are unlikely to be a risk to hygiene.

So how can you make an assistance dog owner feel at home? "It's an old chestnut, but nothing beats a smile on arrival," says Philip. "Some assistance dog users will be quite stressed, so that smile is a very welcoming gesture, particularly for deaf people who rely on lip-reading and facial expression. And it

## DOG OWNER'S EXPERIENCE

**Ann Ramsden and her assistance dog, yellow Labrador Max, travel regularly.**

"I am hearing impaired: I've had Max since 2004 and he has changed my life. He has been tuned in to sounds I can't hear – including the cooker timer, the doorbell and the smoke alarm – and trained to come and tell me when he hears them. When he hears a sound he recognises, he'll come and sit in front of me and touch me with one paw. I ask him 'What is it?' and, depending on which sound he has heard, he will either lead me to the source, or drop to the floor if it is an alarm ringing.

"Max has also given me confidence. Because it isn't normally possible to tell if a person is hearing impaired just by looking at them – we're often thought of as rude or aloof because we don't respond to questions or join in conversations. By having a hearing dog who is wearing his distinctive burgundy jacket, we are telling the world why we aren't responding. Our dogs give us the confidence needed to go out and manage situations that can be tricky.

"It's most embarrassing and upsetting to be turned away from hotels. I travel a lot with my job and on one occasion had pre-booked at a small hotel. I always mention that I travel with a Registered Assistance Dog when I make a booking and, as I hadn't received any reply, I was

helps the dog if it receives a friendly pat – they get stressed in strange places, too. A bowl of water in a suitable spot is always an encouraging sign to a dog as well, and helps to reassure its owner."

## LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

There is also a legal aspect to the acceptance of assistance dogs. Government guidelines state that "assistance dogs are seen as aids that enable a disabled person to live life more independently. The refusal of service is likely to be discrimination in that the person is treated less favourably for reasons connected with their disability".

## For more information

For advice and a free window sticker, contact Assistance Dogs UK, c/o Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, The Grange, Wycombe Road, Saunderton, Princes Risborough, Bucks HP27 9NS: tel 01844 348100 (voice/minicom). If you require further advice, please call the Equality and Human Rights Commission on 0845 6046610.

quite relaxed when I arrived.

"However, the owner looked me up and down as I walked through the entrance with Max and said 'You can't bring that dog in here!' I carefully explained what Max was, showed him Max's ID card, and even gave him a copy of the relevant page of the Disability Discrimination Act, but there was nothing I could say that would persuade him that he couldn't legally turn us away. After 40 minutes of being repeatedly told 'It's my hotel and I can do exactly what I like', I decided to leave with my dignity intact and try to find another bed for the night.

"On the whole, accommodation owners are welcoming. My best experience was at a hotel where I was allocated a ground-floor room with easy access to a grassed area. The restaurant staff moved a table so that there was plenty of space for Max to settle down and the chef sent out a selection of meats for him!

"But really, there's no need to do anything special; just treat us as normal guests. We keep our dogs under close control. Accommodation owners are really missing a trick if they don't welcome assistance dogs owners, because word spreads quickly through our community about good places to stay!"



This is backed up by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which states that service providers should adjust policies that make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to use the service – such as a 'no dogs' policy. "Cases of disability-related discrimination involving hotels and guesthouses have been successfully taken to court," Philip confirms, adding that those who transgress can face fines of between £1,000 and £3,000.

But this isn't just about avoiding penalties – it's about providing hospitality to guests of all kinds. So why not replace that 'no dogs' sticker with a free one from Assistance Dogs UK that reassures assistance dog owners that they – and their best friends – will receive a warm welcome? ■



## Whitby YHA

Abbey House, East Cliff, North Yorkshire, YO22 4JT, Whitby  
★★★★ Hostel

Celia Imogen is Deputy Manager at Whitby YHA in North Yorkshire.

Website: [www.yha.org.uk](http://www.yha.org.uk)

"We've had guests staying with assistance dogs on a couple of occasions. We also have organised groups with assistance dogs using the tearoom, and this is more frequent. We have water bowls at the entrance to the tearoom and in the tea garden, and we advise on walking and toilet areas. We also have sensory signs giving directions. The dogs are well behaved and other guests react positively."