



Can a dog replace a carer? If two pairs of hands are better than one how about four paws? A special charity has trained more than 60 animals to be, what are called, "assistance dogs". Once trained the canine carers are able to help someone transfer in and out of a wheelchair, get dressed in the morning, generally regain some independence and the results are incredible. Having a dog helper has allowed some disabled people to return to work. In other cases their husbands or wives have been freed up from their carer role so that they can go back to work.

At the moment the charity Canine Partners for Independence trains and provides the dogs - the disabled person pays for the food and the vet bills. The charity wants the dogs though to be included in official local authority care packages because as our disability issues reporter, Carolyn Atkinson, has been hearing from people who use them, the savings in care costs are enormous.

Off we go to work - yes. Are you going to get the door then? Open the door. Good boy.

I'm Wendy Plues, I work here - work in Information for Disability enquiries, I'm the senior information officer. This is my canine partner dog Indie and he's a yellow Labrador, he's four years old and he's an absolute treasure - he's changed my life completely.

You don't have to - oh kisses too.

Wendy is a wheelchair user, she has eight medical conditions including the painful muscle disease fibromyalgia.

That's it, good boy.

Before Indie arrived Wendy needed a 24 hour day care package which costs around a thousand pounds a week. She now needs just 35 hours care, saving her local authority

£650 every week. That means the £9,000 cost of training a dog could be recouped in just 13 weeks. The savings are clear and Wendy says Indie is 100 per cent reliable.

He does absolutely loads of things for me - he gets me undressed at night, he unloads the washing machine, he gets me the telephone. I need carers for housework and for getting me washing - because unfortunately Indie can't wash any hair - he can't get up on his hind legs and he's not very good at making tea either. But apart from that he does everything else for me, which is incredible. Indie will wake me up in the night to tell me to turn over because I get into cramps and spasms. So it's changed my life drastically.

... can I help you? Yes.

Councils pay anything between the minimum wage to more than £20 an hour for weekend overnight care. And if agencies provide the carers there's also a fee. Wendy says since Indie arrived not only has she reduced her care package but she's also been able to return to paid work. Only one office support worker is now required to help with handwriting because Indie deals with Wendy's toileting and admin needs.

Hi this is Wendy, how can I help?

He also helps me here in the office - he'll pass messages from one person to the next, I'm always dropping things on the floor and he'll pick them straight up for me and he's watching me, he can tell me if I'm going to be bad, he can tell me if I need my tablets. I can't be here without him.

Pauline Hamblin from Canine Partners for Independence says more than 60 disabled people now have one of their assistance dogs, another 30 animals are part way through the 18 month training programme ready to operate at home and at work.

This is only a small office and there are

not all of them but some of them because it's hard and if you get someone back to work their doctor's visits are reduced, their need for people to come and call at home reduces. So there are savings.

Canine Partners for Independence is now lobbying ministers and MPs for assistance dogs to be included, where appropriate, within local authority care packages.

Back at the Working Information for Disabil

the exact arrangements have to be decided at the local level, but it's very clear in black and white from the minister that direct payments can be used to purchase assistance dogs.

What about people who aren't on direct payments, is there any provision there?

Well there isn't at the moment, that's one reason why I think we need to go rather further than just giving guidelines. We need to make sure in the care plans that are agreed between local social service departments and individuals that the role of the dog can actually be put into the care plan. The minister in her reply to me said that wasn't possible because carers could only be human beings, well there may be some legal responsibility issues there but I can't see why you couldn't actually write in the benefits of a dog to the individual and the dog can be seen as providing caring services.

At the heart of this seems to be a lack of awareness of the fact that these dogs exist and can do as much to help as they do.

That's right. The experience of Canine Partners for Independence is that many social service departments haven't even come across this fabulous solution which not only gives greater independence for the person needing the care - it means they don't have to use so many carers - but also saves the social service department money. So I think we need to make sure that social services departments become aware and that's a role for central government to spread best practice.

So what do you want government to do? You want guidelines?

We want the minister to write to social service departments, make them aware of this option, produce very clear guidelines that direct payments can be used and also to look at this issue of putting the dogs into the care plans and care packages that social service departments agree with the individuals and their communities.

Edward Davy MP. We did ask the minister, Jackie Smith, to come on the programme but she was unavailable.