

Equalities Participation Network – 27 June 2024

Present: Myshele Haywood (GREC), Roslynn Fowler (Aberdeen Action on Disability), Linzi Harrow (ACC), Ells Mchaffie (Guide Dogs), Marion McLaughlin (Aurora Autism Consulting), Magdalena Mikolajewska (Polish Association & Cornerstone), Mary Rasmussen (Guide Dogs), Alison Wilkie (Deafblind Scotland).

Apologies: Fay Morrison, Carol Hannaford, John Whitfield (and his guide dog Peat).

Spotlight: Guide Dogs (the organisation) and assistance dogs (the dogs) – Mary and Ells

Guide Dogs is a UK-wide charity, with strong representation in Scotland and a very active group in Aberdeen.

Mary spoke about starting to lose her sight in her late 20s because of glaucoma, which also caused her mother and grandmother to become blind. Smithy is her fifth guide dog.

Guide Dogs provides many services that don't relate to dogs at all. For example:

- Training people in using a long cane to get around, and helping them memorise routes
- Helping people get gadgets like talking clocks, kitchen scales, smart devices, etc.
- Helping set things up, like attaching 'bump on' stickers to appliances so they can be operated by touch.

The NHS covers wheelchairs and mobility aids, but not guide dogs – so the charity ensures that anyone who needs a guide dog can have one.

Requirements for getting a guide dog: being able to navigate at least two routes independently, and being able to walk at least 40 minutes per day. It's not for everyone – it's a lot of work to look after a dog, take care of them, groom them, keep them healthy, etc.

Some examples of what guide dogs do:

- Stopping at every curb and waiting until it's safe to cross the street
- Navigating around obstacles
- Remembering routes to shops and other places – Mary talked about a trip to London where her guide dog navigated the city perfectly after being shown the route just once
- Finding poo bins, bus stops, etc.

The person does not legally own the guide dog, even though they're called a guide dog owner – Guide Dogs (the charity) owns the dog and handles food, vet appointments, etc.

They also have a breeding programme, volunteer fostering and training for guide dog puppies, etc. Smithy is named after David Smith, who was a puppy walker for many years.

Fundraising is very important – thankfully there are lots of volunteers who help, and the public is very generous.

Ells spoke about assistance dogs – Guide Dogs (the charity) also trains ‘multipurpose dogs’ who can do additional tasks. Ells got qualified to train her own dogs. She also helps other folk ‘owner-train’ their dogs, and she’s qualified to assess puppies.

All training of guide dogs and assistance dogs is through positive reinforcement.

Some examples of what assistance dogs do:

- acting as a ‘grabber hand’ for folk with mobility issues
- taking off socks, shoes, etc
- finding the phone and other objects
- opening and closing doors
- warning of approaching bikes, etc
- the average assistance dog can recognise 200 commands
- medical assistance dogs can smell changes in a person’s body and warn about blood sugar issues, oncoming seizures, low blood pressure, etc

Assistance Dogs UK is not as well known as Guide Dogs, so they’re always struggling for funds, dogs, boarders and volunteers.

Problems faced by folk with guide dogs and assistance dogs:

- people touch working guide dogs and assistance dogs, make a fuss, get between a person and their dog, or don’t control their pet dogs – distraction can be life-threatening (always ask if it’s ok to greet a working dog, and respect the answer)
- people don’t pay attention to their surroundings, and step in front of a blind person and their dog – even on stairs – all of these are very dangerous, and can lead to injuries
- motorised wheelchairs, scooters, bikes, etc don’t give enough space, causing injuries
- pavement parking is a major problem (and is now illegal), forcing people into the street – even without an injury, it can be very frightening and stressful
- some restaurants and shops try to exclude guide dogs or segregate them to a different area, even though this is illegal
- people can be very rude about assistance dogs, asking ‘what’s wrong with you?’ rather than minding their own business.

Q&A

How does the training process work? How long does it take? (for both dogs and people)

- The Guide Dogs website lists lots of jobs across the UK. For example it takes three years to train as a mobility instructor, starting as an apprentice.
- Guide dog puppies spend just over a year with puppy raisers, who do basic training, teach them to stop at curbs, etc.
- The process of matching is very important, to ensure the right dog goes with the right person – for example, Mary is very active, has 11 grandchildren and does a lot of public events, so her dog needs to be robust and able to go for long walks, and good with children and the general public.

- The matching process includes a telephone interview and home visit, then a visit with the dog, a weekend together, residential training for 10 days with other guide dogs, and six weeks intensively learning routes. After that, folk from Guide Dogs check in every two years to sort out any problems, and they are always in call.

Is there anything we can do to be helpful (and not patronising)?

- Sometimes it's very difficult to get across busy roads where there are no lights – if you see a person with a guide dog or a long cane in this situation, ask 'can I help you?' – if they say yes, walk in front of them so they can hold your elbow, and let them control your speed.
- If you're going through a door in front of a blind person, tell them which side the door opens, and hold it for them.
- Pay attention to your surroundings, and avoid getting in people's way.
- Don't ask what someone's assistance dog does (that's a personal medical matter).
- Don't make assumptions about where people should be, based on a disability – they have as much right to be in a space as everyone else.

Date of next meeting: Thursday 29 August, 4:00-5:00pm

please note, no meeting in July

Also: Meeting after next (26 September) to be in-person – venue and details TBC.