

Campaign launched to give assistance dogs extra support on rail network

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Passengers who are supported by assistance dogs are set for an easier ride on train journeys, as rail companies launch a campaign to help raise awareness.

The scheme will see thousands of people with physical disabilities or mental health problems provided with a laminated card, which they can use as an aid to explain why their assistance dog needs to sit under an unoccupied seat. Assistance dog owners can book a free extra seat in advance for their dog to lie under, and it is hoped that the cards will provide particularly helpful on services where it is unable to book a seat in advance.

Vicky Worthington, development manager with [Assistance Dogs UK](#), said: “More than 7000 people rely on a highly trained assistance dog from one of our member charities alone. They enjoy the greater independence that such dogs bring, including when traveling.

“We’re delighted to support this scheme and very pleased to see that rail companies are making it easier for disabled people and people with medical conditions to travel while educating the public about how these wonderful animals change - and even save - lives.”

Most assistance dogs are trained by well-known charities registered with Assistance Dogs UK, and many wear different, vibrantly coloured harnesses, slip leads or jackets, depending on which charity trained them – and ID tags. However, this is not a legal requirement. Despite their impeccable behaviour, many people are still nervous around dogs, or allergic to them.

Because of this, the cards may also act as a helpful note to anyone who is concerned about the presence of a dog (who may not be immediately obvious).

Jacqueline Starr, chief executive officer of the [Rail Delivery Group](#), said: “We’ve all seen guide dogs when they are out and about supporting their visually-impaired owners. It’s less well-known that many of our other four-legged friends have their own skills and character quirks that help people with a range of support needs. These include people with physical disabilities and those with autism, epilepsy or other complex health conditions.

“Many of these conditions are not visible so we want to make life easier for the people whose daily lives they affect. Being able to place the card on the seat next to them – together with the other ID the dogs carry – should achieve that on their train journeys. It will also help fellow passengers adjust to the sight of assistance dogs doing their job while apparently relaxing under a spare seat.”

Fiona Bower has used an assistance dog – Mr Wiz – for six years. She travels on [Southern](#) and [Thameslink](#) and is a member of Govia Thameslink’s voluntary panel of customers who represent people with a range of disabilities and access needs and advise on best practice. She has been a wheelchair user because of her multiple sclerosis for 12 years and worked with the Rail Delivery Group and Govia Thameslink in developing the scheme.

Fiona said: “Mr Wiz, my registered assistance dog, and I welcome this new initiative which will be of tremendous benefit to all those passengers who, like me, depend on a specially trained dog to care for them.”