# Leisure facilities: Your legal obligations

## Introduction

There are approximately two million people in the UK with sight loss and this is increasing. The information below relates to the legal obligations surrounding the access rights of people with sight loss, including guide dog owners.

Access to a leisure facility is not just about being able to get in and around the facility but being able to participate in or enjoy the leisure activities. For example, swimming and other sports, theatre productions and concerts, fitness classes and individual workouts and therapy treatments.

If a person who is vision impaired feels they have been discriminated against, they may decide to take legal action. As a service provider, failure to comply with your legal obligations to make “reasonable adjustments”, may result in you or your business facing prosecution.

The below information relating to access for people with guide dogs can also apply to other disabled people with assistance dogs.

## What the law says

Disabled people including guide dog owners and other people living with sight loss, have important rights under the Equality Act 2010, or Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 (Northern Ireland).

This means people with sight loss have the same right to access theatres/cinemas, gyms/leisure centres, sports halls/stadia, zoos/wildlife parks and other leisure facilities as everyone else.

As a service provider, you are required to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled people can access your service.

The law surrounding access for disabled people is “anticipatory”. As a service provider you should consider the needs of disabled people, including guide or other assistance dog owners, and make any necessary reasonable adjustments prior to those customers accessing your service.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) and Food Standards Scotland (FSS) state: “There is nothing in food safety or food hygiene legislation preventing customers taking assistance animals, working animals or pets, into the front-of-house areas of food retailers or catering establishments.” For further advice contact your local environmental health office.

Cultural beliefs can raise sensitive issues relating to dogs. However, religious grounds cannot be used to exclude guide dog and assistance dog owners. The Equality and Human Rights Commission successfully reached agreement on this with numerous religious groups.

Emergency evacuation - Current legislation and standards state that all people should be evacuated if there is a fire. A PEEP (Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan) for people with disabilities should be completed. Please follow the link to: [Fire-safety-risk-assessment-means-of-escape-for-disabled-people](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fire-safety-risk-assessment-means-of-escape-for-disabled-people/fire-safety-risk-assessment-means-of-escape-for-disabled-people-accessible-version)

## Examples of reasonable adjustments

“Reasonable adjustments” is a phrase used within law to give flexibility and allow different solutions in different situations. When considering reasonable adjustments, it is recommended to ask individual guide dog owners and other people with sight loss what assistance they require.

* Amend any “no dogs” policy to allow access for guide and other assistance dogs where reasonable. Guide Dogs can provide window stickers saying your business welcomes guide and other assistance dogs.
* Provide sighted guiding assistance to support people with sight loss in getting to where they need to go. For example, their seat in the auditorium or to and from the changing rooms in a gym. Follow this link to the Guide Dogs website for information on sighted guiding: [Sighted guide training](https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/how-you-can-help/sighted-guide-training/)
* Invest in disability equality training for staff.
* Guide dog owners should be offered the same choice of seating as other customers. Ask the guide dog owner where they would prefer to sit, with sufficient room for the guide dog to lie under the table or next to its owner, as it has been trained to do so.
* Provide audio described performances.
* Identify suitable and safe locations to accommodate guide and assistance dogs, should their owner not want to take their dog into the activity area. Where necessary, sighted guiding should be offered to support further access to facilities.
* Consider setting up a ‘volunteer gym buddy’ scheme to support persons with disabilities.
* In catering areas, offer to read the menu and let the customer know if the menu is available digitally, in large print or Braille.
* In self-service restaurants, staff could offer to assist with choosing food and carrying meals to a table.
* Offer to assist the guide dog owner with making payment.

## What you need to know

Guide dogs are working animals, not pets. They are trained to provide independence and mobility to their owners. Guide dog owners are trained to maintain a high grooming standard of their dog, with attention to cleanliness. All guide dogs receive regular veterinary checks to ensure they are healthy, fit and able for work.

Guide dogs do not disrupt the everyday operation of businesses. They are trained not to bother other people or climb on furniture and remain under the control of their handler.

## Guide dogs and loud noises and flashing lights.

People with sight loss, including guide dog owners, attend concerts, musicals and other productions that may include loud noises and flashing lights. As they can affect some people, loud noises and flashing lights can affect some guide dogs.

Guide dog owners have legal rights to be supported by a highly trained dog, in most places and situations where pet dogs are not permitted. However, they also have a responsibility for their dog, and not all circumstances or situations are in the best interest of a guide dog, if considering its welfare.

The principal Guide Dogs follows to underpin the welfare of its dogs is known as the Five Domains. Guide dog owners should always take a ‘dog centred’ approach to providing for their everyday care, which means considering each dog’s individual likes, dislikes, and preferences.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding the welfare of a guide dog, when accessing your service, please call Guide Line on 0800 781 1444 (9:00am-5:00pm Monday-Friday) or email: [Information@guidedogs.org.uk](mailto:Information@guidedogs.org.uk) or call the out of hours hotline on 0345 143 0217.

## Additional information and recommendations

Individual guide dog owners know their guide dogs best and understand their dog’s tolerance levels. We therefore recommend that information on content of performances (reference to lighting and loud noises) be made available at point of sale or entry.

Providing there is room for a guide dog to remain safely with its owner and doesn’t block any emergency escape routes, disrupt business operations or impact on the safety of other customers, there is no reason why a guide dog owner cannot take their guide dog into a performance with them should they wish to.

If a guide dog owner decides not to take their guide dog in with them, staff should offer sighted guiding and, where necessary accommodate their guide dog elsewhere in the facility – in an office or behind reception, for example. Guide dogs should be appropriately supervised and not left alone for prolonged periods of time. Arrangements should be discussed and agreed with individual guide dog owners. Larger venues may wish to consider training volunteers or staff to support the accommodation of guide and other assistance dogs. Follow this link to the Guide Dogs website for information on sighted guiding: [Sighted guide training](https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/how-you-can-help/sighted-guide-training/)

## Open Doors Campaign

Guide Dogs ‘Open Doors’ campaign aims to end access refusals faced by people with guide dogs. We want to educate businesses and empower guide dog owners to put an end to this form of discrimination. You can find out more on the Guide Dogs website by following the link to: [**Guide Dogs current campaigns Open Doors**](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/opendoors)

**Further Information**

Visit our Useful Resources document.

If you require any further information, please email [**Information@guidedogs.org.uk**](mailto:Information@guidedogs.org.uk) or call 0800 781 1444.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission have issued helpful information for businesses regarding welcoming assistance dog owners. Please follow this link to: [**The Equality and Human Rights Commission Assistance Dogs: A Guide for all Businesses**](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/assistance-dogs-guide-all-businesses)

The information given in this document was correct as of May 2024. This document provides basic information and is not a substitute for legal advice.

## End of document