

# “Same old ding dong”: the impact of the initial lockdown in 2020 on *Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind*

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## ABSTRACT

Ireland found itself in a lockdown to combat the international spread of the SAR-CoV-2 virus beginning in March of 2020. This paper presents the initial impact that the initial lockdown and accompanying social distancing measures had on *Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind* (IGDB). Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with twenty-six interlocutors, including IGDB staff and clients, professionals within the guide dog sector, and locals to Cork City, Ireland. Findings show that lockdown measures impacted the education and work-lives of the guide dogs and instructors. Guide dogs lived in temporary homes rather than in the center’s kennels, which seems to improve their relaxation and education. Although the instructors may have benefitted from working outdoors with canines, they encountered challenges while teaching clients and guide dogs. They also needed to motivate the canines more to find a purpose in their work which had come to feel like the “same old ding dong”, with most destinations closed. The clients, especially those who experienced their first class during 2020, felt the loss of connection and support offered in the group class pre-pandemic. Despite these obstacles, interlocutors managed these obstacles well and looked optimistically toward the future.

KEYWORDS: pandemic ; guide dog ; SAR-CoV-2 ; Ireland ; guide dog mobility instructors

## 1 Introduction

In March of 2020, governments internationally introduced varying degrees of lockdowns and accompanying social distancing measures to combat the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (hereafter “Covid”) (Gollwitzer et al. 2020). In Ireland specifically, the first national lockdown was put in place on March 27, 2020, in efforts to “flatten the curve” (Fahy et al. 2020, 262). This included restricting travel, temporarily closing non-essential services, limiting access to public spaces, and ceasing sporting events. This was not unique to Ireland. Covid caused significant global shifts in the economic, professional, social, and personal lives of humans and individuals of other species. This included, but was not limited to, the canines (*Canis lupus familiaris*) sharing their personal and professional lives with humans. The aforementioned lockdown and social distancing measures created unique obstacles for guide dogs, guide dog mobility instructors (hereafter “GDMI”), and vision impaired clients of guide dog schools. A guide dog’s education (as discussed in Berentzen 2016; Sanders 1999), breeding (as discussed in Bray et al. 2017; Franck et al. 2010), upbringing, and matching with a vision impaired client (as discussed in Meyer et al. 2018; Lloyd et al. 2016) play key roles in a guide dog’s success.

Guide dogs are expected to perform, on average, 50 tasks for their vision impaired human partners (Mouret 2019; von der Weid 2019; Putnam 1954). Simultaneously, they are required to remain calm and focused amidst distracting or stressful environments (Berentzen 2016; Putnam 1954). Doing so while responsible for the safety of a wholly or partially vision impaired human, results in there being a “tremendous amount at stake in guide dog work, literally the life of both of the dyad’s individuals” (Goode 2007, 112). Therefore, at the *Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind* (hereafter “IGDB”) centre, as well as most guide dog schools globally, guide dogs receive an extensive, rigorous education. This is followed by, on average, a three-week class during which a GDMI instructs guide dogs and clients together to form guide dog teams (Franck et al. 2010). A strong focus throughout a guide dog’s upbringing and education is therefore placed on the ability of guide dogs to manage their emotions and remain professional – efforts to do so being somewhat strained as a result of lockdowns in 2020.

This paper evolved from my PhD thesis, which examined interspecies emotional labour between guide dogs and GDMI at IGDB. The findings shared here were not directly relevant to the thesis. Rather, the timing of fieldwork meant that significant data was collected concerning the initial impact the lockdown and social distancing measures had on IGDB. Data feeding into this paper was gained through 28 semi-

structured interviews conducted over *Zoom* during the initial lockdowns in Europe in 2020, as well as two follow-up calls around one year later in 2021.

What unique complications did the initial lockdown have on the lives of the GDMIs, guide dogs, and clients at *IGDB*? My professional background as a former GDMI fed the desire to answer this research question and inform academics and professionals in the assistance dog sector with this paper. The following discussion examines the impact of challenges which guide dogs, clients, and GDMIs faced during the initial lockdowns in 2020. The factors mentioned throughout are not exhaustive, nor might they apply to guide dog schools globally. Further, the emotional toll of the pandemic on GDMIs, clients, and guide dogs is not addressed in depth. While this element likely influenced the developments and daily work at *IGDB*, a focus is placed on how practical changes (i.e. lockdown, social distancing) impacted the development of guide dog teams and the work-lives of GDMIs and guide dogs. The following section unpacks in more depth the methods used to do so.

## 2 Methods

My six years of experience as a former GDMI, albeit not at *IGDB*, constructed a lens through which to reflexively analyse and present outcomes as a “critical insider” and “long term genuine participant” (Hodkinson 2002, 4–6; see also Sands 2019). Interviews were conducted with 26 interlocutors who took part in 28 semi-structured interviews. Two GDMI interlocutors took part in both an interview and a follow-up call about a year later in 2021, because they showed particular interest in this study. This constructive member checking resulted in feedback on conclusions that had developed since the initial interviews. While *IGDB* is identified, all interlocutors are offered as much anonymity as possible and given pseudonyms.

Interlocutors were contacted as a result of a snowball effect, following initial contact with an anonymous *IGDB* employee who I had known through a professional context. Interlocutors consisted of ten GDMIs, one guide dog trainer, a member of the management team, an individual working in the breeding programme, and nine further members of *IGDB*'s staff. To gain the insight of clients, three visually impaired individuals living with guide dogs from *IGDB* spoke of their experiences during the lockdown. Within the assistance dog sector, but external to *IGDB*, professionals within the guide dog sector were interviewed. Further, two professors and one student, all working in and from Cork, Ireland, where *IGDB*'s centre is based, took part. The interviews were conducted over *Zoom*, which provided a valid alternative to in-person

interviews, given the restrictions present at the time of data collection (Archibald et al. 2019; Sturges and Hanrahan 2004). I share the sentiment of Rodriguez et al. (2019, 2) that qualitative research “can provide a richer and more in-depth exploration of the relationship between service dogs and their owners”. Inspired by Sutton’s (2021) recent work, an emphasis was placed on canine-centric questions.

GDMIs and the trainer were asked about their experiences educating guide dogs and forming guide dog teams with their vision impaired clients during the pandemic in 2020. When speaking to a member of the management team, enquiries were made into how they perceived the well-being of the GDMIs and canines. An individual from *IGDB*’s breeding programme was asked to offer insight into how the breeding and socialisation of canines has been impacted by restrictions placed on their work during the pandemic. The vision impaired clients offered insight into their experiences receiving their guide dog partner during lockdown. The aforementioned local professors shared their thoughts on guide dog work in Cork from both an anthropological and sociological perspective. The student based in Cork offered insight gained from participant observation they conducted at *IGDB* as part of a school project.

Transcribing followed each interview as soon as possible. Conversations were transcribed by hand with the assistance of the website *Otter.ai*. While notes were taken in a fieldwork notebook during interviews, more reflective notetaking was predominantly done when revisiting transcripts once all initial interviews had been carried out. Interview transcripts were read through four times. The first round allowed for a familiarisation with the conversations had. General structures and themes were taken note of without notetaking. After being set aside for about one month, the transcripts were read through again with “fresh eyes”. This time, initial impressions and ideas regarding what was said were documented in a password-protected *Microsoft Word* document. During the third time reading the transcripts, a “focused coding approach” (see, for example, Saldaña 2021, 303–4) was taken, where frequently repeating themes that I perceived as significant to the research question were carefully coded using the *Nvivo* software. Approval was granted by the *University of Exeter*’s ethics committee (reference: 201920-088, 7/13/2020) for research prior to data collection.

### **3 Results and discussion**

#### **3.1 Work-lives of GDMIs during the lockdown**

GDMIs working at *IGDB* come from varied professional backgrounds, with a few working as GDMI apprentices at the time interviewing. These apprentices were at

various stages of *IGDB*'s three-year apprenticeship. This involves collecting practical experiences and learning the theoretical knowledge needed to be properly prepared for GDMI work. Interlocutors expressed that the GDMI apprenticeships have “been hampered with Covid” [interview, 19 January 2021]. One of the reasons for this was the social distancing measures put in place. This limited the full range of mentoring from more experienced GDMLs. Further, pauses and shifts in the timeline of educating guide dogs and offering class to clients altered the apprenticeships to varying degrees. While this was surely frustrating for apprentices, those who were interviewed remained optimistic that their education would resume in full bloom once pre-pandemic routines resumed. Apprentices were not alone in their workload being decreased and altered in 2020.

Indeed, work decreased for professionals globally during the lockdown, yet time spent with companion animals generally increased during lockdowns (Bussolari et al. 2021). While working from home, many humans turned to canines for support to minimise anxiety, depression, and loneliness resulting from lockdown-induced isolation (Ho, Hussain, and Sparagano 2021; Owczarczak-Garstecka et al. 2021, 3–4; Carr et al. 2021). However, GDMLs did not need to go out of their way to do so, as they naturally spend much of their working hours outdoors with guide dogs. A member of *IGDB*'s management team and multiple GDMLs felt that, as a result of this, GDMLs had a psychological health and emotional well-being advantage over *IGDB*'s other employees who worked predominantly in the indoor, well-ventilated office spaces in small numbers:

I think [GDMLs are] better adjusted: they're out in the real world. And they have the dogs for their emotional wellbeing. [...] I do think that [...] the level of stress or anxiety in the office staff is much higher than in the training staff [interview, 17 November 2020].

Pre-pandemic, working long hours outdoors in all weather conditions was a difficult aspect for GDMLs at any stage of their career (Kohl 2010). During lockdowns, however, there seemed to be a perspective shift. As one interlocutor shared, “the biggest complaint [of the] job is that you have to be outside in all manner, weather and all that kind of stuff. [...] I think it's a good complaint now to actually have that. Because you take it for granted, you definitely do” [interview, 16 February 2021]. The nature of GDMI work, then, tended to be beneficial to well-being (physically, mentally, and emotionally) during the pandemic.

Nevertheless, being outdoors was not purely beneficial. A member of *IGDB*'s

management team mentioned the reality that time spent in public spaces during the pandemic could result in GDMIs being “more likely to get Covid” [interview, 17 November 2020]. Despite this, they suggested that GDMIs were still “the ones who cope with [lockdown measures] better. [...] And I think just walking with the dogs is mentally good, as well” [interview, 17 November 2020]. *IGDB* office staff who do not work directly with the canines, but would normally see or interact with them daily in the office pre-pandemic, were asking GDMIs, “could you send me on a picture of the dog” [interview, 16 February 2021]? Such photos and videos of, as well as interactions with, canines were “the only thing that has gotten many people through [...] the last year” [interview, 16 February 2021].

While those working in the office wished for increased interactions with and photos of guide dogs, some GDMIs missed being able to interact more with their human colleagues. One GDMI missed the spontaneity and benefits of asking others for insight. Prior to the pandemic, it was common to meet GDMI colleagues in *IGDB*'s main building to socialise, plan, and discuss new developments. “But the whole thing with Covid, is that we’re not in the same office anymore. That was really helpful before”, one GDMI shared. “We all shared one office: have a question, somebody’s there, just ask them” [interview, 10 November 2020]. Nevertheless, GDMIs and further staff expressed efforts to maintain a supportive atmosphere remaining at *IGDB* throughout, despite social distancing measures.

### **3.2 Client communication**

In-person interactions had decreased between GDMIs and clients, as well. Aftercare visits, where GDMIs visit clients following their successful completion of class, are important for the well-being, and at times the welfare, of guide dogs and clients. Such visits are planned at regular intervals, although they can be carried out spontaneously, should specific, acute challenges arise for a particular guide dog team. In such cases, a GDMI visits the team to assess what might be causing the problem. They will then support the client and guide dog in finding a solution. Without the ability to see the developing dynamics, communication, and established routine within the guide dog team in person during the lockdown, GDMIs tended to have a more challenging time assessing the situation. A GDMI described how, over the phone, determining the well-being of the client or guide dog was challenging, “because it’s only from their perspective or it’s only what they want to tell you” [interview, 2 November 2020]. Another GDMI expanded on this shared experience, sharing further concerns:

You're dealing with the risk of not actually being able to enter somebody's house to see the dog's living arrangements. All the small little bits and pieces that an instructor would pick up on, like doors being open, baby gates not in place, access to an open yard at the back where the gate's broken at the end of the garden: nothing that a video or a photograph will show you. The lack of the presence of the instructor is an aspect of the training that we always considered to be vitally important for the dog care and welfare. That's now missing [interview, 23 November 2020].

This was mirrored in a study by Jezierski and colleagues (2021), who found that for some individuals living with canines during the pandemic, ensuring the canine's well-being sometimes proved challenging. For example, those living without access to a garden confirmed having more difficulties offering canines adequate exercise (Jezierski et al. 2021, 7). However, those with a garden tended to be more easily able to play and offer enriching activities for their canines (Holland et al. 2021, 15). Although GDMIs were presented with these new, at times stressful challenges in ensuring their clients' and guide dogs' well-being, as well as their own, GDMIs expressed that they were managing well and that it did not pose any acute threat to the well-being of *IGDB* staff, clients or guide dogs.

### 3.3 Guide dog education

At *IGDB*, canines were not educated from around the middle of March until the middle of May in 2020 due to the lockdown measures put in place across Ireland. This impacted not only guide dog education, but where the canines were housed. During this time, guide dogs lived in temporary homes with volunteers more often than prior to the pandemic. These volunteers are generally relatively local individuals who raise or otherwise board a young canine for varying lengths of time (Mai et al. 2020). Before the pandemic, as is common practice in most larger guide dog schools (von der Weid 2019; Scandurra et al. 2015), guide dogs had been housed in the kennels at *IGDB*'s centre. Smaller schools, especially those founded and managed by self-employed GDMIs, as was the case for my school, tend to house guide dogs in their own home or with volunteers.

The increase in *IGDB*'s canines living in temporary homes may have improved their well-being and education:

I think Covid has shown us that, actually, temp[orary] homes are a better option for dogs than the kennels. And I suppose people are finding that the dogs are more relaxed now and that they are easier to train, and the training is quicker than when they were in kennels. So, I think, while

stress is such a broad or huge area to define, it would be true to say that dogs are happier in temp[orary] homes [interview, 17 November 2020].

Perhaps some changes implemented in guide dog schools by necessity during the pandemic, such as increased time in volunteer homes, will impact guide dog boarding in the future.

Other changes did not have such a positive impact on the guide dogs' education. Interlocutors addressed the break from educating canines at the start of the lockdown. Some felt that the guide dogs were less interested or exuberant about guiding once their education started up again. However, once class had begun, the enthusiasm generally replenished. Indeed, they seemed to begin feeling more of a purpose again when guiding:

Their willingness kind of dropped and we were thinking, "oh, was it because they were out in temporary homes for the whole of Covid and was it just their willingness dropped and they weren't interested anymore"? It was actually amazing: when we started training them on class, their willingness just increased again, and everything went fine [interview, 10 November 2020].

Interlocutors felt that the guide dogs' education may have been unavoidably under stimulating during the lockdown. Prior to the pandemic, it would have involved visiting shops, riding on public transport, and interacting with a crowded city. Class may have increased their "willingness" and interest in their work, as the interlocutor quoted above mentioned, because of the new environment with unfamiliar routes and the challenge of working with a new human.

The understimulation of guide dogs posed a clear challenge in more ways than just the one. GDMI consistently emphasised the lack of opportunities to prepare guide dogs for circumstances they would inevitably encounter while working post-pandemic:

There's nothing open. There's no cafes or restaurants. [...] The purpose of the walk [during the pandemic] is it's just a walk. It's just a block. And I think that, after a while, the dogs do start kind of getting a bit, "ugh, same old ding dong" [interview, 10 November 2020].

The canines seemed to feel that the purpose of guiding was not present to the same extent as it had once been. On the other hand, guide dogs starting their education during the lockdown may have struggled to develop that sense of purpose while guiding to begin with. Rather than guiding a GDMI to a destination such as a cafe or



store and being rewarded for doing so, guide dogs were predominantly asked to walk along unusually empty streets. To keep the education interesting, GDMLs focused on keeping the canines engaged: “They’re like, [*sighs*] we did this the last six weeks’, you know? ‘Can we do something else?’ So, that’s why you need to have that element of empowerment and jazz” [interview, 10 November 2020]. Here, “empowerment and jazz” referred primarily to ensuring that canines were offered plenty of praise, motivation, and mentally stimulating activity.

A GDML recalled a recent visit to a local shopping centre in Cork City to use the bathroom during a session educating a guide dog. One of the canines was showing signs that worried the GDML concerning their ultimate success as a working guide dog:

[T]he dog gets a bit anxious. Like they’re not used to the internal environment. So that aspect of the training is probably going to be a problem in a few months. Not a massive problem. [...] Even the other day, that retriever – I brought him to a lift. And I’d say it was probably one of the first times he was ever in a lift, you know? “What’s this?” [...] Those are the type of things that we’re kind of missing out on, I suppose [interview, 10 November 2020].

This meant that, as shops, restaurants, and cafes opened again, GDMLs needed to place an extra emphasis on familiarising guide dogs with these environments prior to class. They remained optimistic that the canines would adjust quickly to post-lockdown environments.

Similarly, another GDML expressed concern regarding the lack of access to public transport: “[Prior to the pandemic,] we’d always be doing trains, buses, just getting them so used to it. And we haven’t done anything. [...] So, they haven’t really done too much of stuff inside” [interview, 13 November 2020]. While this, too, was a concern for GDMLs during lockdown, as busses and trains became more populated again, the guide dogs’ familiarity with them increased, interlocutors shared in follow up interviews. The importance of early socialisation, however, was not left unaddressed.

### **3.4 Upbringing and socialisation of puppies**

When speaking with one of the staff from *IGDB*’s breeding programme about the impact that the pandemic had on the early socialisation of the puppies in their breeding programme, they reported some of the puppies appearing unbothered. Nevertheless, they were concerned, because some of the puppies “haven’t even been on public transport”, and “it’s too soon to know if it’s made a big impact on them or

not” [interview, 2 November 2020]. Offering an example of how quiet the local streets were during lockdown, limiting opportunities to socialise puppies, they told a story of a volunteer who had taken a puppy “to the end of the estate: one car passed, and a person walked by” [interview, 10 November 2020]. This reality was mirrored in an article by Pooley (2021) on the challenges of socializing puppies during the pandemic. Further, a *PDSA* (2021) “Animal Wellbeing Report” found that 27% of canines joining new homes from March 2020 presented behaviours generally resulting from a lack of socialisation, with 18% expressing distress when their humans left them alone (Brand et al. 2022). In a similar vein, interlocutors were concerned about the development of puppies experiencing separation anxiety after leaving the volunteer Puppy Raisers. The potential for such separation anxiety developing, placed the GDMI and further staff in a challenging position to educate well-adjusted guide dogs. Interlocutors in the recent publication from D’Angelo and colleagues (2021, 14; see also Harvey et al. 2022) similarly expressed concern regarding separation anxiety of companion canines once lockdowns and social distancing measures were lifted.

### 3.5 Class

During class, vision impaired individuals and guide dogs learn how to live, work, and build a partnership together under the supervision of a GDMI (class is discussed more at length in these texts: Berentzen 2016; Lamontagne et al. 2020; Putnam 1954; Sanders 1999; Kohl 2010). At *IGDB*, class is generally structured such that a group of clients come to the *IGDB* centre for a period of time, before receiving individualised instruction at their home. The structure and process of class was altered temporarily during 2020, a GDMI explained:

It was very different to our standard class where people come and spend two-three weeks at the centre and then we go home. We did them all, basically, kind of individually. Or we did kind of a half morning with one and an afternoon with another if they lived close by [interview, 2 November 2020].

GDMI expressed empathy for clients, especially those experiencing their first class, as discussed in the following section.

Prior to the lockdown, class was an important time for clients to find mutual support through socializing and exchanging experiences and knowledge. The shift away from a group setting offered more intensive coaching from GDMI for some

clients. However, one GDMI expressed somewhat conflicting feelings about changes to class during the lockdown:

We obviously can't do any classes down at the [IGDB] centre, because of the social distancing. So, most of it has been kind of one at a time and a bit tedious in that sense. You'd like to kind of get them all done together. I like classes, personally. [...] They bring great atmosphere and [the clients] can talk to each other and learn from each other. [...] I kind of miss that. [...] But it should be good. Like it should be good. It's just surreal, I suppose, it's a bit surreal. You know, the whole thing. It's a bit strange. For them as well, for all the clients, as well. But you just have to stay positive and try and, you know, get the best out of it [interview, 13 November 2020].

I found the importance placed on class being held with a group interesting. As a former self-employed GDMI, all of my classes were held one-to-one with clients and guide dogs, rather than in a group format. It was understandable, however, that GDMI and experienced clients who were accustomed to group classes may feel a disturbance to their work structure and routine, amidst myriad other factors impacting their lives during the 2020 lockdown.

The GDMI [interview, 13 November 2020] quoted above, further recognised the potential benefits of canines not losing contact with their litter mates too abruptly or permanently due to the absence of a group class. The GDMI did their best to introduce clients who lived close to one another. This allowed clients to make connections and feel less isolated, gain support, and offer their guide dog opportunities to socialise: "I'd like to get them to meet up once every two weeks to do a free run, because that kind of pack mentality with the dogs and I just think it will really help them" [interview, 13 November 2020]. Taking walks outside together, following social distancing and further safety measures, this was one way to support new clients and guide dogs during the isolation that most felt during 2020.

### **3.6. Client experiences**

While meeting with other clients who lived nearby for walks was a solution for some, it proved especially challenging for those living more rurally. One client expressed that the isolation they felt was intensified by the sudden stillness blanketing their secluded village. They could go with their guide dog "for a couple of kilometres' walk up the road

and back again and not see anybody. Which is lovely from the point of view of Covid but isn't really great for buddy walks [*laughs*]" [interview, 21 January 2021]. Walks taking place closer to home than prior to the pandemic was common for many living with companion canines, a study by Owczarczak-Garstecka and colleagues (2021; see also Vučinić, Vučićević, and Nenadović 2022) showed. Indeed, globally, the lockdown and social distancing measures ultimately resulted in less walks, with limited free-running and socializing opportunities (Christley et al. 2021; Mayers 2020).

"Well see, everything changed, because of Covid," the aforementioned client shared [interview, 2 February 2021]. "So, I actually got my training one-to-one at home. I didn't go into a class and certainly there are benefits through being home-schooled, so to speak. But the last of it, really, is that you don't meet other people in similar situations" [interview, 2 February 2021]. Further, while lockdown measures led to social isolation for the majority of the global population, it was often intensified for vision impaired individuals. Halpern and colleagues (2021, 13), in their study based in the United Kingdom, noted that some guide dog teams may not have ventured out into more populated areas, due to concerns that their guide dog had not learned to keep socially distanced from others. While guide dogs are taught to guide vision impaired individuals around obstacles, including moving ones such as humans, they had not been taught to keep a set distance from other humans at all times. Even if teaching a guide dog to do so were attempted, some members of the general public may not maintain the appropriate distance from a guide dog team.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, while *IGDB*'s clients at times felt more isolated during class in 2020, the reality of not meeting others to varying degrees was not unique to them and generally shared across both new and established guide dog teams.

Lockdown restrictions and the changed nature of class also tended to influence the relationship between and education of guide dogs and clients. Clients expressed often being limited regarding where they could practice newly learned cues with guide dogs. Once again, this seemed to be especially the case for those living in more rural areas. For example, one client who had recently acquired their first guide dog explained that they were practicing a local route during the lockdown. They had walked it for around 20 years. Due to their familiarity with the road, the client found that it was not

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1 *IGDB* and other guide dog schools made efforts to improve the experiences of working guide dog teams during the pandemic. *IGDB*, for example, took part in this "Appeal for awareness as guide dogs adapt to new normal" (Ailbhe Conneely 2020) which explained that guide dogs are not able to social distance, queue, and so on. *IGDB* asked the public to assist and behave respectfully toward guide dog teams.

sufficiently challenging them or, perhaps as a result of this, their guide dog. “That’s another fear that I have now with this Covid”, they explained with a heavy sigh [interview, 2 February 2021]. “I’m not getting enough practice with her and that she might lose some of the skills. I’ve been told that she won’t, as long as I walk her six days a week” [interview, 2 February 2021]. *IGDB*’s GDMI’s visited clients regularly to teach them how to communicate with their guide dog, to practice routes, and ensure the success and well-being of both client and guide dog throughout and beyond the lockdown period.

Instructing clients at their home simultaneously had, at times, some silver linings. As one GDMI shared, the transition directly to a client’s home at the start of class may make forming a team a smoother process for client and guide dog:

[Y]ou’re straight into the client’s home place or straight into their routes. So, it probably does make things that little bit easier. Because if you were doing it in a class, it’s three weeks at the centre, the dogs have to get used to that, and then it’s straight back into another environment [interview, 10 November 2020].

In other words, the GDMI felt that the process of class during the pandemic required less of the larger adjustments due to shifts in environment that pre-pandemic class had.

### 3.7 New strains on guide dog teams

On the other hand, some GDMI’s mentioned that the lack of gradual transitions in environment may place unnecessary strain on either guide dog, client, or both. They observed that, particularly for the guide dogs, who are unfamiliar with the routes around the client’s home, learning these unknown routes in addition to acclimatising to the client and the new living environment could be a challenge. Prior to the pandemic, having the first part of class take place at *IGDB*, meant that guide dogs were familiar both with their home and the routes that the team would practice together. This allowed this element to remain consistent, while they developed a relationship and rapport with the client. A GDMI explained that the sense of routine during the first week or so can assist in the transition:

[B]asically, you’d be going out and you’d be going into an area that the dogs know, and they just basically walk the client in a straight line. [...] Then you might do a route block in the afternoon at a place they’ll know [interview, 10 November 2020].

While the team may practice the same routines at the client's home, the route itself and environment as a whole will be new to the guide dog. As a result, both will be adjusting to this change, rather than doing so one at a time over a longer period.

This client recalled a recent experience on the first day of class at their home: "it was bin day. And the poor dog came out of the house and it [sic] was just like, 'Oh my God' [laughs]" [interview, 10 November 2020]. Normally, they might have practiced having the guide dog lead the client in a simple straight line in the harness without any obstacles to begin with on a route familiar to the guide dogs. Instead, the team was faced with multiple bins that the guide dog needed to guide the client around on their first day working together. This resulted in unexpected obstacles early on in their partnership. Smiling, the GDMI who had instructed that team mentioned that both members of the team had managed this unexpected challenge quite well. Nevertheless, depending on the individuals within the guide dog team, this might otherwise strain the early stages of such a young relationship and developing communication. Ultimately, it could result in some frustration on behalf of the guide dog, client, or both.

## 4 Conclusions

This paper offered a review of some adjustments made, challenges faced, and some silver linings at *IGDB* during the lockdowns at the start of the Covid pandemic in 2020. Undoubtedly, the pandemic, the lockdowns, and further social distancing measures had a significant impact on the work-lives of GDMLs, their guide dog co-workers, and clients. It altered GDMLs' work-lives, the education of guide dogs and clients, the socialisation of puppies, and boarding of guide dogs. Further, it impacted the communication with and education of the clients, as well as the experience of clients acquiring their first guide dog in 2020.

During lockdown in 2020, *IGDB's* staff working in offices seemed to find the social distancing measures more challenging than GDMLs who spent long hours outdoors with the guide dogs. Interlocutors felt that this improved the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of GDMLs. However, GDMLs faced their own complications. Those with more experience reminisced on in-person exchanges with colleagues that had been the norm pre-pandemic. Simultaneously, GDMI apprentices coped well with the slowing down and, at some points, halting of their apprenticeship due to lockdown and social distancing measures, despite its frustrations. Nevertheless, interlocutors expressed that they were generally able to remain positive, turning optimistic eyes toward a post-pandemic future.

The guide dogs' education was paused during the first lockdown, from March until the middle of May in 2020. During this time, they were housed in temporary homes with volunteers, which GDMIs felt generally acted as an improved housing solution for guide dogs over the pre-pandemic kennelling. However, spending more intensive, uninterrupted time with humans during lockdown was cause for concern regarding the development of separation anxiety of guide dogs. While the canines received intensive socialisation with their caretakers, interlocutors expressed that the puppies did not receive the socialisation during lockdown that would have been normal pre-pandemic. Further, GDMIs felt that guide dogs may have been underwhelmed about their education, which consisted of less visits to cafes, restaurants, and shops, for example. However, this picked up again during their class and following the lockdown.

Clients were also impacted by lockdown measures. Rather than group classes, they were taught individually at their homes. For some, this meant that the transition was made easier, without first visiting the *IGDB* centre, as they would have done pre-pandemic. For others, this approach resulted in feeling somewhat isolated from other clients, their peers, who they would normally have been in class with. Especially for those living in rural Ireland, it became challenging to be able to practice what they had learned with their guide dog. Furthermore, GDMIs mentioned that it was, in some cases, somewhat more difficult to virtually assess the well-being of guide dogs living with clients. Nevertheless, here too, clients and GDMIs seemed optimistic for the time following the lockdown to counterbalance these experiences. Indeed, despite the challenges mentioned here, the GDMIs and *IGDB* as a whole remained engaged with and continued to offer quality services for the guide dogs and clients during this difficult time.

Central to the success of guide dog teams, the shared work-lives of guide dogs and GDMIs have, as a whole, been given surprisingly little academic attention. This paper turned its gaze to two especially under-examined elements within this broader discussion, feeding substantial gaps. Firstly, it offers insight into the work-lives and dynamic between guide dogs, GDMIs, and clients at *IGDB*. Secondly, it does so during the unique circumstances of the lockdowns in 2020. This paper does not offer insight into pre- or post-pandemic experiences and practices at *IGDB*. However, findings provide information for professionals within the guide dog and broader assistance dog industry concerning practices set in place during pandemics which, until 2020, had not been a consideration.

## LIMITATIONS

The inability to visit *IGDB* during 2020 is worth noting as a limitation that effectively hindered participant observation. While I have experience as a GDMI and posed canine-centric questions to GDMLs during interviews, not being able to witness the daily happenings and developments at *IGDB* for both GDMLs and guide dogs clearly limits findings presented here.

## AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The potential for future research in this area feeds a broad scope of disciplines. Of clear interest would be revisiting *IGDB* and other guide dog schools to examine how the lockdowns shaped the careers of guide dogs educated during that time. Further, how being matched with and having class during lockdown impacted new guide dog teams post-lockdowns would act as an informative continuation of this paper's findings.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Samantha Hurn for the wonderful support throughout this research process and writing up phase. Further, this article is only possible due to *Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind* and the anonymous interlocutors who were so generous with their time and insight during data collection, as well as throughout the writing process.

## DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## FUNDING DETAILS

This research received no funding.

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

Ethical review and approval was granted by the University of Exeter's Ethics Committee (reference: 201920-088, 7/13/2020).



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