

worklife

Karen has the bow-WOW factor

I trained to be a social worker in 2005 but my tutors said I wouldn't be able to cope with the paperwork and pressure because of my dyslexia.

Then I found a job with Portsmouth City Council for six months but when the temporary contract came to an end I was stuck.

The idea of setting up Four Paws Aqua came to me because my labrador, Chum, had broken his leg twice and the vet had recommended hydrotherapy for him. But the nearest pool was 25 miles away and there was a six-month waiting list.

I had to find the money, the premises, the pool and the customers. My mother helped me do some leaflets and I took them to all the local vets and pet shops, but the bank wouldn't lend me any money because it thought the idea would never work.

People started ringing up asking when I was opening and where the pool was. It was unbelievable.

The pool is in a business unit and comes up to my waist. Chum comes to work with me nearly every day.

The dogs have a shower in the doggy shower; then I put a life jacket on them. Some dogs run into the

Karen Standen was told by her bank manager that her idea for a hydrotherapy pool for dogs would never work. Four years on, her business is growing with hundreds of pooch owners splashing out



LISA REEVE

pool, others need more persuasion and some need to be hoisted in.

When I'm in the pool with a dog, we do swimming and exercises. The water is warm so it eases pain, stiffness and swelling, and improves joint mobility and muscle strength. A typical session lasts half an hour.

I see all sorts of dogs: big ones, little ones, overweight ones. One dog that comes in on Wednesday afternoons got so crazy when she first arrived and saw the pool through the window that she tried to jump through the glass! We now have to

draw the curtain before she visits.

There's a lady who comes in with her King Charles spaniel on Saturday mornings and loves getting in the pool with her dog.

I started off with 47 customers and now have about 400. We've started doing grooming, we've got

a physiotherapist and we've just taken on a lady to do dog walking. Because of all this extra work we're having to move to bigger premises.

I hate doing paper work. I have a lovely volunteer who does things like write letters to vets. If I have a document I can't understand, I usually ask my husband or PA to read it and explain it to me.

I don't like writing emails either because I know it shows lapses in my grammar. I also hate working with figures but I found a good cashflow program on the web that explains everything in colours, so I'm fine with that because it's easy to use.

I think this business would be suitable for any disabled person as long as they have passion and get-up-and-go. But they'll need to like dogs and water.

• **For more information see fourpawsaqua.co.uk. Karen Standen was talking to Sunil Peck**

KAREN STANDEN: CAREER PATH

- 1978 – Left Purbrook Park School and did several factory jobs
- 1983 – Began working as a care worker with disabled people
- 2003 – Started training as a social worker
- 2005 – Worked for Portsmouth City Council for six months helping young offenders
- 2007 – Started Four Paws Aqua