

Pic Right: One of the 470 working Guide Dogs in the UK. Should drivers be allowed to say no?

Dial-a-Cab drivers are used to carrying blind passengers and their guide dogs due to the constant stream of work emanating from the Westminster disabled passenger account. While there is no word as to the percentage of blind passengers who use the service or indeed, how many of them have guide dogs, to the best of Call Sign's knowledge - and contrary to the report on London radio station News Direct - no one has ever been refused access to one of our taxis because they have a guide dog with them.

In the April 98 Call Sign, we published an article which showed how many disabled people who were not necessarily blind, still used specially trained "assistance" dogs to help them in their everyday life. Where complaints are made re licensed taxis not taking the passenger's dog, it usually refers to this second group who may not be blind, but where the driver may not realise how necessary the dog is to the passenger. Again, it should be emphasised that very few complaints of this nature are received by Dial-a-Cab.

Discrimination To Be Illegal In Taxis?

However, the Government is being urged by the UK's two leading charities for blind and partially sighted people, to amend new disability legislation and make it illegal for licensed taxis to refuse guide dogs and other assistance dogs which are used by disabled people.

In a new report - Guide Dogs and Access to Taxis - the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (GDBA) and the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) are challenging the Government to swiftly implement section 37 of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) - which will make it illegal for licensed taxis to refuse or demand additional charges for guide dog owners and other disabled people using assistance dogs.

Taxis represent a vital form of transport for visually impaired people. For many, they are easy to use, convenient and accessible. Recent research conducted for the RNIB shows that many older blind and partially sighted people rely significantly upon the services of taxis. One in seven people in a sample of over 500, said that taxis were their most frequently used form of transport. Visually impaired



GUIDE DOGS AND TAXIS - DISCRIMINATION ILLEGAL?

people rely upon taxis for obvious reasons, far more than sighted people who have the option of driving.

GDBA and RNIB are also calling for Section 37 of the DDA to be extended to cover minicabs in addition to licensed taxis. Minicabs also represent a crucial form of transport for the UK's 4760 guide dog owners - especially where licensed taxis are difficult to obtain - although many visually disabled are currently refused access to minicabs due to their guide dog.

Problems For The Blind Using Minicabs

Denise O'Brien, a guide dog owner and mother of three young children from South East London told Call Sign:

"I regularly experience difficulties in getting minicabs to take my guide dog. On one occasion I needed to collect my children from school in Charlton and started phoning for a cab at 3pm. None of the cabs I called would take me because of my guide dog Cassy. In the end, I called nine minicabs from Woolwich, Plumstead and Greenwich. They said they didn't have a driver who would take a guide dog. In the end I had to call the school, ask them to look after the children and then took a bus. I eventually got to the school an hour late. It is just so frustrating. What is the point of being independent with a guide dog if you can't use services that everyone else uses - especially minicabs - which are essential for visually impaired people."

The wife of one Dial-a-Cab driver represents a licensed 10 cab radio co-op in Woolwich. The above seems like an ideal chance to make their move. Call Sign

would like to hear what she has to say on the subject.

National Guide Dog Week

Publication of the report coincided with the launch of National Guide Dog Week. Its theme of 'Open your doors to guide dogs' aimed to raise awareness of the need for guide dog owners and their guide dogs to have the same freedom in accessing services - such as taxis and minicabs, restaurants and pubs, theatres and cinemas, as everyone else.

Geraldine Peacock, GDBA's Chief Executive, commented to Call Sign:

"Working with a guide dog can help give a blind or partially sighted person back their independence. Unfortunately this new found freedom is restricted when people don't welcome guide dogs into taxis and other public places."

Editor's Note:

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) makes it unlawful for people who provide goods, facilities or services to the public, to discriminate against disabled people.

Part 3 implementation of the DDA from 1 October 1999, means that service providers will have to adopt policies, practices and procedures that do not discriminate against disabled people - including guide dog owners. For example, restaurants and shops who do not change an existing 'No Dogs' policy to allow in guide dogs or other assistance dogs, are likely to be acting unlawfully. Legal redress can be pursued by disabled people via County Court proceedings.