

Mental Health and Dogs

With one in four people in the UK experiencing a mental health problem each year, there is a growing interest in the benefits of dogs for our psychological wellbeing. This issue, we present an overview of the subject and launch a confidential SCAS survey.

Over the past year or so at SCAS, we've seen a huge increase in the number of enquiries specifically asking about mental health 'assistance dogs'. In the UK at the present time, there are no charities that train dogs for people with mental health issues where this is the only disability. Psychiatric Service dogs are trained in some other countries, but not in the UK. (*Assistance Dogs UK*)

Many people get confused with terminology. What is an assistance dog and what is a therapy dog?

Therapy dog is rather a general term and is often used to describe a dog that is used to benefit people in a therapeutic way. This incorporates quite a wide range of potential activities with a wide range of potential people and clients. Some pets take part in visiting programmes, whilst others take part in structured activities as part of a therapeutic programme or practice. Therapy dogs in the UK are not considered to be **assistance dogs** – an assistance dog is trained to perform specific tasks to help a **disabled person** and are provided or trained by one of the charitable organisations registered as members of Assistance Dogs UK.

An assistance dog is permitted to accompany its client, owner, or partner, at most times and in most places, within the United Kingdom in accordance with the Equalities Act 2010. A therapy dog or pet dog does not have these same privileges.

Currently the only organisations that are registered with ADUK and provide recognised assistance dogs are:

- Canine Partners
- Dog A.I.D
- Dogs for the Disabled
- Hearing Dogs for Deaf People
- Support Dogs
- Guide Dogs
- Medical Detection Dogs

A recognised assistance dog will undergo extensive and specialised training to perform very specific tasks. In most cases a dog is selected, trained and managed by the organisation in very close collaboration with the client so that the person-dog team are perfectly matched and trained together.

The range of conditions within mental health is massively broad and even within one type of mental health condition the spectrum of severity can vary between the short-term and low impact to a chronic condition that has a significant



effect on a person's entire life. Whilst some people with mental health conditions are recognised as disabled, many are not.

There can be no denial that for many people with mental health conditions the company of their pet dog can be a huge enabler in terms of going about their daily lives. We've heard from many people that feel they could not leave the house if it were not for the company of their dog.

It is sometimes less clear what the specific tasks are that a dog might perform for a particular person or disabling mental health condition. For many people it is the emotional support that the dog provides that is of most help to them and sadly, in most cases, providing emotional support is not considered to be a specific task. We can all benefit from the emotional support of our dogs.

In some countries there are defined '**emotional support dogs**'. ESDs are not usually afforded the same access rights of an assistance dog but do sometimes have additional rights over other pet dogs including some housing priorities and even being able to fly on some airlines. Emotional support dogs are not yet recognised in the UK to have these rights.

There have, over the years, been a number of organisations or projects offering 'assistance jackets' or 'access certificates' for dogs without being registered with AD(UK). Some of these organisations have the best intentions, sometimes the motive is purely financial. Sadly, often in desperation, people will sign up to these operations with the false impression that their dog will have the legal right to be given access to public places with their dog, which is not the case.

With service providers not always aware of the rules and regulations, some do get away with presenting their dog as an assistance dog and claiming a right of access, but this does carry the risk of damage for future legitimate developments in provision especially when dogs may not be appropriately trained or obedient. A rise in cases of illegitimate service dogs in the US led to many legitimate service dog programmes being closed down when government support and funding was withdrawn.

In contrast, the PAWS project, PADSUK and Veterans with

Dogs are excellent examples of current UK projects that are working hard in an appropriate way and with the appropriate organisations to make a difference to people with mental health conditions by providing programmes for them to take part in with their dogs. Supporting the work of these projects will pave the way for further change.

One thing that everyone can do to help improve access for our dogs is to promote and demonstrate responsible dog ownership. If you are looking for dog-friendly public places a first stop might be www.dogfriendly.co.uk, who list over 26,000 venues in the UK that will allow access to dogs.

SCAS wants to help and we are talking with other organisations about improving the information that is available relating to this matter and to explore the possibilities, challenges, obstacles and potential for an improved provision for those with mental health conditions and their dogs.

We would like to hear from you if you have a mental health condition and have thoughts about how your dog does and could help you to cope when going about your daily life. This confidential survey is also available for easy submission on our website at: www.scas.org.uk/mhdogs – your input is very welcome.

SCAS Survey: Dogs and Mental Health

How would you describe your mental health condition? e.g. Depression for 10 years, Bi-Polar, Dementia, etc.

Are you registered disabled as a result of ONLY your mental health condition?

☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ Registered disabled for physical condition

If not registered disabled, would you be considered disabled under the Equalities Act 2010 as a result of ONLY your mental health condition?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you currently own a pet dog? What breed and age is he/she?

How would you describe how your dog provides support for you?

Does your dog have a Kennel Club Good Citizen Award?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If no, have you heard of the Kennel Club Good Citizen Scheme?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Has your dog been trained to do specific tasks to help your daily life?

What sort of tasks would you like your dog to be trained to do to help your daily life?

Have you ever tried to take your dog into a public space without knowing whether it is allowed there?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you seek out dog-friendly venues when you are looking for places to visit?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you ever been challenged when in a public space with your dog? What happened?

Would you ever consider disguising your dog as an assistance dog to gain access to public spaces?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Where have you sought information about access rights for your dog? Is there enough information? What would you like to know?

Please feel free to extend your answers onto another sheet. Thank you