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# Dementia Dog Project

## Journeys and Stories



Dementia Dog Project  
A collaboration between Alzheimer Scotland and Dogs for Good

“This year has had its problems for Henry and myself but with Uno’s help, his gentleness and great nature, we both have come out the winners. So, roll on 2019, it certainly can only get better for us both with Uno by our side.”

This report, 'Journeys and Stories', is an extract from 'Dementia Dog Project: Evaluating the impact of an assistance dog programme for people living with dementia in Scotland.'

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# Introducing

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Name: Webb  
Age: 5 years old

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Name: Uno  
Age: 5 years old

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Name: Willow  
Age: 5 years old

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Name: Ruby  
Age: 3 years old

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Name: Hope  
Age: 4 years old

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Name: Odin  
Age: 4 years old

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Name: Lenny  
Age: 4 years old

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Name: Yazz  
Age: 3 years old

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## What is an assistance dog?

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Dementia assistance dogs start their career at just eight weeks old, at the Dogs for Good national training base in Banbury, Oxfordshire. Each assistance dog spends the next two years learning life-changing skills, starting with basic obedience and socialisation during its first year, progressing to more complex and dementia-specific tasks during the second year. The dog is then matched and placed with a family.

Dog selection is guided by temperament and personality, as ultimately it is important that the dog is enjoying its 'job' when it has its working jacket on. For the Dementia Dog Project, ideal dogs tend to be those with a gentle and loving temperament, whose keenness to undertake physical tasks is balanced with a calm nature and a love of being close to people. Alongside this, it is important that the dogs are able to work in a high distraction environment, walking gently on a lead and not being overly boisterous. So, it is a special blend of skills and temperament that makes a great dementia assistance dog.

One of the key benefits offered through the assistance dog programme is the full support provided to families, both through the legal public access rights that qualified assistance dogs are afforded, and the wider holistic support open to families through the specialist team. Unlike pet dogs, assistance dogs can legally access all public places with the exception of operating theatres and food preparation areas, meaning they are able to provide reassurance and support in busy, unfamiliar environments too.

All the dementia assistance dogs receive similar training, however, once a match is identified between a family and dog, the team undertake many visits to that family to build an accurate insight into their individual needs, daily routine and the types of environment they might visit in the community. This is then mirrored into a highly tailored training programme for each dog, to ensure the project is meeting each family's needs in a meaningful and person-centred way. Paramount to this is the overall aim to create a happy and trusting bond between the dog and recipient family to result in a long-lasting partnership.



# The role of dementia assistance dogs

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As is common with all assistance dog work, considerable effort goes into matching the right dog with the right couple. This goes beyond matching the dog's skills with the support required by the couple and aims in addition to ensure a happy bond is established to form a lasting partnership. When a dog has been matched to a suitable couple, the Dementia Dog Instructor then tailors the dog's advanced skills to meet the individual needs of both the person with dementia and the unpaid carer.

Dementia assistance dogs are trained to help maintain a structured routine at home (Fig.1), to be a social connector within the community and to be an emotional 'anchor' for both the person with dementia and their unpaid carer. Each dog learns skills specific to helping someone with dementia at home, in order to support the emotional wellbeing of both the person living with dementia and unpaid carer, through increased confidence, self-esteem, sense of purpose, and carer resilience.

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## Helping to maintain a routine

Responding to an alarm, a dog can be trained to retrieve a medication pouch or water bottle to a person's lap to remind them to take their medicine or to hydrate. The dog can learn how to help regulate sleeping patterns, waking someone up in the morning to get out of bed, gently nudging the person awake if he or she naps during the day, and helping to remove items of clothing when it is time to get dressed/undressed. A dog can support 'physical anchoring', i.e. for short periods of time, a dog is trained to stay in one location with the person with dementia, e.g. to allow a unpaid carer to go to the toilet in a café, or do some brief shopping in a supermarket.

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## Social connector

The dog can retrieve shoes and its lead when it is time to go for a walk, with a dog harness and dual lead (which requires specialised training for the dog and clients) enabling both the person with dementia and carer to take the dog for a walk together. Dogs act as a natural social icebreaker and may provide an opportunity for conversation and interaction within the community. An assistance dog is well socialised to be friendly and gentle when meeting other people and dogs, it walks gently and calmly on a lead, and stays focused on its owner in a high distraction environment. This is where most of the focus rests within the training programme for an assistance dog: to ensure it is consistently calm, gentle and friendly when out and about.

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## Emotional anchoring

The specific emotional task the dog is taught is a 'head rest', where the dog rests its head in a person's lap and makes eye contact to help ground the person. This can help to reduce separation anxiety, diffuse tension, and help a person feel calmer.

# The expected benefits



## Social interaction

Dogs can act as a bridge to local communities – encouraging conversation and friendship that does not rely on memory. Focusing on the dog can help friends old and new start and maintain relationships with someone with dementia.



## Family/carer support

The role of the carer is often lonely and stressful, dogs can provide joy and companionship to the whole family.



## Emotional benefits

Dementia can be a very lonely and frightening experience. Dogs are loyal companions void of any human prejudice providing 24/7 comfort and reassurance.



## Anchoring

For a person with dementia, dogs can act as a physical anchor: allowing a carer to focus elsewhere, and an emotional anchor: helping one feel safe when alone.



## Independence

The responsibility of caring for a dog may boost a person's self-esteem.



## Out & about

Dementia can lead to isolation through lack of confidence in leaving one's house. Walking with a dog provides a companion who can reassure and a means of exercise that feels safe.



## Routine & reminders

Routine can become difficult for those with dementia. Dogs are creatures of habit and can be trained to support daily routine, responding to timed alarms to remind owners of essential daily tasks.

# Peter, Veryan and Ruby's story

Ruby is a female black Labrador who was born on 1st February 2017. A clever and talented girl, Ruby proved herself to be a fast learner with a sparkling personality to match!

Peter was diagnosed with dementia in 2016 and admits it was initially a 'hammer blow' for him and his wife, Veryan. Ruby was matched and placed with Peter and Veryan in December 2018 and quickly became a member of the family. She has bonded closely with her new family and puts her skills to use every day.

There were several considerations for the team to ensure that this was a successful match – not least Ruby's affectionate nature and clever ability for learning new tasks. The team also needed to consider the ability of the dog to cope in varying busy, urban environments and modes of transport to support Peter in attending his Scottish Dementia Working Group meetings, as well as settling easily living alongside the feline members of the household.

Ruby provides practical assistance to the family: she fetches Peter's medication and is an alarm clock that is welcomed with open arms, supporting a positive start to the day and initiating daily routine. Ruby diffuses

tension within the household when things are difficult, using her 'head resting' training to provide a sense of calm for both Peter and Veryan. The family practices other tasks with Ruby for when they may be needed later on.

But Ruby's role in the household is much more than task-based, and very much centres around being the family's emotional 'rock'. For Peter, she is motivator, confidence builder and companion, ensuring Peter remains connected within his local community and can participate in social and civic life. On days when Peter might be inclined to withdraw, Ruby is the incentive to get out-and-about, providing a focus and reassurance that minimises anxiety. In this way, she also assumes the role of personal trainer, as Peter is supported to continue his life-long habit of walking.

For Veryan, Ruby is counsellor and confidante, and ensures that Veryan gets outdoors every day. Walking is restorative for Veryan, and Ruby is an honorary member of the local walking group. She provides a much-needed constant for Veryan throughout a time of shifting sands. In Veryan's words, 'I really can't imagine life without her and our lives would be a lot darker.'

*'I really can't imagine life without her and our lives would be a lot darker.'*



Peter and Veryan with Ruby

# Henry, Anne and Uno's story

'Uno is my reason to get up in the morning.  
He is the best present I have ever had.'

Uno is a male Labrador x Golden Retriever and was born on 10th February 2015. Highly intuitive to people's emotions, Uno loves learning new tasks and being around people – he greets everyone with a big wag of his tail and is only too willing to offer to help around the house. Uno's intuitive nature means he really enjoys his task work, and coupled with his sensitive and friendly personality, this made him a perfect dementia dog. Having completed his basic training, Uno travelled to Scotland and was placed with Henry and Anne in May 2018.

Uno's ability to adapt to a diverse range of busy environments, along with his beautiful gentle nature with other dogs and small children was a key consideration in his match with Henry and Anne. Henry has been living with vascular dementia for more than ten years. He became depressed following his diagnosis of dementia and as Anne explains, *'Prior to getting Uno, Henry's dementia stopped him doing a lot of things.'*

When they first met Uno, Henry and Anne were excited, if a little apprehensive because they did not want to let Uno down. They need not have worried as they all 'took to it like ducks to water'. Uno has formed very close bonds with both Henry and Anne and is included in everything they do. This includes daily activities such as shopping and eating out, supporting Henry to undertake his role as a dementia activist, and regular trips to London to visit the couple's family.

Uno supports Henry with a number of practical tasks, including helping him to get out of bed by using a gentle nudge in the morning, fetching Henry's medication at

the sound of an alarm, and nudging Henry to remind him to eat when Anne is not at home. Henry travels a lot, both locally and further afield to visit family, and can find this stressful. Uno has been trained to rest his head on Henry's lap when he senses that he is agitated or distressed, which helps Henry to feel more at ease. Uno is a constant companion for Henry and, as a result, Henry is able to continue his activism, which is an important part of his life. In Henry's words, *'Uno is my reason to get up in the morning. He is the best present I have ever had.'*

Anne also benefits. Uno provides reassurance that Henry is safe at home and Anne finds herself more confident to leave the house, more relaxed when she is out and less inclined to 'clock watch'. Anne also feels fitter because of increased walking with Uno and feels the benefits of getting outdoors.

It is not just Henry's experience of dementia that has been impacted on through Uno's presence. Henry is also living with diabetes and his insulin levels have stabilised, during the period of Uno's placement with the family, which they believe is a direct result of Uno's assistance. By retrieving his medication at set times, Uno reminds Henry to take his insulin. On several occasions, Uno has detected that Henry's blood sugar was low and signalled this by persistently nudging Henry and not leaving his side. As a result, the dog team is investigating the options for having Uno dual-trained as both a dementia and medical assistance dog, a great example of the collaborative nature of this pioneering programme.



Uno resting his head on Henry's lap, which helps Henry feel more at ease.

# The carer experience

Carer wellbeing is a theme which includes getting space and time outdoors, companionship of the dog, taking the focus off the negative, and hope.



Ann and her granddaughter with Hope

# The carer experience

Many carers feel emotionally supported by their dog due to the companionship it gives them. The dog is like a friend to talk to when things are difficult and helps them feel more able to cope with a bad day. This is consistent with findings of both the Dementia Dog Project and Dogs 4 Dementia project evaluations, which reported that the dogs provided emotional support for both the person with dementia and carer.

*Early mornings are our private times, gives me a lovely morning greeting – even if I don't feel like facing the challenge of the coming day. She cheers me along with her antics and I get on with it.*

*There have been periods over the last few days that I have found emotionally difficult as Graham's behaviour changes with the progression of dementia, but having Ola to give a hug to helps me through this.*

*I've found it quite hard going recently with Ben's moods and behaviour, feeling a bit sorry for myself but when I get up in the morning – sometimes still rather early – it's so lovely to have her nearby. Our special time together.*

*But it's not just Graham. I often feel she does more for me than him. It's nice if I'm feeling fragile to be able to take her anywhere.*

*The day after was not a good day for either of us. Graham was tired and therefore not functioning well and getting angry, which I found very upsetting. I don't know how I would have got through the day without Ola's love and support. I kept her with me through the day, including delivering posters in the shops, which of course she is allowed to enter, and the attention she generates and the constant presence was so comforting. She really is very special and her having access to everywhere makes all the difference for both of us.*

*Ola has become a big part of my life and gives me a lot of the emotional support that Graham is increasingly unable to give. I give her a free run every day and she accompanies me if I go out with the local rambling club and as a consequence, I am much fitter. She has also meant that I get to know more people as again, she draws people to her because she is so friendly and a lovely-looking dog. Even my non-dog-loving friends admit to having a soft spot for Ola.*

*I really can't imagine life without her and our lives would be a lot darker.*

*How I do not feel quite so alone at the end of a difficult day (like today), when we can exchange a look across the room, Max looking quizzical (may only be that he wonders when the next treat is coming!). And in turn Charles benefits by Max giving me the strength to cope.*

*The time I have with King and myself are very precious to me and can make the most stressful days a lot better.*

The carers also reflect hope – the dog helps to take the focus off the negative, provides a lightness and humour, and makes the carer feel more optimistic about the future.

*Instead of facing winter with not much to look forward to we have been wakened out of our lethargy and sense of sadness by this dear dog. The future feels so much more positive and bearable.*

*Presence is a very positive input in our every day lives. Takes the focus off the negative issues we are more and more confronted with.*

*This year has had it problems for Eddie and myself but with King help his gentleness and great nature we both have come out the winners. So roll on 2019 it certainly can only get better for us both with King by our side.*

*As long as Nero is also part of our lives he makes Alzheimer's that little less frightening. When you or your partner receive a diagnosis, it feels like your life is closing down, but Nero has opened up a new world. Fred has suffered from depression for most of his life but Nero provides a positive start to the day.*



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