

Guide Dogs/Assist Dogs, the challenges for Society and Kennel Clubs

Sean Delmar, Ireland

The President of the Irish Kennel Club (IKC), Sean Delmar, delivered a presentation about challenges for society and kennel clubs in relation to Guide Dogs and Assistant Dogs in Ireland. Brief history of guide dogs for the blind, statistics and the process of selection and training were described.

The weakest links in the guide dogs programme were identified, including lack of pedigree details for more than 3 generations, absence of record of success and failure, as well as lack of education and training of volunteers and absence of a unified training programme.

Assistant Dogs are helping people with Autism, disabled, act as hearing aid and epilepsy seizure alert. The sector has seen significant growth in the last 15 years. Due to demographic changes, enlargement of the sector, increase of demand and awareness, the need for dog companions is also getting bigger. The most important issues currently are definitions, transparency, research, accreditation, lack of standards of competency and regulation for assistant dogs, as well as welfare of clients and animals. Importance of definitions (AAA, AAI, PEATA, etc.) has been emphasised as applying the correct definition has legal repercussions in terms of transport, housing and other social provisions.

In terms of dog selection, accreditation and regulation, there is no standardised test and no control in the market. The UK Code of Practice for AAA only tackles self-accreditation and ethics, rather than provides regulation. Some efforts to regulate the market are made on the European level by the European Working Party.

Unfortunately, some look only for financial opportunities. There are commercial enterprises offering to train dogs for any purpose for a flat fee.

IKC's role is to become a centre of competence in the field and also to ensure that charities providing guide dogs and assistant dogs speak in one voice through a designated working group.

The importance of dog welfare cannot be underestimated, stress management being among other vital components.