



Western Health
and Social Care Trust

Assistance Dogs Policy

March 2024

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1. Legislative Background

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (as amended by Article 5 of the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and as amended by the Autism Act (NI) 2011)

Since December 1996, the Disability Discrimination Act has made it unlawful for disabled people to be treated less favourably than other people, without justification, in areas such as service provision. Under this Act it is a legal requirement to permit access to Assistance Dogs to public premises and the DDA only recognises very limited circumstances in which there may be 'justification' for treating a disabled person less favourably than other people.

The DDA places a duty on public bodies such as Health and Social Care Trusts to promote disability equality when carrying out their functions. In light of this duty it is even more imperative that we anticipate the needs of disabled people and make reasonable adjustments where necessary.

2. Purpose of the Policy

The Trust is committed to providing services that are accessible and responsive to all sections of the community and as such wishes to provide an appropriate service to Assistance Dog Owners.

The Trust aims to minimise restrictions of access for Assistance Dogs in order to reduce distress to the person, the dog, staff and other service users. Assistance Dogs will be expected to accompany/visit their owner except in those specific situations/circumstances detailed within this policy i.e. where there is a risk of infection, where service users are critically ill or when a service user is required to stay overnight.

All Trust staff have a responsibility to be aware of the Policy and ensure that a service user with an Assistance Dog feels welcome.

3. The Objectives of the Policy

To permit Assistance Dogs in all non-patient areas e.g. administration offices, nurses stations, corridors, clerical areas, waiting rooms, shops and cafes.

To permit Assistance Dogs in clinical areas unless there is a justifiable reason i.e. if there is a threat of endangering the disabled person or others e.g. infection control risk or if other patients have an allergy or phobia of dogs; where a service user is critically ill or when a service user is required to stay overnight. In such cases the best possible alternative will be sought.

4. What is an Assistance Dog?

An Assistance Dog is one which has been trained to assist a person with a specific disability; they can be used by people who have sight or hearing disabilities, or other disabilities, to give people greater independence. Seizure Assistance Dogs and Medical Alert Dogs usually sit next to their owner, and often alert their owner to an impending seizure through changing their position, they act as a bridge to communication and social interaction for children with Autism, reducing high anxiety and keeping them safe.

Assistance dogs are highly trained working dogs: they are not pets! Assistance dogs can be recognised by the harness and coloured jackets that they wear. A jacket will usually display the name of the organisation that trained the dog in question. (Further information is at Appendices)

For the purpose of this policy, an Assistance Dog is a dog that is registered and has been trained by an organisation that is accredited by Assistance Dogs International and the International Guide Dog Federation and/or a recognised charitable organisation working towards accreditation.

Assistance Dogs International and the International Guide Dog Federation are internationally recognised coalition of Assistance Dog organisations that encourage the exchange of ideas and best practice amongst its members. Appendix 1 lists the organisations that are accredited by the Assistance Dog International and the International Guide Dog Federation. Accredited organisations must demonstrate appropriate training standards to ensure the quality of the partnerships established.

It is helpful to think of Assistance Dogs as an essential escort to accompany their owner.

5. Identifying Assistance Dogs

Assistance Dogs are distinguishable from pets in the following ways:

- an Assistance Dog wears a special harness and tag on its collar;
- as part of their training Assistance Dogs are carefully taught how to be well behaved in public places;
- Assistance Dogs will sit or lie quietly on the floor next to their owner;
- Assistance Dogs, as part of their training, develop well established routines for toileting and are encouraged to go to the toilet on command, thereby consolidating established practices and minimising the risk of unexpected accidents.

Assistance Dog owners are taught about dog-hygiene and how to groom their dogs thoroughly to ensure that they pose no health risks to other people. Therefore Assistance Dogs are welcome in most areas of the hospital. This applies to any patient with an Assistance Dog, a visitor who has an Assistance Dog and, if it has been necessary to separate a patient from their Assistance Dog, a visitor bringing the patient's Assistance Dog to visit them.

Due to the standard of care achieved, the Chartered Institution of Environmental Health have granted Assistance Dog owners access to cafes where food is being prepared and consumed.

Information relating to types of Assistance Dogs is included in Appendix 3 (Page 16).

6. Assistance Dog Organisations in Northern Ireland

- Guide Dogs for the Blind Association Northern Ireland.
- Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland.
- Northern Ireland Assistance Dogs.

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People provide dogs to deaf people in Northern Ireland though they do not have a base here.

Refer to Appendices 1 & 2, Pages 14 & 15, for contact details and additional organisations.

7. Responsibilities of Staff

It is the responsibility of staff to ensure that Assistance Dog Users are made to feel welcome within their service area and to be sensitive to the individual's particular needs.

The Trust recognises that some staff may have a phobia of dogs; they should make their line manager aware of this if an Assistance Dog is within their work area.

In circumstances, when it is not possible to allow an assistance dog access, the Trust needs to provide justification for this "less favourable treatment" (DDA NI Order 2006). Staff will be required to provide the contact details of the Manager who the Assistance Dog owner can contact to seek clarification or to challenge the decision. It is important that any refusal can be 'justified' and not just based on an individual's reluctance to accept an Assistance Dog into their area.

The Trust can prevent an Assistance Dog from entering an area on the grounds of Health and Safety by proving:

- they genuinely believe that there is a threat of endangering the disabled person or others e.g. infection control risk;

- the belief is 'reasonable' e.g. it is not appropriate for an Assistance Dog belonging to a service user to stay overnight in the hospital, or if the service user is critically ill;
- the matter cannot be overcome by a 'reasonable adjustment' which the service provider has to consider making e.g. no side rooms or quiet rooms for the patient/visitor to use while the Assistance Dog is present and a patient in the same area has an allergy to or phobia of dogs.

If it is necessary for an Assistance Dog and owner to be separated, the owner will need additional assistance e.g. guiding a blind person, alerting a deaf person to alarms or other audio messages etc. Staff should identify what is needed in discussion with the Assistance Dog owner. This would cover the care and welfare of the dog including where the dog can be safely accommodated. Where possible there should be a dedicated area for dogs to go in such situations, where they are safe and have access to food and water.

Staff should also be aware that in 2019 the Western Trust Infection Prevention and Control Department issued "[Guidelines in relation to Therapy Dogs and pet animals in hospitals and healthcare premises](#)".

If an assistance dog owner is admitted as an emergency and is suffering from shock or is unconscious, it is likely that the dog will also be showing signs of distress. In these circumstances staff may need to contact next of kin or:

Guide Dogs:

Guide Dogs for the Blind Association Northern Ireland

For all other Assistance Dogs:

N.B. Northern Ireland Assistance Dogs have an agreement with Hearing Dogs for Deaf People so they can care for a Hearing Dog too.

For patients from the Republic of Ireland:

Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Refer to Appendices 1 & 2, Pages 14 & 15, for contact details.

8. Points for staff to consider

- Ensure you are familiar with the Trust's policy on Assistance Dogs so that the needs of both the owner and the dog can be met.
- It is helpful to think of Assistance Dogs as an essential escort to accompany their owner.
- Staff should talk to the Assistance Dog owner, who will be able to advise about the welfare of both themselves and the dog. If this is not possible staff should speak to either a relative or friend or, in an emergency, contact the relevant organisation listed in Appendix 2.
- The Assistance Dog will not be permitted to stay overnight, go into specialised areas such as operating theatres, areas of high risk or those areas that pose a potential hazard either to staff/patient/client or the dog.
- For planned in-patient admissions prior arrangements should be made by the owner for the dog's care.
- Staff should be aware that they should not feed Assistance Dogs human food or dog treats without the owner's permission.
- It is the responsibility of the ward sister/charge nurse to implement Infection Prevention and Control cleaning procedures as appropriate.

9. Responsibilities of Assistance Dog Owners

You should ask the owner of the Assistance Dog to report to each department/ward reception area upon arrival. It is important to appreciate that it is not always appropriate for an Assistance Dog to be in service user contact areas, e.g. where there is a risk of infection, where service users are critically ill. It is not appropriate for an Assistance Dog to stay with a service user overnight.

If possible, the owner should be asked for the name of someone who may be able to come and take the dog. If this is not possible staff should check the dog's collar as it sometimes has contact details, see Appendices for Assistance Dogs' Organisations.

It is the owner's responsibility to ensure the Assistance Dog's toileting and feeding requirements are met. Staff are unable to take responsibility for the care of the Assistance Dog except under specific circumstances.

Wards/Departments/Clinics have a responsibility to all their patients and it is important to ensure that other patients have no reasonable objections to an Assistance Dog being within the area.

10. Staff Training and Awareness

The policy will be available on the Trust Staff West site and website. It is the responsibility of all managers/departmental heads to ensure that their staff are made aware of the policy.

Patients can be made aware of the policy by notices, in an accessible written version, at main reception desks. A member of staff should make patients with Assistance Dogs aware of the policy and provide the policy in the chosen format of the individual.

Equality and diversity training programmes and specific disability awareness sessions are undertaken across the Trust and all staff are encouraged to attend. This training provides additional opportunities to ensure that staff are made aware of the policy. The Assistance Dogs Etiquette poster, Appendix 4, is available on request for departmental notice boards etc.

11. Equality and Human Rights

This policy actively contributes to protecting disabled people from discrimination. It ensures that disabled people, who use an Assistance Dog, will be treated fairly as well as with respect and dignity. It also helps to protect their capacity to access Trust services with autonomy and independence.

Equality screening was completed as part of the initial policy development. This assessment suggested that the policy will have an overall positive impact for disabled people who use Assistance Dogs. It did however identify some communication support issues for children, people with different disabilities and people whose first language is not English. Actions have been included in the policy to address these issues.

12. Consultation and Engagement

The original version of the Western Health and Social Care Trust Assistance Dogs Policy was approved in 2013. In 2012/13 the Western Trust used Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's (BHSCT) policy as a basis for its policy. BHSCT had consulted with a range of external agencies including Guide Dogs NI, Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, Northern Ireland Assistance Dogs and Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland.

To ensure that the original Western Trust policy was robust and met the needs of people in the Trust area an Assistance Dogs Working Group was established. This group included members of RNIB and Action for Hearing Loss, as well as Managers from Trust Sensory Support Services. Meetings were held during 2012 and feedback from consultation assessed. The draft of the policy was also shared with the Trust Disability Steering Group and several departments within the Trust, including Infection Control.

The review of the policy took place in late 2018 and was again shared with the groups identified above. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) Assistance Dogs Policy was reviewed for consistency of information.

This 2024 update includes amendments to contact information for some of the groups detailed at the Appendices. An example of a poster, available in laminated A3 size for Trust Departments, is also now included at Appendix 4. The poster was developed by NHSCT who gave all HSC Trusts in NI permission to amend the poster for use within their Trust. The amended policy was again shared with Infection, Protection Control and RNIB and will be reissued within the Trust. To obtain an A3 laminated copy of the poster staff can contact the Trust Equality Team via equality.admin@westerntrust.hscni.net or telephone internal: 233835 or external: 028 8283 5278.

13. Monitoring of the Assistance Dogs Policy

The policy will be monitored through staff and patients'/visitors' comments.

14. Review of the Policy

A review of the Assistance Dogs Policy will be undertaken 3 years from the date below.

15. Alternative Formats

This document can be made available on request on disc, in larger font, audio or Braille and in other languages to meet the needs of those who may not be fluent in English.

Appendix 1

Programmes in the UK recognised by Assistance Dogs International (ADI) and/or International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF):

Recognised by ADI only:

Canine Partners Telephone: 03456580480 Email: info@caninepartners.org.uk Web: www.caninepartners.org	Dog Assistance in Disability (Dog A.I.D.) Telephone: 07749725140 Email: admin@dogaid.org.uk Web: www.dogaid.org.uk
Dogs for Good Telephone: 01295 252600 Email: info@dogsforgood.org Web: www.dogsforgood.org	Hearing Dogs for Deaf People Telephone: 01844 348100 (Voice and Minicom) Text relay: 18001 018443 481000 E-mail: info@hearingdogs.org.uk Web: www.hearingdogs.org.uk
Medical Detection Dogs Telephone: 01296 655888 E-mail: operations@medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk Web: https://www.medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk	Support Dogs Telephone: 0114 2617800 E-mail: info@support-dogs.org.uk Web: www.supportdogs.org.uk

Recognised by the IGDF only:

Guide Dogs for the Blind Association Northern Ireland Telephone: 0800 781 1444 E-mail: information@guidedogs.org.uk Web: https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/ or https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/guide-dogs-northern-ireland/
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Recognised by ADI and IGDF:

The Seeing Dogs Alliance Telephone: 01634 572125 E-mail: info@seeingdogs.org.uk Web: www.seeingdogs.org.uk
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Programmes in the Republic of Ireland recognised by ADI/IGDF:

Recognised by ADI:

Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland Telephone: 00353 21 2357107 Email: info@aadi.ie Web: https://www.autismassistedogsireland.ie/	Irish Dogs for the Disabled Telephone: 00353 21 4316627 Email: info@dogsfordisabled.ie Web: www.dogsfordisabled.ie
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Recognised by both ADI and IGDF:

Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind Telephone: 00353 21 4316627 Web: www.guidedogs.ie	Email: info@guidedogs.ie
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Appendix 2

Additional Contact Details:

Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland Telephone: 028 777 68761 Mobile: 07557960599 E-mail: info@adni.org.uk Web: http://www.adni.org.uk/
Dogs for the Disabled Telephone: 021 431 6627 E-mail: info@dogsfordisabled.ie Web: https://dogsfordisabled.ie
Sensory Support Services WHSCT Telephone (Derry): 028 7132 0167 Minicom (Derry): 028 7132 0166 Telephone (Enniskillen): 028 6632 4400 (Voice and Minicom)
Assistance Dogs International Telephone: (858) 366-3991 E-mail: +1 (419) 350-5788 Web: https://assistancedogsinternational.org
International Guide Dog federation Telephone: 0118 354 0405 E-mail: enquiries@igdf.org.uk Web: https://www.igdf.org.uk

Trust Support

Equality Team Telephone: 028 8283 5278 Textphone: 028 8283 5345 E-mail: equality.admin@westerntrust.hscni.net
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Appendix 3

Types of Assistance Dogs

Canine Partners	Assistance Dogs for adults with physical disabilities. They are trained to do many tasks which their owner may find difficult or impossible. <u>Qualified Canine Partners Assistance Dogs wear a purple jacket.</u>
Companion Dogs	Provide therapeutic benefits to individuals. Children or adults with emotional disorders or autism can benefit from the companionship that a dog provides. The dogs have been shown to assist individuals to gain the confidence to engage more in society and can help to maximise the safety of the disabled child or adult.
Dogs for the Disabled (DfD)	Trained to assist a person who uses a wheelchair or has limited mobility in a range of tasks which their owner may find difficult or impossible. Also includes Assistance Dogs for children affected by Autism. <u>Qualified Dogs for the Disabled Assistance Dogs wear a fluorescent yellow jacket. Autism Assistance Dogs wear a blue harness.</u>
Guide Dogs	Assist people who are blind or visually impaired. <u>Qualified guide dogs wear a white harness with a yellow fluorescent handle.</u>
Hearing Dogs for the Deaf	Alert deaf people to important sounds and danger signals in the home, workplace and public buildings. <u>Qualified hearing dogs wear a burgundy jacket.</u>
Medical Detection Dogs	Trained specialist dogs to detect the odour of human disease. <u>Qualified dogs wear a red jacket.</u>
Seizure Assistance Dogs & Medical Alert Dogs	Assist people with certain medical conditions such as epilepsy and diabetes. These dogs alert the person when a medical crisis is coming, giving them time to get to a safe place or take medication. <u>Qualified support dogs wear a blue jacket.</u>
Service Dogs	Trained to assist a person who uses a wheelchair or has limited mobility. They are trained to do many tasks which their owner may find difficult or impossible. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• opening and closing doors;• picking up objects;• assisting with dressing and undressing;• acting as a physical support.
Support Dogs	Assistance Dogs for adults with physical disabilities (client-owned dogs specifically trained to meet their owner's needs).

Appendix 4

Please refer to next page for an example of the Assistance Dog Etiquette poster.

The poster within this document is for information purposes only. It is available, laminated in A3 size for Trust Departments, by contacting the Trust Equality Team via equality.admin@westerntrust.hscni.net or telephone internal: 233835 or external: 028 8283 2378 should be 028 8283 5278.

The poster was developed by NHSCT and is reproduced with their kind permission.



Do you know your Assistance Dog Etiquette?

Assistance Dogs need to concentrate on their job to keep their owner safe. If you break that concentration, you could be putting the dog and its owner in serious danger!

Please respect Assistance Dogs and their owners by following this simple etiquette guide

DO ✓

-  Speak to the owner first, not the dog.
-  Allow the dog to work without distraction.
-  Respect that the dog is working.
-  Allow the dog to rest undisturbed.
-  Let the dog owner know if the dog approaches you as this may be unwanted behaviour that needs correcting.

DO NOT ✗

-  Approach, touch or speak to the dog without the owner's permission as this can be a distraction.
-  Offer the dog food.
-  Allow other pets to interact with the dog.
-  Be offended if the owner does not want to answer questions or says no when you ask to pet the dog – they may be in a hurry to get somewhere.



**If you think a handler needs help,
remember to ask before acting!**

This poster was developed in NHST in collaboration with a service user who is supported by an assistance dog.

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