

Barking up the right tree

Bruce the labrador has got his housing job licked

A black labrador dog called Bruce is an unusual member of a panel which advises Tor Homes on policy issues.



Bruce is the only specially-trained Dog for the Disabled in the South Hams and his owner, Helen Robertson of Strete, near Dartmouth describes him as her gentle giant.

Helen has Multiple Sclerosis and is in a wheelchair. She explained: "When you are in a wheelchair, you tend to lose confidence, but thanks to Bruce that is no longer an option and I now love to go out and meet people. I got involved with the Tor Homes' tenants panel and Bruce looks forward to going to the meetings because they make such a fuss of him. He sits quietly under the table whilst we discuss business and he instinctively knows when I need him."

Bruce is Helen's first Dog for the Disabled and when he arrived 18 months ago, he transformed her life.

"He does so much for me and has increased my independence. He can take out washing from the washing machine, he's awake before my alarm goes off and gently pulls back the bed clothes, he helps with tights and socks and is so gentle, he has never laddered my tights. He can also pick up the phone, or press the alarm button."

Dogs for the Disabled train dogs to help with practical, everyday tasks that enable disabled people to lead more independent lives.

John Taylor is Tor Homes' Maintenance Planning and Construction Manager and Helen and Bruce have advised on access for the disabled in some of the housing company's schemes. He says: "Helen and Bruce are a fantastic partnership and their advice is invaluable."

Helen says that at the end of the day, Bruce is a dog and he likes to do doggy things, so he has his own special play time every day when he knows he can just enjoy himself.

Helen is also involved in the Totnes and Dartmouth Ring and Ride service and is a Village Voice for Tor Homes' tenants in Strete, representing the views of tenants.

Every dog is trained by Dogs for the Disabled in practical tasks - tasks that many people may take for granted. For example, picking up dropped items such as wallets or keys, opening and closing doors, helping to remove clothing, and even emptying the laundry out of the washing machine.

The dog is matched specifically with a client and the dogs are trained in five main areas of task work: obedience; pushing or targeting; pulling; retrieving; speaking (or barking) on command.

Dogs for the Disabled is based in Banbury, Oxfordshire. They are a Charity, with no government funding and rely solely on donations and grants to continue their work. To date over 300 partnerships have been trained nationwide For further information see www.dogsforthedisabled.org