

Common questions asked by audiences, updated April 2021

Useful links

All Guide Dogs volunteers receive a copy of One Voice, our book of key messages and information. The book is revised and sent out every couple of years. Use this link to access [One Voice 2021](#).

You also have access to VIP our website pages for volunteers www.guidedogs.org.uk/vip.

New terms used in this document can be found using this link to our new online [glossary](#) which is also available on the [Volunteer Information Point](#).

To keep up to date with FAQ's please join our [Speaker Facebook group](#) and Speaker webinars and check for updates in the community fundraising newsletter.

Frequently Asked Questions

This section 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. If you need up to date information to answer a question from a talk, please visit the website or check One Voice.

Q: How long does guide dog training last?

A: Guide dog puppies are learning from day one with their mum, then with their Puppy Raisers. From a young age they will go on public transport, into shops and cafés and need to have good basic skills, such as sit and recall. They leave their Puppy Raisers at around 14 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). They then train together for a minimum of five weeks learning their routes, before qualifying as a partnership.

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. All together, we work with around 8000 dogs, including puppies and our guide dog mums and dads.

Q: How do you train guide dogs? And, how does the dog know where the supermarket is?

A: We use positive reinforcement (reward based) training to train the dogs using food, play 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's the Guide Dog Owner who must know the route they are taking. They direct the dog and determine when it is safe to cross a road, this could be using a

combination of their hearing and any remaining vision. The dog doesn't know where to go or when to cross the road.

A guide dog's role is to work in partnership with the person, enabling them to get to their destination safely. For example, by stopping when they reach a kerb so the guide dog owner knows whether to go left or right or cross the road. 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.

It is also 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.

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 many pups do you breed each year?

A: Guide Dogs is the largest breeder of working dogs in the world. Over 1000 guide dog puppies a year are born, mainly in volunteer's homes. are supported by our state-of-the-art National Breeding Centre. We use science and technology in our work, to improve all aspects of our breeding programme so that we can produce the healthiest guide dogs.

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

A: We don't charge people who are blind or visually impaired to have a guide dog, we can cover all the costs of the dog from birth to retirement. That means toys, food, vet bills, training, bedding, equipment. Sometimes people are able to help with the costs of their guide dog which we fully support, but anyone who needs a dog is able to have one without the worry of affordability. This is discussed during the initial conversations we have, when people get in touch about having a guide dog.

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

A: The average working life of a guide dog is 6 to 7 years as they are usually around two years of age at the start of the partnership. Guide Dogs consider a number of elements to determine when to retire a guide dog, e.g. the dogs' age, health, mental resilience, willingness to work and workload (length and regularity of routes).

Q: What breeds do we use?

A: Mainly we breed Labrador/Golden Retriever crosses, we have some pure breeds - Golden Retrievers, Labradors, German Shepherds and crosses such as Labradoodles.

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

A: Some of our dogs may be suitable for other roles within Guide Dogs such as a Buddy Dog for a child or a Companion Dog for an adult (a dog that's there as a companion but doesn't have a harness or guide the child or adult). Others may go

onto new careers with other charities or organisations such as Hearing dogs. In 2020 we had three dogs go into training as COVID detection dogs. If an alternative role isn't suitable, they are available for rehoming and often one of our volunteers will apply to rehome a dog they've looked after. There is 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: 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 and have a home with a garden (not a flat). 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. The puppy will be with you for about 14 months in your home before leaving to become a guide dog. Becoming a Puppy raiser also depends on whether Guide Dogs need Puppy Raiser's in your area.

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

A: No, the dogs are trained and given the opportunity to go to the toilet on command before and after a walk. This reduces the opportunities of accidents while the dog is working. During training the dogs are encouraged not to toilet on walks (so this becomes an ingrained habit) and given verbal praise when they "spend"/ go on command.

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: 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: Do guide dog's bite?

A. Aggression is a natural behavior, 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. At 6 weeks, they are placed with a volunteer Puppy Raiser. Trainee guide dogs leave their Puppy Raisers at around 14 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 person who is blind or partially sighted. They then train together for a minimum of 5 weeks learning their routes, before qualifying as a partnership.

The training is carried out at the person's home or at a hotel, where they will stay for the duration of the induction period with their new guide dog and their assigned Guide Dog Mobility Specialist. It is the Specialist who teaches the person how to handle and look after the guide dog as well as working with them on the regular routes they will take with their dog. The person will usually already have routes they've learned with their white cane.

A guide dog will support their owner until they are about 10 years old and then 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: 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.

Q: Can you tell me more about approaching someone with a guide dog?

A. The most important thing is to recognise that when a guide dog is wearing its harness, not to distract or touch the dog because it is working. Also, do not feed the guide dog or give it commands, the only person who should feed and instruct the guide dog is the guide dog owner or their Guide Dog Mobility Specialist.

Q: Is it true that some guide dog owners can see?

A: Yes, there are many different causes of sight loss and many ways people's eyesight can be affected. Some eye conditions can cause a gradual loss of sight over many years. Whether a person is blind or has some remaining vision, a mobility aid for example a cane or a guide dog could help them to get around safely.

Q: How can I help on a personal level?

A:

- Fundraise: There are lots of ways you can raise money for Guide Dogs, from organising an event with friends and family, to taking part in a charity challenge, or even hosting a dogs' tea party! Your support will help fund our vital services that enable thousands of visually impaired people to lead confident, independent and fulfilling lives.
- Volunteer: Come and join the Guide Dogs team. We rely on volunteers who give their time for so many things. From joining a local fundraising group or starting your own with friends and family, to being a My Sighted Guide, working with people who are blind or partially sighted. You could volunteer to care for our

dogs, there's something for everyone and an opportunity to be involved in almost every area of what we do. By volunteering for Guide Dogs, you'll be helping to make a huge difference to people living with sight loss. You'll be part of a great team; learn new skills and we promise you'll have a lot of fun!

- Sighted Guiding: learn how to provide sighted guiding and therefore be able to properly assist a visual impaired person. Did you know that when a guide dog owner drops the harness, it indicates to sighted people, that he/she needs mobility assistance perhaps in directions, or crossing the road?

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: The Orientation and Mobility Service is the teaching of, and advising 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 mobility 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. Please follow the link to the [CYP Question](#) in this document.
- My Guide: My Guide, our sighted guiding service, aims to help people with sight loss get out of their homes with a sighted volunteer or family member to engage with their community, rebuilding their confidence and independence.
- Buddy & Companion 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 research in three key areas:
 - Canine Research
 - Orientation, Mobility, Wellbeing and Technology (OMWT) Research
 - Market and Customer Insights

These research outcomes helped inform the Guide Dogs strategy, and they're continually being used to modify everyday working practices to ensure we're all operating as efficiently as possible.

[Note to Volunteers - Further details are in our One Voice Booklet and are available to the public on the website].

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?

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. It's a huge challenge - our research shows that there are some 180,000 blind and partially sighted people in the UK who never leave home alone. Guide Dogs recognises that a guide dog may not be suitable for everyone. Guide Dogs aims are based on what blind and partially sighted 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?

Since January 2017, we have supported people with a vision impairment, whatever their age, through one organisation. 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
- Some young people with a guide dog
- Some children with a buddy dog, a well-trained companion dog.

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: How can I get involved in fundraising?

A: There are many ways that you can get involved with fundraising, by running your own DIY event such as a quiz night or an open gardens day, or you could even hold a Great Guide Dogs Tea Party. If you are part of a community group or are having a fundraising day at work, why not choose Guide Dogs as your charity.

For further information, contact the community fundraising team who will be able to give you up to date information about local events and ideas that may be of interest to you, or visit our webpage. We have a comprehensive range of nationally organised activities that take place all over the country that you may find valuable

to share. To find out more about fundraising and to get a copy of our fundraising pack visit www.guidedogs.org.uk/fundraiseforum or call 0345 143 0192.

Note - offer the “How you can help” leaflet or the “Learn” leaflet to Schools and Youth groups and talk about our fundraising products (in the pre-training pack).

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.

Q: How much income does Guide Dogs receive from legacies?

A: 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 around 20 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. In order to mitigate the risk to the provision of this long-term commitment to each guide dog owner, Council has concluded that, in the medium to long term, free reserves should be maintained at a level equivalent to least two years’ running costs of the core guide dog service.

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