



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION, DOCUMENT

Accessibility of democratic engagement in Wales: evidence review (summary)

This review explores the accessibility of the democratic process in Wales and suggests measures for its improvement, using evidence from other comparable nations, both within the UK and internationally.

First published: 14 May 2024

Last updated: 14 May 2024

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Background

Following the devolution of responsibility for national and local government elections to the Welsh Government through the Government of Wales Act 2017, Welsh Ministers have embarked on a programme of electoral reform most noted by the extension of the franchise to 16-and 17-year-olds and qualifying foreign citizens for Senedd and local government elections. The **Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (UK legislation)** also provided the legislative framework for future electoral reform particularly around automatic registration and the optional use of Single Transferable Voting (STV) at local government elections.

Throughout the reform agenda, it became apparent that the accessibility of elections was an outstanding issue and officials became aware of a number of barriers faced by electors, in particular people with certain protected characteristics, including disabled people.

Accordingly, the **Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Bill** introduced into the Senedd in October 2023 proposes further commitments by the Welsh Government to modernise and reform Welsh elections and increase participation in Welsh elections. The Bill includes a number of provisions aimed at improving accessibility for disabled people and also sets out the Welsh Government's commitment to using the Social Model of Disability in all aspects of its work. This includes taking steps to remove the barriers that prevent disabled people from being able to participate fully in the electoral process.

In addition to its agenda for reform, Welsh Government has several legislative commitments, including the incorporation of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People** (CRDP) into Welsh law; the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015), and within it the wellbeing goal for 'a more equal Wales'; and the Welsh Government's **Socio-economic Duty**, which places a statutory duty on public bodies to ensure that due regard be given to the need to

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reduce socio-economic disadvantages.

This evidence review will assist the fulfilment of these commitments through its contribution to the development of a knowledge base around disabled people and inequalities in democratic processes.

The review specifically explores the accessibility of the democratic process in Wales and suggests measures for its improvement, using evidence from other comparable nations, both within the UK and internationally. It does this by conducting an analysis of literature from policy fields and academia relating to the accessibility of democratic processes; situating the accessibility of Wales' democratic process within wider literature both on disability and democratic engagement; and identifying examples of good practice, both in the UK and internationally.

Barriers to an accessible electoral system

Being a disabled person is itself a statistically significant determining characteristic for turnout and is associated with a lower likelihood of voting.

Research undertaken in the US and in Europe in recent decades on the political participation of disabled people found voter turnout to be lower amongst disabled people than non-disabled people, and more so amongst those who were older, poorer or with significant mobility impairments (Schur et al., 2002; Priestley, 2016).

Analysis of data from the Netherlands, where nearly one in eight citizens have long-term impairments, indicates that people with physical and learning impairments experienced particularly low turnout (Van Hees, Boeije and de Putter, 2019).

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Data from the European Social Survey (ESS) also confirms that disabled people who felt discriminated against were even less likely to turn out to vote than those who did not feel discriminated against (Mattila and Papageorgio, 2016; Reher, 2018; Johnson and Powell, 2019).

Research undertaken in the United States (Schur and Adya, 2013) noted that voter turnout and political participation was lower amongst disabled people, while in the UK research by Clarke et al. (2006) suggested that disabled people were less likely to vote in the 2005 general election than non-disabled people.

This pattern of low voter numbers among disabled people is a recognised feature internationally and is often referred to in the literature as the 'disability gap' in voter turnout (Teglbjærg et al., 2022).

Despite the development and implementation of legislation in recent decades giving effect to the CRDP, this gap has remained large due to the 'combined and interactive effects of polling place inaccessibility, social isolation, fewer economic resources, and perceptions that the political system is unresponsive' (Schur and Adya, 2013; Priestley, 2016).

A lower likelihood of voting is, however, not to be confused with lower political interest or engagement.

Research suggests that disabled people are in fact just as, if not more, engaged with political issues than the population at large, despite their lower voting rates.

Disappointment with the political system can encourage certain types of political activities; for example, poor health often motivates people to engage in actions that are directly relevant to their needs, such as participating in demonstrations related to insufficient public health care policies, or contacting politicians to try to affect decisions that go to local level health services (Mattila, 2022).

Barriers within the electoral administration process

Disabled voters face numerous potential barriers to their political participation compared to non-disabled voters, including a lack of access to information; logistical challenges relating to the location of the polling station and its proximity to public transport and accessible parking facilities; problems within the polling station itself; and difficulties with the experience of voting.

Many of the barriers to democratic engagement stem from a lack of access to information, including information provided on voter registration and the process of voting (both pre-election and mid-election, e.g., at polling stations), election literature (from election authorities as well as political parties and candidates), media broadcasts and websites, and wider civic education on political literacy and awareness.

Disabled people often struggle to negotiate the environment of their designated polling station. Parking areas with inadequate wheelchair ramps and polling queues that lack seating or handrails, as well as inaccessible pathways and a lack of accessible parking outside polling stations, have all been reported as present barriers to casting a vote (Schur et al., 2017, Cabinet Office, 2018).

Disabled voters also encounter problems not being able to get around polling stations, with many reporting numerous potential hazards for wheelchair users or people with limited mobility, including closed doors, narrow corridors, badly fitted carpets and problems with lighting. The use of buildings such as church halls and community centres as polling places was also highlighted as particularly problematic in this context as many had features that could not easily be adapted (Capability Scotland, 2003).

Infrastructure and processes used during elections and specifically at polling stations are in need of significant improvement and modernisation with disabled

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voters reporting problems reading or seeing the ballot paper and figuring out how to vote; difficulties with voting technology or a lack of specialist equipment such as tactile voting devices and portable induction loops being made available; and experiences of hostile or ignorant electoral officials (Electoral Commission, 2017; Stanford, 2019).

Remote voting is often put forward as a solution to the inaccessibility of in-person voting and used as an adjustment for some disabled people; its take-up is higher amongst disabled people than amongst the rest of the population, particularly those with mobility impairments, due to difficulties (whether experienced or anticipated) in accessing polling stations (Electoral Commission, 2017).

Remote voting, however, is replete with its own issues and challenges including the small print of forms; having to provide a required signature and the complexity of accompanying instructions resulting in not all requirements being understood. This inaccessibility of formats means that disabled people often rely on others for help with their postal ballot, even when they would prefer to be able to complete the ballot alone, which raises concern regarding the secrecy and security of their vote (Cabinet Office, 2018).

Evidence shows that many people, including disabled people, prefer to be able to vote in person; they see it as part of the theatre of the occasion and trust the process more when it is done in person, and it also offers electors more time to digest information.

The possible trade-off between more proactive polling station staff, the encouragement of voting assistants and other perceivably more accessible voting options (such as postal voting), on the one hand, and the possibility that the secrecy of the ballot might be undermined, on the other, needs to be carefully monitored.

Adjustments and interventions to improve accessibility

A range of possible adjustments to electoral processes could be implemented in the lead up to elections to improve the accessibility of the democratic process in Wales.

Those managing elections in Wales should ensure that all pre-election materials (including registration forms and ballot papers) sent out via post are available in accessible formats, such as easy-read, illustrated and large print versions, braille and tactile versions. Material should also be available online in the format of text, audio, and video, with videos adapted to various languages including British Sign Language, and with closed captions available.

There needs to be better awareness about the support available to disabled people to help them, their support workers understand the process of registering to vote and voting, and to enable the people running elections to know what support and help can be made available to disabled people (Electoral Commission, 2017).

Disabled people who may struggle with unknown environments, should receive a summary of what to expect on polling day, provided in an accessible format. This should include information on how to identify someone at the polling station who could offer support should they require help, tailoring election materials to a level of understanding for people with learning impairments and in different languages, and providing information on what to bring on the day, how to get to the polling station and what to expect once inside (Hees et al., 2017).

Voters' experiences could be improved by local authorities across Wales giving more thought to identifying suitable buildings for use as polling places, making adaptations as necessary and working with local disabled people's groups and relevant disabled people's organisations to ensure they consider locations and

layout from the perspective of a disabled person with health conditions or impairments.

There are several adjustments that could be made to polling stations in order to make the process of voting in-person fully accessible.

Possible adaptations could include ensuring that all polling stations are in locations accessible by all modes of transport and in close proximity to accessible parking and bus stops; ensuring step-free and hands-free access to every polling station and a flat and obstacle-free route through the polling station, including to the ballot box and to the exit; and creating processes to deal with queues for those who require it.

Balloting procedures along with the design and use of ballot papers and supporting equipment within polling stations are important dimensions of accessibility for disabled people. Blind or visually impaired voters are particularly at risk of being denied access to printed ballots and other electoral material essential to participate effectively in electoral processes (Fleming, 2009).

The tactile voting device (TVD) should continue to be provided to blind and partially sighted voters, although it should be ensured that the TVDs provided to polling stations are appropriate for the length and size of the ballot papers at each individual election. The combination of a TVD and audio device or other equipment could help to ensure that blind and partially sighted voters are able to vote without assistance, and therefore independently and in secret.

The width and height of polling booths should be considered, and accessible options provided, to ensure that polling booths are suitable for wheelchair users and those with mobility impairments. All information at polling stations should also be available in a variety of accessible formats, as well as in multiple different languages.

Remote voting should not be seen as an easy alternative to in-person voting, as

many people, including disabled people, prefer to vote in person. Nonetheless, in many circumstances voters may opt for remote voting due to access issues, and there are ways that remote voting of all kinds can be expanded and improved to maximise accessibility across the board.

Mobile polling stations (i.e., bringing ballot boxes to people's places of residence) are a popular option internationally, including in the UK, Europe and the USA. (Electoral Commission, 2021; van Hees et al, 2019; Schur et al, 2017). The most practicable suggestion regarding mobile voting is that such schemes should target accommodation with several electors who might struggle to attend a polling station (for example, hospitals, care homes, nursing homes and sheltered accommodation).

As with pre-election information, postal ballots, and the information associated with postal voting, should be in accessible formats, as well as multiple languages. This should be supplemented by online information in the form of text, audio, and video, with videos adapted to various languages including British Sign Language, and with closed captions available.

Steps should be taken to ensure that those voting remotely can do so privately and independently rather than depending on others for help.

Making necessary changes between elections is fundamental in improving outcomes for disabled people.

Polling stations should be audited for accessibility issues and any identification of problems should lead to solutions which will remove barriers. This is likely to require upfront costs but is fundamental to achieving an accessible voting system.

All polling station staff should be trained to be aware of the possible needs of electors, and to manage any adjustments on polling day. In addition, civic education campaigns, both for the general public and specifically targeted at

disabled people, should be run, not only to make electors aware of their right to vote but to inform them about the process of doing so. Those aimed at disabled voters should be undertaken in cooperation with advocacy groups.

Adjustments to all aspects of the voting system should be monitored on an ongoing basis to assess their efficacy and identify any unintended negative outcomes.

Electoral reform

Possible changes to the electoral system may also improve access to the democratic process and bolster voter engagement and turnout, including among disabled people.

Changes could include a relaxation of the restrictions regarding when and where voters would be required to vote (Peixoto Gomes et al., 2022); automatically registering voters, or allowing voters to register to vote on polling day; and moving from First Past the Post (FPTP) to an alternative, more proportional voting system.

Being able to choose a polling station, rather than have one assigned, would potentially allow disabled voters to choose their polling station based on to what extent each location suited their needs. The ability to vote on multiple days may also allow similar improvements to access, as disabled voters would in theory have greater flexibility to choose times which are most suited to them, or, for example, quieter times of the day or week.

For disabled people, the removal of the requirement to register in advance is likely to facilitate the process of voting, as, for disabled people in particular, layers of bureaucracy may constitute barriers to electoral participation (Matsubayashi and Ueda, 2014). In addition, given the scale of digital barriers

faced by many disabled people and people with learning disabilities, the process of registering to vote should be made as accessible as possible as the option to register online may not be an option for some disabled people (Good Things Foundation, 2024).

Alternative voting systems, such as Single Transferable Vote (STV), which requires a change in the method of voting on the part of the elector (e.g., needing to select multiple candidates or use numbers rather than crosses), may create issues for accessibility. If any councils in Wales choose to change from FPTP to STV for local elections, under the powers of the Local Government (Elections) Act 2021, accessibility should be factored in from the outset. No such changes should be made without first ensuring that reasonable adjustments are in place to allow disabled people to access these systems in the same way, or more easily than others. This will require not only education and training, but a wholesale assessment of adjustments to the information provided to voters, as well as to polling stations and remote voting methods.

Recommendations

Pre-election information and postal applications and ballots should be provided in accessible formats. This includes easy-read and illustrated versions; large-print; audio and video; ballots available in colours other than black and white; braille and tactile versions and electronic text. Pre-election material should also be available online in the format of text, audio and video, with videos adapted to various languages including sign language with closed captions available.

All polling stations should be equipped with a combination of a TVD and audio device or other equipment to help ensure that blind and partially sighted voters are able to vote without assistance, and therefore independently and in secret.

Inclusive voter education and information campaigns or initiatives should be

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developed to enhance voters knowledge of the system and their voting rights.

Disabled people should receive a summary of what to expect on polling day.

Consultations should take place with disabled people to inform the selection of suitable sites and buildings for polling stations.

It should be ensured that all polling stations are in easy to access locations with accessible parking provided, sufficient seating available in queues and that there are opportunities to 'queue jump' if necessary. Polling booths should also be adjusted to ensure they are accessible for wheelchair users and those with mobility impairments.

All polling staff should be correctly trained to recognise and respond to the potential needs of all electors.

The Welsh Government should make further considerations surrounding wider elector reform including, but not limited to, same-day and automatic voter registration, alternative voting systems and flexible voting.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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Social research number: 28/2024

Digital ISBN 978-1-83625-025-8



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