

## **St Thomas à Becket Church, Ramsey: PCC Policy Statement on Animals in Public Worship**

This policy deals with attendance of domestic animals (pets, assistance animals, emotional support animals, etc.) at public worship in St Thomas à Becket church.

(When public worship or other organised events are not taking place, domestic animals may come into church. They are under the responsibility of the owners. Owners are nevertheless expected to comply with requests from representatives of the church, so as to avoid or deal with any problems. Our church building is also sometimes used by external event organisers, and policy on domestic animals at such events is a matter for the event organiser, and should be covered in their risk assessment.)

### **Policy**

Our overall policy is to balance the needs of different people who attend public worship. For some, being accompanied by animals is important. But for others, those animals may be frightening or risk making them ill. Overall, our church prioritises welcome and hospitality, particularly to those we do not yet know well, and particularly to those who are vulnerable.

We therefore accept attendance of dogs or other animals at public worship, but see it as the exception, not the norm. We expect dogs in public worship to be a) muzzled; b) kept on a short lead; and c) kept away from areas where food or drink are being prepared, laid out or consumed. Dog-owners are requested to keep their animals away from our children's areas, which are on the north side of the church – so people with dogs are encouraged to sit on the south side of the church (the right-hand side as one enters from the west).

### **Exceptions**

Exceptions to our overall policy might include:

- Advertised 'Pet Services'; and
- Assistance animals, which are highly trained animals that enable a person with a disability to overcome or mitigate the disadvantage that they would otherwise experience, compared to a person who did not have the same disability. (These are not the same as 'emotional support' animals, a category that has no standing in UK law.)

People wishing to attend with an assistance animal are asked to alert the church when they arrive, speaking to the welcomer on duty. The Welcomer or Steward will let know the service officiant or Churchwarden on duty. Welcomers and Stewards will be briefed on this policy.

### **Explanation**

Our church is focused on growth: in depth of discipleship, and also in numbers, with a goal to double in five years. This growth is based on our culture which we describe in terms of our values: faithful and worshipful; loving and inclusive; encouraging and relevant.

Public worship that is open to the whole community involves trying to care for people with competing needs. Our values mean we try particularly hard to care for people with vulnerabilities of various kinds. Such vulnerabilities could be fear of animals, or arise from emotional fragility or social disadvantage, or they could relate to a disability. People's needs can conflict, so solutions may involve compromise or balance; we will try to strike this balance on the basis of deeply listening to people, and trying to understand what they need.

Given a focus on growth, we plan for the situation that people will come to our services whom we do not yet know well, and in particular we do not know if they are allergic to or frightened of animals. Focusing on the needs of newcomers is, to some extent, sacrificial: it means we cannot always

organise church in ways that are most comfortable for long-term members. On the contrary, we hope long-term worshippers will participate in our effort to welcome newcomers.

### **Our legal responsibilities**

As set out above, assistance animals for a person with a disability can join us for worship.

Care for people with disabilities is not only a spiritual commitment, but also a legal obligation, under the Equalities Act 2010. We are providing a service to the public, and are therefore barred from discriminating against people with disabilities, and we are obliged to make reasonable adjustments with the aim of avoiding any disadvantage that our policy might create<sup>1</sup>.

Assistance animals for people with disabilities are highly trained. We can therefore be confident that they will be under close control and behave in a generally predictable way. While their presence might create fear for some other worshippers, we would expect their good behaviour to substantially mitigate those problems. While other problems could arise – for instance, for a worshipper an acute allergy – we would expect both the person with the animal and the person experiencing the problem to talk to the church’s decision-maker and, if appropriate, comply with requests so as to manage conflicts between different interests. (Our duty is to make ‘reasonable adjustments’. ‘Reasonable’ is a key word, which implies this matter might be sorted out through discussion, sharing of information and, if necessary, some compromise.)

Disabilities are not always physical, and not always visible<sup>2</sup>. No-one is under the least obligation to disclose to us any information about their health, disability or other personal matters. However, we cannot take decisions on the basis of what we do not know, and we are not under any obligation to accept claims without evidence, particularly where these might create problems for others. If there is any uncertainty about whether an animal is a trained assistance animal, we might request supporting documents to establish this and/or the nature and implications of a disability (e.g., registration documents, a doctor’s letter).

We are not aware of any concept in English law of an ‘emotional assistance’ animal<sup>3</sup>. Dogs being so described could attend services on the conditions outlined above (muzzle, short leash, avoiding refreshments, requested to keep away from the children’s areas).

St Thomas à Becket PCC, September 2023

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<sup>1</sup> The Equality Act 2010, section 20(30) imposes “a requirement, where a provision, criterion or practice of A’s puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage in relation to a relevant matter in comparison with persons who are not disabled, to take such steps as it is reasonable to have to take to avoid the disadvantage.”

<sup>2</sup> Section 6 of the Equality Act 2010 says that disabilities involve a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

<sup>3</sup> Assistance Dogs UK is a coalition of UK assistance dog charities. It states on its website: “Currently, emotional support animals do not have legal recognition in the way that assistance dogs do in the UK. There is no register for emotional support dog or assistance dog in the UK, so it is not possible to register, validate or get an ADUK ID booklet for an emotional support dog. Some websites claim that registering your emotional support dog with them (for a fee) will allow you the same rights as someone with an assistance dog by providing you with ID. There is no guarantee that this will increase your access rights.”

([https://www.assistedogs.org.uk/faqs/#:~:text=There%20is%20no%20register%20or,they%20require%20ID%20by%20law](https://www.assistedogs.org.uk/faqs/#:~:text=There%20is%20no%20register%20or,they%20require%20ID%20by%20law;); accessed 28<sup>th</sup> June 2023.)