



Dear [name]

I hope this update from Guide Dogs finds you well. It's just over a year since the pandemic changed our world. Over the last 12 months, we have undergone a journey where we've needed to pause, readjust or adapt to a new frontier – in our personal lives, work and volunteering.

It has been an uncertain time for all of us, especially during periods of lockdown. However, through the uncertainty we have still accomplished a great deal. As a service, we played an active role in supporting people with sight loss in different ways. In the immediate aftermath of COVID-19, we set up an information phone line, now called Guide Line, to provide immediate support and to collect data on emerging issues to inform our future COVID-19 guidance and campaign work. Alongside this support, our devoted My Sighted Guide volunteers made tens of thousands of keeping in touch calls with service users to help reduce isolation and maintain their partnerships. I know how much this has been appreciated.

From an operational context we kept going on many fronts. This included recommencing, after the first immediate lockdown, the training of our dogs and the creation of new guide dog partnerships alongside breeding and puppy placement to ensure we have sufficient dogs for training in the future. In our new more virtual world, the community spirit and determination shown by our volunteer fundraisers was exceptional as they continued to support us by taking much of their community fundraising online, which helped us to sustain our overall income throughout the pandemic.

I'm deeply grateful for the ongoing support that you have all shown us – whether you've waited to resume normal volunteering activities, looked after a puppy longer than expected or taken in a dog at short notice. I know it hasn't been easy.

Today, however, there's light at the end of the tunnel as we begin to take steps to return to a new normal. Like the government, we have also developed a roadmap of phased activities to allow us to restart all services and volunteering by the summer. Please refer to our 'Getting back on track' update in the information section. In addition, our 2021 annual plan outlines six key priorities, which will focus our efforts to reverse the effects of COVID-19 on our service delivery, and also build upon some of the areas of change which made us more efficient, resilient and innovative during the pandemic. You can watch a video of our 2021 plans on the Volunteer Information Point (link below).



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One of our priorities is to reduce the waiting time for a guide dog. Before COVID-19, we had worked hard to reduce the number of people waiting for a guide dog from around 900 in 2017 to around 700 in 2019. Because of the pandemic, and in particular the inability to create multiple new guide dog partnerships, there are sadly more people waiting to be matched with a dog. At the moment this figure is just over 850 people. It's difficult to put an exact figure on how COVID-19 has affected the wait for a guide dog, but we estimate it has extended it between 6-10 months. For those waiting for a replacement guide dog, we know that any length of time feels too long and reducing this impact is a priority for everyone within the charity.

Currently the average national waiting time for a dog is around seventeen months – but this figure varies considerably by region and because of people's individual circumstance. For many people the wait will be considerably less. Getting back up to normal levels of matching partnerships is our focus, balancing the urgent need for more qualified partnerships, with maintaining levels of quality, safety and welfare.

We are investing significantly in numbers of frontline staff, and are setting up our Guide Dogs Academy which means we can recruit and train more of our world class technical staff – more Guide Dog Mobility Specialists and Trainers, than ever before – and enable them to be trained to the same standard in a shorter time frame. We have 66 new Guide Dog Mobility Specialists and Trainers already in training this year and plan to recruit 150 new trainees over the next three years. We are also increasing our capacity around the country with new and updated centres such as Southampton, Exeter, Reading and our newly opened Bristol centre, and those in development at Redbridge, Leeds and Leamington Spa.

Although at times, it feels like there's little to celebrate, we should take a moment to reflect and recognise the inspiring contributions made by volunteers from last year. For many of us, this has kept us going. So, please nominate your fellow volunteers for the upcoming local volunteer awards by 16 April (link below). On a similar note, from 28 April (Guide Dogs Day), we'll begin to celebrate our 90th anniversary, which will continue throughout the year. I do hope you can join in. We have a number of activities and opportunities to get involved, including Volunteers' Week (1 – 7 June). We'll be in touch with more information over the coming months.

Inside this mailing, we've included key information and recent developments which you may have missed from our earlier communications. Furthermore, we've enclosed our newly updated 'One Voice' booklet which contains the latest Guide Dogs facts and figures, so we hope you'll find this a useful resource for when talking about and what we do.

And finally, as a fellow volunteer myself, I wanted to share some exciting news with you. My guide dog mum Dolly welcomed a litter of ten puppies during lockdown earlier this year. Her pups like many pups born during the pandemic will go on to become future life-changers and take part in our pioneering Born to Guide project (further information below).

Thank you again for everything you do,



**Tom Wright CBE**  
Chief Executive  
Guide Dogs

## Related links:

- Our 2021 annual plan: [guidedogs.org.uk/vip/news](https://guidedogs.org.uk/vip/news).
- 2021 Volunteer Awards: [guidedogs.org.uk/how-you-can-help/volunteering-for-guide-dogs/awards-and-recognition](https://guidedogs.org.uk/how-you-can-help/volunteering-for-guide-dogs/awards-and-recognition).