Government
Equalities Office

Barriers to Elected Office for Disabled People

Dr Elizabeth Evans Goldsmiths, University of London & Dr Stefanie Reher, University of Strathclyde

Contents

Glossary

Ableism

Cultural norms which promote the idealisation of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness.

BSL

British Sign Language

Cllr

Councillor

D/deaf

D/deaf refers to those who are Deaf (sign language users) and those who are deaf (hard of hearing people with English as their first language and may lip-read and/or use hearing aids).

Disability

According to the 2010 Equality Act, you are disabled if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.

Disablism

The practice of excluding or marginalising people based upon their impairments.

Impairment

The functional limitations of an individual's body and/or mind. For example, an injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes, or is likely to cause, a loss or difference of physiological or psychological function.

LGA

Local Government Association

Neurodiverse

Neurodiversity refers to neurological differences, such as autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia.

PPC

Prospective parliamentary candidate.

Protected Characteristic

It is illegal to discriminate against someone based on a protected characteristic. These include: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability recognises the multiple ways in which society disables people with impairments. Disability is therefore created in the ways in which society is organised.

Executive Summary

Disabled people, who make up around 1 in 5 of the UK population, are thought to be under-represented in politics at different levels of government, both across the UK and internationally. The purpose of this report is two-fold: first, it provides an overview of the state of political representation of disabled people in the UK and around the world. Second, it identifies and analyses the barriers to achieving and holding elected office faced by disabled people in the UK. To date, few governments and political parties outside of the UK have taken steps towards improving access to elected office for disabled people. As such, the array of policies and measures already in place in the UK are relatively advanced. Nonetheless, interviews with disabled people in England and Wales who aspired to stand for election, stood as candidates, and who were successful in being elected as candidates revealed that they continue to face a range of barriers during the various stages of the recruitment and representation processes.

The political representation of social groups

The *descriptive* representation of a social group refers to the presence of members of that group amongst elected representatives. When a group is descriptively under-represented, one potential consequence is that

their views and experiences are not sufficiently included or reflected during the policy-making process. Political parties and governments have broadly recognised that the under-representation of social groups is not good for the health of a democracy; accordingly, some have adopted a range of measures in order to increase the number of elected politicians from under-represented groups. This report discusses the extent to which such measures have been taken to increase the political representation of disabled people.

Disabled people face barriers to political engagement

A range of studies show that disabled people tend to be less engaged in politics. This is partly due to the inequalities they face in education, employment and income. Yet, many disabled voters also face a range of barriers due to the inaccessibility of information and campaign material, polling stations, and ballot papers.

Disabled people are under-represented in elected office

Data about disabled politicians is scarce in the UK, and even more so in other countries. Surveys conducted amongst candidates and office holders at different levels of government across the UK provide varying figures, but they are almost always below 1 in 5, which suggests that

disabled people make up a smaller proportion of politicians than the general population.

The UK has policies aimed at reducing barriers to elected office for disabled people

The Equality Act 2010 states that political parties must not directly or indirectly discriminate against disabled members or candidates. Reasonable adjustments must be made in order to ensure that disabled people are not treated unfairly, and that positive action is permitted in order to encourage and facilitate the participation of disabled people in politics and their election to public office. Several political parties as well as governmental bodies in the UK have adopted various strategies to increase the political participation and representation of disabled people, including: mentoring programmes; internships; and financial support programmes in the form of the Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund, the Access to Elected Office Fund in Scotland and the interim EnAble fund.

Barriers to elected office for disabled people: Evidence from interviews

For this report, 45 interviews were undertaken with disabled MPs, former MPs, local councillors, prospective

parliamentary candidates, local candidates, as well as people who had considered standing for election or who had tried to get selected. The sample of interviewees was relatively diverse in terms of party membership, gender and region within England and Wales. As part of these interviews, a number of barriers were explored in relation to: participation; selection; election; and representation. Strategies for overcoming these barriers were also identified.

Barriers to participation

Disabled people face a number of barriers when participating in party politics, including venue accessibility, lack of interpretation, inaccessible formatting of materials, lack of facilities, and cultural barriers – including a lack of awareness, knowledge and interest on the part of some local parties to make politics more accessible for disabled people. Those interviewees who had been active in party and electoral politics from a young age, and those who developed their impairment after they had already been actively involved in politics, tended to report fewer barriers.

Barriers to selection

Many disabled people reported receiving active encouragement and support from their party to seek selection. At the same time, they encountered a number of barriers which made it difficult to fully participate in assessment days, successfully complete the application

process, and/or effectively campaign for the support of local party members. Financial constraints presented a frequent barrier, for example some interviewees expressed the fear of losing of benefits. Some disabled people who had sought selection also reported facing heightened scrutiny and negative attitudes about their ability to fulfil the roles of candidate or political representative.

Barriers to election

Disabled candidates from all parties experienced a range of barriers during their election campaigns, and particularly in relation to canvassing. They include fatigue, lack of accessible transport, and inaccessible roads and buildings. Overcoming these barriers tends to involve high financial costs which are not often covered by the political parties. Hustings too can be stressful and inaccessible for disabled candidates, particularly for neurodiverse or deaf candidates. Some disabled candidates also reported how their impairments had been perceived or politicised in order to suggest that they were not up to the job.

Barriers to representation in office

Disabled politicians, at both the local and national level, reported that some of the barriers which they had experienced during the selection and election process did not disappear once they had been elected. Interviewees reported continued issues around accessibility, the

formatting of materials, and bureaucratic processes which made it harder for reasonable adjustments to be made. Disabled politicians observed that these barriers meant that they typically spent far more time fulfilling their duties than their non-disabled colleagues.

Strategies for overcoming barriers

Disabled aspirant candidates, candidates, and elected representatives all identified various strategies for overcoming the barriers highlighted above. The strategies principally revolved around the development of personal and informal support networks, the use of social media to make their work and campaigns visible, assistive technologies, developing a sense of assertiveness to challenge perceptions, and securing funding, from schemes such as from the Access to Elected Office Fund.

Conclusion

A core principle of representative democracy is that all sections of the public have equal rights and opportunities to participate in political decision-making, both as citizens and as representatives. Yet, as this report shows, disabled people who stand for elected office or seek to do so face a multitude of barriers. The nature of the barriers varies between individuals, and depends, for instance, on a person's impairment, political experience, and the levels of support they receive from their party. At the same time, the research reported here also finds

many similarities in the experiences of disabled people in politics as well as continuities across the various stages of the representation process at both the local and national level. All of the interviewees emphasised the importance of reducing the barriers and improving access in order to increase the presence of disabled people in politics.

1. Introduction

Around one in five people in the UK have a disability[1], a proportion that is likely to expand with increased life expectancy, and yet there are few politicians with a self-declared disability.[2] The under-representation of disabled people, at both the local and national levels, has the potential to negatively affect the ways in which issues and interests of particular importance to disabled people are represented.

This study was commissioned by the Government Equalities Office (GEO) in order to identify and understand the barriers that disabled people face as political candidates and potential candidates. This includes barriers that occur across the different stages of the political recruitment process, from initial political activism and considering running for office, through to the actual selection and election processes. The research also addresses the barriers that disabled people face once they have been elected, as any negative experiences or portrayals of disabled politicians may discourage others from standing for office.

1 Department for Work and Pensions (2019) Family Resource Survey 2017/18 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/790000/family-resources-survey-2017-18.pdf

2 There is no official data on the number of disabled politicians; previous reports on disability and local government date from 2013 and are likely out of date. Following the 2017 General Election 5 MPs were elected who self-declared a disability. See Section 3.3 for a discussion of existing statistics.

The findings of the research highlight a range of different barriers experienced by disabled people in the political recruitment and representational process. There are certain barriers which re-emerge throughout the various stages, in particular venue accessibility, formatting of materials, societal attitudes towards disability, and financial costs.

The structure of this report is as follows: it begins with a description of the methodology adopted for this study, followed by findings from a review of the existing literature and evidence. This section focuses on the political representation of social groups, and disabled people in particular, in the UK and around the world, including existing policies to increase their representation. Finally, the report presents findings from qualitative interviews with disabled political candidates and representatives, exploring the barriers to elected office as well as the strategies that individuals have adopted in order to overcome those barriers.

The report uses the language of the social model of disability, a model which recognises the role that society plays in disabling people with impairments. Furthermore, in line with this model and in recognition of the language used by the majority of the disability rights movement in the UK, it uses the term ‘disabled person’ rather than ‘person with disabilities’.

2. Methodology

A systematic literature review was conducted in order to gather relevant studies, reports and analyses. This began with a search of various social science journal databases, including JStor, Project MUSE, ProQuest and Social Science Research Network. The research team also used internet search engines, including Google and Google Scholar, and searched the UK Parliament website, as well as those of UK political parties and disability rights groups.[3] The material that was collected included literature and information produced by political parties, government departments or other governmental bodies, and NGOs (both in the UK and around the world), as well as peer-reviewed articles and books by academics. Finally, the authors consulted a network of expert international scholars in the fields of political representation of minorities and disability studies, who provided information about the existence of any legislation, party policies or other efforts in their country to improve access to elected office for disabled people. The authors also consulted Professor Sarah Childs, author of The Good Parliament Report[4] and academic

3 The search was conducted using the following terms: 'disability and political representation', 'disability and politics', 'disability and elections', 'disability and access to elected office', 'disabled political candidates', 'disability and voting', 'disability and political participation', and 'disabled politicians'.

4 Childs, S. (2016) 'The Good Parliament Report' http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/news/2016/july/20%20Jul%20Prof%20Sarah%20Childs%20The%20Good%20Parliament%20report.pdf

advisor to the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation.[5]

Evidence on the barriers to engagement in political parties and to access to elected office that disabled people face, and indeed information about the numbers of disabled people who are in elected office, is extremely scarce. The vast majority of the literature that was gathered in the initial search was not relevant to the topic. Despite having access to a large and pre-existing database of material related to diversity and political representation (which was subsequently analysed to identify references to disability and political representation), there was little that was of direct relevance to the topic. The evidence review, therefore, presents a summary of the key findings of existing studies and reports related to disability, as well as research on the barriers to elected office for other under-represented groups.

This empirical research was designed in order to identify and analyse the barriers to elected office experienced by disabled people, at both the local and national level. 'Nothing about us without us' is a key tenet of the disability rights movement, and this project centralises the voices, experiences and views of disabled people. The study involved a series of interviews undertaken with disabled politicians, candidates and party activists.

5 2010 Speakers Conference on Parliamentary Representation. https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/speakers-conference-on-parliamentary-representation/

The below section describes the research design, the recruitment of interviewees, and the interview process, before concluding with a brief note on how the authors sought to deal with the limitations of this type of research method.

Research design

The study was underpinned by a number of key research questions which were created to identify both the barriers to elected office and the strategies which individuals used to overcome those barriers:

1. What are the specific challenges faced by disabled people during the selection and election process?
2. What strategies and information do disabled people use to overcome these challenges?
3. How do varying structures and selection processes of political parties influence and impact disabled people's experience of candidate selection and their decisions to stand as Parliamentary candidates or local councillors?
4. Which perceived barriers have negatively affected disabled people in practice?
5. What are the relative impacts of barriers to participation?
6. How does this differ for disabled people who chose to put themselves forward as candidates, compared

with those who considered but ultimately decided against this option?

In consultation with the GEO, interview schedules were created to help answer the above questions (see Appendix A). The questions were approached thematically through a focus on the nature of the disability, participation, political recruitment, elections and representation, and these are the themes that guide the structure of this report. Although the report is structured according to the stages of the political recruitment cycle, it is worth emphasising the interconnectedness of these different dimensions. For example, barriers to representation once elected might act as a deterrent to those considering whether or not to stand for office.

Interviews

The study is based upon 45 semi-structured interviews conducted with disabled people. Semi-structured interviews are formal individual interviews, based upon a predetermined set of open-ended questions grouped by topic and set out in an interview guide.[6] Semi-structured interviews are characterised by a degree of flexibility, as the interviewee is able to express their views and guide the direction of the interview, whilst still providing a reliable and comparable qualitative data set. Semi-structured interviews are considered to be an effective method for exploring people's experiences and

6 Bryman, A. 2001. *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

perspectives in depth. More specifically, they are routinely used to analyse the barriers to elected office for under-represented groups.[7] The political recruitment process has been referred to as a 'secret garden' – a process that is often hidden from view and determined by internal party rules and informal party cultures and practices.[8] As such, interviews are a particularly helpful method for gaining an in-depth insight into this process.

The interviews were conducted by the principal researchers (Evans and Reher), as well as by two research assistants (Dr Faith Armitage and Alina Dragos). All researchers have extensive experience of conducting empirical research. The participants were informed about the themes of the research and the types of questions they would be asked before the interviews took place. The interviewers were guided by the language used by the participants during the interviews, for instance whether an interviewee identified as D/deaf, hard of hearing or as having a hearing impairment.

The majority of the interviews were face-to-face meetings, with some being conducted via Skype and telephone. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour and a half. They were conducted in public spaces, such as cafes and local authority buildings, as well as in the homes of interviewees. All the interviews

7 Norris, P., and Lovenduski, J. 1995. *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

8 Gallagher, M, and Marsh, M. 1998. *Candidate selection in comparative perspective: The secret garden of politics*. London: Sage

were audio recorded and are stored on secure encrypted servers at Goldsmiths and Strathclyde.

The authors analysed the qualitative data by first familiarising themselves with the audio recordings and taking notes on the main questions explored, before grouping and coding the data by identifying categories and concepts, and then drawing out overarching themes.

Recruitment of interviewees

In order to ensure that the study captured the views and experiences of disabled people from across the political spectrum, interviews were conducted with individuals from the three main parties as well as with those from smaller parties and independents. The research was framed by an intersectional approach, meaning that particular attention was paid to the diversity of the interviewees in order to ensure it was representative. Participants were recruited via initial contact with the political party disability groups as well as via emails that were distributed by various stakeholders (e.g. LGA and the Office for Disability Issues). Additional participants were identified via the use of a ‘snowballing’ technique, where interviewees recommend other people that the interviewer should approach. Social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, were also used to contact people. While the research team interviewed anyone who self-identified as disabled and volunteered to take part in the research, every effort was made to recruit interviewees with a range of different backgrounds and experiences.

The achieved sample included interviewees from across the main UK political parties as well as many smaller parties and independents; in a range of different positions; across most regions in England and Wales; and with a range of different disabilities. A detailed breakdown of interviewee characteristics is provided in Appendix A to this report.

Participants were made aware that the use of any potentially revealing quotations or descriptions would be checked with them prior to inclusion in any official reports. All interviewees signed a consent form and were informed that they were entitled to refuse to answer any questions. Clarification was sought after the interview if the meaning of an interviewee's words were unclear. None of the research team reported any issues arising from the interviews; indeed, many of the interviewees noted positive feelings about participating in this research project.

3. Evidence Review

The evidence review begins with a brief discussion of the key themes and conclusions in the academic literature regarding the *descriptive* representation of societal groups in politics, i.e. the extent to which political representatives reflect the characteristics of the represented. It then provides an overview of policies and measures that have been taken to increase the number of elected office-holders from other under-represented groups in society, specifically women and ethnic minorities. While this section primarily focuses on the UK, it also touches on policies implemented in other countries. Next, the review outlines statistics and scientific findings on the inclusion of disabled people in politics, both as voters and as elected office-holders. Finally, it provides an overview of the existing policies and measures to increase access to elected office for disabled people, both in the UK and internationally.

3.1 Political representation

Descriptive representation and its implications

The defining feature of a representative democracy is that all citizens should have an equal opportunity to influence the political decision-making process. This includes participating in elections and other forms of political activities, but also standing for elected office.

If members of a particular group in society are significantly less engaged in politics and systematically under-represented among elected office-holders, it is an indication that they might not have equal opportunities to participate in the democratic process. Equal opportunities to participate and to stand in elections are democratic goals in and of themselves. However, they are also an important means by which to facilitate the representation of issues, interests and demands of different social groups.

The academic literature identifies several types of political representation, including *descriptive* and *substantive* representation.[9] Descriptive representation refers to similarity between representatives and the represented in terms of their characteristics and backgrounds. Substantive representation is the reflection of citizens' interests and opinions in the preferences of decision-makers and in the outputs of the policy-making process. Scholars have long argued that the two are connected.[10] Representatives from a particular group might be more likely to share the preferences of the members of that group, due to shared experiences and a motivation to promote their interests.[11] As a result, parties, legislatures and governments who include more representatives of groups such as women, ethnic minorities, or indeed disabled people, might be better

9 Pitkin, H. (1967) *The Concept of Representation,* Berkeley: University of California Press

10 Phillips, A. (1995) *The Politics of Presence,* Oxford: Clarendon Press

11 Mansbridge, J. (1999) 'Should blacks represent blacks and women represent women? A contingent "yes"', *The Journal of Politics*, 61(3),pp. 628-657.

placed to promote and implement policies that reflect the views and needs of the group.[12]

Another reason for why it might be important that political representatives come from different groups in society, and particularly from groups who tend to be politically and socially marginalised, is that they might encourage others from the group to become more politically engaged. Scholars have argued that representatives can act as role models and increase political interest and participation among under-represented groups,[13] thereby helping to close gaps in participation and in representative bodies. Disabled citizens tend to participate less in elections and have lower trust in politicians and the political system, as we explain further below. This could potentially be remedied through measures that increase the numbers of politicians who share their experiences.[14] Diversity of political representation is an issue that fits with the aims of the disability rights movement, which has long argued that disabled people must be directly involved in the political processes in which decisions are made that affect their lives. In other words, “Nothing About Us Without Us”.[15]

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12 Of course, the presence of descriptive representatives does not *guarantee* substantive representation of group interests. Additionally, substantive representation can occur without descriptive representation.

13 Bobo, L., & Gilliam, F. D. (1990) ‘Race, sociopolitical participation, and black empowerment’, *American Political Science Review*, 84(2), pp. 377-393.

14 Reher 2018

15 Charlton, J. I. (1998) *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Barriers to elected office

The majority of the studies and reports exploring barriers to elected office do not focus on disabled people. However, it is still useful to briefly summarise the obstacles that prevent people from other under-represented groups from becoming elected politicians. Research on this particular issue tends to focus on the interaction between supply-side and demand-side factors that shape the political recruitment process. Whilst political parties often claim that they are prevented from selecting people from under-represented groups because they do not put themselves forward, there is evidence to suggest that candidates from under-represented groups are not selected due to various forms of discrimination.[16] In truth, the various barriers to elected office tend to be an interaction between the two. Barriers to elected office include: attitudinal perceptions, caring responsibilities, financial costs, institutional norms, political culture, time constraints, lack of support networks, and levels of political experience. Mainstream political parties in the UK have broadly acknowledged these barriers and, to various degrees, sought to put in place strategies for helping address the under-representation of particular social groups, although their efforts have predominantly targeted women and ethnic minorities.[17]

16 Norris, P & Lovenduski, J. (1995) *Political Recruitment,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

17 Evans, E. (2016) 'Diversity Matters: Intersectionality and Women's Descriptive Representation', *Parliamentary Affairs* 69(3), pp. 569-585.

Policies to increase the political representation of other social groups

In light of these arguments, different actors and institutions have taken steps to increase the number of policy-makers coming from different under-represented and marginalised social groups. In particular the representation of women in decision-making bodies has received increasing attention and a variety of different policies to increase their numbers have been debated, proposed and implemented by political parties, legislatures and governments.

We can broadly categorise the strategies adopted by parties and governments as equality rhetoric, equality promotion and equality guarantees. Equality rhetoric refers to the public acknowledgement that diversity of representation matters; examples of this might include speeches on the topic given by party leaders. Equality promotion is evidenced where parties target and train potential candidates from under-represented groups, for example by running women-only training sessions. Both of these two strategies are internal party measures, typically introduced in response to internal and external pressures.[18] Conversely, equality guarantees, referring to the adoption of measures that guarantee the election of under-represented groups, for example quotas, might require a change in the law.[19] There are different types of

18 Childs, S. (2008) *Women and British Party Politics,* Oxon: Routledge.

19 Lovenduski, J. (2005) *Feminizing Politics,* Cambridge: Polity.

quota systems, as set out in Table 1, and they are used in various countries and regions around the world. They are applied to disability, gender, regional, ethnic, linguistic or religious groups.[20]

Table 1: Quota types

Quota type	Description
Reserved seats	Sets the minimum number of a specific social group in a legislature
Legal candidate quotas	Requires political parties to select a set proportion of a specific social group as candidates
Political party quotas	Political parties set their own internal quota – there are two main types: (1) *aspirant quotas*, where a set proportion of aspirants seeking nomination (i.e. the short-list) must be from a specific social group, and (2) *candidate quotas*, which determine which or how many candidates must be from a particular social group.

In the UK, some parties have set aspirant quotas for how many women should be included on candidate shortlists: the Social Democratic Party started this policy in the 1980s, which has since been continued by the Liberal Democrats.[21] The Conservative Party also established aims and quotas at the candidate selection level from the mid-2000s onward. Meanwhile, the Labour Party adopted candidate quotas, specifically all-women shortlists (AWS),

20 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Gender Quotas Database*. https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/quotas; Krook (2009); Giraud, I., and Jenson, J. (2001) 'Constitutionalizing Equal Access: High Hopes, Dashed Hopes?', in Klausen, J., and Maier, C.S. (eds.), *Has Liberalism Failed Women? Assuring Equal Representation in Europe and the United States*, New York: Palgrave, pp.69-88.

21 Evans, E. (2011) *Gender and the Liberal Democrats,* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

as the proportion of women in Parliament remained low despite the use of aspirant quotas.

Parties have also adopted centralised measures to increase the numbers of ethnic minority politicians. In the 2010 General Election, in which the number of ethnic minority MPs almost doubled to 27, the Conservative Party included several ethnic minority candidates on its centralised 'A-list' of priority candidates. Although the list was repealed ahead of the election, all of the ethnic minority candidates on it were selected and about half of them were elected as MPs. Labour meanwhile sought to place a relatively high number of its ethnic minority candidates in its safest seats.[22]

3.2 Political engagement and representation of disabled people

Statistics and studies from the UK and a range of other countries suggest that disabled people are less politically engaged than non-disabled people, and that they are numerically under-represented among political representatives. Several studies exist on the political attitudes and participation of disabled citizens, while the data on disabled representatives is more sporadic. In several countries, steps have been taken to address the under-representation of disabled politicians, although

22 Sobolewska, M. 2013. Party Strategies and the Descriptive Representation of Ethnic Minorities: The 2010 British General Election. *West European Politics* 36(3): 615-633.

these efforts are much rarer than the measures to increase, for instance, the number of women in politics. This section provides an overview of the electoral participation of disabled people, disabled people in elected office in the UK and internationally, and existing measures in the UK to improve access to elected office for disabled people.

3.2.1 Electoral participation of disabled citizens

We can distinguish between two broad categories of barriers to political engagement for disabled people: legal barriers that effectively disenfranchise them, and barriers that make participating more difficult or less likely.
In some countries, including in Europe, citizens with intellectual disabilities or mental health problems who are deprived of legal capacity and placed under guardianship are fully excluded from the right to vote and the right to stand as a candidate in elections.[23] In other countries, participation rights are not fully denied but limited. Meanwhile in another set of countries, including the UK, they have full participation rights. The 2006 Electoral Administration Act states that "[a]ny rule of the common law which provides that a person is subject to a legal incapacity to vote by reason of his mental state is abolished."[24]

23 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2010) *The right to political participation of persons with mental health problems and persons with intellectual disabilities*.

24 Electoral Administration Act 2006, c.22, c73(1)

Yet, even when disabled people do have the right to vote, their participation rates in elections are lower than those of non-disabled people, as evidence from a range of European countries and the United States shows.[25] Data from the European Social Survey collected between 2002 and 2015 suggests that, on average, the turnout rate in UK general elections was around 6 percentage points lower among disabled people than among non-disabled people. This disability gap in turnout is similar to the European average, which was around 5 percentage points.[26] Disabled people also tend to express lower levels of confidence in their ability to influence politics, in the responsiveness of the political system, and more generally in politicians, parties, and Parliament.[27]

What are the causes of the participation gap? Physical barriers such as inaccessible polling stations, ballot papers, and campaign material can prevent disabled people from exercising their right to vote. In UK elections, polling stations must be accessible and various measures are designed to ensure that disabled voters can cast their

25 Clarke, H., et al. (2006) 'Taking the Bloom off New Labour's Rose: Party Choice and Voter Turnout in Britain, 2005', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinions, and Parties*, 16(1): 3-36; Mattila, M., & Papageorgiou, A. (2017) 'Disability, perceived discrimination and political participation', *International Political Science Review*, 38(5): 505-519; Mattila, M., Rapeli, L., Wass, H., et al. (2017) *Health and Political Engagement*. Oxford: Routledge; Reher, S. (2018) 'Mind This Gap, Too: Political Orientations of People with Disabilities in Europe', *Political Behavior*. doi: 10.1007/s11109-018-09520-x; Schur, L., and Adya, M. (2013) 'Sidelined or Mainstreamed? Political Participation and Attitudes of People with Disabilities in the United States' *Social Science Quarterly*, 94(3): 811-839; Schur, L., et al. (2002) 'Enabling Democracy: Disability and Voter Turnout' *Political Research Quarterly*, 55(1):167-190.

26 Reher (2018)

27 Ibid.

vote. Specifically, disabled voters may ask the presiding officer or a “companion” to help them mark the ballot paper. Where appropriate, they must also be provided with access to a Tactile Voting Device, and large print ballot papers for reference must be available. Information about the electoral process must, upon request, be made available by electoral officers in formats including Braille and audio format.[28]

Despite these measures, disabled voters have reported a variety of barriers to participating in the electoral process. Among those who responded to the UK Cabinet Office’s Call for Evidence on Access to Elections, around a third found the voter registration process difficult. Moreover, disabled voters and disability organisations reported physical barriers at a majority of polling stations, including a lack of ramps and accessible parking. Inside polling stations, respondents pointed to booths and writing instruments that were inaccessible to voters with mobility impairments, polling cards that were inaccessible to people with visual impairments, and inadequate support by polling station staff, which prevented some from voting in secret. For people with learning disabilities, the lack of information about parties and candidates in accessible formats, such as Easy Read or using pictures and audio, was frequently cited as a key problem. Moreover, relatives and carers were often not aware about the legal right and capabilities of disabled people to vote. Finally, the law states that carers themselves need to

28 Cabinet Office (2018) *Call for Evidence: Access to Elections. Government response*.

be eligible to vote in order to act as a companion, something which may prevent some disabled people from voting.[29]

In addition to these barriers to access, studies have identified that marginalisation in other spheres of society also plays a role in the lower voter turnout amongst disabled people. Education, income, employment and social integration provide important resources that facilitate and encourage political participation. Studies based on survey data have found that the lower education, income and employment levels that still exist among disabled people, as well as their frequent exclusion from social and family life, partly explain why they tend to be less politically engaged.[30]

Finally, the dearth of disabled politicians might also discourage disabled citizens from participating. As explained above, scholars have posited that the presence of representatives who share salient identities with voters can increase political engagement among these voters. Descriptive representation has the potential to increase people's political interest and empower them by providing role models and changing perceptions of the ability of group members to participate. Indeed, the demobilising effect of the low number of self-declared disabled people in elected office was also mentioned

29 Cabinet Office (2018)

30 Reher (2018); Schur and Adya (2013)

by respondents in the *Call for Evidence on Access to Elections*.[31]

3.2.2 Disabled people in elected office in the UK and abroad

Since disabilities, including physical impairments and mental health problems, are very often invisible or 'hidden', it is only possible to obtain reliable data on disabled politicians by asking politicians directly. Political parties and the state are often hesitant to do so as this information is perceived as personal and confidential. Moreover, due to the stigma associated with being disabled, and the discrimination and harassment that may result, representatives might be reluctant to disclose their disability even if asked confidentially. Others may not identify as being disabled even if others would categorise them as such. Consequently, it is almost impossible to capture the precise numbers of disabled politicians. Yet, some attempts at doing so have been made in different contexts, for instance through surveys of office holders or on the basis of data requests for accommodation measures.

The Speaker's Conference on Representation has pointed out that the House of Commons would include 130 disabled MPs if it were to be representative of the UK population. Even if a more restrictive notion of disability was used, only including major impairments, we should

31 Cabinet Office (2018)

expect to see 65 disabled MPs.[32] Yet, after the General Election in 2015 there were only three MPs who declared or were publicly identified as being disabled, which increased to five after the 2017 General Election.[33] However, there is no official data on disabled elected representatives in the UK Parliament, while some data exists at the local government level in England. In general, no official data on disabled elected representatives is regularly collected in the UK. Below, we summarise the key figures from the sparse data that does exist.

The Local Government Association (LGA) has carried out several censuses of Local Authority Councillors in England since 1997. In 2013, 38.1% of councillors responded to the survey, 13.2% of whom indicated having a disability or long-term illness (in 2010, the figure was 14.1%).[34] A set of surveys that have been conducted among candidates at different elections in the UK, including general elections, provide additional information. A recent report for the Equality and Human Rights Commission reports statistics from several recent candidate surveys. The questionnaires were sent to all candidates who stood in the respective election, although not all candidates responded. For instance, 53% of the

32 2010 Speakers Conference on Parliamentary Representation; Government Equalities Office. 2010. *Government Response to the Speaker's Conference Report*. http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/speakers-conference/7824.pdf

33 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jun/11/new-intake-brings-number-of-disabled-mps-in-commons-to-five

34 Kettlewell, K. & Phillips, L. 2014. Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013 (LGA Research Report). Slough: NFER.

candidates who stood in the 2017 General Election participated in the survey, 24% of whom responded to the question of whether they identify as disabled. Among the candidates in the 2017 General Election who responded to the question, 10% identified as disabled.[35] These figures are similar to those from the 2015 UK Candidates Survey, where 11% of candidates indicated a disability.[36]

Among the candidates who stood in the Scottish parliamentary elections in 2016, 5% of survey respondents identified as disabled. In the Scottish local elections in 2017, 10% of candidates identified as disabled, whereas 20% of candidates in the Welsh local elections in 2017 did. Among elected councillors in Wales, 18% indicated being disabled.[37] Again, it must be noted that these figures might not accurately reflect the true percentages of disabled candidates and office holders, as not all candidates responded to the surveys and to the relevant question and because it was up to the candidates to indicate whether or not they are disabled.

Despite the scarcity of statistics on the representation of disabled people in elected office, the candidate studies and censuses of councillors in fact put the UK ahead of other countries in terms of data availability. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) sought to obtain statistics from the EU Member States in 2014 but

35 Lamprinakou, C., et al. 2019. Diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain. *Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 124.*

36 Reher, S. 2019. Bridging a Gap? Congruence in Policy Preferences between Political Elites and Citizens with Disabilities. *Unpublished working paper.*

37 Lamprinakou et al. 2019

was only able to obtain information from a few countries about parliamentarians who officially identify as disabled. This figure was highest for Croatia, with 7 MPs, followed by Poland and the UK (3), Greece (2), and Portugal (1). Official data from Cyprus and Luxembourg indicated that there were no members of parliament identifying as disabled. Unofficial data suggested that there were disabled parliamentarians in France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, and Spain.[38] A range of other countries are also known to have disabled parliamentarians, but official figures are lacking.[39]

Several countries, predominantly in post-conflict societies, have reserved seats for disabled people in parliament. They determine minimum numbers of disabled office-holders, which generally constitute less than 2% of legislative seats. These are minimum figures as additional representatives who are not elected through these quotas might potentially also be disabled. Since 1996, Uganda allocates five seats (out of 431) in the national parliament to disabled persons, alongside reserved seats for women, the army, the youth, and workers.[40] It also has reserved seats in local government. Rwanda has one reserved seat elected by the Federation

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38 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). 2014. *The right to political participation for persons with disabilities: human rights indicators*, pp. 68-69

39 In several countries there are well-known politicians with disabilities currently in office, including Wolfgang Schäuble, the President of the German *Bundestag*, Gabriela Michetti, the Vice President of Argentina, and Tammy Duckworth, a United States Senator.

40 Muriaas, R.L, & Wang, V. 2012. Executive dominance and the politics of quota representation in Uganda. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 50(2): 309-338; ElectionGuide. *Uganda National Assembly 2016*. Accessed on 20/03/2019 at http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2755/#_ftn3

of the Associations of the Disabled.[41] Similarly, by passing its Equal Representation and Participation Bill in 2016, Liberia created one reserved seat for disabled people in the lower house.[42] In Kenya, twelve seats in parliament (out of 349) are reserved for women, the youth, disabled, and marginalised.[43] Egypt adopted quotas for party lists for different groups including disabled people, which led to eight disabled (out of 567) parliamentarians being elected in 2015.[44] The 2014 Constitution also makes reference to "appropriate representation" of people with disabilities in local councils.[45] Finally, Zimbabwe[46] and Afghanistan[47] both have two reserved seats for disabled people in the upper house.

3.2.3 Existing policies aimed to reduce barriers to elected office for disabled people in the UK

The under-representation of disabled people in politics is now widely recognised as problematic for the quality and

41 ElectionGuide. *Rwanda Chamber of Deputies 2018*. Accessed on 20/03/2019 at http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2696/

42 Guilbert, K. 2016. Liberia passes law to create seats in parliament for women. *Reuters*. Accessed on 20/03/2019 at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-liberia-women-politics/liberia-passes-law-to-create-seats-in-parliament-for-women-idUSKCN1202AR

43 Shiundi, A. 2017. FACTSHEET: Kenya's new parliament by numbers. *AfricaCheck*. Accessed on 20/03/2019 at https://africacheck.org/factsheets/factsheet-kenyas-new-parliament-numbers/

44 Völkel, J.C. 2017. Sidelined by design: Egypt's parliament in transition. *Journal of North African Studies* 22(4): 595-619; http://www.egyptembassy.net/media/12.16.15-Egypt-Parliamentary-Elections-Fact-Sheet1.pdf

45 Constitution of The Arab Republic of Egypt 2014, Article 180

46 ElectionGuide. *Zimbabwe Senate 2018.* Accessed on 20/03/2019 at http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2772/

47 Constitution of Afghanistan, Article 84

health of democracy in the UK. This is evident, for instance, in the emphasis that the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation placed on this issue in its report from January 2010.[48] A significant section of the report outlines the specific barriers to access to elected office that disabled people face, including attitudinal and cultural barriers created by stigma and prejudice; physical and practical barriers; lack of support from political parties to tackle barriers; and the financial costs of candidacy, including for BSL translation or transportation. The suggested solutions include encouraging people to act as role models; internship schemes; financial support; heightened efforts especially by local councils, which are an important entry point into politics; and stronger efforts by political parties to reduce discrimination, tackle negative attitudes, improve accessibility, set out clear policies to improve access in a systematic way, and develop solutions and alternatives, for instance, for campaigning.

There are two relevant pieces of legislation in the UK that relate to disability and political representation. The first is the Mental Health Act 1983, which disqualified MPs from office when they had been sectioned for more than six months. This clause was subsequently repealed in 2013. The second is the Equality Act 2010, which enumerates several key clauses on disability and political representation: direct and indirect discrimination;

48 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/239/23902.htm

reasonable adjustments and anticipatory duties; and positive action.

Direct and indirect discrimination

Direct discrimination refers to the ways in which someone is treated 'less favourably' than others on the basis of their disability, for example, preventing a disabled person's personal assistant from accompanying them to interviews, meetings or training events. Indirect discrimination refers to rules, policies and practices which disadvantage disabled people, for example, not providing information in a range of accessible formats. The Equality Act 2010 states that political parties are prohibited from either directly or indirectly discriminating against disabled members or candidates.

Reasonable adjustments and anticipatory duties

The law states that associations (which includes political parties) and local councils are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that disabled people are not treated unfairly as a result of their disability and can "access existing rights, benefits, facilities or services in the same way as everyone else".[49] These reasonable adjustments cover policies and practices, premises and venues as well as additional aids and services. This includes, for example, investing in portable audio induction loops for those with hearing impairments or allocating extra speaking time to people with speech

49 Electoral and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2018) *The Equality Act 2010: a guide for political parties,* p. 17.

impairments. Furthermore, councils and associations are required to anticipate the needs of disabled people and to make reasonable adjustments without disabled people having to request those changes be made.

Positive action

Positive action refers to the steps taken by an employer or organisation to encourage the participation of specific groups. Positive action is permitted in situations where participation in an activity by persons who share a protected characteristic is disproportionately low, for example the number of disabled people in elected office. The law allows for 'enabling or encouraging persons' with a protected characteristic to participate in that activity, for example, by holding candidate training sessions solely for disabled people.

The Act also specifies that parties can reserve a percentage of places on candidate shortlists for people from particular under-represented groups, meaning they can use aspirant quotas. It is also legal for political parties to restrict certain shortlists to disabled candidates only (this is only legal for the protected characteristics of sex and disability). This would not constitute discrimination against non-disabled people, as only disabled people are protected against discrimination on the grounds of disability. However, shortlists cannot be restricted to candidates with a specific type of impairment.[50]

50 EHRC (2018)

Actions by the political parties

The political parties in the UK have created bodies and implemented measures aimed at making involvement in the parties more accessible and facilitating the process of becoming a candidate for disabled people. Most parties have affiliated disability groups, including Disability Labour, the Conservative Disability Group, the Liberal Democrat Disability Association, the SNP Disabled Group, and the Green Party Disability Group. Labour also has Disability Co-ordinators in some Constituency Labour Parties (CLP).

There have, to date, been some examples of parties using equality promotion and even equality guarantee strategies to increase the number of disabled candidates. For example, in 2016, Labour's National Executive Committee gave funding to the Oxford East CLP to set up the Oxford Disability Labour Network, which aimed at recruiting and training disabled people as candidates for the Oxford City Council.[51] Also in 2016, the Liberal Democrats adopted a motion to offer its local associations the option to select their candidate from an all-disabled shortlist.[52] Meanwhile, some parties have implemented a mentoring programme to help those from under-represented groups navigate the selection and election process; for example, the Liberal Democrats

51 Tidball, M. 2017. 'My mum has been driver, cook and canvasser. The state leaves a gaping hole'. May 24, 2017 Accessed on 20/03/2019 at https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/24/mum-state-labour-candidate-disabled-oxford

52 BBC News. 2016. Lib Dem plan for 'all-disabled' election shortlists. March 14, 2016. Accessed on 20/03/2019 at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35804750

have a scheme whereby a candidate (or potential candidate) is matched up with someone from the same social group who is experienced in the party and who can provide support and guidance.

Beyond individual parties, there have also been wider movements to try and increase the number of disabled politicians. In 2013, the LGA published a guide for disabled people considering standing as a candidate in local elections.[53] The *One in Five Campaign*, a cross-party initiative launched in Scotland, aims to encourage, empower, and increase political participation amongst disabled people in Scotland, with the long-term aspiration of achieving representation of disabled people in elected office proportional to their numbers in the population.[54]

Parliamentary internships

The House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament have launched initiatives aimed at increasing disabled people's access to Parliament by providing opportunities for them to gain work experience, potentially followed by full-time employment. The Speaker's Parliamentary Placement Scheme offers 9-month paid placements with MPs from different political parties. In the 2019 scheme, 3 out of the 13 positions were reserved for disabled people.[55] Scotland has had several internship schemes

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53 Local Government Association. 2013. *Make a Difference. Be a Councillor. A Guide for Disabled People.*

54 https://www.oneinfive.scot/home/

55 https://www.parliament.uk/about/working/work-placements-and-apprenticeships/speakers-parliamentary-placement-scheme/

for disabled people, funded by the Scottish Government. They include three-month Disability Equality Internships in the Scottish Parliament, with placements in Human Resources, Facilities Management, and Committee Offices, as part of a wider ongoing scheme with a range of employers across Scotland.[56] Previously, several participating MSPs have offered three-month internships in their offices to young disabled people as part of the scheme set up by Inclusion Scotland.[57]

Financial support for disabled candidates

In order to address the higher financial barriers to elected office for disabled people, as identified by the Speaker's Conference in 2010 (and confirmed by the analysis presented below), the UK Government launched the pilot Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund in July 2012.[58] The Fund was used in Local Authority elections between 2012 and 2015, as well as in the General Election in 2015. The fund provided money to disabled people seeking elected office to cover the additional costs they faced, with the aim of allowing them to compete on a "level playing field" with non-disabled candidates. The ultimate goal was to increase the number of disabled people in elected office. Disabled people seeking elected office could apply for funds to cover, for instance, the costs for BSL interpreters,

56 http://www.parliament.scot/abouttheparliament/107612.aspx

57 http://www.lothiancil.org.uk/scottish-parliamentary-internships-for-young-disabled-graduates/

58 Government Equalities Office and Digital Outreach Ltd. 2018. *Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund 2012 to 2015.*

transportation to party meetings or canvassing, or support workers.

Out of 141 applicants to the Fund, 67 of the 94 approved applicants stood for election, and 13 were elected. The total value approved was £418,734, with the highest award at £39,735, the lowest at £130, and the average at £4,455. In the evaluation report, the Government Equalities office and Digital Outreach Ltd, who administered the Fund, noted that "whilst the Fund clearly made a difference for those who were awarded grants, the impact on increasing participation by disabled people has been negligible".[59] Meanwhile, the candidates who received funding were positive in their evaluations, saying that they could not have stood for election without it, but that more funding was needed.[60]

In 2016, the Access to Elected Office Fund Scotland was launched as a pilot project, supporting disabled people standing for selection and as nominated candidates in the local government election in 2017.[61] The Fund, which shared its aims with the Access Fund launched in England and Wales, was administered by Inclusion Scotland. It supported all 44 people who applied, of whom 39 stood as official candidates. Two thirds of those who used it indicated that it "completely" or "mostly" removed the barriers they faced, with one third saying it

59 Ibid., p. 14

60 Ibid., p. 16

61 Inclusion Scotland. *Access to Elected Office Fund (Scotland) 2016 -17 Pilot Evaluation report*

removed some of them.[62] Among other things, the evaluation report by Inclusion Scotland recommended the following: that political parties promote the Fund more actively; that more accessible information for potential applicants by provided; that more information about options for support and more person-centred support be provided; that the Fund should open well in advance of parties' selection processes; and that more consideration be given to the barriers faced by BSL users and deaf people.

The Access to Elected Office funds in England/Wales and Scotland were the first schemes of their kind to provide financial support to disabled people seeking elected office around the world.

62 Ibid., p. 6

4. Qualitative Research Findings

4.1 Barriers to participation

To understand the various ways in which disabled people experience barriers to elected office, it is important to explore the initial stage of the political recruitment process: participation. We asked the interviewees to reflect upon their initial involvement in politics and whether or not their disability shaped the ways in which they were able to participate. Our research identified a number of barriers to the participation of disabled people in party politics including: venue accessibility; lack of interpretation; formatting of materials; lack of facilities; and culture. More broadly, these combined issues of accessibility and culture were framed by a sense that there was a lack of awareness, knowledge and interest on the part of some local parties to make politics more accessible for disabled people. Of course, not all of our interviewees necessarily experienced any barriers to participation, particularly those who had been active in party and electoral politics from a young age, and those who had developed their impairment after they had already been actively involved in politics.

Some of our interviewees had been involved with party politics from a very young age (e.g. whilst teenagers and university students), and had taken part in election

campaigning and local party activities over a long period of time. Others entered party politics at a slightly older age (typically in their 20s and 30s) and brought with them campaigning experience from other sectors, whilst others entered party politics at a later age and brought with them a wealth of experience in the public and private sectors as well as in relation to specific campaigns. The age at which our interviewees became active in party politics appears to be important because those who had been active participants at a younger age did not report that they had experienced any barriers to their participation. It is not clear why they would necessarily have experienced fewer barriers to participation than older people, although those interviewees who had been active from a young age reported that their political parties had been welcoming, encouraging and had made adjustments to enable them to participate. Conversely, those who had come to party politics at an older age were sometimes disappointed that their party had not given any thought to, or were not prepared to spend any money on, meeting the needs of disabled people. Indeed, one local election candidate was struck by the lack of ‘disability literacy in the party’ relative to that in the public sector. There were a few interviewees whose impairments had developed after they had already been actively involved in party politics. They typically reported that their parties had made adjustments in order to ensure that they could still participate.

Venue accessibility

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges our interviewees faced in terms of their initial participation related to inaccessible venues. Interviewees from across the political spectrum reported that they had been prevented from attending local party meetings or campaign events due to issues of accessibility, both in terms of the location but also the building itself. Interviewees observed instances of local party meetings or campaign fundraisers that they could not attend because they were held in inaccessible buildings. Sometimes, even if the building had ramp access, the meeting room was unsuitable in terms of the size or the proximity to disabled toilets. One local councillor could not attend a campaign fundraiser because it was held upstairs in a pub with no lift. Another local election candidate was told that a campaign social was taking place in a restaurant that was inaccessible for wheelchair users because it was cheap and they had to make it accessible for people on low incomes to attend. In this instance we see accessibility being presented as a choice: it is either accessible for people on low incomes or for disabled people.

All of our interviewees noted the extra planning that was required when travelling to an unknown venue:

> The amount of planning and related stress that goes into travelling to an unknown venue is something that many non-disabled people just don’t even think

> about. Is it near a major bus route? (local election candidate)
>
> It can be quite scary going to find a building I've never been to before, and will take me much longer unless I can get a lift with someone. (local election candidate)

As the two quotations above indicate, not only does transportation require disabled people to undertake significant advance planning, travelling to unknown venues (sometimes on the other side of the constituency) can also lead to stress for the individual. This is particularly problematic when local parties hold meetings in many different venues. Some participants suggested that those organising the meetings just simply did not have, in the words of one former PPC, 'accessibility on their radar', which meant that issues of transportation and venue accessibility were not taken into account.

Interpretation

Lack of interpretation for D/deaf interviewees framed the extent to which they were able to participate in local party meetings once they were in the room. For instance, several interviewees noted that hearing loops were not in place, which meant that deaf individuals or those with hearing loss were unable to participate. In some instances, this led some interviewees to decide not to attend any further meetings. For example, one interviewee, aware of the costs involved with hiring a BSL interpreter, subsequently decided not to attend party

meetings because they were ‘embarrassed’ by the amount this would cost the local party:

> I wanted to go to local meetings but I couldn’t because there was no interpreter. […] I felt really embarrassed that we would be using all of the funds to provide access for me. So I decided that I wouldn’t go to meetings anymore so that they could save that money. (former PPC)

Similarly, one MP noted that their party “just didn’t have any money” to spend on induction loops in order to make meetings accessible. Moreover, there was an additional pressure on D/deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals to attend meetings if the party had paid to have an interpreter present. Issues of accessibility therefore seemed to come down to cost, whether the local party could and would pay to make meetings more accessible, and if they did there was sometimes an additional pressure placed on disabled members to make sure they attended every meeting – a requirement not made of other local party members.

Formatting of materials

Several interviewees, especially those with visual and/or cognitive impairments, noted that materials were not formatted in an inaccessible way. For instance, certain audio computer packages struggle to read documents which contain images, cut-and-pasted sections, or dialogue boxes. Indeed, this particular issue was felt to be a barrier for disabled people at all levels of the

recruitment process as the following quotation from a former MP makes clear:

> The biggest barrier I've experienced in public life is getting material in an accessible format and then having the time to sit down and read it. No question about that. (former MP)

As the above quotation indicates, it is not just the accessibility of the material, in and of itself, this is a significant issue for disabled people, but it is the knock-on effects in terms of additional time required to review paperwork and absorb the necessary information. This was an issue highlighted by another councillor who observed:

> I'm at a disadvantage because I can't speed read, it takes me 4 or 5 times as long as everybody else to get through the material. And there's just no recognition of that fact. (Cllr)

This issue is one that affects not only elected politicians, an issue to which we return in a later section, but also disabled people trying to participate in their local party. For instance, literature for party meetings was not always circulated in advance, meaning that some people were not able to participate in discussions relating to paperwork that was circulated during the meeting itself. Sometimes this meant that they could not always take part in decisions or votes during the course of the meeting, or be involved in important discussions regarding campaigning, local issues or policy.

Lack of facilities

Some interviewees had effectively been prevented from attending local party meetings due to the lack of an accessible toilet. Some participants had to push their local parties to recognise this as an important issue:

> After the election the local MP stood up and used out of date legislation to have the temporary disabled toilet removed; […] they argued it was too expensive. They were in denial that it was discrimination. (local election candidate)

The interviewee quoted above has yet to return to their local party meetings as a result of the local party's decision not to go ahead with installing a permanent accessible toilet on the grounds that it would cost too much. This is reflective of what another interviewee, who in the end decided not to run for office, described as a "failure on the part of local parties to realise that the duties set out in the Equality Act 2010 also apply to them."

The Party

For some of our interviewees the parties themselves proved to be the biggest barrier in terms of participation. Several interviewees noted that there was a distinct lack of knowledge about how disability might affect one's participation in politics, with one local councillor recalling that she had received disparaging remarks because she had not gone out door-knocking. Others noted that the

ways in which local parties are run mean that it is very difficult for disabled people to actively participate, for instance one interviewee described how walking was a central part of activism (e.g. walking whilst canvassing, walking to and from events), and that this prevented her from participating as she could not join in. Others noted that party events tended to be very expensive, which was especially prohibitive for someone in receipt of benefits.

Culture

Many of our interviewees, especially those who had decided not to stand for office, reflected on the culture of politics as being particularly off-putting for disabled people. One participant observed that disabled people were less likely to have work experience than non-disabled people, and that this meant that the overly formal style of meetings, as well as the aggressive nature of political debate, would be particularly challenging for some disabled people to engage with. Those interviewees who identified as neurodiverse found the tone and tenor of political debate to be particularly difficult. For example, one politician noted “I find it very difficult when I’m interrupted, and I can’t really cope with the heckling”; another local candidate had struggled with “anxiety when there was lots of shouting and arguing and everybody talking at once.” Indeed, there was a sense that the lack of consensus within party politics was particularly difficult for disabled people to cope with.

The barriers and challenges that we have described above were, for some of our interviewees, framed by a lack of knowledge or interest by parties in making politics more accessible for disabled people. Several interviewees noted the ableist and disableist assumptions which underpinned the way in which party politics was conducted, from the selection of the venue for local events to the timing of the meetings, to the way in which the meetings were conducted. There was a sense that guaranteeing accessibility for all was too expensive and a failure to recognise disability as a protected characteristic. Of course, despite these barriers, the vast majority of our interviewees were very active participants in their local parties, and nearly all of them had sought selection as a local or national candidate.

4.2 Barriers to Selection

The next stage of the political recruitment process is selection. Activists typically have to go through some form of internal party assessment and/or approval stage before they can apply to become a candidate for a specific ward or seat. We invited our interviewees to reflect upon the selection process and the extent to which they received encouragement and support from their political party, as well as any specific barriers they encountered. We found that interviewees encountered a number of barriers to selection, including: assessment days, application processes, financial constraints, perceptions, and expectations. Moreover, these were

compounded by continued problems of accessibility and the formatting of material, as set out in the previous section. However, before exploring these barriers in greater detail it is worth noting that for many of our interviewees the selection process itself was a positive and empowering experience.

Positive experiences

Many of our interviewees reported that the selection process itself had been a good experience. Indeed, participants routinely described the process as “very positive” (former PPC), “very easy” (Cllr), “very supportive” (local candidate) and “very straightforward” (Cllr). Positive experiences were reported across the political spectrum as well as by those standing for office at both the local and national levels. Interviewees praised their political parties for providing invaluable additional encouragement and support which convinced them to put themselves forward, as the following quotation illustrates:

> I received a handwritten letter from the local party and it said we’re having a selection day and we really want people from under-represented groups to come along and stand. That was really nice. If I hadn’t received that letter I wouldn’t have stood. (former PPC)

Other interviewees discussed how their political parties had encouraged them to stand and asked what, if any, additional support they could offer in order to make that possible. For example, one participant asked their

political party to adjust the selection timetable in order to enable them to stand:

> I spoke to the local Conservative party and explained to them that I would need to be selected early so I would have enough time to make an impact and I was selected 6 months out and then won. (Cllr)

Assessment

All the main political parties hold assessment days for those wishing to become election candidates. The process differs according to whether or not a candidate wishes to stand for local or national office, but generally consists of a day of written and oral exercises which applicants have to ‘pass’ in order to be added to the approved list of potential PPC’s. For instance, if a candidate wishes to stand as a local councillor for the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat parties, they need to fill out a detailed application form and attend some form of interview. The Green Party requires candidates to submit an application form and then local party members vote for their preferred candidate. Meanwhile, candidates wishing to stand for national office typically have to undergo a centralised assessment process.

Some interviewees reported that the centralised assessment day held for those wishing to stand for elected office at the national level presented a number of distinct challenges and barriers. For example, one person

who had thought about standing at the national level reported being prevented from attending assessment days for well over a year because the party had, so far, been unable to provide him with a scribe:

> The whole process is run by volunteers, and with the best will in the world, they're nice, but they're a bit bumbling. So we had a scribe then we didn't have a scribe and then we had to cancel and reschedule and then we had to reschedule again and then there was the local elections. So, no-one in the party was obstructive but it still hasn't happened because we can't find a volunteer and I haven't pressed as hard as I can. Everyone's a volunteer and doing more important stuff. (prospective national candidate)

The quotation above demonstrates the problems surrounding the informality of some of the assessment days, with the reliance on volunteers having a detrimental impact on the ability of disabled candidates to participate. Meanwhile, others have had to rely on family and friends for assistance on the actual day because their political party has not provided assistance.

There was a sense from those interviewees who had experienced challenges during the assessment process that whilst the party had not sought to discriminate against them, they had nonetheless been either placed at a disadvantage or treated differently to the other candidates to their detriment. For example, one

interviewee had been given extra time to complete the tasks but the party had placed him in a different room for most of the day which meant that he missed out on the socialising and networking with the other candidates.

Application

Having gone through the assessment stage, candidates then have to apply to become a candidate for a specific seat as and when they are advertised. Several interviewees reflected on how this stage of the process was particularly disadvantageous for disabled people. One interviewee described the selection process for by-elections for national office as particularly 'inaccessible' because candidates may only have 24-48 hours to submit an application. Some noted that they were restricted in which seats they could apply for, as they could only really stand in the ward/constituency in which they lived. Indeed, there was a sense that the parties ought to pay particular attention to mobility when considering applications from local disabled people.

Financial

Interviewees reflected on the expense of seeking selection. Disabled candidates with particular support needs often had to pay for their own assistants or interpreters in order to try to get themselves on a level playing field with the other candidates seeking selection. Interviewees identified a lack of funds available to help disabled candidates at the pre-selection stage. For

instance, a visually-impaired candidate seeking selection as a PPC in a geographically-large constituency would have to either rely on friends or family to drive them around to meet local members or would have to pay for taxis. Indeed, many of our interviewees observed that they were, in the words of one local candidate, “heavily reliant” on informal support from friends or family because they could not afford to pay for the additional support. The additional cost faced by disabled candidates is a particular issue because reports routinely identify that disabled people are less likely to have access to economic resources and are more likely to experience higher rates of unemployment.[63]

Benefits

The potential loss of benefits as a result of standing for office deterred a couple of our interviewees from seeking selection. Several of our interviewees who had considered running for office observed that if they were to stand for office they believed that they would lose their benefits, as they would be deemed ‘fit to work’. This loophole was deemed to be particularly discriminatory as running for elected office provides no income in and of itself, which meant that those who did stand for office would effectively lose their income. Some interviewees noted that it was ‘unfair’ that disabled people would lose their benefits and that standing for elected office was not the same as being fit for work.

63 House of Commons Library. Briefing Paper Number 7540. 30th November 2018. People with Disabilities in Employment.

For instance, one interviewee noted that she could perform many of her council duties from her bed, such as reading, responding to emails, writing reports, making phone calls and participating in virtual meetings, however, due to various long-term health conditions she was not able to work.

Perceptions

Many of our interviewees reflected on how their disability shaped the ways in which their local party perceived them during the selection process. In particular, respondents stressed the ways in which disability came up during interviews or at husting events:

> There was a question about how I was going to manage with my disability and I said well, I work, I already go canvassing so I've had a track record. (Cllr)

Whilst some interviewees welcomed the opportunity to address any perceived negativity with regards to their disability, others were less comfortable discussing it. Indeed, for some of our participants there was a reluctance to call attention to their disability by discussing their impairment in any great detail. Others, however, welcomed the chance to address any negative perceptions head on:

> I'm very direct and clear about what I want and need, but I know that is not the case for very many disabled people. (MP)

Obviously, the extent to which individuals are willing to discuss their disabilities varies, but it also appeared to be the case that some local parties were asking the candidates directly about how they would ‘manage’ to campaign.

Expectations from political parties

Our interviewees noted that political parties often have very traditional views about their expectations of candidates and how potential candidates can ‘prove’ themselves. There is a certain degree of ‘presenteeism’ presumed, with someone’s commitment measured by how often, and for how long, they go out door knocking. One interviewee observed that phone canvassing was not seen as a “legitimate alternative” for those with mobility issues. Another interviewee recalled how in her local party there was an expectation that anyone serious about standing to be selected would attend the weekly Saturday canvassing session, noting that “you need to be seen to get selected”.

Whilst some of our interviewees reported very positive experiences of the selection process, it was clear that there were a number of distinct challenges. Underpinning these barriers was a sense that parties had not always sought to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people, nor had they taken disability into account when running processes for selection or setting expectations for aspirant candidates. These barriers notwithstanding,

most of our interviewees went on to stand as candidates at either the local or national level.

4.3 Barriers to Election

Once an individual is selected as a candidate or decides to run as an independent, the next stage of the process is the election itself. Just under half of our interviewees had been successfully elected at either the local or national level, whilst the remaining participants had either not (yet) been elected or had decided against standing for office. The vast majority of our interviewees (87%) had at some point stood for election. Whilst some of our interviewees noted the ease they had in getting past the selection process and the active encouragement they had received, all of those who had stood for office reported multiple barriers during the election process itself. These ranged from the typical components of an election campaign, e.g. canvassing and hustings, to the perceptions of other candidates and the voters, to the lack of support and financial implications. Some of these barriers are ones that other non-disabled candidates might recognise, but these barriers have particular implications for the political representation of disabled people.

Canvassing

One of the major activities of an election campaign is canvassing, where candidates and party activists deliver leaflets and knock on doors to talk to voters. Virtually all

of our interviewees observed that they found this element to be particularly challenging, not least when they were standing at the national level and so had to go to parts of the constituency that they were not familiar with. Similarly, those with mobility issues or visual impairments found the process of knocking on doors, gaining entry to blocks of flats, and then navigating their way around once they were inside, to be a significant barrier. Whilst some of our interviewees reported that the party had provided additional support for them, such as someone to accompany them as they canvassed, there was also frustration at parties' failure to take their impairment into account when organising canvassing sessions:

> I turned up to the canvass, which I was told would be the most accessible canvass, but I discovered that rather than as promised that we would be near to accessible roads which had better pavements and letter boxes, I ended up wheeling ¾ of a mile to the meeting point not feeling my best. (local candidate)

Other interviewees also talked about the double-edged sword of trying to prove that they were just a candidate like everybody else whilst also recognising that there were limitations on what they could do because of being disabled. One very experienced local councillor summed this up:

> I used to feel as though I should be doing everything myself, now when leaflets arrive and it's time to

> knock on doors I just pick up the phone and ask for help. I have accepted that I can't and shouldn't be trying to do everything. (Cllr)

For the above interviewee this sense of having to prove himself had diminished over time, and yet for those seeking election for the first time, or those relatively new to electoral politics, there was a distinct recognition of the pressure to push themselves as hard as possible. In one instance, this led to a local election candidate (now a councillor) being hospitalised. Indeed, for those interviewees with ongoing illnesses or chronic health conditions, the physical and emotional toll of the election campaign was a significant barrier. One councillor identified how he had to be constantly thinking ahead about his time and his energy during the election campaign, not least because of the importance of the candidate being seen to be out and active:

> There is a lot of energy involved as opposed to someone without a disability, so I have to manage that and manage my time effectively. If I walk down the street I have to get seen that I'm out and about. (Cllr)

Those who stood at the national level reported a much higher level of exhaustion and physical stress during the election, with one interviewee reporting that the election had "created illnesses I didn't have previously because of the barriers I'm facing […] and relentless discrimination." Whilst candidates at both the local and national levels

reported the physical and mental toll that campaigning had had upon their health, the size of the constituency meant that those standing as PPCs were often out canvassing in unfamiliar areas which, as discussed previously, oftentimes exacerbated the physical toll of campaigning.

Hustings

Although not all of our interviewees had participated in hustings events, many of those who had participated identified them as a barrier during the election campaign. Some were invited to participate in hustings in inaccessible venues, others reported not being able to go up onto the stage with the other candidates, and others identified the format of the events themselves as being particularly difficult for some disabled people to negotiate, particularly for neurodiverse and/or deaf candidates, as the below quotations illustrate:

> In the hustings it's difficult for deaf people because there is always a time lag whilst it's relayed by the interpreter. In a debate sometimes you need to take advantage of interrupting at a certain point to focus on an opponent's weakness. Always behind in real time with communication. (former PPC)

> I'm fine with public speaking and presenting but I cannot cope with the idea of people shouting and interrupting each other, and lots of different people all asking me questions. (someone who had considered running for office)

This returns us to how the style of politics poses a particular barrier for disabled people during the election process. There was also a sense that hustings and the format of these traditional events favoured those who came from well-educated backgrounds and who were well-versed in how politics is conducted. For a couple of our interviewees, this accepted style of politics was one which implicitly, if not explicitly, disadvantaged disabled people. Interviewees described hustings events as "utterly exhausting" (PPC) and "physically and mentally difficult…very disadvantageous for disabled people" (Cllr).

Perceptions

The vast majority of our interviewees disclosed their impairment during the selection and subsequent election process. Although many of our interviewees reported that they felt respected across the political spectrum, some were dismayed that their impairment had been used by their opponents during the election campaign, as one local councillor recalled:

> When I started doing politics I was on employment support allowance and […] there is a stigmatism there. Other politicians will go 'oh, he's on benefits' which stigmatizes that person and then it goes onto election leaflets. And it's not only hurtful but it actively damages the chances of someone like me wanting to go into politics. (Cllr)

In fact, the participant quoted above reported that he thought this strategy had actually backfired, and that whilst he had received a lot of questions about his benefits, many voters were sympathetic. Similarly, another local councillor reflected on how her opponents used her disability on the doorstep to indicate that her visual impairment would make it much harder for her to do her job properly.

Very few of our interviewees reported feeling as though the voters had negative perceptions of them because of their disability. However, several did identify situations in which they felt as though the voters had responded to them in a somewhat patronising or dismissive manner. For instance, one councillor said that during the election campaign people frequently assumed he was campaigning on behalf of someone else and that he couldn't be the candidate. Another local candidate said that whilst people were often well-meaning, their attempts to help were often thoughtless and/or misguided, for example offering to push her up the road as she delivered leaflets which to her mind "did not identify me as an equal". Indeed, these experiences formed part of a wider set of experiences in which people were uneasy and unsure about how to approach and engage with disabled people.

Lack of support from political parties

Some of our interviewees, including those who had been actively encouraged by their parties to run for office,

noted that there was a lack of support once they were selected. For some, this lack of support was because they were not standing in a target or winnable seat; for others, it was symptomatic of a lack of recognition that disabled candidates might require additional support with campaigning activities, such as those described above. One interviewee noted the gap between the desire on the part of her party to see more disabled people elected and the additional support they were willing to provide in order to help bring that about. A couple of candidates described feeling ‘abandoned’ by their local party once they had been selected and felt as though there were no support structures in place for them. Others noted that their parties had such scarce resources that they had to rely on their own informal support networks (an issue to which we return in Section 4.5).

Financial

In the previous section we discussed the ways in which disabled candidates might be deterred from standing for office due to financial constraints. None of our interviewees reported receiving additional funds from their party because they were disabled candidates. Some of these issues were also apparent during the election itself, in particular candidates having to pay for their own taxis and transport during the campaign, for which they were not reimbursed. One interviewee, described how they had taken time off work during the campaign but because they were self-employed this

meant that they had lost out on income and had to turn work down:

> It really hit me in the pocket. The total loss might have been about two grand. I had to borrow that off my parents and there were loads of things I had to buy once I got elected which probably took me up to three grand. (MP)

Of course standing for national office, and in particular in a winnable seat where a candidate might be expected to give up paid employment in order to be a full-time candidate, places the candidate in a financially vulnerable position. For some of our interviewees, this was a significant problem and meant that they had gone into debt as a result of standing for office.

All of our interviewees thought that additional funding should be provided specifically for disabled candidates standing on behalf of a political party or as an independent. Whilst the vast majority of interviewees , across all parties and independents, felt that this money should be provided by the Government, in order to ensure that those from smaller parties and independents were provided with financial support, a few interviewees felt that political parties should provide the additional funds.

The range of barriers experienced by our interviewees during the election process were more extensive than those reported during the selection stage. In particular, assumptions regarding political campaigning and

electioneering were felt to put disabled candidates at a disadvantage. Financial constraints were a critical issue for many interviewees who required funding to help them secure additional support and new assistive technologies in order to help them try to compete on a level playing field.

4.4 Barriers in Office

Those of our interviewees who were successfully elected at either the local or national level reported that once in office they experienced significant barriers to their ability to perform their representative duties. These barriers are very similar to those that participants reported experiencing during the previous stages of the political recruitment process. In particular issues of accessibility, both in terms of buildings and the material provided, the impact of perceptions, and the political culture continued to present significant barriers.

Accessibility

Buildings had frequent accessibility issues, for example two of our interviewees described how the lift was frequently out of order which meant that they could not access either their office or meeting rooms. The below quotations give a flavour of the types of barriers that disabled councillors experienced:

> What I have discovered to my utter dismay and frustration is that when you enter local government there is no support for disabled people. In my

> council there is no support for dyslexia or epilepsy. I asked if there was any first aiders in the council chamber just in case I had a fit and they said no. So I asked if we could move the group to a different room with an extra door so that if I did have a fit I could get out easily. And they declined that request. (Cllr)
>
> The lift in the Council building was broken for 10 weeks. All of the offices are on the lower ground floor, so I asked how I was supposed to access my office and they told me I could work from home. (Cllr)

As the above quotations indicate, disabled councillors have been prevented from performing their representative duties in a number of different ways. Reasonable adjustments were not made, for example by rearranging meetings to the ground floor or making offices available on the ground floor. Our interviewees expressed their frustration at the process, with one local councillor stating that she could not recommend that any local disabled person with similar impairments to her run for office.

Formatting of materials

Our interviewees also reported that despite making specific requests to provide material in an accessible format, some councils had refused. Not only did this make it harder for the councillors to perform their duties, it also meant that they had to spend far more time reading the material than any of their other colleagues.

> I found the materials to be really inaccessible and when I asked the council to change them they said no sorry that's the way we do them. (Cllr)
>
> When I asked for my questions to be in a different shade on the screen so I could read them they said no because yellow is your party colour. But it's the only bloody colour I can read. I had a fight because they weren't taking my questions because I couldn't read them off of the screen and people were point of ordering me because it wasn't verbatim off the screen. So that was difficult. (Cllr)
>
> They put you in a massive committee and give you a pile of documentation and tell you that it's your job to read it. I understand that's part of the job but can you change the font or the colour? No because it's printed by an outside firm. Can I use the printer to print off my own copy in a different colour? No because that's uneconomical. There are barriers after barriers after barriers in this place. (Cllr)

For these interviewees there had been a failure to make reasonable adjustments which would enable them to perform their duties, for example by printing paperwork for everyone on yellow paper.

Perceptions

For some of our disabled politicians, there was a fear about requesting additional support because of the stigma and perceived repercussions of not being seen

as being up to the job. Indeed, one local councillor was concerned that by asking for support she might also be contributing to an existing negative narrative about disabled councillors who ‘need extra help’. Another councillor spoke about how he tried to just ‘get on with things’ and not ‘make a big deal’ out of his disability because he worried that people would think that he was asking for special treatment or that he was trying to ‘get out of’ fulfilling his representative duties.

Bureaucracy

Of course, many of our interviewees who are currently serving in office had requested and been granted various forms of support, for instance assistive technology. However, there were also participants who had struggled to secure the additional support required. For instance, one councillor who has recently lost the use of his right hand has been waiting for 6 months for a phone with voice to text functionality. Meanwhile, others are frustrated by bureaucratic processes which leave them unable to fulfil their duties. One councillor described how despite having successfully secured money through Access to Work in order to help pay for a personal assistant, she was sent a PA who refused to read newspapers to her or to essentially provide any professional help.

Culture

Among the MPs (current and former) who we interviewed, there was a recognition that the culture of Westminster, with its myriad formal rules and informal norms, was sometimes particularly difficult for disabled people to navigate. The culture and tone of the Chamber was identified as being a significant barrier for neurodiverse MPs, whilst the scheduling of votes late into the evening and throughout the night was thought of as something that many disabled people with chronic illnesses would struggle with. The aggressive and combative nature of Westminster meant that disabled MPs were not always able to fully participate, which meant that they felt as though they were not able to perform their representative duties. Indeed, one MP described Westminster as having an “inaccessible, hostile, bullying culture.” Another interviewee, reflecting on the challenges of being a disabled MP in Westminster, also observed that they were aware of several other MPs who were not willing to identify as disabled or disclose their impairments for fear of stigma and discrimination. For this MP the wider cultural approach to disability needed tackling in order to see change in Westminster.

Our interviewees who currently serve at the local and national level reported various barriers to their ability to perform their representative duties. It was clear that there had been instances in which equalities legislation had been breached. Moreover, several interviewees reflected

on the extent to which their work was made more difficult by the refusal to make minor or reasonable adjustments. Strikingly, all of our interviewees reported the sheer scale of the tasks involved with being a disabled politicians, specifically in relation to the amount of time that they have to spend on their duties relative to their non-disabled colleagues.

4.5 Strategies for Overcoming the Barriers

Our interviewees developed a variety of strategies for trying to overcome the barriers described above. These strategies can be broadly grouped as follows: informal networks of support; social media; assistive technologies; assertiveness; and the Access to Elected Office Fund.

Informal networks of support

In the absence of more formalised support from the political parties, many of our interviewees described how they had relied on the support from family and friends to help enable their participation, selection and election:

> I spoke to my partner and she said she would interpret for me. The party had offered but they are very expensive and I was embarrassed and didn't want to use up all their funding so I said no. (former PPC)

Many interviewees spoke about the importance of this support, and how they would not have been able to stand

for office without it. However, some did note the pressure that this additional support placed upon their relationships. The support ranged from providing lifts, accompanying them whilst they canvassed and during hustings events, as well as checking election material and reading documents aloud. This support also included financial support, for example through loans or donations:

> I work for the family business and they made it financially possible for me to stand, I was given a leeway for my hours. I could work from home when necessary. (local election candidate)

It is also the case that anyone, disabled or otherwise, who stands for office acknowledges the importance of support networks. However, the types of support provided to disabled candidates is significant because it is directly related to their impairment(s).

Social media

Whereas disabled politicians are, or can be at a disadvantage when it comes to some traditional forms of campaigning, such as canvassing, social media was considered by many of our interviewees to be an important platform for them to be able to communicate on a more level playing field:

> People like to vote for people they can engage with and are like them and I think it’s great that different people have said that I have inspired them. And I think it helps to use Twitter videos with captions so I

> can put my views across that way. I think that's good. They will see that my views match their politics. (former PPC)
>
> I always made sure people knew what I was doing. I would go the local café and tweet and Facebook about it to make sure I was seen because you can't be everywhere and for me I think it was important to be seen. (Cllr)

As the above quotation illustrates, social media enabled some disabled candidates to raise their profile and to ensure visibility. This was considered to be especially important for those limited in the number and type of election activities in which they could participate. Interviewees were able to use various social media platforms in order to engage with voters, promote their activities and also to combat any potential negative perceptions of them based upon their impairment.

Assistive technologies

Many of our interviewees relied upon a range of assistive technologies in order to overcome the various barriers they faced. These were particularly important for visually impaired people whose devices included iPads that speak to them whilst out canvassing. Others made use of voice activation technologies and devices that enlarged text.

Assertiveness

Some of the interviewees talked about how they had learnt to be more assertive in order to overcome some of the barriers that they experience. For instance, one councillor said that he would intervene in a meeting to ask people to go round the table at the start of a meeting to identify themselves, in the absence of the Chair having done this. Another observed that during elections he had become “quite good at telling the party what I need”. However, there was also a recognition that not all disabled people felt comfortable doing this.

Access to Elected Office Fund

Several of our interviewees had benefited from the Access to Elected Office Fund in previous elections. All of those who had been previous recipients of the Fund described how important and useful it had been. As noted above, the majority of our interviewees believed that the money for this fund should be provided by the Government in order to make the process open to those from across the political spectrum. Interviewees who had been awarded money from this fund described how it had enabled them to overcome specific barriers, for example, one councillor was able to hire a personal assistant to help her canvass during the campaign:

> It was fantastic; it gave me a pot of money that I was able to pay somebody to basically be my right-hand person like a support worker who came with me

> wherever I went. I was able to campaign as well as someone who could see. I can't go out canvassing on my own, it's just too difficult. I don't know exactly where I am, I don't see beware of dog signs when I'm going in with my dog it's a safety issue. I need someone with me. I need someone with me when I'm up on stage at a hustings; I can't see if someone puts their hand up or if it's my turn to answer. (Cllr)

Importantly the freedom to be able to campaign with a paid-for assistant meant that she was not reliant on volunteers, and so could decide for herself when and where she would canvass. Another interviewee who tried to get selected as a PPC reported that the money had been 'indispensable' in enabling her to pay for someone to help write and edit her campaign material, whilst another identified it as a 'crucial resource' to help him stand for election, as it allowed him to pay for transport costs which he otherwise could not have afforded.
The money which was awarded to these interviewees allowed them to overcome specific barriers to election which were directly related to their impairment and would not have been experienced by their non-disabled colleagues and opponents.

5. Conclusions

Many of the barriers that our interviewees described, especially issues surrounding accessibility, formatting of materials, perceptions and finance, were present throughout all the stages of the political recruitment and representation life cycle. In other words, the initial barriers experienced by our interviewees did not disappear once they were selected or elected. This indicates that there is a widespread problem in making politics accessible for disabled people at both the local and national levels.

Whilst around a third of our participants highlighted the support and encouragement that they had received from their political party, local authority or from the support services at Westminster, there were clear examples of where parties and institutions had failed to make reasonable adjustments to facilitate the participation of disabled people. In other words, equalities legislation has been breached. In order to make politics more attractive and accessible for disabled people these issues need to be addressed.

These initial findings represent the first stage of a wider project designed to explore the barriers to elected office for disabled people. From our initial evidence review it is clear that there is a lack of information or research on disability and representation both in the UK but also around the world. There is, moreover, a lack of

knowledge regarding exactly how many of our elected representatives and candidates are disabled.

One of the key findings emerging from this initial stage of the project is the impact of financial barriers on the selection and election of disabled people. The second stage of the project will therefore explore this in greater detail by surveying those who have applied for the EnAble fund and the impact it made to their campaigns, as well as further exploring the strategies adopted for overcoming barriers.

Appendix A – Interview Schedule

Introduction

Brief overview of the project including aims and objectives; explain data management; gain informed consent; answer any questions about the project or interview process.

- Can you briefly describe the nature of your impairment to me and the types of barriers or difficulties you experience in your daily life? Are there any circumstances or settings that pose particular barriers?
- Have you had your impairment since birth? If not, did it develop before or after you became politically active?

Participation

- Can you tell me about how, when and why you got involved in politics?
- To what extent do you feel that your impairment has shaped the ways in which you participate in politics? (follow up on issues of access, discrimination, financial constraints and perceptions)

  - *(If applicable, ask about how participation has changed after the impairment developed)*

- Can you tell me about why you have decided against standing for office *(if applicable)*?

Recruitment

- Can you tell me about your experiences of the selection process for becoming a local/national election candidate? *(follow up on how early on in the election cycle they were selected and how this affected them e.g. employment, support)*
- Did you always fully disclose your impairment during the selection process? Can you tell me a bit about how you felt about the decisions you made in that regard?
- What forms of support and encouragement did you receive, if any, from your political party? *(ask about levels of support for those who stood as Independent candidates)*
- In what ways do you feel that your impairment has affected your experience of the selection process (either positively or negatively)?
- What, if any, changes would you like to see to the selection process which would better enable disabled people to seek selection?

Election

- Can you tell me about the election process itself, specifically whether disability affected the campaign?
- Did you always fully disclose your impairment during the campaign? Can you tell me a bit about how you felt about the decisions you made in that regard?
- Did you receive any additional support from your political party during the election campaign?
- Do you feel that your impairment affected how you were perceived in any way by voters, the media, or your opponents?
- Have you, or would you in the future, consider running for office at the national level? If not, why not? *[for local election candidates]*

Representation

- What, if any, support is in place to help you with your duties as a Local Councillor/MP? Are there any additional ways in which you could be better supported to carry out your role?
- To what extent do you think it is important to have more disabled politicians?
- Finally, do you have any other thoughts on how best to increase the number of disabled politicians? *(ask about views on the EnAble fund, and where they think the money should come from)*

Appendix B – Characteristics of Interviewees

Type of office	
MPs and former MPs	4
Local councillors	18
PPCs (incl. those who considered and tried to get selected)	8
Local candidates (incl. those who considered and tried to get selected)	15
Party	
Conservative	6
Green	2
Independent	4
Labour	22
Liberal Democrat	11
Gender	
Female	25
Male	20
Ethnicity	
BAME	3
White	42
Region	
East of England	5
London	10
West Midlands	1
North East	2
North West	6
South East	6
South West	6
Wales	2
Yorkshire and the Humber	7

N.B. Interviewees are not categorised by type of impairment, as many interviews had a wide range of multiple impairments.