

Polls Apart 4

Campaigning for accessible democracy



Executive Summary

scope

About cerebral palsy.
For disabled people achieving equality.



Time to get equal
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Results

Polling stations	
Number of surveys returned	2,055
Constituencies covered	81%
Polling stations with level access into the building	60%
Appropriately designed ramps	64%
Level access inside the building and easy to move around	87%
Polling stations with a low-level polling booth	66%
Polling stations that had a large print notice on display	70%
Polling stations that had a tactile voting device	68%
Polling stations staff that were welcoming and helpful	96%
Total polling stations inaccessible	68%

Access to polling stations for voters with learning impairments	
Number of surveys returned	86
Information from council on the election was easy to read	56%
Accessible polling station	89%
Helpful staff	80%
Polling stations inaccessible to voters with learning impairments	49%

Postal voting	
Number of surveys returned	215
Constituencies covered	24%
Simple guide to completing postal vote	73%
Information about requesting assistance to vote in your home	51%
Voting information contains details of a helpline	60%
Total postal voting systems inaccessible	63%

Key findings

Voting at a polling station

68% of all polling stations surveyed had one or more serious access barrier. This is an improvement of just 1% on 2001.

These disappointing results are largely due to poor physical access. Only 60% of polling stations had level access into the building, an improvement of just 9% on 2001. More worryingly, at this election only 64% of ramps were appropriately designed compared to 71% in 2001.

“What a disaster! Yet again this polling station is a touring caravan. At least it wasn't displaying a "disabled access" notice as has happened in the past. I was informed that there was no other suitable location in the area and that staff got around the access issue by bring the ballot box outside into the pub car park! No polling booth inside as it doesn't fit, nowhere secret to vote as the two staff sit at the table inside, poorly lit, totally inaccessible. Large print ballot paper was posted on the outside of the caravan.”

Vale of Glamorgan

These findings prompt some serious questions about the extent to which the Disability Discrimination Act duties are being observed and enforced. The new duties that came into force in October 2004 were expected to significantly increase the numbers of accessible community buildings. It is clear from these results that this hasn't happened and that inaccessible buildings remain a major barrier to disabled people's equality.

The increase in the number of poorly designed and unsafe ramps being used suggests that temporary ramps are widely being used as an alternative to permanent access adjustments. Badly designed ramps are dangerous and do nothing to improve access and should never be used as a cheap alternative to a permanent ramp.

30% of polling stations didn't display a large print copy of the ballot paper. This is compared to 38% in 2001.

28% of polling stations didn't provide a tactile voting device to help visually impaired voters vote independently and in secret. This is compared to 49% in 2001.

The Representation of the People Act 2000 requires every polling station to display a large print notice of the ballot and provide a tactile voting device. At this election our findings showed that nearly a third of all polling stations surveyed didn't have one or the other available. Though an improvement on the Polls Apart findings from 2001 the fact that many local authorities are not complying with statutory duties is a major cause for concern.

“I asked them the question "where is the template?" Answer, "we don't have any blind people here.”

Romsey

In some areas a design fault with the tactile voting device, which meant it didn't fit over the ballot paper correctly, rendered it useless. The template enables some voters with visual and coordination impairments to vote independently and in secret so without it a number of disabled people in these areas were denied their right to a secret ballot. Immediate action must be taken to ensure this never happens again.

Voting using a postal vote

63% of postal voting systems failed our basic access test.

Clear information and instructions and access to support both at home and via a helpline are essential to making remote voting systems, like postal voting, accessible. At this election almost two-thirds of respondents reported that one or more of these basic services weren't provided.

Concerns about postal voting fraud highlight the importance of access to impartial support to vote, yet only 51% of respondents received information telling them they could get independent support to vote by post in their homes.

Many disabled voters reported that they had no choice but to use a postal vote because their polling station was inaccessible. As, contrary to popular belief, postal voting is inaccessible to many disabled people it is essential that disabled people have a genuine choice of voting systems that are designed with their needs in mind.

“Spinal Injury. Impossible to attend polling station. Postal vote made it impossible to vote with any privacy.”

Leeds

Experience of voters with learning impairments

49% of voters with learning impairments reported that the voting process was inaccessible to them.

Accessible information and appropriate support is vital to enabling people with learning impairments to access elections. At this election only 56% of voters with learning impairments thought the information they received about the election was easy to read.

In the past many voters with learning impairments have experienced discrimination from polling station staff. At this election 80% of voters with learning impairments said that polling station staff had been helpful, compared to 96% of respondents to the overarching Polls Apart survey. This is very encouraging and suggests that investment in training for polling station staff has been effective. However, in terms of the negative experiences of 20% of voters with learning impairments there is still room for improvement.

“I can't read the voting paper so I asked the man to point to the name of the person I wanted to vote for but he refused. I really wanted to vote so I put a cross in the top box, I don't know who I voted for.”

Bedfordshire South West

Conclusions and key recommendations

Despite very positive work by a number of local authorities the results from the Polls Apart 2005 survey paint a bleak picture overall.

The Polls Apart survey results reveal a disappointing amount of progress towards an electoral system that guarantees the right of every citizen to vote in secret free from coercion. Action is needed to enforce existing legislation designed to improve access for disabled people. Statutory access standards must also be introduced to eliminate the postcode lottery and guarantee consistent accessible electoral services are available to disabled people wherever they live in the UK.

Some disabled people find it impossible to vote using the current electoral system and many others continue to encounter unacceptable access barriers. This highlights the urgent need to modernise our electoral system. Government must continue to pilot new e-voting systems with a view to rolling out a multi-channel voting system that meets the wide range of disabled people's access needs in the next five years. Without this commitment disabled people will continue to be second class citizens.

“Can't wait till we get Internet voting.”

Broxtowe

Recommendations

Key recommendations for Government

- Continue piloting alternative voting methods including Internet, telephone and text message voting, with a view to rolling out multi-channel voting nationally in the next five years.
- Introduce individual voter registration to combat electoral fraud.
- Do not run all-postal elections; they disenfranchise disabled voters.
- Establish compulsory minimum access standards for postal voting and polling station voting like those for suppliers of e-voting technology.
- Replace central Government grants for temporary ramps for polling stations with grants towards the cost of building permanent ramps.
- Give Local Authorities statutory powers to use accessible buildings as polling stations.

Key recommendations for Local Government:

- Ensure polling station staff and disabled voters have a formal opportunity to report access barriers and recommend alternative accessible premises.
- Ensure all polling station staff receive disability equality training including full training in supporting voters with learning impairments to vote.
- Do not use caravans, tents or old-style portacabins as polling stations and investigate less traditional alternatives like shops and private houses.

What next?

Scope will continue to campaign to banish disablism within the electoral process. There is still a great deal of work to be done before disabled people have equal access to the electoral process and can play a full and active part in all aspects of public and community life.

There are approximately 10 million disabled adults in the the UK, an average of 15,000 people in every constituency. At a time when voter apathy and disengagement is a high political priority we must consider those voters who want to participate but are prevented from doing so. The lack of progress since 2001 has made many disabled people question whether voting is worth the hassle, discomfort and humiliation.

We hope that disabled people, Government, the Electoral Commission, political parties, local authorities, electoral administrators and politicians will work with us to achieve our aim of equality for all disabled people.

“If things don’t change I won’t vote again’.

Thurrock



Double whammy: An inappropriate ramp outside a portacabin polling station.



“I was really appalled about my polling station as there were no facilities for disabled people. I suppose they think that disabled people should not be allowed to vote. All disabled people are treated like 2nd class citizens, it is not just fair is it? I also have a severely disabled son with cerebral palsy, he is 38 years old, and he was treated the same way. It makes me feel so angry.”
Hastings and Rye

Scope is a national disability organisation whose focus is people with cerebral palsy.

Scope’s aim is that disabled people achieve equality: a society in which they are as valued, and have the same human and civil rights as everyone else.

Through Polls Apart and subsequent campaigning work Scope aims to ensure that our democracy is accessible to all disabled people and guarantees all citizens their right to a secret ballot.

To get this report in an alternative format or to request the full Polls Apart 4 report visit www.scope.org.uk or call 020 7619 7245.