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## **IN TOUCH – Guide dog waiting lists, Watches, Blind parenting**

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**PRODUCER: CHERYL GABRIEL**

### **White**

Good evening. Tonight, when the dog dies – the implications of having to wait for your replacement guide dog. Why there's more to watches than telling the time.

### **Clip**

I don't want to be all dressed up in my finery with my nice pendants and bracelet and rings and just a boring old watch sat on one wrist.

### **White**

And baby and me and buggy makes three. Why mobility and motherhood don't always mix.

But first, after the shock announcement last week that the Chief Executive of the Guide Dogs was stepping down we heard from guide dog owners what they would like his successor to be concentrating on. Top of their priorities was the waiting lists for a new or replacement dog. We've heard of cases of people having to wait for at least a year for their new dog. Well our reporter with BBC Scotland, Ian Hamilton, who's been a guide dog owner himself since the early 1980s, has been looking into this problem. He told me about his own experience.

### **Hamilton**

Earlier this year, in February, my dog was coming up for retirement so I went through the application at that point, in preparation for the dog to retire. Very sadly at the end of June unexpectedly my dog developed cancer and had to be put to sleep very, very quickly, so really I'd been in the guide dog application system really since February. Not that long, I can hear people say, but nevertheless I'm in the system and I've been told it could be quite some time yet before I get a dog.

**White**

So you approached them in June, at the time of your dog having to be put to sleep and what exactly did they say at that point?

**Hamilton**

Not very much at that point really to be honest with you. I knew they had some issues locally with staffing levels. More recently I spoke to someone and they're saying that there's real issues with staff and it could be some time yet, unspecific time, when I could get a replacement.

**White**

So is it your impression, in that case, that it is therefore the lack of a human being, rather than the lack of a dog?

**Hamilton**

Absolutely no doubt that is quite clear. There's some parts of Scotland, I'm not quite sure about other parts of the UK, but there really are some real shortages of guide dog training staff and guide dog instructing staff. In the west of Scotland they cover a huge area.

**White**

As an experienced guide dog owner what are the implications for you of not having a dog?

**Hamilton**

Massive. A dog has been my choice of mobility, as I say, since the early '80s. Now I'm not quite as good with a white cane as you Peter so perhaps arguably maybe I should kept those skills up, given what's happened to me now but a guide dog is very important for me doing the job that I do – I cover quite a large part of the country, my mobility is everything to me. And so having a dog is critical I would say.

**White**

So is this affecting you – what decisions are you having to make that are different?

**Hamilton**

I think it affects you in all kinds of ways, things you didn't quite expect about how much sometimes you have to rely on other people to get you from A to B. And also how much it has an impact on your fitness, how quickly your fitness can deteriorate when I've not had a dog – I don't move as quick as I do with a white cane, I'm not very confident at using one, so I try and avoid using one where I can, which means I'm probably getting more taxis and getting more sighted guides around than I normally would. And I notice – I say my fitness was the biggest thing, so much – to such an extent Peter I've even gone to the extreme length of joining a gym, how bad is that?

**White**

Now you're a BBC broadcaster and you've been asking questions as a result of your experience, can you explain what's happened?

**Hamilton**

Yeah, through one of my colleagues we've been asking the association some questions – and it's some basic questions actually and it's questions I think we would like to hear some answers to. As a guide dog owner I'd like to hear these answers. For example, why are staff leaving the association, why are they going; what plans have they got to replace them and what is the extent of the waiting list, not just for new applications but for replacements?

**White**

Have you asked specifically something like what's the average waiting list?

**Hamilton**

I've asked questions like that and I've also asked questions – how many are currently on the list? I've also asked – how many staff have left, how many staff have you got now compared with say – an example – compared with say 16 years ago?

**White**

And what would you say finally Ian is a reasonable length of time to wait if you're waiting for a replacement dog?

**Hamilton**

I would have thought six months would be a reasonable time, so already I've passed that.

**White**

Ian Hamilton.

Well for the second week in a row we invited Guide Dogs to come on to the programme. They turned us down. But this is what they say:

**Statement – Guide Dogs Association for the Blind**

We understand how difficult it must be for a person with sight loss, who's used to getting around with a guide dog, to be without one temporarily. However, the process of matching a person with a guide dog is complex and we want every partnership to succeed. This means the person and the guide dog must be compatible in character, temperament, lifestyle and environment. Each case is treated individually, so we carefully assess the needs of every person. Whilst waiting times are a factor our priority is creating a sustainable partnership which benefits both the person and the guide dog. The current average waiting time for a guide dog is eight months and 96% of people who have received a guide dog this year report a positive experience. Some people have more complex requirements and needs than others, for example some people may be looking for a specific breed of dog or a dog comfortable travelling on the Underground. In these cases the matching process can take longer but once we've made a match that partnership lasts, on average, six to seven years.

And of course we would be interested to hear about your own personal experiences of guide dog ownership – positive or negative.

Sean Randall was very positive about the recent item we carried about ways of operating your PC by speech alone and thinks that more blind people need to know about what's now possible. He says that with a school age child, regular meetings at work and his voluntary commitments he would have to juggle a boatload of Braille diaries, especially given the confidential nature of some of his work. With a smartphone, he says, this is all integrated into one device and the speech software is great at giving him a rundown of his day. Sean says there are now a large number of voice controlled devices out there – “but still I have to nudge my colleagues into being on time, simply because they haven't learnt about the powerful nature of the diaries on their devices.”

Well Sean I suspect I come into that category, so that's me told?

And we stay with smart equipment for our next item. Time was when if you wanted to know the time your only resort, other than asking a policeman of course, was the so-called Braille watch – a wristwatch with tactile markings – they're not actually Braille. But things have moved on. First, with the talking watch and now with an increasing range of smart watches – that word smart again. Two of our gadget minded listeners have just acquired new watches and we've asked them to compare notes. I began by asking Hazel Dudley and first, Ian Macrae, what other than knowing the time they wanted from a watch.

**Macrae**

There's two answers to that. One, is everything and if that's not possible then as much as possible really. The watch I'm here to talk about today will tell me anything from the date and the time to the phase of the moon that we're in. It doesn't tell you it's a super moon though.

**White**

And Hazel?

**Dudley**

Yeah pretty much the same for me but the added thing that I want is a nice piece of jewellery because I'm a jeweller-holic and I don't want to be all dressed up in my finery with my nice pendants and bracelet and rings and just a boring old watch sat on one wrist.

**White**

Okay, so the look of it for you is important. So Ian Macrae the Apple watch is what you've come to talk about. First of all, just describe it for me.

**Macrae**

Okay, basically it's an extension to your iPhone but it's also a self-contained wristwatch. The one I have is square and 42 millimetres in size and there is another version of it which is 38 millimetres. It has a glass face, which is basically like the touchscreen on any other smart device. And as well as the touchscreen there are also two buttons which help you to control the watch.

**White**

Before we get into smartness, how do you tell the time with it?

**Macrae**

Okay, well you can tell the time by sight, if you've got any, which I have a bit, by hearing and by touch and so now I can demonstrate the – well I can't demonstrate the sight on the radio but I've got a face which is called modular and it has a digital time display...

**Watch voice**

Fourteen twenty nine.

**Macrae**

The date...

**Watch voice**

Monday 14 November.

**Macrae**

The weather...

**Watch voice**

London 12 degrees, cloudy, H 12 degrees, L six degrees. Moon phase – full moon.

**Macrae**

The moon...

**Watch voice**

Sunset 1612.

**Macrae**

Time of sunset.

**Watch voice**

Set timer.

**Macrae**

And then I've got a short cut to my timer.

**Watch voice**

BBC Sport. ...Chelsea midfielder, Frank Lambert announces he is leaving...

**White**

[Laughing] So – and it's got football news as well.

**Macrae**

Yes, no not only can you choose which face you want to use at any time, you can have a number of faces on the watch and you can very easily flick between the faces.

**White**

So what about downsides?

**Macrae**

Okay the downsides are first of all the price. The cheapest version is £399. There is a special edition version of it which has a case made of ceramic and that comes in at more than a thousand pounds.

**White**

Right, now obviously all the companies are now in competition with each other, even over things for us – for visually impaired people. Anything else on the horizon?

**Macrae**

I'll tell you what when I saw this watch for the first time I was so completely blown away by it that I was quite worried because I thought I'm going to write – I was writing a review of it, I knew I was probably going to come and talk to you about it and I knew that I had to be balanced in what I said. So I contacted the most Apple sceptic person in the world that I know – that's Steve Nutt, a blind guy who sells other access technology – and I said to him what is wrong with this watch and his reply was it's basically the only accessible smart watch in the arena, there's nothing to match it and the only thing that's missing from it is an hourly chime.

**White**

Okay. Let me turn to Hazel – Hazel Dudley. Now you've got a smart watch but you've got a smart watch in the sense my mum would have used the word, in other words kind of dressy, if you like, and yours is a talking watch, just explain what it is.

**Dudley**

I've actually brought along a ladies' watch and a man's watch and I would not in a million years go for a talking watch, to be honest, because I don't like them but of course you can't do anything else because if you had a tactile one by the time you'd put your grubby paws all over them five or 10 times they wouldn't be smart and nice looking.

**White**

Well if you don't mind I've got a tactile watch and I am putting my grubby paws all over it. So could you not find a tactile watch, what some people call a Braille watch, which you just identify by touch, could you not find one or was it simply that, as you say, you would make it scruffy even if it wasn't when you got it?

**Dudley**

Well the RNIB used to do one and I think they were sort of diamante dots on them but it wasn't nice and it is true wear and tear is going to make it look scruffy. So I have not anywhere found that I can get a watch that will look nicer. When these came up I thought well I'll have a look at them and they asked what I wanted and I said I wanted a Rose Gold one and it's got crystals round the glass and it looks really nice. Now my immediate reaction when I first looked at it was ooh my goodness how chunky but of course they are fashion.

**White**

Well you handed it to me, you handed me the man's one, it wears a tonne.

**Dudley**

Yes but you see you and I probably don't go looking for watches for obvious reasons but apparently I'm told this is fashion. And everybody I've shown it to says what nice watches they are. And the voices on them are really nice. So I'm going with it.

**White**

You said you don't like talking watches as a rule – why not?

**Dudley**

I don't know, there's always something a bit bizarre about sticking something up to your ear to find out the time. I just – I wish there was some way that I could just do it more naturally, but there isn't, so you go with it. And the voices are really clear, so I think it's good.

**White**

Now there are quite a lot of talking watches around, how much did you go through all the options when you were trying to choose?

**Dudley**

Well I didn't look at many from this place but I have seen quite a few talking watches from various people that have got them and there are watches that say – it is 12 a.m. – oh my goodness you know, no, no don't like – I didn't want any of that. So these voices are actors and they're just very nice.

**Talking watch**

Three thirty nine pm. Monday 14 November, year 2016.

**Macrae**

Here's the gent's one.

**Talking watch**

Eighteen thirty eight. Today is Monday 14 November, year 2016.

**White**

Do you use this only for dressy occasions?

**Dudley**

Yes, yes.

**White**

So what kind of watch do you use the rest of the time?

**Dudley**

I have a tactile watch, a scruffy one.

**White**

Like a scruffy one like I've got.

**Dudley**

Yeah a very scruffy one, yes.

**White**

Right, Hazel your watch – how much?

**Dudley**

Roughly £150. I got it from the Talking Watch Shop, which is online.

**White**

Which has got quite a wide selection obviously?

**Dudley**

Yes, yes it has.

**White**

Any downsides with your talking watch?

**Dudley**

The only thing that I can think of Peter is that they're a bit slow, I would have sped up the voice a bit and I would have had it not saying the date, I would have liked to have customised it, in other words.

**White**

And do you ever use a talking watch Ian?

**Macrae**

I have used talking watches, the reason that I don't much like them is that I do like a watch that will talk at a speed that I want it to talk at and the thing about the Apple watch is that like a lot of the other features on it the voice in terms of the speed and the volume is completely customisable.

**White**

Ian Macrae and you also heard Hazel Dudley.

Now we know becoming a parent changes – well – everything. But if you're blind or partially sighted some of those changes aren't necessarily the ones you were expecting. Joy Addo has been musing on her own recent experience for us.

**Addo**

I, like most people, enjoy the warmth and comfort of a minicab, in fact I like it so much that I actually gave birth to my daughter in the backseat of one. After she came along I found myself getting very comfortable with getting cabs everywhere and to be honest my bank account was really feeling the burn. I know a lot of first-time mums feel a little nervous when travelling with a baby, although until I had my daughter I had never given it a second thought. It's really weird because I feel like travelling is something I should just be able to get on with but for some reason I felt nervous and scared.

Before I had a child I was happy to get on the bus, train, tube – you name it. But all of a sudden when I put my baby in her sling I started to think of everything that could possibly go wrong and I found myself even fearing walking down the street. For a while the sling was my best friend and I was able to travel semi-confidently. Although the box says she can be in there until she's three I found my back was killing me when she got to around nine months old. The combination of my two water melons on my front, my ever growing baby on my back and the rather large changing bag over my shoulder was really starting to quite literally drag me down. I got some advice from the Blind Mum's Connect Group that I'm a part of and they mentioned a particular buggy that was easy to pull behind you, so that I could still

use my cane. So I decided to buy one and when it came I was happy and enthusiastic because I felt like if they can do it so can I. But for some reason I found myself still not going out with the buggy on my own. For months I had it in my flat and I couldn't find the confidence to use it.

Eventually I realised that I could not let life pass me by or let my daughter miss out on taking in the lovely polluted London air or seeing the miserable faces of early morning commuters. I realised I had two options: I could try and find myself a rich husband that could drive me around all day or I could face my fear and start waddling down the road like I used to. So I contacted the council's community access team who said they were happy to send someone out to help me practise some routes with the buggy, so that I could be independent again. The first few times of pulling the buggy behind me was a little weird because I felt like people were thinking – why the hell is she pulling her buggy behind her. Now considering I am a woman who has blue hair, been sick on the DLR and regularly sings out of tune in public caring about people's opinions doesn't usually affect me, so I'm not going to let it now.

Sometimes having a visual impairment has its disadvantages, however, what I've realised is that being a decent mum when travelling doesn't have to be one of them. I guess now it's my daughter I feel sorry for, she's the one that has to stare at my rather perky rear end every time we go out.

### **White**

She doesn't sound too worried about it does she? I don't mean Joy Addo, I mean Baby Addo.

And we'd like to hear about your experiences of travelling with baby, you can call our actionline on 0800 044 044 for 24 hours after the programme. You can email [intouch@bbc.co.uk](mailto:intouch@bbc.co.uk) and if you're able to go to our website you will find more information there as well. It's also the place from where you can download tonight's programme and arrange for subsequent ones.

That's it from me, Peter White, producer Cheryl Gabriel and the team, goodbye.