

Knowledge Exchange, Guide Dog ownership

Thank you to Paul Bush Guide Dog manager for sharing his lived experience of Guide Dog ownership.

Paul has had 4 guide dogs since 1999. His sight began to deteriorate around the age of 12. He was diagnosed with Nystagmus and suffered from night blindness. Paul left school with limited qualifications and started his career in childcare services, going back to college to pursue a career in social work. Paul was reluctant to use mobility aids or have a guide dog initially, but started learning how to use a long cane in his local area gradually building up to using it further afield. He now decides on whether to use his dog or his cane as his mobility aid depending on his plans, for example as a keen football fan he may take a long coach journey to a game and then be in a crowded space so he would choose his cane over his dog.

Question 1 – if you're going to be a guide dog applicant do you need to first have long cane training

No, but preferably. You will need to be able to navigate 3 routes independently and the dog is not suitable for all journeys so being able to use other mobility aid is preferable.

Question 2 – what is the difference between using a long cane and using a guide dog

Cane – you are in contact with the ground, you must really concentrate, keep track of your location and route, easier to use in crowded places as the dog may struggle in this environment for example a football match Paul prefers to use his long cane in this environment. Coach and train travel can also be easier with a long cane especially on long journeys

Dog – smoother, more confidence, walk quicker, get around obstacles quicker. The dog always takes the most direct route.

Question 3 – is there an age limit to guide dog ownership

Conversations start at around the age of 11-12 years old, but this is always dependant on circumstances. An honest conversation with the young person (CYP) and their parent/carer around the responsibilities of guide dog ownership is one of the many phases. Consideration is also given to the education pathway the young person is going to take, for example if they are going away to university is it possible to care for a dog while on campus? If the young person plans on travelling internationally this comes with complications. They can always remain on the waiting list and be reassessed later. Relocation out of area can be supported either by guide dogs in another region or another agency.

Question 4 – what are the day-to-day responsibilities of Guide dog ownership?

Feeding, grooming, walked in all weathers, not out for long period in the heat, up early to feed and toilet. Take the time to bond with the dog, the parent shouldn't lead as this will confuse the dog

Question 5 – what is the eligibility criteria ?

What is the mobility needs of the CYP

The CYP must have a minimum of 3 active routes, this could be the route to the bus stop then the route off the bus to school and then a route around school. This could also involve the route to a family member's house.

The dog must be worked at least 5 days a week ideally for 40-45 minutes per day. If taking the bus the CYP could get off a stop earlier to allow the dog some exercise. Time out of the house can be split into shorter journeys throughout the day.

Is the home a suitable environment for a dog? Is there a safe space to let the dog get fresh air? This doesn't have to be a garden it can be a park away from the home

What is the application process?

Contact Guide Dogs to initiate an initial assessment

Initial assessment involves building a profile of the CYP, the profile will build up a picture of mobility needs, honest conversations around the responsibilities of dog ownership

Work with a Habilitation Officer on learning 3 routes

When the above is met the CYP will be added to the training list which is reviewed, and the applicant is kept up to date

The profile is updated with any changes like education transition, this process is repetitive but helps build a profile for each pupil. The profile can be used to assess suitability for dog ownership as well as matching a CYP to a dog

Once the CYP has been assessed as suitable they are added to the ready to train list, this is reviewed every 6 months until a match has been found. Once a year a visit will be made to check whether they can still navigate 3 routes independently. If the CYP is having health issues they can be suspended from the list until it is suitable to rejoin.

The matching process

Each dog goes through 26 weeks of training and a profile is created for each dog

Once a potential match has been found, there will be 2 weeks of intense training for the CYP, once the skills sets have been built up the trainer will begin to take a step back and visits will become less regular. A request can be made for a specific sex or colour of the dog, but the mobility needs of the CYP are more important.

Road crossing, do dogs indent?

No they cross at a safe point, the dog will go to the dropped kerb, and if they are met by an obstacle they will navigate around it and the return to the straightest route. The dog knows to guide to the box at a crossing.

Zebra crossings – the dog will find the crossing and stop at the tactile paving. The dog is the pilot, and the user the navigator, so the dog will wait for commands. Users are encouraged to wear bright clothing. The dog is trained to not cross if there is oncoming traffic, but this is not reliable, so the user still has to be aware of their surroundings.

The dog is trained to go from kerb to kerb, taking the straightest route. The owner is the navigator and will give commands like find the door

What if the family already have a pet dog?

An assessment of the pet will take place, they would be introduced in an unfamiliar setting.

What age is the dog worked until

Age 8 – the dog will be checked more regularly

Age 9 – a conversation around retiring the dog will begin

Age 10 – in depth medical to assess if medically fit and the workload will begin to reduce

Variety of sight loss

The CYP's sight loss is assessed an application

Must have sight loss but some useful vision is acceptable

Is there a limit to how many times you can take the dog on an unfamiliar route?

Yes, but once established can do whatever routes they want

In a busy environment can the dog find a vacant seat?

Some dogs can follow instructions to find a vacant seat

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