

I read a story in the KM a couple of weeks ago about a blind lady who had been barred from entering a cafe because she had a guide dog. Like so many people who commented on the story, I was truly shocked. Having a guide dog is not the same as owning a dog. Assistance dogs allow a blind or partially sighted person to continue to be a part of the local community, and they do a brilliant job.

I met a group of people last week who train guide dog puppies, the next generation of assistance dogs. OK they were young pups who were excited about the photographer and all the attention they were getting but they were well behaved under the circumstances. The trainers do their best to prepare them for their future world of "work" but it is no walk in the park for either the eventual owner or the dog itself.

Think of the street clutter that we sighted people navigate around without a fuss. Or the fact that we can look both ways and spot the silent electric car coming along the road. These are all challenges that we do not automatically think about unless we are personally affected or have a close friend or member of the family suffering from the condition. I've signed up to a number of national and local campaigns in support of the Guide Dogs charity. Plus I was proud to actively work on the Bill currently progressing through Parliament which will protect assistance dogs from the increasing number of attacks from other dogs.

These dogs are amazing. They are trained to the highest level and provide a real sense of reassurance to their owners. So much progress has been made to end discrimination against those with disabilities but it is clear that more needs to be done, perhaps in particular educating those who misunderstand the purpose and need for well trained, well behaved but ultimately essential guide dogs.