

## Common questions asked by audiences

### Useful links

All Guide Dogs volunteers receive a copy of One Voice, which includes key messages and information. This revised and sent out usually annually.

You also have access to our Volunteer Information Point (VIP)  
[www.guidedogs.org.uk/vip](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/vip).

To keep up to date, please join our [Speaker Facebook group](#), which has regular updates from staff, news on Speaker webinars, and supportive discussions with other Speakers. Please also check the community fundraising newsletter, which is emailed to you on the last Tuesday of the month and has a specific speaker section.

This document runs through questions that are often asked by audiences to our speakers. We've tried not to include too many answers with data/ figures, as they can quickly become incorrect, but One Voice will help with any interesting figures.

It's OK not to know the answer to every question! You can always refer a person to our website to find out the answer or say you will contact them afterwards with the information and visit the website or check One Voice yourself once the talk is finished.

## Contents

Q: How many guide dog owners are there in the UK? .....	3
Q: Do you charge a person who is blind or visually impaired for a guide dog? .....	3
Q: How old do you have to be to have a guide dog? .....	3
Q: Do you have to be completely blind to have a guide dog? .....	3
Q: How long does it take to get a guide dog? .....	3
Q: How many pups do you breed each year? .....	3
Q: What breeds do we use? .....	3
Q: Do you use chocolate Labradors? .....	3
Q: How long does guide dog training last? .....	4
Q: How do you train guide dogs? How does the dog know where the supermarket is/how to cross a road? .....	4
Q: Why does the dog wear a harness? .....	4
Q: What happens to those dogs who are not able to become guide dogs? .....	5
Q: On average how long does a guide dog work for? .....	5
Q: What happens to the Guide Dog Owner when their dog retires? .....	5
Q: Is it true that you stop the dogs going to the toilet? .....	6
Q: How do you pick poo up if you cannot see? .....	6
Q: How do you groom the dog if you are visually impaired? .....	6
Q: Do guide dogs bite? .....	6
Q: What does the dog eat? .....	6
Q: How often is the dog fed? .....	7
Q: Can you explain how the guide dog service works from birth to retirement? ..	7
Q: How do I become a Puppy Raiser (formerly Puppy Walker)? .....	7
Q: When I'm out and about, how can I help people who are visually impaired? ...	8
Q: How can I help on a personal level? .....	8
Q: Other than training dogs to guide people with a visual impairment, what else does the charity do? .....	8
Q: Why is Guide Dogs venturing into providing other services for people who are blind or partially sighted? Why are funds which had been raised for guide dogs now being spent on other services? .....	9
Q: What are Guide Dogs Children and Young People services? .....	9
Q: How do I find out more information about leaving a gift in my Will? .....	10
Q: Why does Guide Dogs have reserves? .....	10
End of Document. ....	10

**Q: How many guide dog owners are there in the UK?**

A: This changes every day, but there are around 5,000 people in the U.K with a guide dog and the number grows every year. Note - you may wish to add here: A guide dog doesn't suit everyone, it depends on each person's preference and need.

**Q: Do you charge a person who is blind or visually impaired for a guide dog?**

A: Due to the generous donations of the general public, Guide Dogs can train and partner a person with sight loss with a guide dog at no cost. We cover the costs of a dog from birth to retirement, this includes food, training, vet bills, toys, etc.

**Q: How old do you have to be to have a guide dog?**

A: There is no minimum or maximum age for guide dog ownership, we are pleased to offer guide dogs to young people and adults.

**Q: Do you have to be completely blind to have a guide dog?**

A: To apply for a guide dog, our criteria is that a person's sight impairment significantly impacts their ability to travel around safely, efficiently, and confidently.

**Q: How long does it take to get a guide dog?**

A: Unfortunately, we can't give timescales, as the waiting time for a guide dog varies depending on the demand in the local area, the types of dog available at any given time and a person's requirements.

**Q: How many pups do you breed each year?**

A: Guide Dogs breed and train more dogs than any other organisation in the world. Around 1000 guide dog puppies a year are born, mainly in volunteer's homes, and supported by our state-of-the-art National Breeding Centre in the Midlands.

**Q: What breeds do we use?**

A: Mainly we breed Labrador/Golden Retriever crosses, which we cross to gain the best characteristics of each breed. We also have German Shepherds, Curly Coat Retrievers, and Labradoodles.

**Q: Do you use chocolate Labradors?**

A: We mainly use black and yellow, but we do have some chocolate Labrador and Golden Retriever crosses in training.

**Q: How long does guide dog training last?**

A: Guide dog puppies are learning from day one with their mum, then with their volunteer Puppy Raisers. They leave their Puppy Raisers at around 14-18 months of age to start their education at one of the Guide Dogs centres. Tasks are taught in 'dog friendly' steps and they become a fully trained guide dog in around 20 weeks, ready to be partnered with a Guide Dog Owner (a person who is blind or partially sighted). This new partnership then trains together for a minimum of five weeks before qualifying. We regularly visit newly qualified Guide Dog Partnerships to check on their progress, as well as provide support and advice throughout their life.

**Q: How do you train guide dogs? How does the dog know where the supermarket is/how to cross a road?**

A: We use positive reinforcement (reward based) training using food, play, praise, and whatever the dog finds reinforcing. They start by learning the basics such as wearing the harness and then build up to becoming a qualified guide dog. It is important that everyone involved in training the guide dog, including the Guide Dog Owner, always gives the same command for each task required by the guide dog.

A guide dog's role is to work in partnership with the person, enabling them to get to their destination safely. It's the Guide Dog Owner who must know the route they are taking and direct the dog. Regular routes are practiced and learned by the dog. A dog will indicate when reaching a down kerb onto a road and can find a crossing point, but it is the Guide Dog Owner who determines when it is safe to cross a road, this could be using a combination of their hearing and any remaining vision. The dog is also trained to find doors and stairs and avoid any obstacles in the street, e.g., lamp posts, benches, bins, A-frames placed outside shops, and people.

**Q: Why does the dog wear a harness?**

A: The harness is a comfortable piece of equipment which the dog wears. A handle is attached to it via D-rings and the owner holds the top end gently in their hand (just resting). The Guide Dog Owner can then pick up and identify the subtle movement of the dog through the handle, e.g., movements to the left and right. The harness also has a safety element to it, it's a visible identification that the dog is a working assistance dog.

**Q: What happens to those dogs who are not able to become guide dogs?**

A: Our dogs are bred and trained to work as guide dogs, and we're delighted that the large majority of them qualify. However, for some of our dogs, we find they may be better suited for other careers or for being a pet dog, because of a variety of reasons. Our Buddy Dogs bring a canine friend into the lives of children with sight loss: by helping them build confidence and trust in their surroundings, these dogs have a hugely positive effect on a child and their family's wellbeing. If an alternative role isn't suitable, some dogs are available for rehoming and often one of our volunteers will apply to rehome a dog they've looked after in its earlier training. There is also a waiting list of members of the public wishing to rehome a dog from Guide Dogs. We have a vetting process in place to ensure our dogs are placed with the most suitable home to meet their needs.

**Q: On average how long does a guide dog work for?**

A: There is no set age for a dog to retire because they are all individuals. One dog may continue safely in a partnership until over ten years of age, another may need to retire at 8 or 9 or even earlier. From age 9 (or according to need), we conduct a thorough assessment to understand the health of the dog and any issues that may be affecting the dog's ability to work comfortably and safely, e.g., the dogs' mental resilience, willingness to work and workload (length and regularity of routes). We are in regular contact with all Guide Dog Owners and have ongoing conversations with them as the dog gets older.

**Q: What happens to dogs after they retire?**

A: When a dog retires, he or she will enjoy life as a pet, hopefully for several years. If the Guide Dog Owner wishes to keep the dog themselves, and can provide them with everything they need, we will do everything we can to support this. Alternatively, we can try to find a home for the dog with their family or friends, so the Guide Dog Owner can still be part of the dog's life. If none of these are appropriate, Guide Dogs will rehome the dog into a loving home elsewhere, including asking those involved in its upbringing and early training. We are so fortunate and grateful to have lots of people willing to offer our retired guide dogs the golden years they deserve.

**Q: What happens to the Guide Dog Owner when their dog retires?**

A: As a guide dog is retired, we will reassess the owner to find out if their needs or lifestyle have changed. Following a successful assessment, they will join our ready to train list. This means they will be on the list to be paired with a new guide dog. Guide dog

partnerships are created on a bespoke basis as it is essential to match the right dog to the right person. A person's needs and lifestyle are taken into account before a dog is matched to them so we can create the most successful partnerships. This means that people are not allocated a numbered position on the ready to train list and the timeframe before a new partnership is created may vary. While a guide dog owner waits for a new dog to be matched to them, they will be offered access to other services to help maintain their mobility, independence and confidence.

**Q: Is it true that you stop the dogs going to the toilet?**

A: No, the dogs are trained to "spend"/ go on command and given the opportunity to go to the toilet before and after a walk. This reduces the opportunities of accidents while the dog is working.

**Q: How do you pick poo up if you cannot see?**

A: There are techniques which the staff can teach to the Guide Dog Owner during their training. It is of course easier when the dog is on a lead. The squatting movement of the dog identifies where the owner needs to search for the faeces. It is a case of ensuring your hand is securely placed in a plastic bag and that you know which way your dog has been facing. It is not easy but possible and we encourage all our clients to pick up if their dog has toileted on a walk. However, people who are blind or partially sighted are exempt from picking up if their dogs foul on a pavement.

**Q: How do you groom the dog if you are visually impaired?**

A: Guide Dogs staff provide training and equipment on how to groom and care for your guide dog. They use touch and systematic techniques to ensure the dog is well groomed from head to tail.

**Q: Do guide dogs bite?**

A. Aggression is a potential natural behavior for all dogs, but guide dogs are bred to have a specific temperament that, amongst other things, aims to reduce the likelihood of them showing this trait. Breeding from parents with good temperament, early handling and socialisation (along with expert training and behavior management) all help to ensure that guide dogs are very unlikely to resort to showing aggression towards people or other animals.

**Q: What does the dog eat?**

A: We use a number of good quality, mainly dry food types which contain the correct nutrients and vitamins that a dog needs. Guide dogs must not be fed by the public.

**Q: How often is the dog fed?**

A: This is individual to the dog, but as we use their food as a reward, the dog's meals may be split into smaller portions, and some will be given whilst they are out working to reinforce their training. Their daily food will be measured out to ensure the calories consumed are correct for their breed, size and workload to maintain optimum health. Uncontrolled titbits are not encouraged. However, with advice from the Guide Dog Trainer and/or the Dog Health and Wellbeing Specialist some types of treats are used to maintain dental hygiene and used as an extra special positive reward for the dog.

**Q: Can you explain how the guide dog service works from birth to retirement?**

A: The pups are born in our volunteer's homes; they are supported from day one by our National Breeding Centre in Leamington Spa and have a final health check here when they are old enough to be placed with a volunteer Puppy Raiser. Trainee guide dogs learn basic skills with the Puppy Raiser and start their formal education with a Guide Dog Trainer at one of the Guide Dogs centres at around 14 - 18 months. Tasks are taught in 'dog friendly' steps and they become a fully trained guide dog in around 20 weeks from arrival at our centres, ready to be partnered with a person who is blind or partially sighted. They then train together with support from a Guide Dog Mobility Specialist for a minimum of 5 weeks learning their routes, before qualifying as a partnership. A guide dog will support their owner until they are ready to retire. The owner can choose to keep their newly retired guide dog, or for the dog to go to a suitable family member or friend. If they are unable to keep the dog, it will be rehomed via our rehoming department. There is a waiting list for people wishing to adopt a retired guide dog.

**Q: How do I become a Puppy Raiser?**

A: To be a Puppy Raiser you must enjoy dogs (!), be over 18 years, be at home most of the time, have someone at home who can handle large breed dogs, access to a car, and have a home with a safe secure area outside. Puppy raisers need to be able to dedicate time every day to train the puppy and need to be prepared to attend weekly puppy classes, where training help and advice is offered as well as having the opportunity to meet fellow pups and Puppy Raisers. You can see if Puppy Raisers are needed in your local area through our website.

**Q: When I'm out and about, how can I help people who are visually impaired?**

A: If you see a person using long cane, or a Guide Dog Owner in the street, step aside so you do not obstruct their path. Also, tempting as it is, please do not distract the guide dog, either by talking to or touching the dog. If you see the guide dog owner drop the dog's harness it indicates that they may need help with directions or perhaps crossing a particularly busy junction. Guide dogs do not know when to cross, it is the guide dog owner who decides when to cross the road, but in a noisy or multi junction road, it can be difficult to decide when to cross and that is when assistance is often sought. If a person with a long cane or guide dog asks for assistance, or you think they might need assistance, introduce yourself and offer help. If your offer is accepted ask the person what help they need, it could be something as simple as knowing which shop they are in front of, help getting across the road or to a destination. They may wish to hold onto your arm at the elbow, so that you can guide them safely. When you've finished helping, always check they are ok and let them know you're leaving. If they say they don't need any help, don't be offended, it just means they are ok. If you'd like to know more about how to guide and learn some techniques, we have videos on our website that can show you how to "sighted guide" a person with sight loss. You can access information about this at the following link <https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/how-you-can-help/sighted-guide-training/>

**Q: How can I help on a personal level?**

A: Come and join the Guide Dogs team. We rely on fundraisers and volunteers who give their time for so many things. From joining a local fundraising group to volunteering to care for our dogs or being a My Sighted Guide, working with people who are blind or partially sighted. There's something for everyone and an opportunity to be involved in almost every area of what we do. Our website has more details. Note - offer the "How you can help" leaflet.

**Q: Other than training dogs to guide people with a visual impairment, what else does the charity do?**

A: **Orientation & Mobility Training:** Our Vision Rehabilitation Specialists teach, and advise on, specific techniques to increase confidence and the ability to move safely and efficiently through the environment both indoors and outdoors. The team provide tailored training to support the person to achieve their goals, for example this may include long cane training.



**Children and young People (CYP):** We offer a range of services and activities for children and young people (under the age of 25) and provide valuable advice for parents and teachers.

**Buddy Dogs:** Buddy Dogs - for children, providing a key friend, increasing trust, boosting confidence and decreasing social isolation. Companion Dogs - for adults, providing a well-behaved dog for exercise, social connection and confidence.

**Technology:** People with sight loss are using technology every day, it's opening up the world for them and enabling them to make many more choices about where they go and what they do. At Guide Dogs, we work in collaboration with others to influence the design of technologies, ensuring they meet your needs.

**Influencing & Campaigns:** Visual impairment is a fact of life for many thousands of people in the UK. We're campaigning alongside them for the rights that most sighted people take for granted.

**Research:** Guide Dogs' research programme is instrumental in helping to shape our policies, campaigns and services. We commission and carry out Canine Research, Orientation, Mobility, Wellbeing and Technology (OMWT) Research, and Market and Customer Insights.

**Q: Why is Guide Dogs venturing into providing other services for people who are blind or partially sighted? Why are funds which have been raised for guide dogs now being spent on other services?**

A: If you want to live a full life and contribute to your community, you need to be able to get around on your own. At Guide Dogs, we're in the business of making sure that losing your sight doesn't mean losing this vital ability. Guide Dogs recognises that a guide dog may not be suitable for everyone. Guide Dogs aims are based on what people have told us about the services they need to help them on their journey to independence, whether this is with or without a guide dog.

**Q. What are Guide Dogs Children and Young People services?**

A: Guide Dogs' children's and young people's services support under 25's and their families providing:

- Practical help and advice
- Education support
- Habilitation (mobility and life skills) training
- Custom Eyes - large-print bespoke books (from any book currently in print)
- Advice on technology and equipment and grants
- Family support, including early diagnosis support

- My Time to Play - 0 to 4's learning through play
- Family events - activity days for the whole family
- Guide dogs and buddy dogs.

**Q: How do I find out more information about leaving a gift in my Will?**

A: You can find further information on the Guide Dogs website in the 'Leave a gift in your will' section, using this link to [gifts in wills](#) or call our Legacy department on 0800 953 0113. Guide Dogs currently receive approximately 65 percent of our annual voluntary income from those who choose to include a gift to Guide Dogs in their Will. This means that without gifts in wills we would be unable to train two out of three guide dogs.

**Q: Why does Guide Dogs have reserves?**

A: Our reserves policy reflects the long-term commitment inherent in our work, in line with Charity Commission guidelines. When someone becomes a guide dog owner, we make a commitment to provide them with a guide dog for as long as they need one. The average working life of a guide dog is six and a half years, so a client may require eight or more dogs during their lifetime. Each guide dog partnership involves months of training. The highly specialised nature of our work also means that we must train our own staff. This is a long process which must be planned well in advance. Furthermore, the charity's income is derived primarily from voluntary giving, particularly legacies, which may fluctuate significantly. To mitigate the risk to the provision of this long-term commitment to each guide dog owner, reserves should be maintained at a level equivalent to least two years' running costs of the core guide dog service.

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