# Access to stadia for people with sight loss including Guide Dog Owners

## Introduction

This information aims to help stadium officials have a greater understanding and awareness of the issues that face guide dog owners attending events at their venue. It sets out the legislative duties under the Equality Act 2010 and Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 (Northern Ireland). A person should not be refused access because they are a guide dog owner. They must not receive service of a lower standard, and the organisation may be required to make reasonable adjustments to enable access to services.

This document provides examples of reasonable adjustments that can assist guide dog owners and other blind or partially sighted people. There is also advice and information on how to make premises more inclusive, and how to communicate with and assist vision impaired visitors.

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

**It is important that stadium staff are aware of the following factors concerning vision-impaired visitors, including guide dog owners:**

* The role of the guide dog
* What the law says
* Provision for the guide dog owner and their dog
* The location of the guide dog within the stadium
* Comfort and safety issues
* Evacuation of venues / stadia

## The role of the guide dog

Guide dogs are not pets. They are working animals and are relied upon by their owners for independence and mobility. They undergo up to two years of intensive training from professional staff before qualifying as guide dogs. In addition, all guide dog owners receive advice and training to maintain the high standards of working and social obedience in their guide dogs that is essential for successful guide dog mobility.

Guide Dogs provides aftercare services throughout a dog’s working life, including any training needs associated with changes in the owner’s activities. This could include visiting venues such as stadia.

Stadia often include restaurants and other food premises. 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.

In practical terms, guide dogs do not disrupt the everyday operation of stadia. They are trained not to bother other people and not to climb on seats or other fittings.

Guide dogs provide an essential and effective mobility aid to their owners when travelling to and from locations, such as stadia. It should be recognised, however, that the internal environment within the stadium can be highly complex and confusing to both guide dogs and owners. There can also be limitations to dogs working in the high-density crowd situations associated with large events. Guide dog owners, will at times, require additional support from a companion or staff member. A dog does support confidence and safety with routine travel and emergency evacuation.

## What the law says

Disabled people including blind and partially sighted people and guide dog owners, have important rights under the Equality Act 2010, or Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 (Northern Ireland).

The Equality Act and DDA in Northern Ireland provide for blind and partially sighted people to have the same right to services and access to facilities as everyone else.

This includes a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled people can access services, such as amending a ‘no dogs’ policy to allow guide and other assistance dogs.

Staff should not refuse to serve a disabled person or provide them with a lower standard of service because of their disability. This means that a guide dog owner should not be refused service or access to services because they are blind or partially sighted, or that they have a guide dog with them. Managers and staff may also need to make reasonable changes to the way in which they provide their services, to make sure that they do not discriminate against a disabled person.

## Examples of Reasonable Adjustments

**“Reasonable adjustments” is a phrase used within law to give some flexibility and allow different solutions in different situations. Staff at stadia should be able to:**

* Provide a seating area for a guide dog owner with sufficient room for the dog to lie comfortably and safely next to its owner. However, a guide dog owner should not be placed in a lower standard area than any other spectator.
* Provide a sighted guide and assistance when required. 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/)
* Offer to assist with purchasing tickets.
* Be aware that additional time, effort and skills are sometimes needed when providing services to blind and partially sighted people.
* Provide information in alternative formats for supporters/spectators, e.g. Braille and large print programmes and information leaflets.
* It is good practice to provide a dedicated audio commentary of matches and other sporting events.
* Assign a location at the venue where a guide dog could be accommodated during the event. This must be agreed with the guide dog owner. Guide Dogs can also provide advice.

## Provision for the Guide Dog Owner and their Dog

* Never distract a working guide dog. Check with the owner before any contact is made.
* Never feed the dog. Guide dogs are working animals and are fed a strict diet at regular times. Any additional food may cause the dog to be sick or affect its health.
* Provide a water bowl for the guide dog if asked.
* In seating areas make sure there is sufficient space for a guide dog and its owner.
* Provide information and help if needed, for example, to access points into the stadium which aren’t turn-stiles (which are too narrow for a guide dog owner and their dog to access).
* Provide appropriate relief areas for guide dogs and other assistance dogs. Many new stadia incorporate relief areas in their design. If the facilities are located outside the stadium, staff support will be needed to guide the owner to the area. Guide Dogs can advise on the provision of suitable relief facilities. (See Further Information).

## Location of guide dog and owner within the venue

The design features of new and refurbished stadia and other sports arenas should allow the freedom of choice for a blind or partially sighted person, accompanied by a guide dog and/or a sighted companion, to sit anywhere within the venue. Facilities should be developed to consider their requirements.

The best place for a guide dog is with its owner, who will have both the skills and the relationship with their dog that ensures a high level of control.

The front row of a block on any tier of seats will usually provide more space and comfort for a guide dog.

## Comfort and Safety

As previously stated, it should be recognised that large public venues can be highly complex and confusing environments and there are limitations for guide dogs working in the high-density crowd environments associated with large events. Accessible routes, without obstructions such as turn-stiles, should be identified both in and out of the stadium for the guide dog owner.

A sighted companion and/or staff support may also be required within the internal and external stadium environment. A sighted companion can also enhance safety, relaxation and mobility and provide effective support in respect of emergency evacuation procedures.

## Evacuation of Venues/Stadia

In the event of an emergency evacuation of the venue, blind and partially sighted visitors are expected to comply with the venue’s evacuation procedures. Experience suggests that guide dog owners, who have their dog with them, are more likely to feel safer, remain calmer and consequently, be able to respond more effectively to instructions.

It is the responsibility of the management to ensure safe escape of visitors, by introducing suitable escape plans in conjunction with Fire Safety Officers.

**Useful procedures include:**

* Ensure an escape strategy is in place.
* Ensure all fire exits are clearly signed and free of obstruction (internally and externally).
* Identify supporters/spectators with a vision impairment.
* Make sure staff on duty are aware of the number of people who would require assistance.
* Explain the emergency procedure to blind and partially sighted people on arrival, preferably making the information available in an alternative format if required.

## Guide Dog Owners’ Responsibilities

To qualify as a guide dog owner a high level of competence and responsibility needs to be demonstrated when working with a dog in a variety of situations and built environments.

The culture and crowd behaviour that is associated with events commonly held at stadia will require the guide dog owner to assess the likely situation on an individual event basis. In some situations, Guide Dogs may advise owners to make alternative arrangements to attend the event and not subject their guide dog to unnecessary stress or risk of harm.

Guide dog owners who intend to regularly or occasionally, attend such events, are advised to contact the venue well in advance to establish ticket availability and facilities, and to notify the venue of their intention to be accompanied by their guide dog. Guide dog owners, accompanied by their dog, are also encouraged to consider their arrival and departure at the ground, to avoid the crowd congestion that can occur at events with high attendances.

**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