

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1744](#)

Main Petitioner: Karen Mercedes Greer

Subject: Psychiatric service dogs in Scotland

Calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to recognise the valuable role psychiatric service dogs can play in helping people recover from trauma and mental ill health, and to fund a pilot programme of accredited psychiatric service dogs in Scotland.

Background

Psychiatric service dogs (PSD) would come under the general umbrella term, 'assistance dogs'. These are dogs which are specially trained to assist people with practical tasks, or to provide support of some kind. They include hearing dogs for the deaf, guide dogs, medical detection dogs and more general therapeutic assistance. [Assistance Dogs UK](#) is a voluntary association of a number of charities training assistance dogs. Their website states that:

'All ADUK member charities have successfully passed an extensive accreditation process that covers all aspects of their training and administration – ensuring they meet the exacting standards set by [Assistance Dogs International](#) (ADI) and the [International Guide Dogs Federation](#) (IGDF).'

The ADI and IGDF are membership organisations linked by their involvement with training and supplying assistance dogs to those who need them.

A psychiatric service dog would be a dog that is specifically trained to support someone with a mental health condition. As the petitioner says, and according to the [Society for Companion Animal Studies](#), a UK-based charity, there is no assistance dog organisation that trains or supplies dogs to specifically support people with mental health conditions in the UK. However, there appears to be a distinction between what would be deemed a 'service' dog and a dog that would be used by someone with a mental health condition.

Service dogs vs Therapy dogs

The University of California, Los Angeles, [UCLA, makes a distinction between 'service' and 'therapy' dogs](#). The former are trained to carry out

specific practical tasks to make the lives of those with a disability easier. They are trained to work with one particular person and their position as a companion is secondary. Therapy dogs are chosen for their temperament and the training is less exacting, and they can work with a range of people. 'Service' dogs do not appear to be used with psychiatric patients, or those with other mental health or behavioural issues.

How are assistance dogs trained?

There appears to be no prescribed training of dogs, nor any legislation about the supply of such dogs. Assistance Dogs UK seeks to create and promote models of best-practice and ensure that people use organisations that are accredited by the ADI and IGDF.

All of the members of Assistance Dogs UK are charities themselves, which established themselves to fulfil a particular need or demand from people with disabilities or other needs. [Dogs for Good](#) have a more general remit than some and their support could cover some aspects of what might be understood as a 'therapy dog' through the [Community Dog scheme](#).

Research on assistance dogs

UCLA <https://www.uclahealth.org/pac/animal-assisted-therapy>

Review of benefits (2002):

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232478105_Benefits_of_assistance_dogs_A_review

Research on the use of assistance dogs with children with autism spectrum disorders: <http://www.researchautism.net/interventions/55/assistance-dogs-and-autism/currentresearch>

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Government has not taken any action on this, and it is not clear that the petitioner is calling for any specific action other than the funding of a pilot project to train and supply such dogs. It appears that the petitioner is primarily raising awareness of the potential for PSDs and that there is no provision or training of dogs currently in the UK. However, as stated above, most funding for assistance dogs is charitable.

Scottish Parliament Action

None. However a number of motions and questions have been put, about assistance dogs, during the current session of Parliament, mainly in relation to issues of people with disabilities accessing taxis, shops and other venues.

UK Parliament Action

The Equality Act and assistance dogs

The key piece of legislation linked to assistance dogs is the Equality Act 2010 (The Act). This sets out the rights of people who are disabled or have a mental impairment. The Equality Act 2010, s173, refers to assistance dogs and defines them as:

- A dog trained to guide a blind person
- A dog trained to assist a deaf person
- A dog 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 co-ordination or ability to lift, carry or otherwise move everyday objects
- A dog of a prescribed category which has been trained to assist a person who has a disability (other than mentioned above) of a prescribed kind.

The Act is about the rights of disabled people, and whether or not they have an assistance dog is incidental. The Act covers the rights of people to access such things as shops, restaurants, taxis etc, with their assistance dog; where dogs would normally be prohibited.

Mental illness and mental impairment

The petitioner is correct that the law makes a distinction between mental health conditions and a mental impairment. A mental impairment, such as congenital deafness or a learning disability is deemed a disability under the Act, whereas a mental health condition does not fall under the definition of 'mental impairment', so is not covered by the Act. This means that someone with a mental illness and using an assistance/therapy dog does not have the same rights as a disabled person using an assistance dog. Mental health conditions are covered by separate [mental health legislation](#), which is made in the Scottish Parliament under devolved powers. Rights associated with the Equality Act are reserved to the UK Parliament

Assistance Dogs UK [submitted evidence](#) to a House of Lords Committee that was considering the [impact of the Act on disabled people in 2015-16](#). The charity highlights some of the issues related to a lack of clarity in the Act regarding the definition of assistance dogs, their training and supply and the consequent abuse and discrimination linked to the lack of clarity in the Act.

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21/08/2019

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