# Medical facilities: Your legal obligations

This document relates to medical facilities and associated services such as hospitals, ambulances, and other health care / treatment providers as an out-patient, in-patient or visitor.

## 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.

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).

These acts provide for blind and partially sighted people to have the same right to services such as GP surgeries, hospitals, and walk-in centres as everyone else. In situations where a guide dog cannot accompany their owner (due to infection control or other health and safety reason) reasonable adjustments must be made.

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 several religious groups.

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.

## Examples of reasonable adjustments

“Reasonable adjustments” is a phrase used within law to give some flexibility and allow different solutions in different situations. When considering reasonable adjustments, it’s 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. Guide Dogs can provide window stickers saying your service welcomes guide and other assistance dogs.
* Being aware that additional time may be required when providing services to people with sight loss.
* You may be required to provide sighted guiding assistance around the premises. 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/)
* All prior information regarding an appointment or admission should be provided in the patient’s preferred format.
* The medical facility should put in place a procedure to ensure that the notes of patients with a visual impairment are flagged for ease of identification and assistance provision.
* Reading out information or providing it in alternative formats.
* Providing a tactile plan of the facility to aid orientation.
* There maybe areas within the facility e.g. treatment rooms, where the guide dog may not be permitted, due to infection control or health and safety issues. Providing a safe place, agreed with the owner, where the dog can be kept and giving sighted guiding for the owner where required.
* GP surgeries and dentists should know whether a patient registered has sight loss and a guide dog. Thereby, ensuring the ways of communicating and using the self-service systems are accessible and inclusive for all. Where this is not possible, staff can provide the support.

## 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 and other assistance dogs are exempt from the rules that prevent other dogs from accompanying their owner to most parts of a hospital or medical facility. 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.

For unplanned admissions or emergencies, a guide dog owner may be suffering from shock or is unconscious. It is likely their dog will also be showing signs of distress. It is advised to contact Guide Dogs on 0800 7811444 or email [Information@guidedogs.org.uk](mailto:Information@guidedogs.org.uk) or the out of hours hotline on 0345 143 0217.

In the event of an unexpected admission to hospital it is also advised to contact Guide Dogs, who will remove the dog to a place of care and safety while the owner is indisposed.

A guide dog owner who visits a hospital or medical facility with their guide dog should not be refused because they have their guide dog with them. It is the service provider’s responsibility to provide the same level of care to disabled people that they would provide to other patients, and to make any necessary reasonable adjustments in order to be able to do so.

Where a guide dog owner needs to be transported to hospital by ambulance and there is no one to take care of the dog, the medical staff should take the dog along with the owner as separation will increase stress on both the dog and owner. On arrival at the hospital further arrangements can be made to accommodate the dog. If it is impossible to take the dog along, the ambulance staff must contact Guide Dogs (using numbers in the above paragraphs) for the dog to be catered for.

## 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 this link: [www.guidedogs.org.uk/opendoors](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.

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