Cabinet Office

Call for Evidence: Access to Elections

Government response

August 2018

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The UK Government is committed to ensuring that our electoral system is both secure and accessible.

A key aim is to make sure that the systems and processes used are accessible for disabled people. This is something that should be considered in all aspects of public life, but has a particular importance in relation to people having an equal opportunity to cast their vote.

This Call for Evidence was initiated by my colleague and predecessor in the role of Minister for the Constitution, Chris Skidmore, and I am grateful for his work in laying the groundwork for this report on the responses. I will continue this important work and Government will play its part in bringing about change. We welcome collaboration with partner organisations representing disabled people and organisations charged with running and overseeing polls.

Every voice matters and I am particularly pleased that we received responses directly from disabled people as well as from organisations. This reflects that those individuals have an active interest in participation and want their voices to be heard.

I hope that what has come out of the responses is considered positively by all involved in our democracy and that this report spurs further thoughts and initiatives beyond the proposed actions to be taken forward.

My thanks to all who contributed and I look forward to taking forward suggestions made here to make a real difference and ensure we build a democracy that works for everyone.

Chloe Smith MP

Minister for the Constitution

INTRODUCTION

On 5 September 2017, the Cabinet Office launched a Call for Evidence, asking for views on how disabled people experience registering to vote and voting to:

- enhance the Government's understanding of the experiences of disabled people in registering to vote and casting their vote;

- help identify if current mechanisms to support disabled people to participate in the democratic process are sufficient; and

- identify examples of good practice provided by Electoral Service Teams to disabled people at elections.

The Call for Evidence was open for 10 weeks, closing on 14 November with accessible versions provided in large print, Easy Read and British Sign Language (BSL) formats.

Respondents were invited to respond by email, including by submitting a BSL video, and in hard copy to the Electoral Administration Team at the Cabinet Office. In total we received 256 responses including from individuals, organisations, charities, NHS Foundation Trusts, sector representative bodies and local authority election teams.

Respondents addressed some or all of the questions, and this document sets out a summary of the main findings made to each part of the Call for Evidence. It includes actions to be taken forward, produced in partnership with the Government-chaired Accessibility of Elections Working Group[1] which includes representatives from organisations acting on behalf of disabled people and from bodies which oversee and conduct elections and referendums.

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[1] The Government-chaired Accessibility of Elections Working Group includes representative from leading charities (Mencap, Rethink Mental Illness, RNIB, Scope and United Response) the NHS, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and key electoral stakeholders (Electoral Commission, Association of Electoral Administrators and Scottish Assessors Association).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Government is grateful to all those who took the time to respond to the Call for Evidence.

256 responses were received. The responses were in the main from:

- those electors with learning disabilities;

- those affected by mental illness;

- wheelchair users; and

- those affected by sight loss.

Those electors declaring a learning disability formed the majority of the respondents; 106, followed by those declaring a mental illness.

We are also grateful for the responses received from: disability charities and organisations; electoral administrators; legal organisations and health professionals; the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) and the Electoral Commission. In particular we are grateful to those organisations which facilitated input directly from disabled people; whether that was on paper or in meetings or using other mechanisms. We received detailed and considered responses from both individuals and organisations. We particularly appreciate the responses from disabled people as they provide a first-hand account of their voting experiences.

We are particularly grateful to Mencap and the RNIB for their advice in producing Easy Read and large print versions of the Call for Evidence as published on GOV.UK[2], which supported people with learning disabilities and those with sight loss to respond, and also for advising on the correct terminology alongside Rethink Mental Health to illustrate the views of the people they represent in the Call for Evidence response.

There were slight variations in the questions asked by various organisations and, therefore, information provided is not consistent in all cases. For example, some health authorities asked how electors found out about the process of registering to vote, as well as their experience of actually registering.

The Government wants to better understand the experience disabled electors have had when registering to vote and in casting their vote. The responses we have received have moved that understanding forward and have identified a number of themes.

It is helpful to understand the 'work-rounds' that people have devised to address the issues they have faced. There are useful and valid suggestions in the vast majority of the responses.

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[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/access-to-elections-call-for-evidence

It is clear from the responses from individuals that the use of technology has been of significant benefit. The ability to register online to vote has been a positive development, although other areas of the registration process still raise some concerns.

Further use of new technology was also called for in a number of responses, particularly from people affected by sight loss for whom paper as a medium creates problems – in the form of enhanced audio and computer app support including the potential benefits of online voting (e-voting). Current solutions to accessibility issues, whilst introduced to improve access and tailored to particular needs – such as the Tactile Voting Device (TVD) – work for some people but are not seen as fit for purpose in the 21st century when it is considered that the use of IT should be able to provide a better service and support. These issues are considered further later in this report.

Other areas of expressed concern related to the accessibility of premises and materials used for voting, and the awareness of the right of disabled people to vote both legally and practically which should be addressed by organisations who support disabled people and who are involved in the conduct of elections. A need for more general information to be easily available, together with a change in the perceptions of disabled people and their role in political life, was apparent in the evidence provided.

The Electoral Commission[3] stated in its report on experiences of disabled people at the June 2017 General Election, there should be no barriers: disabled people should be able to vote on their own and in secret.

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[3] *Elections for everyone: Experiences of people with disabilities at the 8 June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election* https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/237194/Accessibility-report-call-for-evidence.pdf

LIST OF ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN FORWARD

We have identified the following actions to improve the accessibility of future elections from the received evidence to the Call for Evidence, and will work with the Accessibility of Elections Group to determine how best they can be taken forward for polls reserved to the UK Government.   It will be for the devolved administrations to consider if the changes should apply to those polls that are devolved.

Action 1: Returning Officers should ensure effective training of polling station staff and the use of checklists developed in conjunction with national and / or local disabled persons groups to identify issues from the viewpoint of disabled people.

Action 2: The Accessibility Working Group to review the Electoral Commission's guidance on the setting of polling districts and polling places and to identify how good practice examples can be included on how local interaction with organisations representing disabled people can be more effectively used to ensure polling places are accessible.

Action 3: The Accessibility Working Group to consider, in the first instance, what outreach services could be provided to support individuals and residents of care homes to participate in elections.

Action 4: Returning Officers to consider equipment at polling stations with reference to use by people with manual dexterity issues and ensure the availability of full size writing implements for those who may need them.

Action 5: The Government to continue to consider the needs of disabled people when implementing changes to election or electoral registration processes and how these areas may be further developed to support disabled people, including through the provision of Easy Read guidance.

Action 6: The Accessibility Working Group to consider the viability of piloting additionally sending out the information included on poll cards by electronic means to disabled people who request this service, to assess its usefulness and identify any security issues

Action 7: The Accessibility Working Group to promote the use of existing Electoral Commission guidance to ensure that large print ballot papers are available and can be taken into the voting booth by people who need them.

Action 8: The Accessibility Working Group to consider whether 'practice' ballot papers could be made available to disabled people in advance of polling day and support this with guidance and / or legislation if required.

Action 9: Returning Officers and relevant local authority staff should ensure that all polling station staff know how the Tactile Voting Device (TVD) works and ensure it is readily offered to those who need it. Disabled Persons Organisations

including those supporting people with sight loss should also ensure that awareness is promoted.

Action 10: The Government to consider, with the Electoral Commission and the Accessibility Working Group, what improvements can be made to the existing arrangements concerning the support provided to voters with sight loss in polling stations and look to make the necessary legislative changes when a suitable opportunity arises.

Action 11: The Accessibility Working Group should engage with political parties to discuss how information on parties, candidates and their policies can be made more readily available to disabled people.

Action 12: The Accessibility Working Group to consider how awareness of disabled peoples' right to vote can be improved, through consulting with delivery partners including those within the care and medical sector as to how this could be achieved.

Action 13: The Government to consider if inclusion of awareness of voting rights in the Care Quality Commission assessment is practicable and of value and, if so, how it may be incorporated.

Action 14: The Government should reconsider the law regarding companions to further ensure carers and family members are able to support disabled people.

Action 15: The Electoral Commission and other relevant organisations should consider how training of staff in polling stations may be focused to address the needs of disabled people.

Action 16: The Electoral Commission should consider whether it should include more specific requirements in its performance standards in relation to support for disabled voters in polling stations.

Action 17: The Accessibility Working Group should consider options to make information around postal voting and proxy voting more accessible to disabled people and those with serious health issues.

KEY FINDINGS AND ACTIONS

The evidence received highlighted that there are 13 million disabled people in Britain - one in five people. There were a variety of figures cited about engagement of disabled people with registration and voting from different surveys undertaken over the past 15 years and all of these reflected levels of participation below that of the population as a whole. That was against a background of activity cited in the evidence which reflected a willingness and desire to engage in the vast majority of responses from disabled people.

SECTION ONE: EXPERIENCE OF DISABLED PEOPLE IN PARTICIPATING IN ELECTIONS

For this section of the Call for Evidence disabled people and those affected by mental illness provided details of their experience in registering to vote and casting their vote at elections.

Experience of disabled people in registering to vote

Question: Do you know how to register to vote?

We received 163 responses to the question with the majority of respondents (62%) stating they know how to register to vote. A range of views was expressed by people who have different disabilities and those affected by mental illness.

People who have a learning disability were the largest group of respondents with 98 responses and 57% of these people know how to register to vote, followed by people affected by mental illness with 53 responses and 68% of them knowing how to register. We also received 10 responses from people affected by sight loss who are blind or visually impaired with 70% knowing, and two responses from people with other physical disabilities, including wheelchair users, who were aware of how to register to vote.

Question: How do you find the process to register to vote?

We received 103 responses with a range of views expressed and different approaches undertaken in answering the question. The majority of the 56 people who stated they had a learning disability responded on the basis of how they found the process to register to vote, with 46% stating it was easy, 21% hard and 11% requiring help.

The majority of the 39 respondents who are affected by mental illness took a different approach in answering the question detailing how they received information on how to register to vote, with 51% receiving information from their local authority, 10% from TV/radio/press, and 10% online. Eight responses were also received from people affected by sight loss who are blind or visually impaired, including 25% stating they found the process to register to vote hard.

Question: Do you need help to register to vote, and if so, who provides this?

We received 148 responses to this question. A range of views were expressed by people who have different disabilities and those affected by mental illness.

78% of the 91 responses received from people who have a learning disability stated they need help to register to vote. Responses showed that the three most used sources of help were staff (for example at places of study), family/friends, and support workers/carers. For those affected by mental illness, 64% of the 50 respondents stated they do not require help in registering to vote. Where people do require help, staff involved with care, such as nurses and case workers, provide a key source of support. Seven responses were also received from people affected by sight loss who are blind or visually impaired. Of these, three stated they did not need help with registration. Of those who said they did need help, this came from a family member or volunteer.

Question: What do you think can be done to make it easier for you to register to vote?

We received 82 responses to this question.

67 responses were received from people who have a learning disability with the three most cited ways for making it easier to register to vote being by providing Easy Read guides which include large text and coloured text, being able to access support through helplines, and more information being provided through adverts and leaflets. 13 responses were received from people affected by mental illness, with the three most recommended ways to make the process easier being: having more help from staff including in hospitals and care homes; greater use of technology; and automatic registration. Two responses were also received from people affected by sight loss who are blind or visually impaired who recommended greater accessibility including through screen reading software.

Voting experience of disabled people

Question: Do you know how to cast your vote?

We received 167 responses to this question with the majority of respondents (84%) stating they know how to cast their vote, within which there was a range of views expressed by people who have different disabilities and those affected by mental illness.

People who have a learning disability were the largest group of respondents with 99 responses, with 87% knowing how to cast their vote, followed by individuals affected by mental illness with 60 responses, of whom 77% knew. The remaining responses from people affected by sight loss who are blind or visually impaired and wheelchair users all stated they were aware of how to cast their vote.

Question: How do you prefer to vote: is it by post, by proxy or at the polling station?

We received 123 responses where voters preferred to vote in person at the polling station. The largest group of respondents were people with a learning disability, with 80 responses and 90% stating this was their preferred method of voting, followed by 29 responses from people affected by mental illness, nine responses from people affected by sight loss who are blind or visually impaired and five responses, including wheelchair users, all stating that voting at the polling station is their preferred method of voting.

We received 82 responses where voting by post was the preferred method of voting. The largest group of respondents were people with a learning disability with 54 responses and 44% stating this was their preferred method of voting. 20 responses were also received from people affected mental illness with 90% stating this was their preferred method of voting. Five responses were also received from people affected by sight loss who are blind or visually impaired and three responses, including wheelchair users, all stating that voting at the polling station is their preferred method of voting.

We also received three responses from people affected by mental illness stating that voting by proxy was their preferred method of voting.

Question: Do you need help to cast your vote and, if so who provides this?

We received 95 responses to the question with a range of views expressed by people declaring different disabilities and those affected by mental illness.

The largest group of respondents were people affected by mental illness with 51 responses and 63% stating they did not need help to vote. For those who did need help, this was provided mainly by hospital staff including nurses, social workers and family/friends.

A different view was expressed by the majority of people who have a learning disability with 97% of the 32 respondents stating they required help to cast their vote. This help was mainly provided by staff including at academic institutions, family/friends and support workers/carers.

12 responses were also received from people affected by sight loss who are blind or visually impaired with 92% stating they need help, this came mainly from polling station staff, family/friends and from someone with no visual impairment.

Question: What do you think can be done to make the process of voting easier for you?

We received 144 responses to this question with a range of views expressed by people with different disabilities and those affected by mental illness. 89 responses were

received from people who have a learning disability. The three most popular suggestions for making it easier to vote were: having more help (including at the polling stations and reading materials at home); having colour photographs of candidates on the ballot paper; and Easy Read guides to voting.

22 responses were received from people affected by mental illness with the three most suggested ways being: having more help and support (including from care workers and mental health staff); being able to vote online; and having clearer communications including reminders and notifications. 23 responses were also received from people affected by sight loss who are blind or visually impaired with the three most suggested solutions being: the ability to vote online; improvements to the ballot paper including the numbering of candidates in braille and publication of the paper online; and clear communication forms including large print versions. Ten responses were also received from people with other physical disabilities, including wheelchair users with the three most suggested solutions being: more help from polling station staff; more accessible voting booths; and support to vote for care home residents.

The Government is grateful for the responses received from disabled people and those affected by mental illness on their experience in registering to vote and casting their vote at elections.

We have taken this into account, where possible (there is, for example, a wider issue about the security and integrity of e-Voting that precludes that being considered as a solution here) alongside the other evidence submitted including from leading charities, clinical specialists and those responsible for elections delivery, to develop actions to dismantle identified barriers to democratic participation as set out in the following section of this Call for Evidence response.

SECTION TWO: SUPPORT PROVIDED TO DISABLED PEOPLE AT ELECTIONS

For this section of the Call for Evidence organisations submitted details of the support they provide, and what they do to promote the rights of disabled people to register to vote and cast their votes.

They also submitted opinion on the support provided to disabled people to vote at elections (as listed at Annex A) and suggested additional measures to improve the voting experience.

Question: What support is provided by your organisation?

Details of a wide range of support was provided by respondents, including those responsible for overseeing and supporting the running of elections.

A number of representative organisations detailed how they work towards supporting people with particular disabilities including those with a learning disability and autism (and their families and carers) to participate in their communities and society, including

through supporting their independent living and also providing social and residential care.

For those who support people affected by sight loss who are blind and visually impaired, this includes raising awareness, preventing avoidable sight loss, providing support services to enable independence, and campaigning to create a fully inclusive society.

Others provide support to disabled people so they can have the same opportunities as everyone in society, and to improve the quality of life of people affected by mental illness through campaigning and the provision of services.

Outside of organisations providing direct support to disabled people and their families, sector representative bodies provided details of how they support electoral administrators to deliver elections, and improve wider society including through the promotion of high professional standards in the legal profession.

A number of local authorities and the Scottish Electoral Management Board highlighted good practice to assist with accessibility. These included adherence to the Electoral Commissions guidelines, providing home support for disabled people to complete their ballot papers (including at care homes and hospitals). They also liaised with local disability organisations to provide information and receive advice, including on buying new equipment, having specific outreach workers, holding events, attending open days and providing targeted training to public-facing staff.

Question: What does your organisation do to promote the rights of disabled people to register and to cast their votes?

Respondents provided details of a range of support provided to disabled people to register and cast their vote. A campaign was run to encourage young cancer sufferers to vote at the 2017 General Election, supported with guidance for first-time voters on registering to vote, the experience of voting at the polling station, and how to register for a proxy or postal vote if someone is unwell or in hospital.

A number of respondents detailed how they use tools to support disabled people to understand their voting rights, how to register to vote and vote at elections, including through Easy Read guides, workshops, and accessible hustings with the candidates standing for office, with additional support provided through dedicated helplines, webpages and social media.

Respondents also highlighted the use of materials produced by other organisations including Mencap and the Electoral Commission to support people with learning disabilities to register to vote.

Others noted that they contacted local authorities ahead of the 2017 General Election to ensure polling station staff were made aware of the rights and requirements of disabled voters.

Question: Do you think that the support provided to disabled people to vote at elections is sufficient?

Question: What additional measures can be implemented to dismantle barriers to improve the voting experience of disabled people?

In answering these two questions respondents used the findings of research they had commissioned for this particular Call for Evidence and using information about the 2017 General Election and previous electoral events to inform their response.

This included seeking the views of disabled people, their families and carers on the experience of registering to vote and voting; through interviews, focus groups, roundtable discussions, regional consultation events and dedicated surveys.

The responses to these questions are best given in a format that addresses the main areas of opinion and which were essentially broken down by type of disability:

- mobility issues;
- sight loss;
- learning disabilities; and
- mental illness.

The majority of responses came in from individuals affected by these issues and organisations that focus on those themes in particular. This allows some very clear issues to be identified and suggestions and actions to address them to be discussed.

Of course, people can be affected by a number of issues which also need to be taken into account. There was a particular call from one leading organisation for the position of people with severe and multiple disabilities to be further considered.

We have included the responses received from Electoral Service Teams to section three of the Call for Evidence *Levels of support provided by electoral administrators to disabled people at elections* within this section as it provides insight on support provided to people with specific disabilities. In partnership with the Accessibly of Elections Working Group we will look to determine how these can be developed into good practice.

Mobility issues

Individuals with mobility disabilities raised a number of issues. In particular, access to polling stations and polling booths. In its report *Polls Apart in 2010[4]*, Scope reported that 67% of polling stations had one or more significant barriers.

There is no recent figure to measure this against but the mix of responses outlined below indicate a need to look further at this area and promote consistency.

Access to Polling Stations

On access, some easily remedied problems were cited, with a failure to consider the needs of someone seeking to enter a building in a wheelchair being the most common. Although people were largely positive about the service they received from staff, they identified a failure to think through their needs.

In a number of cases double doors were only unlocked and opened on one side, preventing access by wheelchair users. One had to be helped by campaigners outside who unbolted the other door, whilst others had to wait until another voter turned up to assist or notify the staff inside as there was no means of doing so from outside the building.

This adds significant frustration for people who have challenges to overcome in getting to a polling station. As a result of these access difficulties, others had opted for a postal vote – which from the tone of the response was not their preferred option. In one case, polling station staff suggested that a wheelchair user who was prevented from voting by a repeatedly bolted door at several elections should use a postal vote.

One individual respondent commented *"*staff need to be trained not to make an accessible building inaccessible*".*

This would be easily remedied through training of polling station staff and having a robust checklist when preparing for the opening of polling places.

More general comments were that polling stations were located in buildings with stairs, another had a ramp that could not be accessed using a mobility scooter and another whose polling station is a caravan, which meant people had to complete their ballot papers outside. This made voters feel as though they were not valued and that their needs were not important.

One respondent noted that in their area where 70% of the population is over retirement age, the polling station was a building with steps for entry and no ramp.

These issues do not appear to be insurmountable. Voters' experiences could be improved by giving more thought to changes that are able to be implemented. Some respondents reported that they had raised issues and local authorities had adapted

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[4] https://www.scope.org.uk/Scope/media/Documents/Publication%20Directory/Polls-apart-2010.pdf

processes to help them or even given a customised service. None of that required changes to the law and this pragmatism is to be commended.

A number of responses from the local authorities also cited the positive actions they take in identifying buildings, making adaptations and in working with relevant organisations to ensure they consider locations and layout from the perspective of a disabled person with mobility issues. However, this was not universal.

There was a mix of responses from local authorities which recognised that more could be done – some of which said they would do more if required – and some that felt current requirements and guidance were sufficient. A number had clearly engaged positively and productively with organisations to get advice on the use of buildings and equipment, and had standing arrangements for some regular users at particular polling stations. One reported assessing all polling stations from the point of view of disabled people as a header for a list of positive actions.

This is welcome news but it clearly isn't a consistent picture and attitudes still need to be considered. Some comments reflected the view that the assistance given was positive but without necessarily taking the disabled elector's concerns into account. For example, several responses cited staff going outside to assist people in wheelchairs as a positive whereas most recognised that it was important to allow access so people could vote in a booth with privacy and to feel they and their vote were respected.

It is recognised that finding buildings for polling stations can be an issue for local authorities. However there is a requirement to ensure, as far as is reasonable and practicable, that the polling stations are accessible to the local community, including disabled voters. More consideration should be given to access on both policy and individual location levels.

The AEA identified the use of schools as an issue for those administering elections. Schools are usually designed or modified to enable access and can provide helpful locations for polling stations that support use by disabled people. Their use by Returning Officers as polling stations is expressly provided for in law, but education heads and others in local authorities can be reluctant to allow their use because of the disruption to school planning, children's education and parents' work. Given that, in many families, both parents work, or only one parent provides care for the child, the impacts can be substantial. Some local authorities make good use of schools and other educational establishments whilst others use none. This is an issue that needs to be considered at both local and national level but greater use of schools could provide a solution to the availability of accessible premises for polling stations in some areas.

Other issues raised by those with mobility issues included a lack of disabled, or any, parking outside the polling station and a need to travel down a road or through a car park (sometimes of gravel or pebbles) because the pathway to the polling place was inaccessible or gated.

In its response the Electoral Commission proposed giving flexibility and choice by allowing people to choose their polling stations (where one may be more accessible than another) and providing voting on other days in addition to the designated polling day. The Commission also suggested that mobile polling stations could be provided to attend care homes and remote areas as a useful addition. These are areas that have been looked at, but not implemented, by previous Governments and raise significant policy issues that cut across elections in general so are not issues that can be considered as part of the work flowing from the Call for Evidence.

Inside the Polling Station

When inside the polling station two other issues emerged repeatedly.

The first was of the polling booths not being usable for some wheelchair users. Despite sets of polling booths designed with a booth that has a lower table, some of these will not accommodate all types of wheelchairs. This means the voter has to complete the ballot paper outside the booth which brings concerns about secrecy as privacy, for which the booth is expressly provided, is lost.

In one instance, someone felt their inability to use the booth was looked on negatively by staff who appeared reluctant to provide a pencil from their table and then watched over them as they used it. This led the person to feel their vote was neither valued nor secret.

The second most repeated issue inside the polling place was the ballot box being put on a table that made it too high for someone in a wheelchair to put their completed ballot paper into.

Alongside these comments about the booths and the ballot box, there were comments about the lack of chairs for people who needed to sit regularly: this could be easily addressed.

Comments collected by one organisation on this topic varied. Some were 'disability access was awful' and 'no disabled parking outside the door, wonky path, useless handrails'.

Whilst another was 'Love my polling station…step free access, lowered counter and staff got me a seat to be able to vote. This is how it should be.' This reflects an inconsistency of service provision across the country.

One suggestion was to have polling booths in care homes so that people with mobility issues did not need to travel to the polling station. This recognises that some people do not like to use postal votes and prefer to vote in person. A number of local authorities provide an outreach service to support disabled people to vote, for example, to assist with the completion of postal ballot packs, but it is not a requirement and is dependent on available resources.

A more practical issue raised by one person was about their inability to grip the pencil provided, which prevented them marking the ballot paper themselves. They had to ask another person to mark the ballot paper for them, removing the element of secrecy.

Additionally one person raised that no party worker or candidate knocked on their door. Although this is not an issue that the working group could address, nor that relates solely to disabled people, it does highlight that if a person is not mobile this can undermine their ability to interact and to participate in the democratic process.

A few simple changes could reap immediate dividends here. Paying greater attention to the needs of people with mobility issues including those who use chairs and scooters could remedy a number of access issues in some locations. Alongside this, there are aspects that cause frustration like the height of the ballot box, lack of chairs for people who need to sit and provision of writing instruments that can be more readily gripped.

Concentration on training and guidance would help to make that shift where it is needed – and it is important not to forget that there are exemplars that people have cited – and thus remove many frustrations with little resource or cost.

Measures suggested by respondents to improve the access of the polling station for disabled people included:

- local authorities should annually review the accessibility of polling stations to ensure that all actions to improve accessibility are taken. This should take place in close consultation with local disabled people's organisations (DPOs). This consultation should take place early in the municipal year to ensure local authorities are able to arrange for the necessary changes in time for elections the following year;

- the Government should also ensure that disabled people are able to access information about the accessibility of their local polling station ahead of the election. Where an assigned polling station has been deemed inaccessible, disabled people should be able to use an alternative polling station; and

- a review of physical access standards should be undertaken to assess whether a building is eligible for use as a polling station. From this, a set of clear and reasonable standards can be developed.

Action 1: Returning Officers should ensure effective training of polling station staff and the use of checklists developed in conjunction with national and / or local disabled persons groups to identify issues from the viewpoint of disabled people.

Action 2: The Accessibility Working Group to review the Electoral Commission's guidance on the setting of polling districts and polling places and to identify how good practice examples can be included on how local interaction with

organisations representing disabled people can be more effectively used to ensure polling places are accessible.

Action 3: The Accessibility Working Group to consider, in the first instance, what outreach services could be provided to support individuals and residents of care homes to participate in elections.

Action 4: Returning Officers to consider equipment at polling stations with reference to use by people with manual dexterity issues and ensure the availability of full size writing implements for those who may need them.

Sight Loss

The evidence provided reflected that sight loss creates an issue for electors in both polling stations and home environments.

The main response relating to people with sight loss came jointly from RNIB and the Thomas Pocklington Trust. Their evidence began with statistics which reflected responses to a survey at the 2015 General Election where it reported that 45% of respondents disagreed with the proposition that the current system allowed them to vote without assistance and in person, with a further 29% saying that was only partially the case. Only 4% felt no change was needed. 54% said telephone, electronic and online voting should be considered.

The joint response reflected mixed feedback on support given by local authorities for registration with positive comments about rehabilitation workers offering help to register when visiting, but concerns that telephone helplines failed to route callers to the right place quickly enough and weren't able to get advice.

One respondent who identified themselves as someone who doesn't like to ask for assistance on personal matters said that the service was 'inadequate compared to other processes'.

Electoral Registration

There was a range of opinions on the support provided by local authorities to disabled people in registering to vote. This included some respondents who support the interests of blind and visually impaired people referencing feedback they had received on local authorities being very proactive in supporting their members in registering to vote. However, negative experiences were more common.

For people with sight loss, the move to support online applications to register was generally welcomed as it enables people to undertake the task themselves without having to deal with paper and seek assistance. However, other parts of the registration process are primarily paper based, such as Household Notification Letters, which can present difficulties with those with sight loss to read and understand content.

There was also a concern expressed in a couple of responses to the Call for Evidence that the move to Individual Electoral Registration (IER) may have led to some people

falling off the register as previously somebody else in the household had completed forms for them. This is unlikely as those on the register at transition will have been retained and registers have both grown and become more accurate since IER was introduced. However addressing perceptions, whether of electors or organisations providing advice, to ensure that information is accurate is important and is an area to consider further.

The difficulty in disabled people accessing help through automated local authority helplines was highlighted by the Electoral Commission. Its research showed that some people would like to be automatically registered to vote but this would raise the issues people not being in control of, or potentially aware of, their registration status or being prompted about absent vote options.

Measures suggested by respondents to improve the registering to vote experience for disabled people included:

- the Cabinet Office should work with the Electoral Commission to produce a voter registration form that meets good practice formats of Easy Read and is informed by input from people with learning disabilities and autism;

- the Government should ensure the online process is accessible and that easy read information is available alongside;

- there should be an agreed standard for Electoral Registration Officers for supporting disabled people to register to vote and that local councils should be publicising the support offered;

- the process of registering to vote should be changed so that people can set out their accessible communication needs at the time of application. From then on information should be provided to them in their preferred alternative format.

Action 5: The Government to continue to consider the needs of disabled people when implementing changes to election or electoral registration processes and how these areas may be further developed to support disabled people, including through the provision of Easy Read guidance.

Paper documents

Poll cards have frequently been cited as a problem for voters with sight loss. Blind and sight impaired people cannot recognise them amongst other items of post, and require assistance with reading them as do others with sight loss who find the text small and the cards cluttered with information. Some respondents said that they could not readily use anything not provided electronically or in Braille and others did not read Braille.

Electronic delivery – most responses that raised it suggested email – was cited as an access solution. However, that raises concern with providing security as it would not provide delivery at the actual registration address and could be used by fraudsters to support fraudulent applications for registration, or postal or proxy votes. Delivery to an

address of a physical card enables residents to see who is registered there and the elector to be aware of what type of vote they will be using (or to be able to apply to change). Therefore any wider use of email (or other means) for this purpose could be an additional service, rather than an alternative, and a physical poll card would be also delivered.

Additional delivery of useful information such as that on poll cards and for registration purposes, by email or other electronic means, could be a useful service for those who would prefer the information in that format. This service does seem to be provided where people have arranged a form of bespoke agreement with their local authority or elections office.

Birmingham City Council recently tested the use of email to send out information about boundary changes in the authority, and also included the data contained on poll cards.

Birmingham held email addresses for around 200,000 of its 730,000 electors but with no information as to whether any had a disability. The pilot received good feedback and Birmingham is analysing the data to determine whether there are any particular comments from disabled people to identify what their views were.

The test came with a cost that would need to be considered in any wider or full roll-out but which would not be excessive if the activity was repeated as a matter of course for disabled people who said they wished to receive their information by email. In order to maintain the integrity check that physical poll cards sent to the registered address provides, then this is likely to be an additional service if implemented in the short term.

Measures suggested by respondents to improve the accessibility of poll cards included:

- polling cards should be produced and sent out in alternative formats to enable blind and partially sighted people to identify them and to access the information contained on them;

- links to information online, such as a video to show someone where to vote and what they need to do to vote; and

- suggested improvements including the use of large print, pictures to show information, and the provision of audio and Easy Read versions.

Action 6: The Accessibility Working Group to consider the viability of piloting additionally sending out the information included on poll cards by electronic means to disabled people who request this service, to assess its usefulness and identify any security issues.

Polling Stations

Responses showed awareness of the needs of disabled people to be inconsistent. There was a view that training of polling station staff seemed to be of a different

standard in various places. One person said 'I settle with the fact that someone else knows about my vote'.

There were some examples of people not being allowed to take the large print ballot paper into the booth to use as an aid or, as with another example, it being stuck to the wall away from the booths. There were reports of some polling station staff incorrectly having said it was against the law for them to assist a voter with sight loss in marking their ballot paper, leaving the elector unable to vote as a consequence.

Other people noted a need for very precise instructions in order to locate and enter their polling stations and suggested that removal of other signs around a building would assist on polling day. A talking app for a mobile phone was also suggested as a solution when finding the location.

One person suggested that there should be specific times for voters with sight loss to attend polling stations so they could get help from the staff. For others, the need for such help was the main concern given it meant a loss of secrecy about their ballot.

The Tactile Voting Device (TVD)

All polling stations must be equipped with a special tactile voting device (TVD), a reusable plastic template with Braille and raised numbers that can be attached to the ballot paper and is designed to allow blind and partially sighted voters to vote independently without revealing their voting intentions to a third party.

The device was originally developed ahead of and first used at the 2001 General Election, in conjunction with RNIB, to provide an option for an elector with sight loss to cast their own vote where previously the process was for polling station staff or a companion to do it for them. It was welcomed as a positive development and it was seen as ensuring secrecy for voters using the device as they could now mark their own ballot paper. It also gave consistency on what voters could expect to be able to ask for and use at polling stations.

The RNIB response viewed the TVD as not fit for purpose and gave examples of it not being available, of the wrong version being available and of staff not knowing how to use them. The Scottish Electoral Management Board also agreed that the TVD needs review – seeing it as 'overpriced and underused'.

Some specific feedback from people using the TVD identified a concern that there was no way of knowing that they had marked the ballot paper in the right place or even if the pen they had used had worked. Asking staff to confirm the mark then removed the secrecy in the voter's eyes (although staff are bound by section 66 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 not to reveal any knowledge they have of the way any person has voted).

Some people did use it and regularly asked for it, with some suggesting improvements. In general people had either not experienced it or had suffered a negative experience. In some cases it was clear that it had not been affixed to the ballot paper correctly and

in others people were just unsure they had made a valid mark. One respondent described using it as 'not an entirely comfortable or certain process'.

PakFlatt (the company which manufactures and holds a patent on the Tactile Voting Device) responded to the consultation on the history and continuing development of the TVD and expressed a keenness to work with others including representative organisations.

Evidence reflected that time and context has moved on and indicated that it is time for options for improved provisions to be considered. These could include devices that provide audio (which could be the elector's mobile phone or piece of communications hardware), a different type of template or other option but some may want to retain assistance from others.

An overhaul of elections staff training in respect of disability awareness to include clarity on what assistance the staff can give and practical training on use of the TVD was proposed. Scrapping the existing TVD and replacing it with a truly accessible device with disabled people and representative organisations involved in the design and testing was also proposed.

People will prefer different options, so we believe that the law should support that and allow Returning Officers the flexibility to provide different, or a range, of support in which case the current legislative requirements, set 20 years ago, are overly prescriptive.

Therefore, we will consider whether improvements can be made to the existing legislation. There is a balance to be struck between requiring something specific and allowing flexibility and any change in requirements will need to ensure there is still provision made to support people. We recognise that this would place a discretion on Returning Officers but the Electoral Commission could provide guidance, in consultation with representative organisations and the Accessibility Working Group.

Ballot papers also caused concern and one suggestion was of a technical option with cuts and measurements so people knew which way round it was when they came to complete and subsequently fold it. That could be too technical for some electors and there is a need to find simple but effective solutions. A more simple suggestion was for copy ballot papers to be available in advance of polling day so that people could 'rehearse' completing them. Given that postal ballot papers are sent out ahead of polling day, it may be possible to create 'practice' ballot papers. However in considering this option it would be necessary to ensure that any copy ballot paper is clearly distinguishable from a real ballot paper, to both the elector and the Returning Officer, and that any security concerns are fully explored as part of this consideration.

For many respondents the use of modern technology including scanners, audio and electronic voting (e-voting) were areas that needed to be further investigated. A few people suggested telephone voting. Half of the people surveyed by RNIB wanted an electronic alternative to enable them to be independent when voting.

One e-voting supplier and an e-voting advocacy organisation provided input on how electronic machines could support disabled people to vote from home and in polling stations. A respondent identified that such systems could link to information on candidates, parties and their policies which would add further assistance. These are issues to be considered in a larger debate about the integrity of e-voting overall. There may be potential benefits for some groups in using e-voting but there are significant concerns about the security of online voting and increased risk of electoral fraud and providing unproven systems to people who are already vulnerable in terms of engagement and participation would not be helpful. Benefits such as online links to information can be provided in any event.

Postal Votes

Many people with sight loss felt that postal votes were the only realistic option for them but then need a relative or carer to help them. Some people found them 'easy and convenient' and didn't mind seeking assistance from people they trusted. But other people noted they lost secrecy or worried about being influenced or worse when they relied on other people.

Some people were unaware they could ask for assistance from elections staff whether at home, if the elections team offered an outreach service, or at a polling station if they could get to one.

As in other areas, some people had identified particular ways to assist themselves with one individual explaining that they scan their postal ballot pack so they can play back the contents via a screen-reader's audio facility. However, they faced difficulties by not being able to distinguish between the A (inner) and B (outer) envelopes for return of the postal vote papers and which ensure the secrecy of their vote when being processed and counted.

More widely, suggestions included the creation of clear rules on the standard of support to be given by elections staff and that availability of such support should be publicised. A second suggestion was that the Government and Electoral Commission should bring forward a performance standard linked to this and provide for a complaints process where the standard is not met.

Others identified that provision of information on voting in a variety of formats was important and should be set out at the point of registration. It was also suggested that voting at weekends or over an extended period would support them to engage more as relatives may be more available to assist at the weekend or within an extended period.

Following changes to the Certificate of Visual Impairment, Adult Social Services can now signpost people to electoral services for targeted support will help address the first point but the Accessibility Working Group will look at all of those points as part of its work going forward.

Action 7: The Accessibility Working Group to promote the use of existing Electoral Commission guidance to ensure that large print ballot papers are available and can be taken into the voting booth by people who need them.

Action 8: The Accessibility Working Group to consider whether 'practice' ballot papers could be made available to disabled people in advance of polling day and support this with guidance and / or legislation if required.

Action 9: Returning Officers and relevant local authority staff should ensure that all polling station staff know how the Tactile Voting Device (TVD) works and ensure it is readily offered to those who need it.   Disabled Persons Organisations including those supporting people with sight loss should also ensure that awareness is promoted.

Action 10: The Government to consider, with the Electoral Commission and the Accessibility Working Group, what improvements can be made to the existing arrangements concerning the support provided to voters with sight loss in polling stations and look to make the necessary legislative changes when a suitable opportunity arises.

Learning Disabilities and Mental Illness

We recognise that learning disabilities and mental illness are separate medical conditions. We have grouped the responses covering learning disabilities and mental illness together as a range of similar barriers to registering to vote and voting were raised.

There was a number of responses from individuals and organisations, with this area attracting the largest number of individual responses. The individuals were largely supported by organisations, including NHS Foundation Trusts, which gave them the opportunity to talk to us directly. This is, as noted earlier, enormously helpful and greatly appreciated as a mechanism to get direct experience and input. We are grateful to each of the individuals for their time and effort as well as to the organisations for facilitating the responses.

A number of statistics were recited by representative organisations in their evidence:

Learning Disability

- 2017 - 60% of those with learning disabilities find the process of registering to vote too difficult

- 2007 – one in eight people with a learning disability voted in 2005

- 30% of people with learning disabilities vote compared with 68% of the population

Mental Illness

- 2010 – people with mental illness were 50% less likely to register and then 50% less likely to vote

- 2010 – nine out of ten of those who were unregistered cited a lack of knowledge of their eligibility to vote or of the registration process

- 2015 - a third of those living in supported accommodation felt they required assistance to vote

These statistics reflect lower than average engagement by disabled people but are part of responses that also detail significant effort being put in to facilitate their participation. Where responses are included from individuals, they show a keenness from the person to have their say and to play their part in the democratic process.

The overarching theme here is that it is felt that parts of the community are not always included in the regular thinking of those delivering electoral events. Given there are an estimated 1.1 million people with learning disabilities in the UK and more with profound and multiple disabilities, and given 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year, this is a significant proportion of the electorate that may be being overlooked.

Rethink Mental Illness (Rethink) highlighted that their client group of people affected by mental illness generally know how to register and vote. However, information is rarely passed on to them of those who had a long stay in hospital only 12% said they were told of their right to register and vote. 42% said they were not (others could not recall). It was also noted that people moving between residences were also particularly vulnerable to disengagement as registration and voting were rarely mentioned to them.

A good example of what can be done is highlighted in the work of Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust which has worked to promote the uptake of voting rights among those affected by mental illness and which has been included in the Royal College of Psychiatrists' guidance on voting rights.

Political Party and Candidate information

The main cited issue was a lack of information from parties and candidates in a useable format (Easy Read being repeatedly referred to). This was expressly the case in relation to manifestos and, whilst a number of organisations reported pushing candidates and parties to produce them, this was often done later than the standard manifesto was published. This meant reduced time for people to be able to understand the proposed policies.

It was clear from a range of responses from both representative organisations and individuals that knowledge of candidates and policies is a primary interest. The common call was for accessible versions of manifestos to be published at the same

time as the standard ones to ensure disabled people had time to read and consider them.

Mencap identified the Easy Read versions of manifestos as being the most popular download from its website with over 30,000 downloads ahead of the 2015 General Election and over 20,000 ahead of the 2017 General Election.

The AEA also noted that it had sought to promote the use of Easy Read and other guides produced by RNIB and the Electoral Commission through its website and in promoting them to its members who deliver the polls.

Many of the organisations that responded had sought to address the issues of jargon and lack of direct contact from parties and candidates through organising events targeted at people with learning disabilities. These have proved popular – again reinforcing the view that people want to engage and as one response put it, enable a conversation that is 'talking my language'.

Organisations suggested that timetables be set for Easy Read manifestos to be produced and one suggested targeted manifestos – e.g. on mental health issues – to engage people and it was also noted that for online information screen-readers cannot read information within an image which can often be the case for posts on social media.

Having limited information from political parties in accessible formats and also a lack of contact with party workers, presents specific challenges for disabled people and those affected by mental illness in participating in the democratic process.

Measures suggested by respondents included:

- political parties must ensure that communications including through social media are accessible for disabled people;

- the Cabinet Office should consider establishing time frames in which parties and others must make accessible information available, including Easy Read manifestos and practical guides on voting; and

- Political Parties must consider the access implications of unscheduled polls such as early General Elections and strive to engage with people with a learning disability when these occur.

Action 11: The Accessibility Working Group should engage with political parties to discuss how information on parties, candidates and their policies can be made more readily available to disabled people.

Understanding and awareness of legal capability to vote

There was a lack of understanding and awareness among relatives and carers and others about the rights and capabilities of disabled people with respect to voting. There

can be a perception by families, carers and others that someone affected by mental illness is legally prevented from voting.

Experiences of polling stations also reflected this with some people being turned away and others refused help. Mencap saw this as an 'attitudinal barrier' for people with learning disabilities. They noted that research undertaken ahead of the 2015 General Election identified that two thirds of care service managers providing support to people with learning disabilities believed that a capacity test applied for people to be able to vote and so did not help people to register.

One respondent's family cited a need to involve their social worker in order to convince a local authority that their son could register and vote using a postal vote. Another wrote that only face-to-face appointments with local authorities had achieved progress in providing their relative with the opportunity to vote. One organisation called for official guidance to overcome that issue.

There is a need to ensure that carers are aware that disabled people have the right to vote and that any perception otherwise is misplaced. Some responses raised that the lack of a clear legal obligation for care providers to provide assistance to register to vote and to exercise the right to vote for adults living in health and social care services is an issue.

The representative groups and those responsible for delivery and oversight of elections have a part to play here in educating families and carers about the rights of the individuals they care for. Many organisations already do this and make specific efforts to educate people about elections but clearly more could be done. Organisations such as the Electoral Commission, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE)[5] and the AEA can work with organisations such as Mencap and Rethink to identify the channels available to pass on information both about the ability to vote and to set some expectations of what the experience will be for the voter. These could include social services departments and care providers in the training of their staff.

On a more formal note, the Law Society Mental Health and Disability Committee noted that the 'capacity' issue was removed in the Electoral Administration Act 2006 (section 73). Previous law that did preclude people without 'capacity' from voting was, in itself, poorly directed as it was not for anyone in a polling station or working for a Returning Officer to make judgements as to who could and could not vote based on their medical situation. Any misunderstanding of the position should be addressed and a number of organisations felt it important that the 'myth of capacity' is dispelled.

The UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities Committee review into implementation of Article 29 (Participation in political and public life) of the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities takes the view that formal deprivation of legal capacity and even individual assessments of mental capacity cannot form the basis of

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[5] SOLACE - which represents Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers

restrictions on the right to vote. A recommendation for the UK was that the Government collaborate with representative organisations to ensure universal and secret suffrage. That work will continue through the Accessibility Working Group.

Mencap further suggested that the Care Quality Commission should build democratic participation into its assessment process to ensure that the area is not overlooked when assessing an individual for their care needs. The Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust agree that this could help to promote participation if it leads to support for engagement in the democratic process becoming a routine part of a patient's care plan. We will consider this jointly between the Department of Health and Social Care and Cabinet Office.

Electoral Registration

Responses from individuals gave some interesting answers with many saying they knew how to register and how to vote and that it was 'easy' or 'fine as it is' when asked about changes, but others raised issues and suggestions such as:

- wanting 'help' 'support' and 'encouragement;
- 'more understanding of politics and someone helping me with the form;
- Easy Read, use of pictures, colour form, audio; and
- use of a voting app to allow people to vote through their phone.

Some individuals did not want either to register or to vote but others showed a willingness that was outweighed by other factors such as finding it 'intimidating' to register and 'feeling anxious' about marking the ballot paper and needing support for those activities.

People with learning disabilities use a number of mechanisms to find out how to register and vote including general sources like newspapers, TV, poll cards and Google. But for many there was also a reliance on more dedicated resources like support workers and Easy Read guides.

There was a repeated call for Easy Read to be added to the Government's online registration portal on GOV.UK and we are undertaking that work as a consequence of the responses and points raised in the Accessibility Working Group. Further action could be taken to reduce jargon and 'click-through', and improve awareness through videos and helplines. These are suggestions we need to look at further in terms of practicability.

One organisation suggested automatic registration for people affected by mental illness to avoid the stress of registration and ensure that they could vote. However, that could raise issues if people are vulnerable, where others could steal their vote or coerce them to vote a particular way.

The Law Society as well as a number of representative organisations raised an issue around the ability to register if a person cannot make the declaration of truth (that applicants to register to vote are required to make to confirm that the information they are providing is true). They saw this as an unintended consequence of not providing an alternate route to register for people affected by mental illness. The Law Society argued that it could make people liable to potential fines for a failure to register although it was recognised that Electoral Registration Officers had discretion not to prosecute and that people with Lasting Powers of Attorney could sign declarations on behalf of a disabled person.

The requirement to be registered was identified as an issue within responses from local authorities. One respondent noted that it can cause distress and lead to them having unhelpful conversations with family and carers where the latter feel it is pointless to have someone registered as they will not engage.

As evidenced by other organisations and some individuals, providing their consent for registration was viewed as difficult and felt to lead to lower registration amongst people with dementia and learning disabilities.

There is a concern here also with one organisation reporting that the requirement to register and the threat of a fine causes distress where people were not interested in voting.

Respondents also raised that people detained under the civil sections of the Mental Health Act, voluntary in-patients, and people receiving community treatment are all entitled to vote. Research they conducted suggested that people detained under the civil sections of the Mental Health Act could be unaware of their entitlement to vote and staff did not accommodate their wishes to participate in elections, and seemed unaware that the right to vote existed.

Measures suggested by respondents included:

- the Government should amend the legislation or regulations to create an alternative mechanism for individual electoral registration for those unable to make the declaration of truth because of mental incapacity;

- a duty on health and social care providers to provide support to those using residential care services, supported living services, or longer term residents of hospitals, to assist with registration to vote and exercising the right to vote;

- Government and Charities should work together to communicate to families, carers and people with a learning disability that they have as much right as anyone else to vote (this applies to people affected by mental illness also);

- the Care Quality Commission should explore building democratic participation into their assessment framework; and

- the Government should explore how existing methods used to raise awareness of the need to register could be adapted to target people severely affected by mental illness, such as targeted advertising in different care settings that people affected by mental illness are likely to engage with.

Action 12: The Accessibility Working Group to consider how awareness of disabled peoples' right to vote can be improved, through consulting with delivery partners including those within the care and medical sector as to how this could be achieved.

Action 13: The Government to consider if inclusion of awareness of voting rights in the Care Quality Commission assessment is practicable and of value and, if so, how it may be incorporated.

Voting at Polling Stations

The experience of voting is particularly important in this context people with learning disabilities and those affected by mental illness can find interaction with authorities and formal processes disconcerting and stressful. One respondent referred to a survey which found that people affected by mental illness can find the polling station intimidating and confusing due to not knowing what to expect on arrival and anxiety related to queues at polling stations. A number of respondents highlighted issues within the polling station including the noise and numbers of people inside which made it stressful and made them feel anxious.

There should be consideration by those delivering elections of how the polling station environment can be adapted to reduce stress and improve the voter experience.

The differences between various mental illnesses blurs this picture as some people do not find the process unduly daunting and said that they enjoyed being able to independently attend a polling station and cast their vote. Others actively need support from a companion or member of the polling station staff to mark their ballot paper.

One respondent felt intimidated after being asked their name and address at a polling station and has not subsequently voted. This is a standard part of the voting process at a polling station so someone can be identified and challenged if it is felt they are not the person they claim to be. We must consider how such sensitivities can be taken into account given the process is important to maintain the integrity of elections. A solution may revolve around the approach of polling station staff and engendering a more customer based service with processes being explained and voters reassured if they appear vulnerable or distressed.

Many local authorities recognised the need for informed assistance for Returning Officers and their staff with one suggesting that guidance on how to communicate with people with different disabilities would be useful.

The AEA noted that it is not always clear to polling station staff that people need help and if they do not ask, their difficulties with voting could go unnoticed. There is a gap

between help being sought and it being offered. It may be that sometimes offers are not made in case it causes embarrassment or offence.

Respondents who support people with learning disabilities and autism provided details of a 'voting passport' which can be used by a person with a learning disability and autism to request support to vote at the polling station, for example asking for an individual to mark the ballot paper, enter the booth with them, or to read out the ballot options for them. Respondents commented that it was disappointing that a similar Government scheme is not forthcoming. We need to consider how that may be addressed, including any mechanisms for collecting (and holding) sensitive information on individuals.

Use of companions

The AEA commented on the legislation relating to the provision for companions, notably the provision in law for a carer of a disabled person to mark their ballot paper in the polling station on their behalf. The carer must complete a form providing a signed declaration that they have acted as the companion. In order to do so, the carer must be a relative or someone entitled to vote at the election taking place.

If a carer is not eligible to vote in a particular type of election then they are not allowed to enter a polling station where such a vote is taking place, even though they may be seeking to assist the person to whom they provide care. In some instances this can mean that the carer is excluded for some polls but not others. For example, European Union nationals are not entitled to vote at UK Parliamentary elections but can vote in local council elections.

The support that can be provided by someone to help a disabled person to vote was also referenced by a respondent who is responsible for overseeing elections delivery. It was stated that the current law relating to this can make it hard to find someone to help. The helper must be 18 or over. They must also be either entitled to vote as an elector at the election, or be the father, mother, brother, sister, spouse, civil partner, son or daughter of the voter.

The Government recognises that this is an issue and it would require a change to the Representation of the People Act 1983 to address it.

Design of ballot papers

People with a learning disability may find reading and understanding the content of the ballot paper difficult, and there were calls for use of colour on ballot papers or inclusion of coloured photographs of candidates or coloured party logos.

Research in other countries where photographs have been used or trialled reflect a tendency for people to vote differently than where there are no photographs and for some candidates to be disadvantaged because of their physical appearance (and vice versa).

Further, this suggestions raise issues with secrecy, and timings and production of ballot papers. In order to maintain secrecy, all ballot papers must be the same and therefore any change to include colour and / or photographs would need to be a universal change, requiring legislation.

Other timing and production factors would need to be considered in respect of any such change as the timing for printing and dispatch of postal ballot papers could be adversely affected and printing capacity could be reduced.

On a more positive note, it was highlighted that care workers having access to the ballot paper in advance would be of particular help to first time voters who have a learning disability and could practice voting. It was suggested that ballot papers be made available in advance so that people can practice completing their paper before going to the polling station. Given postal votes are produced ahead of polling day, it might be possible for people who need to do this to have one in advance. It would need some security aspects to be considered to reduce the possibility of fraud.

Measures suggested by respondents to improve the support provided by polling station staff included:

- training and guidance for polling station staff on how to support disabled people to vote, including on common accessibility requirements and communicating with disabled people so they feel welcome, included and can understand the process;

- the Government should work with the Electoral Commission to bring forward a performance standard around accessibility in elections which should be binding on Returning Officers. There should be a set of published standards that disabled people can refer to about what to expect from electoral staff alongside a method of highlighting when staff fail to meet these standards; and

- local authorities should proactively seek to recruit more disabled electoral administrators and volunteers to promote greater awareness and understanding amongst electoral services about the barriers many disabled people can face and how to remove them.

Measures suggested by respondents to improve the voting experience of disabled people within the polling station included:

- the Government should explore whether Easy Read format ballot papers with images might be produced for people with a learning disability;

- a step-by-step guide to what will take place when voters arrive at polling stations should be included in the information sent to voters in advance of elections taking place;

- people should be asked if they know how to vote and whether they have any questions by staff on arrival at a polling station; and

- Government should change the law so disabled people have more choice about who they can take to the polling station with them.

Action 14: The Government should reconsider the law regarding companions to further ensure carers and family members are able to support disabled people.

Action 15: The Electoral Commission and other relevant organisations should consider how training of staff in polling stations may be focused to address the needs of disabled people.

Action 16: The Electoral Commission should consider whether it should include more specific requirements in its performance standards in relation to support for disabled voters in polling stations.

Postal Voting

A range of opinion was expressed by respondents including the challenges people with learning disabilities and low literacy can face when voting by post. Particular difficulties were highlighted: including the small print of forms; having to provide a required signature; the complexity of accompanying instructions resulting in not all requirements being understood; and the difficulty when filling in and folding the ballot paper. It was also stated that disabled people may have to rely on others to vote and also post their ballot paper, which raised concern regarding the secrecy and security of their vote.

Additionally, it was stated by a respondent who supports people affected by mental illness that postal voting may be a chosen method of voting for some due to a perception that the polling station can be perceived as intimidating. With their research showing a greater preference at the 2015 General Election for people affected to by mental illness to vote by post (41%) compared to the wider electorate (16.9%).

The Electoral Commission cited research it had undertaken which included people giving views on how postal voting can be made easier. This recommended including providing digital information online showing how to apply for a postal and proxy vote, and clearer information so that people know they can ask for an alternative version of the postal voting instructions, for example in Easy Read.

The Scottish Electoral Management Board also felt that waivers were not used as much as they could be. They saw postal votes as a positive for those that wanted to use them but recognised that the signature and date of birth requirement could impact their value which is likely to have caused some votes to be rejected.

Measures suggested by respondents to improve postal voting for disabled people included:

- an Easy Read guide to postal voting should be prepared and issued with all postal ballots; and

- the Government should consider introducing an option to register for a postal vote automatically, either generally or for people affected by mental illness, instead of the present system where individuals need to apply to participate in this way.

OTHER ISSUES

There were a number of additional issues raised by some respondents which are worthy of note:

Accessible information and guidance

A range of opinion was expressed on the accessibility of information and guidance. CLIC Sargent, an organisation which provides services for young people with cancer, highlighted that unexpected hospital appointment or sudden illness can prevent people voting at short notice, especially as there is a lack of awareness regarding voting by proxy and emergency proxy.

CLIC Sargent's beneficiaries wanted to engage in the democratic process as the NHS and benefits system are important to them, but often found a lack of awareness that people can vote even if sick on polling day. This was particularly noted amongst health professionals.

Respondents who support disabled people including those who have a learning disability highlighted that disabled people need accessible information and guidance on how to register and vote. If this is not accessible and is difficult to understand then this presents a barrier to voting.

The Electoral Commission noted the work it has done in conjunction with Mencap and the RNIB to produce accessible materials, which are also shared with electoral administrators in local authorities.

The AEA also actively promotes the materials produced by organisations such as Mencap and the RNIB which it includes in its own bulletins, which it in turn shares with those organisations and others. The AEA noted that there are legal requirements which all electoral services must meet. However, it recognises that there needs to be greater awareness of the barriers faced by disabled people when exercising their right to vote.

Measures suggested by respondents to improve the accessibility of information of information and guidance included:

- Easy Read information about voting, polling stations and party manifestos, should be available to make it easier for people to make an informed decision and use their right to vote;

- ensure that the system for applying for postal, proxy and emergency proxy voting is easy and straightforward (whilst maintaining necessary security and secrecy elements);

- provide healthcare professionals with up-to-date information and guidance on voting and what to do in emergencies; and

- all election material should be written in clear, easy to understand language (i.e. plain English) and should be available in different formats, for example Easy Read, large font and audio.

Action 17: The Accessibility Working Group should consider options to make information around postal voting and proxy voting more accessible to disabled people and those with serious health issues.

Combination of polls

The combination of polls can create difficulties for disabled people given they may be faced with different voting systems and more than one ballot paper. Elections tend to be scheduled for the same date in early May in general and so there can be a number of polls taking place on the same day. If a local council election is taking place and there is also a Police and Crime Commissioner election scheduled for that date then there would be two voting systems being used and two ballot papers, each with different instructions and different layouts for how votes are marked.

Timing of Elections

Respondents highlighted that the timings of elections can impact on the level of support that can be provided to disabled people. During the 2017 General Election, there were difficulties as Easy Read manifestos were not published with sufficient time to allow those with a learning disability to full review and understand them.

Disabled representation in political parties

Respondents also highlighted the relatively low number of disabled people in elected office which can be discouraging to disabled people to take part in politics. It was felt that political parties should do more to encourage people with learning disabilities to participate in the democratic process, stand for election and become politically active.

It was commented that the closure of the Access to Elected Office fund has created a financial barrier for disabled persons wishing to stand for election. In May 2018, the Government announced an interim fund of up to £250,000 to support disabled candidates seeking elected office at a local level, over the next 12 months while a long term solution is being established. More details on the scheme will be released in the near future, including any measures taken to ensure such costs are not considered to be part of a candidate's election expenses.

CONCLUSION

The Call for Evidence has elicited a significant body of information that we have sought to set out clearly and do justice to in this report.

Much of the evidence reflects positive activity by all of the major organisations in delivery of support and facilitating participation for disabled people to engage in elections. That is good to see and provides a sound basis to work from.

Many of the individual responses were positive too. Some reflected repeated and enjoyable experiences in participating and engaging in the democratic process. But some people had more negative experiences and are facing hurdles that may deter them from participating in our democracy.

It is important for Government at both national and local level to recognise this and to address it where we can. Working with the range of organisations that represent disabled people is essential in achieving that and the Accessibility of Elections Working Group is a prime vehicle for achieving progress.

We need to see the people involved and not just a process. By their very nature, people are different in all sorts of ways and service provision needs to be flexible. There are limits to how flexible the law can be given the need to provide a consistent service and maintain the secrecy and security of the electoral system. However, at present engagement and participation is undermined by not providing enough flexible provision where there is scope to do so.

We must assess whether the registration and voting channels that are provided which aim to meet the needs of disabled people. Any planned changes implemented to electoral registration or elections (such as Canvass Reform and online registration) will ensure that the needs of disabled people are fully considered during the development of these proposals through an Equality Impact Assessment and compliancy with accessibility standards.

As with any group of people, there was a diversity of views given, for example some want assistance and are happy to be supported to vote and some are not. The challenge is to meet that range of needs as best we can.

The biggest challenge is to change the general mindset to achieve a position where disabled people are included as a matter of course. The Government looks forward to working with its partners to promote a culture of inclusion so disabled people can have their voices heard.

ANNEX A. CURRENT SUPPORT PROVIDED TO DISABLED PEOPLE TO VOTE AT ELECTIONS

At elections and referendums, disabled voters may ask that the presiding officer in the polling station to help them to mark the ballot paper. They may also vote with the help of another person - or "companion" - who must be a close family member over 18 years old or a qualified elector.

All polling stations must be equipped with a special Tactile Voting Device. The TVD is a reusable plastic template that can be attached to the ballot paper and is designed to allow blind and partially sighted voters to vote independently without revealing their voting intentions to a third party.

A large print version of the ballot paper must be displayed in the polling station and an enlarged hand-held sample copy provided on request to be taken into the polling booth for reference.

Local authorities have responsibility for designating polling places (that is, locations or buildings) within their area and make sure, as far as is reasonable and practicable, that they are accessible to the local community, including disabled voters.

Also, electoral officers are now required to make certain information and documents about the electoral process available to electors in other formats upon request, including Braille and audio format.

ANNEX B – LIST OF ORGANISATIONS WHICH PROVIDED RESPONSES

Organisation
Association of Electoral Administrators
Aldingbourne Trust Chichester
Big Voice
CLIC Sargent
Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust
Dimensions
Electoral Commission
Electoral Management Board, Scotland
Enable Scotland
Foxes Academy Catering College
Law Society of England and Wales
Greater Manchester Health Authority
Keyring
Law Society of Scotland
Learning Disability Alliance Scotland
Leonard Cheshire

Macintyre Charity Responses From Reps on Board project Derbyshire
Manor Community
Mencap
Mencap (Harrow)
Pakflatt
Papworth Trust
Rethink Mental Illness
RNIB & Thomas Pocklington Trust
Royal College of Psychiatrists
Royal Society for Blind Children
Scope
Smartmatic
United Response
Voices for All
Voices to be Heard
WebRoots

Local Authorities

Access for all working Group (Basingstoke)

Calderdale
Carmarthenshire
East Cambridgeshire
Basingstoke and Deane
Blackpool
Kirklees
Lancaster
Manchester
N E Lincolnshire
Rochford
Rutland
Salford
Shepway
South Tyneside
Waltham Forest
Warrington

Plus a letter from the Scottish Government which made reference to the Call for Evidence.