

## **Becoming a SARDA Meridian dog handler**

Many thanks for your interest in becoming a volunteer SARDA Meridian dog handler. This document has been put together to help you understand the recruitment process and what is involved with becoming a search & rescue dog handler. We hope you find it useful.

### **Which dogs are suitable for search work?**

We currently have in the unit several border collies, a hovawart and a rotweiller, but spaniels, retrievers and many other breeds are equally suitable.

The dog needs to have excellent stamina and it helps if it is easy to motivate with a toy.

### **What is involved?**

It is very important to realise that being a dog handler is not just about the dog.

Obviously, you will be training your dog for search operations, but there is much more involved. Handlers also attend courses in basic search techniques, radio communications, navigation, first aid and any other relevant area.

You must be ready to commit several hours every week for training and for operational searches. We are all volunteers and nobody can be available 24/7, but we all make sacrifices to ensure we can be as available as possible.

Please note that applicants for membership of SARDA Meridian may be police checked.

If all of this has not put you off, then read on...

### **What are the requirements?**

Before you can consider training your dog for search & rescue, it is essential that you have basic control of your dog as search dogs usually work off the lead. SARDA Meridian will typically only assess dogs that have reached 12 months of age and have passed the Kennel Club Good Citizen Scheme at a minimum of bronze level. We may consider foreign equivalent and working qualifications or consider younger dogs with higher qualifications at our entire discretion.

### **What is the recruitment process?**

Most prospective dog handlers will be interested in being a “dogs body” during one of our training sessions to help them understand what it is all about. But before you may be invited to join one of our training sessions with your dog, it must be assessed for search & rescue work. For that purpose, SARDA Meridian runs assessment and information days a few times a year.

During these, dogs are put through a formal assessment allowing us to check their sociability and motivation for search work. You also get a chance to meet some members of the team who will give you an insight into the world of search & rescue by sharing their experiences with you and answering any questions you may have.

Following this, assuming that you are still interested and that the assessment was successful, you may be invited to a maximum of 4 training sessions which must take place within a 6 month period. SARDA Meridian currently trains every other Sunday.

If you have not already done so, it is also considered good practise at that stage to approach an ALSAR unit, such as [Kent Search & Rescue](#) as you will also have to join them if you are serious about wanting to become a SARDA Meridian dog handler.

During the four training sessions you will need to meet as many members as possible. If you decide you would like to join SARDA Meridian, you must find two full members who are happy to be your sponsors.

You will be expected to write a brief biography (you can see the current members' biographies in "The Team" section of SARDA Meridian website) which one of your sponsor will circulate to all members as an introduction before you have completed your 4th session.

If no member objects and if you still wish to join, you will then be offered probationary membership of SARDA Meridian. Your dog will then become a level-1 dog, which is a dog in training, and your two sponsors will become your mentors.

Full membership, which allows you to vote at General Meetings is usually granted once you have qualified yourself and your dog to operational level and successfully passed the unit support module.

## How to become operational?

One of the requirements of operational status is to be part of an ALSAR unit, such as Kent Search & Rescue (<http://www.ksar.co.uk>).

The first level needed to reach operational status is level-2, which you get to when you and your dog are qualified for searches alongside routes and paths (this is called hasty search).

The time needed to qualify to level-2 varies enormously from one team to another, but it rarely takes less than 12 months.

When you are ready, your mentors will organise for you a series of internal mock assessments. Once you have passed 3 mock assessments, an official assessment will be arranged at a venue where you have not trained recently and will include at least one external assessor.

Handlers of level-2 dogs will then usually train to reach level-3, which allows them to search large areas such as woodlands or open countryside (this is called area search), providing an even more efficient resource to help locate vulnerable missing persons.

## What happens when I become operational?

You are then included in the SARDA Meridian call out list. Our call-out coordinator will contact you by SMS each time SARDA Meridian services are requested. You will be expected to respond immediately with your availability and to make your way with your dog and your search kit to the meeting point should you be available, in order to be deployed with your dog and a support member.

## What's next?

If after reading all of this you are still potentially interested in joining us, then please [contact us](#) and let us know a little bit more about you, your dog and your motivations to get involved.