Allergies and dogs: How to manage the risk

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. This document is for general information only. Further advice should be sought from an appropriate medical practitioner.

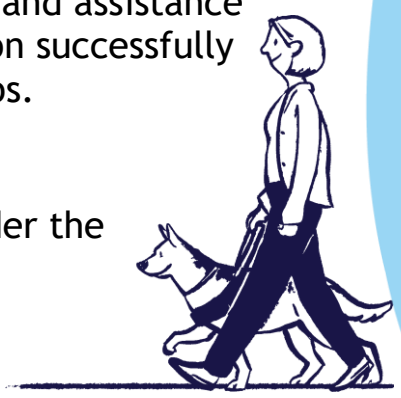
What the law says

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

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



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needs of disabled people, including guide or other assistance dog owners, and make any necessary reasonable adjustments prior to those customers accessing your service.

What is an allergic reaction?

This is what happens when a person's immune system has become over sensitised and reacts inappropriately to what is normally a harmless substance (an allergen).

An allergic reaction may appear as asthma, anaphylaxis (severe whole-body reaction involving narrowing of airways), stuffy or dripping nose, allergic conjunctivitis (red, watery, itchy eyes), hives, or eczema.

The fear of dogs and allergies can be confused as one issue. The fear of dogs can sometimes produce an emotional or psychological reaction which may be confused as an allergic reaction e.g. panic attack.

Allergens in the environment

We are constantly exposed to a huge range of potential allergens in all sorts of environments.

Some of the most common types of allergen include:

- Food e.g. nuts, eggs, fish, dairy
- Pollen
- Dust mites
- Dog and cat allergens (transferred from clothing of pet owners)
- Fragrances – includes deodorant, perfume, shampoo
- Insect bites and stings
- Cleaning products
- Cosmetics
- Latex

This list is not exhaustive.

There are many things we can do to minimise the risks of exposures to allergens, but this must be balanced with the rights of the non-allergic individual. For example, up to 40% of children

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suffer from hay fever, but it would be unreasonable to expect
schools to remove their grass and trees because of this.

Allergic reactions to dogs

In the UK, it is estimated that up to 8% of adults may be allergic to dogs. This is a small group compared to the estimated 39% who are allergic to pollen, 36% to dust mites and 18% to cats.

Dog allergens are already present in many public places e.g. offices, hotels, hospitals, schools, cinemas and pubs have been found to contain dog allergens, making it near impossible for people with allergies to completely avoid exposure. Some of these places, despite not having any animals in them, have been found to contain significant levels of cat or dog allergens, presumably transferred from the clothing of domestic pet owners.

So, it's likely that people who experience allergic reactions to dogs or cats are exposed to these allergens on a regular basis in everyday life.

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 business welcomes guide and other assistance dogs.
- If a person is identified as having an allergy to dogs, then employers and service providers should take reasonable steps to ensure that person has minimal or no contact with dogs; reasonable steps are unlikely to include banning all assistance dogs.

What can be done to reduce risk of allergic reactions to dogs?

If you are concerned about the presence of a guide dog on your premises, there are many ways to minimise the levels of

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exposure to dog allergens:

- Advise individuals with dog allergies to avoid all physical contact with the dog.
- Highlight the importance of good hygiene after interacting with the dog e.g. washing hands immediately after touching the dog or its toy or bedding.
- Create clear guidelines on the best way to interact with the dog (avoid people feeding the dog and allowing the dog to lick or jump up).
- Make sure floors, especially carpeted areas, are cleaned regularly and thoroughly.
- People with suspected dog allergies should seek advice from their GP as it will be beneficial to get a clear diagnosis.
- Identifying individuals with dog allergies will help when planning the routine of the guide dog.
- It may be advisable to restrict the dog's access to certain areas where there is a confined space or an activity involving contact with others. The dog may be kept in a suitable room nearby with a member of staff and sighted assistance provided. This should be discussed and agreed with the guide dog owner.
- Air cleansing products are available to buy – these may reduce the quantity of dog allergens in the air.

Selecting the areas accessible to the dog

- Carefully select the location where dog bedding and toys will be kept.
- Make sure dog toys are only made of hard material and washed daily in hot soapy water.
- Avoid soft bedding for the dog – the ideal solution is a plastic bed which is easy to wash.

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- An appropriate toileting area should be identified which is far removed from the public or other employees' environment.

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**

Further Information

Visit our Useful Resources Document.

If you require any further information, please email **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**

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

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