

University of
Chester

Guide dog user attitudes towards the implementation of non-discriminative legislation in EU Member States 2014

Centre for Labour Market Development



European Guide
Dog Federation



Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	i
Executive Summary	1
Methodology	2
Research Strategy.....	3
Data Collection	3
Survey	3
Focus Group.....	4
Pilot Study	4
Limitations	4
Survey Response Rate.....	5
Discussion	6
Accessibility	7
Participation.....	8
Equality.....	9
Employment.....	11
Education and Training.....	12
Social Protection.....	13
Health	14
Key Findings	15
Suggestions for further research	15

Executive Summary

The European Guide Dog Federation, (EGDF) is a European level disability umbrella organisation of member organisations representing guide dog users and guide dog service providers.

The European Guide Dog Federation mission statement states that it “is dedicated to influencing laws, policies and attitudes and to ensuring excellent facilities and access for guide dog users.

This report into guide dog user attitudes towards the implementation of non-discriminative legislation in European Union (EU) seeks to explore perceptions of;

- Practice
- Attitudes (Government, service provider, and Public)
- Legislation

Data was collected through an online questionnaire and a focus group.

Methodology

The methods used in this report consisted of;

1. An online questionnaire survey aimed at completion by guide dog users in EU Member States
2. A focus group with EGDF board members and partners

The survey was based on the priority areas of the European Disability Strategy (EDS) 2010-2020:

- Accessibility
- Participation
- Equality
- Employment
- Education & Training
- Social Protection
- Health

The priority areas of the EDS were selected as a framework for enquiry as the EGDF are an organisation who help to facilitate the EU's commitment to create a barrier-free Europe after signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

As the EDS's priorities were central to the research design, the results will directly relate to current policy and commitments to combat discrimination based on disability. Furthermore the EGDF can be in a stronger position to support the adoption of legislation to address such discrimination, in line with the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU).

This report was commissioned by the European Guide Dog Federation to be completed by the University of Chester's Centre for Labour Market Development based in the Faculty of Business, Enterprise and Life-long Learning.

Research Strategy

The overall research strategy adopted was quantitative in nature as the empirical enquiry produced responses that could be analysed in a broadly positivistic way; using mathematical modeling and statistical techniques to understand the collected data. As research has to be framed in the realities of the present time and context, or zeitgeist, the statistics should not be viewed in isolation. Therefore this report has incorporated an interpretivist method of data analysis in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced through the practitioners themselves, the guide dog users. This is evident in several questions in the survey and more specifically the focus group.

Data Collection

Survey

Data collection was conducted by creating an online questionnaire survey. The participants were emailed a link to the survey through the EDGF's contact database. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement to 27 statements that were grouped into the 7 priority areas of the EDS, under 4 themes:

- Public Attitudes
- Government and Service Provider Attitudes
- Legislation
- Practice

In addition to the statement questions, 2 additional questions enabled respondents to give an open response in a comment box. Finally it was advised in the pilot study, which will be discussed in the next sub-section, that there should be a space for any additional comments, concerns, or issues the respondent would like to raise.

Focus Group

A focus group was hosted in February 2014 in the Netherlands with EGDF board members and partners. The resulting discourse compliments the survey responses in a more qualitative matter. This is especially useful where statistical significance cannot be guaranteed, thereby making the findings of this report more valid.

Pilot Study

Prior to distributing the questionnaire survey a pilot study was conducted with EDGF board members. The link to the online survey was emailed to the focus group members and asked to complete the survey and respond answer questions:

- Are you able to access the questionnaire?
- Is the language used in the questions appropriate or familiar?
- If you find any questions difficult to answer, or you feel they are not applicable

The comments raised by the pilot group were generally positive; all of participants were able to access the survey online, and their assistive software worked with the survey. However, issues of consistency of terminology were raised; the need for additional comments question in case members had anything further to add; and a consideration that the survey was only available in English.

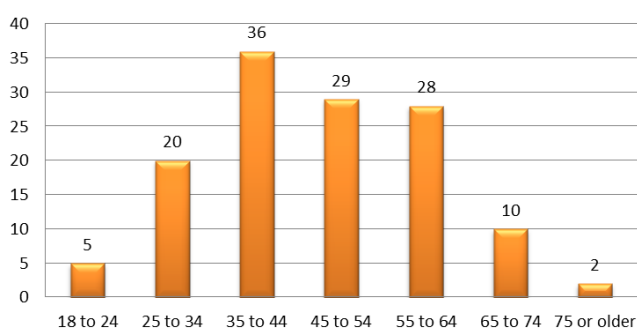
Limitations

Although the questionnaire survey had been designed to be disseminated throughout EU Member States, there was no consideration for individual languages. It should be assumed that English language proficiency will vary from respondent to respondent, and that the responses may not be as accurate and reliable as a survey available in their first language. This was evident in the large number of 'neutral' responses the survey received; either respondents did have 'neutral' opinion to the statement, or they did not understand the question sufficiently enough to give an answer.

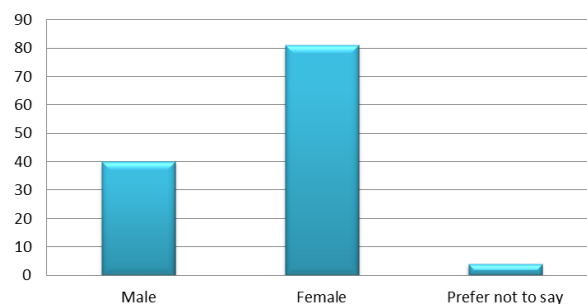
Nonetheless, in the open response questions where respondents left comments in, for example German, this was then translated and subsequently resulted in useful data. Furthermore, only relatively small number of the total guide dog population completed the online questionnaire survey, therefore this report cannot generalize its findings as there was not a representative sample size. Still, the questionnaire does offer a lot of information which will greatly assist the EGDF in their operations.

Survey Response Rate

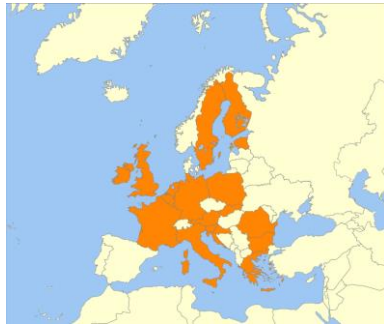
In total, 140 EGDF members were selected to participate of this number, 135 responded to the online survey. Figure 1 on page 4 shows the demographics of the respondents, including employment status. As would be expected those countries with longer traditions of using guide dogs and assistance dogs and with larger infrastructure organisations provided more respondents than those countries where the notion of guide dogs is still relatively new. A high number of responses from Germany, and similarly France, Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom, compared with many other EU Member States. Additionally, Female responses were double that of Males. With the exception of 18 to 24, 65 to 74, and 75 or older categories, there is an even distribution of respondents.



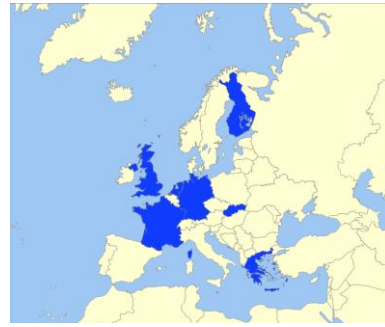
A graph to show survey respondents by age



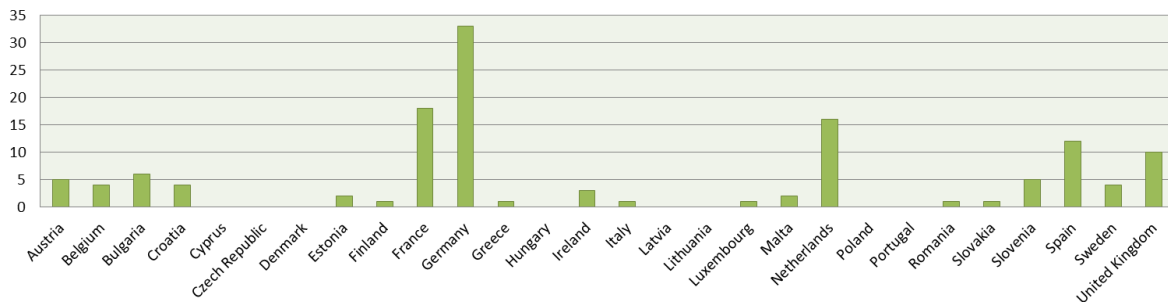
A graph to show survey respondents by gender



A map of the EU illustrating survey responses by country



A map of the EU illustrating focus group attendees by country



A graph to show survey respondents by Member State

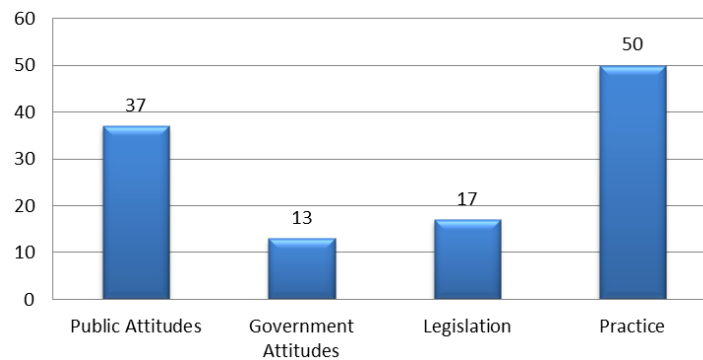
Discussion

This discussion section is a running commentary of the survey responses in relation to the EDS's priority areas. As stated in the Methodology section of this report; respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement to 27 statements that were grouped into the 7 priority areas of the EDS, under 4 themes: Public Attitudes, Government and Service Provider Attitudes, Legislation, and Practice. Additionally, the data collected from the focus group will be used to show relationships and put the survey results into perspective.

The reader should be reminded that the purpose of this discussion to not to simply labour the general opinions guide dog users raise in the survey; it is to help develop a deeper understanding of guide dog user perceptions of the implementation of non-discriminative legislation in EU. Additionally, in some Member States there are significantly higher numbers of guide dog users than in others; therefore conclusions should be framed in the wider context of the EU rather than individual member states unless explicitly specified.

Accessibility

'Accessibility' is defined as meaning that people with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, transportation, information and communications technologies and systems (ICT), and other facilities and services.



A graph to show survey responses in relation to accessibility

Whilst disregarding unusual events such as flights; on a day-to-day level, respondents felt that they can easily get around. Although when responding to “my country is actively implementing accessibility legislation”; more respondents agreed with this statement than not. However some ‘Strongly Disagree’ answers came from Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.

Furthermore, when addressing public attitudes towards accessibility and specifically, the goods services, and assistive devices required by a guide dog user, respondents were positive in their access levels, especially with ICT.

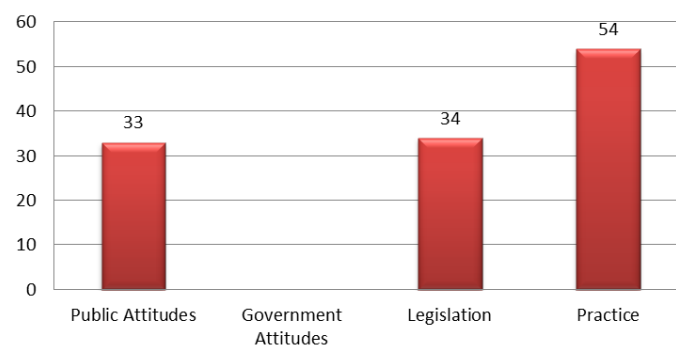
The chief concern raised by focus group participants concerning accessibility discrimination was flights. Several members of the focus group stated that they had difficulties with airline company regulations taking precedence over the law in some instances. Many anecdotal exemplars were shared with the group, notably Air Malta not allowing a guide dog fly on a connecting flight within the EU. This is a clear example of discrimination as the guide dog user was treated differently by the airline because he had an assistive dog.

An additional pertinent issue raised by respondents is to have more autonomy when accessing information; *“Increase in usable documents in braille or numeric support to be able to read without assistance from others”*.

The EDS has stressed that accessibility is the precondition for participation in society and in the economy. Therefore the EGDF should ensure accessibility to goods services including public services and assistive devices for people with disabilities are a consideration for other priority areas to succeed.

Participation

‘Participation’ is to ensure that people with disabilities enjoy all benefits of EU citizenship; remove barriers to equal participation in public life and leisure activities; and to promote the provision of quality community-based services.



A graph to show survey responses in relation to participation

Although several respondents from Austria, Germany, and Netherlands ‘Strongly Disagreed’ with the legal rights statement, respondents were generally positive towards both the legal rights to ensure full participation and that of public attitudes.

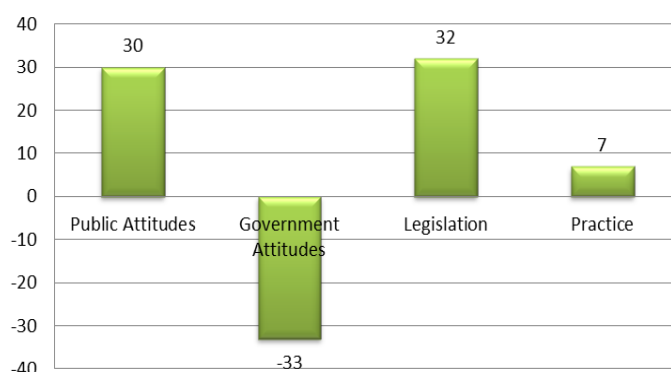
When assessing practical access to organisations, venues and services, including those relating to sport and culture; buses, trains, and banks were the highest scoring, whereas sporting events, supermarkets, and especially taxis scored lower in agreement. A focus group member stressed that *“The general is usually fine but the particular examples are really discriminative”*.

It should be recognised that, much like the accessibility priority where the statistics present the impression that this is not such an area of concern for the EGDF; the less tangible, infrequent, and one-off instances of discrimination collectively can have an impact on the social mobility for the guide dog user.

The EDGF should make attempts to overcome obstacles to exercising participation rights of guide dog users as individuals, customers, students, economic and political actors. In addition to the concerns raised about taxis, sporting events, and supermarkets. Similarly to accessibility; pertinent issues regarding air travel were raised by respondents; *“It’s not always clear if airline regulations are breaching laws”*. Therefore, attempts should be made to address this concern through further investigation.

Equality

The ‘Equality’ priority area is defined as combating discrimination based on disability by promoting equal opportunities through policy implementation and raising awareness.



A graph to show survey responses in relation to equality

Overall it is agreed that current legislation promotes equality in the countries this survey gained responses from. Those respondents who strongly disagreed with this statement came from Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Netherlands, Romania, and Sweden.

This suggests that in both the more affluent and established EU Member States such as Germany and the Netherlands, and the less so and newer Member States such as Romania and Bulgaria, perceptions of equality legislation is a pan EU concern.

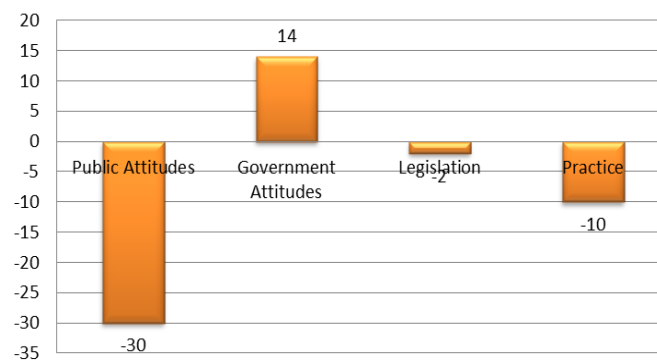
There appears to be a mixed view on how well service providers implement non-discriminative practice; only 7 more respondents agreed with the statement than disagreed. Furthermore, guide dogs users feel that they do not have the same level of accessibility as a full-sighted person.

One respondent raises some of the practical realities equality on a macro level; *“Even though there is local legislation with regards to equal treatment I often have had to deal with misassumptions people had about guide dogs which in turn hindered access. Also the fact that you have to go through a formal complaint procedure to make policy makers aware of access issues assures that not many people do this. Another reason for this is that sanctions are, if dealt out, low. Therefore, perceptions and attitudes need to be changed to make access for guide and service dog users 'normal'”.*

The comment speaks volumes towards the negative perception of government attitudes by guide dog users shown from the survey. A distinct pattern of misassumptions has emerged from the survey responses, not only in this exemplar. This is discrimination based on disability, but perhaps it is just simply because the legislation is not widely known, or easily accessible to a member of the public for example a restaurant host. The focus group raised issues regarding ignorance of the laws from members of the public; ranging from explaining why the dog needs to be with me, to fighting for access to restaurants. Innovative solutions to this problem came from the focus group members including a helpline with information related to service providers and the public, and an identity card with the legislation printed on it in a similar style to the EU disabled parking permit or ‘Blue Badge’. However the questionnaire survey revealed that experience of discrimination from members of the public was low.

Employment

'Employment' is to raise significantly the share of persons with disabilities working in the labour market. In covering this priority we must first remember that our global economy has recently experienced a recession that had a considerable impact on jobs in the EU for all, not just guide dog users or those with disabilities. Therefore we must recognise that, although this priority area scored the lowest, sentiments towards employment may be based on recent economics.



A graph to show survey responses in relation to employment

Respondents felt that they face significant discrimination when applying for jobs. However, there was no clear indication of discrimination towards guide dog users within the workplace. In fact, one focus group member stated that *“having a dog in the office is good for morale”*.

There were mixed opinions on whether the respondent's country has an employment policy for improving accessibility to workplaces and employment that caters for their needs. Furthermore, respondents viewed support for becoming self-employed in a negative light, however there were mixed views on government support to assist guide dog users and their employers to improve the quality of their jobs.

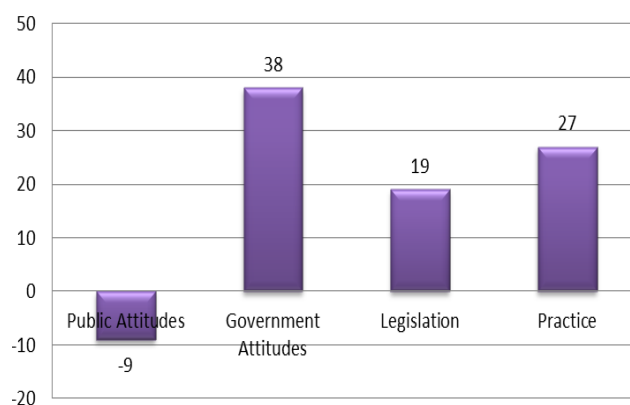
The map to the right illustrates 'Strongly Disagree' responses to statements on employment and implies a negative attitude towards employment.

Employment disapproval appears to be far reaching in the EU regardless of Member State; the more affluent and established such as Germany and the Netherlands, as well as the less so and newer Member States such as Romania and Bulgaria.



Education and Training

'Education and Training' is to promote inclusive education and lifelong learning for students and pupils with disabilities.



A graph to show survey responses in relation to education and training

The majority of respondents agreed that being a guide dog user does not hamper the quality of education they receive. Focus group participants lead a lively debate on this priority area, raising concerns that; *“learning support staff are not always qualified for blind needs”*. An attendee from the Netherlands identified that *“in Holland cases of blindness and partial sightedness examples and cases are so special that people don’t know the specific needs”*.

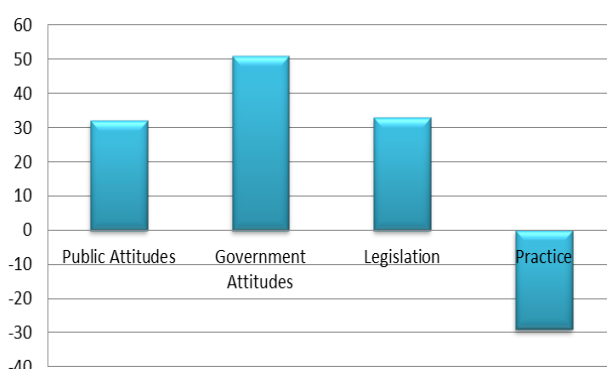
There was little evidence from either the survey results or the focus group that government legislation stopped guide dog users partaking in education and training. Additionally, respondents also felt they have the same rights to education and training as someone who is fully-sighted.

However, respondents to the survey also typically agreed that they have felt discrimination as a student or someone who is in training.

Some focus group members felt that they could easily “*fall behind*” academically and that in special education there is a tendency to focus on vocational forms of education. This may hamper guide dog users attending higher education; “*I need to jump a higher level of academic ability because of lower support at lower levels*”. Yet focus group members state that “*University is better [than school] and more practical*”.

Social Protection

‘Social Protection’ is to promote decent living conditions combat poverty and social exclusion.



A graph to show survey responses in relation to social protection

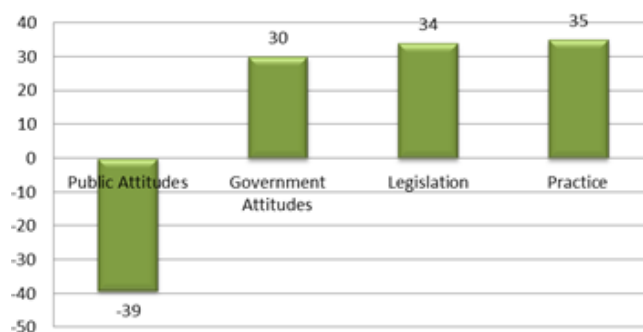
According to the survey results, discrimination towards guide dog users for claiming social protection does not seem to be an issue for concern. However there were many neutral responses to this statement. A focus group participant raised a an opinion that guide dog users in receipt of social protection in the United Kingdom are typically “low income, social housing, struggling [financially], and people wouldn’t be able to pay for this if social welfare wasn’t there”. This comment indicates a reality that we can assume extends beyond the United Kingdom to less economically developed EU Member States. Some guide dog users may be vulnerable of being socially excluded if they live in poverty and do not have decent living conditions.

With current governmental spending reductions implemented by various EU Member States such as Greece, social protection may be an area that is affected.

Survey respondents felt that current welfare legislation is suitable for guide dog users. Yet, in practice guide dog users feel their voice is not such a powerful one when creating welfare policies. This was lamented by 24 strongly disagree statements from respondents in 13 of the 20 countries this survey had responses from. Therefore this is a significant issue that the EGDF should continue to address as it speaks to the topical EDS objective of social exclusion in social protection.

Health

'Health' as promoting equal access to health care services and related facilities, is a priority area that is inextricably linked with guide dog users as the assistive dog itself is a service to aid a disability.



A graph to show survey responses in relation to health

Respondents overwhelmingly disagreed with the statement that there is strong public awareness of the health needs of guide dog users. This again relates to previous concerns of unawareness of the non-discriminative legislation.

Respondents feel that the health care system caters for their specific requirements, legislation to safeguard accessibility rights to healthcare, and that health care is affordable and appropriate to their needs were all largely positive.

However focus group members indicated that insurance was a persistent and long standing issue that some guide dog users felt discriminated against as a customer.

Key Findings

- Unawareness of legislation is a recurring theme throughout, for example; often company regulations take precedence over law
- Employment concerns are widespread, although this may be a reflection of the general employment situation in the EU
- Guide dog user's feel their voice is not a powerful one when creating welfare policies
- On a day-to-day basis accessibility is not a strong concern, however specific incidences of discrimination hinder social mobility, for example transportation issues concerning flights
- Unawareness of health needs of guide dog users is a prevailing issue along with health insurance discrimination in for example Malta

Suggestions for further research

To expand on this research further; a research strategy that investigates each Member State individually should be adopted. It would be an astute move to approach guide dog related organisations directly, using their contacts, experience, and influence, thereby generating Member State specific reports which will increase usefulness of the report's findings and aid in policy implementation.