

BIAZA Advice Regarding Admittance of Assistance Dogs to Zoos and Aquariums

Introduction

Making the wonders of nature accessible to a wider audience is at the heart of what we do and is a key part of the BIAZA five-year strategy. As such, the benefits of extending the accessibility of a site through the admittance of assistance dogs should be carefully balanced against any inherent risks, on a site-by-site basis.

What is an assistance dog?

Assistance dogs are trained to support disabled people and people with medical conditions in a variety of ways. (Note, for members in Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man, please refer to the [DDA 1995](#) and [Isle of Man Equality Act 2017](#)).

The Equality Act 2010, ([EA2012 section 173](#)) lays out that in relation to protecting the rights of disabled people accessing private hire transport, an Assistance dog means

- (a) a dog which has been trained to guide a blind person;
- (b) a dog which has been trained to assist a deaf person;
- (c) a dog which has been trained by a prescribed charity to assist a disabled person who has a disability that consists of epilepsy or otherwise affects the person's mobility, manual dexterity, physical coordination or ability to lift, carry or otherwise move everyday objects;
- (d) a dog of a prescribed category which has been trained to assist a disabled person who has a disability (other than one falling within paragraph (c)) of a prescribed kind.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission states that assistance dogs:

- are highly trained
- will not wander freely around the premises
- will sit or lie quietly on the floor next to its owner and are trained to go to the toilet on command and so are unlikely to foul in a public place
- Most are instantly recognisable by the harness or identifying dog jacket they wear.

There is no current UK or Irish legislation which specifically excludes the entry of assistance dogs into licensed zoos or aquariums, and therefore this issue is at the discretion of individual collections. Owners of assistance dogs have important rights under the [Equality Act 2010 \(EA\)](#) and individual site policies should therefore be evidence-based and clearly documented and communicated to visitors. Those sites which are Balai-approved must ensure that their policies are also in line with [EC Directive 92/65 \(the Balai Directive\)](#).

Key areas of concern for zoo operators are:

- Biosecurity: the potential risk of infectious diseases carried by assistance dogs;
- Animal behaviour and welfare: the potential for dogs to cause stress or distress to zoo or aquarium animals, or stress caused to the dog by being in the presence of zoo animals.

Any animal health or welfare concerns should be addressed through careful risk assessment, and individual site policies on assistance dog admittance should be set and made easily available to visitors both on zoo and aquarium websites, at the point of ticket purchase and at site entrances. Zoo operators may feel able to sufficiently mitigate these risks to the extent they can allow entry to assistance dogs to all or parts of their sites, or they may feel unable to at any given time.

Development of a Site-Specific Policy

Each site's policy should be based on risk assessments, considering site layout and zoo species (or individual animals) of particular concern. It should be developed with input from animal keeping and veterinary staff and should identify steps to mitigate any perceived risks. One option could be to include a 'real situation' test using an assistance dog – see below point regarding working with assistance dog organisations as appropriate.

Points to consider might include the following:

Biosecurity

All biosecurity information and policies should be clearly and easily available to visitors in advance of attending the site.

- Owners or handlers could be required to sign a declaration prior to entry to state that the dog:

- o Is currently enrolled on a standard canine vaccination program as advised by their vet and are up to date with all doses (this could include asking for an up-to-date vaccine card/proof of inoculations, evidence of flea and worm treatment/parasite treatment if desired);

- o has not shown any signs of disease including vomiting or diarrhea in the last 24 hours.

- All faeces must be immediately cleaned up and disposed of appropriately, and if appropriate, a plan for any accidents/spills discussed with the visitor upon entry or in advance.
- Dogs should not be permitted to enter walkthrough exhibits. Where possible, at the visitor's request, arrangements could be made for a member of staff to hold the dog outside the enclosure to allow the visitor to spend time in the walkthrough, but protocol must be in place to mitigate the disability and absence of the dog for the visitor in this scenario.
- Dogs should not be permitted to have contact with zoo animals directly or through fences or barriers. Any zoo animals which may be moved around site using leads or harnesses and their potential to come into contact with assistance dogs (and the implications of this depending on the zoo animal) should be taken into consideration as part of the risk assessment.

Behaviour

- All dogs should be kept under the close control of a responsible handler.

- Dogs should not be permitted at zoo animal handling sessions, displays or other situations where the dog would be in close proximity to zoo animals which are outside of a secure enclosure where the presence of the dog may distress zoo animals or affect their behaviour.
- It may be necessary to prevent entry into certain animal houses or buildings on site, to prevent stress for any especially sensitive zoo animals. It should be made clear to visitors in advance exactly where dogs are and are not allowed.
- For guest experiences it is recommended to require advance notice that an assistance dog will be attending, and that zoos should assess all experiences to determine whether assistance dogs would be allowed, with this information made clear to all in advance of booking.
- Dogs which start barking or growling should be removed to an area where no zoo animals are present until the animal stops vocalising. Note - some assistance dogs may do a "Woof" (not bark uncontrollably) to alert to their owners that they are about to collapse or even to get help – there should be a clear distinction in this vocalisation.
- If the dog is obviously causing distress to any zoo animals it should be removed from the area immediately. Zoos/aquariums have the right to ask assistance dogs to leave if they are causing disruption or distress.

BIAZA recommends each collection implements and communicates clear policies regarding the admittance of assistance dogs and that these are regularly reviewed.

Points of note

- In the UK there is no assistance dog register, so it is not possible to register a dog as an assistance dog, regardless of where it has been trained.
- Assistance dog owners are not required by law to carry identification.
- Most assistance dogs are instantly recognisable by a harness or jacket. However, the law does not require the dog to wear a harness or jacket to identify it as an assistance dog. Assistance dogs come in a variety of breeds, colours and sizes.
- It may be advisable to make staff/volunteers aware either upon visitor arrival or, if possible, in advance when there is an assistance dog on site.
- It is not a legal requirement for Assistance Dog users to provide ID. Some, but not all, assistance dog users will carry an ID book giving information about the assistance dog and the training organisation together with other useful information. Assistance dog users should not be refused a service simply because they do not possess an ID book.
- In the UK the lack of clarity about what legally constitutes an assistance dog makes it hard to define what standards of training must be met. Assistance dogs can be owner trained and the owner selects their own dog to fit their own requirements – therefore, zoo operators cannot request evidence of accredited training and should take this into consideration when conducting a site risk assessment.
- Organisations should never request ID or evidence of disability, and it should be recognised that not all disabilities are visible. It is possible to require evidence that an assistance dog is necessary to assist the visitor. This requirement should be clearly stated in advance of the visit – examples include a blue badge or letter on headed paper from a recognised health professional.

- It is worthwhile ensuring all staff, volunteers etc are clear on the rules regarding assistance dogs on your site, to help avoid potential confusion.
- If you allow assistance dogs on site only in specific areas, please note you cannot remove the handler from the dog unless you are putting a protocol in place to mitigate the disability. In the same way you would not remove crutches from a person that could not walk and for the purpose of the disability act an assistance dog is a tool to mitigate a disability.
- If you are a site which allows assistance dogs entry, you could offer organisations the opportunity to train their puppies in this environment as part of their socialisation training. Organisation specific dogs have full health checks and hold full preventative health care cover for their animals. Many assistance dog organisations would love the opportunity to work with you and can even help to train staff on what assistance dogs do and how to handle them in emergency situations.
- It may be worth your organisation considering the use of apps to help explain and develop your site accessibility, such as the 'Open Doors' or 'WelcomeMe' apps. As mentioned, many assistance dog charities will happily assist you with additional advice or educational resources if needed.
- Safari parks and drive through exhibits – for some collections there will be a specific issue of dogs in vehicles travelling through enclosures. If, based on a risk assessment, dogs are not allowed in drive through exhibits, some assistance dog charities have advised that *as a rule, most assistance dogs would not cope well with being placed in a kennel alone*, so this needs to be factored in when considering alternatives and reasonable adjustments.
- Zoo operators are within their rights to ask for proof of 3rd Party Public Liability insurance for a dog (zoos and aquariums will automatically assume liability once accepting a visitor into your establishment and by default that would then pass the liability of that dog onto you too). You may also choose to check for any evidence of training - note it would be the dogs' credentials being challenged and not the owner.
- If allowing assistance dogs on your site, it is also worthwhile having clearly and easily available published information of what is expected of an assistance dog whilst on the premises; this could include basic behavioural requirements of what is accepted and what is not (such as not allowing dogs to ride on scooters or be carried in trollies etc).

Emotional support animals

- Emotional support animals (i.e. animals that provide emotional and psychological support to their owners whose health conditions don't fit into the prescribed disability category) are excluded from the definition. Currently, emotional support animals [do not have legal recognition](#) in the way that assistance dogs do in the UK. There is no register for emotional support or assistance dogs in the UK, so it is not possible to register, validate or get an ID booklet for an emotional support dog. This means that service providers [are not required](#) to make reasonable adjustments for

emotional support animals, or even to allow them access to premises. Access for these animals can be considered on the same basis as assistance dogs.

- Assistance animals [beyond dogs](#) – there have been a couple of example cases of requests being made for an assistance animal other than a dog to enter public services such as supermarkets. Guidance in this area is unclear, and reasonable adjustments for the visitor as outlined above should still be incorporated in the meantime. It may be worth considering this in your site risk assessment and biosecurity policy.

Refusal of Entry

Assistance dogs can only be excluded when doing so is reasonable/in exceptional circumstances – which may be the case depending on your site risk assessment for biosecurity reasons, or reasons connected to animal welfare. To avoid conflict, it is advisable to outline the welfare reasons (including potential stress to their dog), clearly outline the reasonable adjustments you can offer instead, as explained below, and be positive and helpful to any visitors you do have to refuse entry to.

A disability is defined by the Equality Act 2010 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 for a service provider to discriminate against a disabled person in the following ways:

- Failure to make reasonable adjustments: where a physical feature, provision or practice puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage, the service provider has a duty to take reasonable steps to avoid that disadvantage where possible and offer reasonable adjustments in providing safe and secure accommodation for a dog and support for its handler in the dog’s absence. Some organisations, such as Guide Dogs UK, offer training to staff so they can offer alternatives to visitors unable to bring their assistance dog, such as having a ‘My Sighted Guide’. Training such as this helps demonstrate the organisation is providing staff/volunteers with training to ensure that your policy and procedures in relation to assistance dogs is fully understood and embedded within your organisation. Institutions could also offer other reasonable adjustments, such as free entry for a carer or, as mentioned, a staff member to hold an assistance dog whilst the visitor enters an area the dog is not permitted (see above points regarding mitigation). Assistance dog users should never be charged more to cover the costs of such adjustments.
- Refusing to allow access to people with assistance dogs because other people ‘might’ be allergic to dogs is likely to be unlawful disability discrimination. This is because the Equality Act 2010 states that service providers must make reasonable adjustments to policies for disabled people. This includes amending ‘no dogs’ and ‘no pets’ policies to allow access for assistance dogs. If there is an identifiable person with 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.

If you have completed a risk assessment on your site and deemed all/part of it as inappropriate for assistance dogs, this should be clearly stated and explained on your website/front of house policies, along with detailed information on the reasonable adjustments made to allow access for disabled visitors.

Some of the above information comes from the [Assistance dogs A guide for all businesses](#) document, which also contains additional advice and contact details of relevant organisations if you require further information.