

Equality and Diversity Toolbox Talk ED009/2026: Assistance/Service Dogs

This toolbox talk relates specifically to Assistance Dogs and Emotional Support Animals in healthcare premises.

The purpose of this document is to raise awareness of our legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 as well as local infection prevention and control. It represents our commitment to an inclusive and supportive environment and describes how to meet our legal obligations.

The use of animals in care setting is widely accepted. Assistance dogs are an aid to provide additional support or assistance to a help people with blindness, hearing difficulties, physical mobility problems, medical conditions, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other disabilities. They help disabled people carry out a variety of practical day-to-day activities and enable them to retain their independence and confidence.

Diseases can be acquired from service animals. However, the psychological as well as physical benefits of having them leads to improved patient experience and outcomes and, by taking reasonable care, infection risks can be mitigated.

It is important that a safe environment is provided for all staff, patients and visitors.

Infection control and patient safety remain paramount.

Animals in Care Settings

The NSS Health Protection Scotland guidance on [Animals in Care Settings](#):

[Infection Prevention and Control Guidance](#) sets out actions for any healthcare settings when considering bringing animals into an environment.

The Royal College of Nursing published a clear guideline "[Working with Dogs in Health Care Settings](#)" on all reasonable safeguards that should be put in place to protect patients, visitors and staff.

Terminology:

Assistance Dog – a dog that has been trained to assist a person with a specific disability and accredited by a member organisation of Assistance Dogs (UK) or the International Guide Dog Federation.

Assistance Dogs are not pets. They:

- Are highly trained
- Will not wander freely
- Sit or lie quietly on the floor next to its owner
- Trained to go to the toilet on command, and so are unlikely to foul in a public place

Assistance dog owners received full training on how to manage their animal.

Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) – an animal not defined in the Equality Act 2010 and therefore do not have the same protected status. It may be a reasonable adjustment to give access to a person's ESA. However, this depends on the specific circumstances and requires the application of 'good judgement' in each case in a given setting.

For further advice or if unsure, please contact Equality and Diversity for support and advice at:

gram.equalitydiversity@nhs.scot

How can you recognise an assistance dog?

Assistance dogs may be recognised by their harness or identifying coat they wear – which are usually brightly coloured, carry appropriate lettering to identify it as an assistance dog or service animal.

Some assistance dog users carry an ID book* giving information about the assistance dog and the relevant training organisation.

*It is not a legal requirement to have an ID book. There is no official registration or certification, so there is no legal 'proof' that can be asked. The assistance dog users should not be refused service or entry if they do not have an ID book.

If staff have any queries, please approach the dog owner/handler in a respectful, sensitive and unchallenging manner. The owner may get distressed, upset or feel unwelcome. Remember, Assistance Dog owners are protected from disability discrimination from the Equality Act 2010.

What are our legal obligations?

The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as 'a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'.

It is unlawful to directly or indirectly discriminate against a disabled person. Refusing a disabled person with an assistance dog to enter a premises or

access service is direct discrimination and/or discrimination arising from disability.

The Equality Act 2010 requires service provider to make 'reasonable adjustments' in order that disabled people can access our premises and services.

Assistance Dogs and the Equality Act 2010
<https://www.assistedogs.org.uk/information-hub/what-is-an-assistance-dog/>

Key points to consider:

1. To minimise restrictions of access for assistance dog and their owners in healthcare premises
 - a. Areas/services who allow animals in their department complete risk assessment and contact relevant stakeholders (e.g. IPC, Palliative Care Team) for input into the document
 - b. Assistance dogs will be generally permitted access in healthcare premises, with the exception of some high risk areas*.
 - c. Any areas where the assistance dog has restricted access must be clearly and sensitively discussed with the dog owner/handler
 - d. For further advice on IPC, please contact
gram.infectioncontrol@nhs.scot

***High risk areas** may include:

- High Dependency Wards
- Intensive Care Units
- Operating Theatres
- Day Surgery Units
- Haematology Wards
- Oncology Wards
- Transplant Units
- Neonatal unit
- Renal dialysis unit
- Xray/CT/MRI

Please check with the Person in Charge which include managers, senior charge nurses and nursing staff.

2. To minimise distress to the owner/handler, the dog, staff and other patients/visitors
 - a. Staff should politely and respectfully approach the dog handler if they have any queries. This is to understand the person's individual needs and the role the assistance dogs plays in meeting those needs.
 - b. Any issues or questions raised by staff and other patients/visitors must be sensitively framed and handled.
 - c. Alternative arrangements should be offered if necessary, such as offering to keep the dog in an office or other room; with a nominated person being responsible for regularly checking the dog/offer water or other assistance.
3. Minimise the separation time of assistance dog and owner
 - a. In order to minimise the separation time, have a polite and respectful conversation with the owner/handler.
 - b. Staff are not expected to care for the assistance dogs. The dog should not be left alone with anyone other than their owner however, in some exceptional circumstances, ask the owner what you can do for the dog and what the owner needs.
4. To prevent transmission of disease from the assistance dogs to patients and the measures should be taken:
 - a. Staff, patients and visitors must follow hand washing and infection control procedures at all time.
 - b. Areas where assistance dogs have visited should be cleaned thoroughly in line with local cleaning protocols/schedule.

- c. Any accidental fouling must be cleaned as per existing protocols.

References

EHRC, 2024. Guidance on Assistance dogs: A guide for businesses and service providers.
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/assistance-dogs-guide-businesses-and-service-providers>

NSS Health Protection Scotland, 2019. Animals in Care Settings: Infection Prevention and Control Guidelines
<https://www.nss.nhs.scot/media/5950/animals-in-healthcare.pdf>

Other resources

Assistance Dogs UK. Welcoming Customers with Assistance Dogs
<https://www.assistedogs.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/11/ADUK-Quick-Guide-to-Welcoming-Customers-with-Assistance-Dogs-1.pdf>

Royal College of Nursing. Working with Dogs in Health Care Setting
<https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-working-with-dogs-in-health-care-settings-uk-pub-011-943>

For more information, please contact:
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