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# Accessibility of democratic engagement: Evidence review

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## **Accessibility of democratic engagement:**

### Evidence review

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

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## Glossary

Glossary text

<b>Acronym/Key word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
CRDP	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People
WCPP	Wales Centre for Public Policy
PCC	Police and Crime Commissioner
STV	Single Transferable Vote
ERO	Electoral Registration Officer
RO	Returning Officer
ESS	European Social Survey
EC	The Electoral Commission
WLGA	Welsh Local Government Association
AEA	Association of Electoral Administrators
TVD	Tactile Voting Device
RNIB	Royal National Institute for Blind People
WHO	World Health Organisation
FPTP	First Past the Post

## 1. Introduction

1.1 This evidence 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.

1.2 The key objectives of this review are to:

- Identify the barriers faced by citizens when engaging with democratic processes such as elections in Wales;
- Improve understandings of the complexity of issues affecting disabled people as regards democratic engagement;
- Collate domestic and international literature to contribute towards the development of an evidence base on election accessibility which can guide future research within the policy area; and
- Use this evidence to provide recommendations for improvements to the democratic process.

1.3 It achieves these objectives 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.

### **The UK electoral system**

1.4 The UK Government has recently introduced changes to the UK electoral system through the Elections Act, which received Royal Assent in April 2022. The Act contains measures aimed at improving the security, accessibility and transparency of elections and the way people vote, and campaigning and the rules on campaign spending and funding. The changes in the Act apply to UK Parliament elections, Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections in England and Wales, and local

elections in England. Some provisions will apply to Northern Ireland Assembly elections and local elections in Northern Ireland.

1.5 The measures contained in the Act will:

- Change the rules so that people can apply for a postal or proxy vote online through a new online system for absent voters. Applicants can use the online platform as part of the register to vote process or, for those who are already registered, as a stand-alone online submission. These measures will introduce safeguards against the abuse of postal voting;
- Introduce photographic identification for voting in polling stations in Great Britain;
- Change the voting system for mayoral and PCC elections to First Past the Post, meaning that the candidate who wins the most votes in each constituency is elected;
- Require authorities to provide disabled voters with specialist equipment to support them to vote if need, and allow anyone over the age of 18 to accompany disabled voters in the polling station;
- Remove the 15-year limit on British citizens overseas voting in UK Parliamentary elections, allowing any British citizen previously registered or resident in the UK to register to vote;
- Introduce a new electoral sanction for those convicted of intimidation against a candidate, campaigner or elected office holder. The sanction would ban offenders from standing for election for 5 years, as well as the punishment for the underlying criminal offence which can include a fine or imprisonment, depending on the severity of the intimidation;
- Update undue influence to include a wide range of harms, such as physical violence, damage to a person's property or reputation, undue spiritual pressure and injury, or inflicting financial loss;

- Update the political finance regulatory framework, by increasing transparency, fairness, and strengthening controls against ineligible foreign spending on electoral campaigning; and
- Introduce a new digital imprints regime that will go much further than the print imprint regime, increasing transparency and empowering voters to make informed decisions about the material they see online.

### **Electoral reforms in Wales**

- 1.6 Responsibility for national and local government elections was devolved to Wales through the Government of Wales Act 2017. Welsh Ministers have since 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 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. The Welsh Government has also made Rules setting out how local elections would operate under STV. Councils in Wales have until November 2024 to decide whether to switch to STV for the next local elections in 2027.
- 1.7 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.
- 1.8 Accordingly, the [Elections and Elected Bodies \(Wales\) Bill](#) ('the 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 supporting documents to the Bill also set 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.

1.9 The Bill and wider reform package includes a number of provisions aimed at improving accessibility for disabled people. These include:

- new powers allowing Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to add eligible electors to the local government register in Wales, without the individual needing to submit an application;
- a new duty on the Electoral Commission to report on the steps taken by Returning Officers to assist disabled people in their ability to vote at Senedd and local government elections in Wales (there will also be proposed new duties in secondary legislation on Returning Officers (ROs) to provide such equipment as is reasonable to support disabled people to vote, having regard to Electoral Commission guidance) ;
- the creation of a Welsh elections information platform - an electronic facility providing electors with up-to-date information on how to register or cast their vote, or on candidates standing in Senedd and local government elections in Wales, and signposting to other trusted sources of electoral information;
- increasing opportunities for underrepresented groups to play a full role in supporting and representing their communities by standing for elected office, building on the Welsh Government's [Access to Elected Office Fund Wales pilot scheme](#)<sup>1</sup>.

### **Background to the research**

1.10 This research follows on from a variety of reports by Welsh Government which have addressed the issue of democratic engagement, as well as other papers detailing the barriers disabled people face in public life, although rarely have these dovetailed. Part of the aim of this research is to unite these two strands of research.

1.11 For instance, a review of evidence on 'Democratic Renewal' undertaken in 2019 to support local government electoral reform ([Hunt and Nickson, 2019](#)) found that disabled people do not have equal opportunities to vote as compared to the rest of

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<sup>1</sup> The Access to Elected Office Fund Wales pilot scheme was implemented to fund reasonable adjustments and support for disabled candidates seeking election to the 2021 Senedd Cymru Election and standing for the 22 Principal and 735 Community Councils in the 2022 Local Government elections.



the Welsh population and suggested several possible electoral reforms which could improve both accessibility and turnout.

- 1.12 These research reports and further exploratory work on democratic engagement undertaken in 2020 ([Beaufort Research, 2020](#)), noted that the voting process is not the major barrier to participation in Wales, and that consistently low turnout is a product of wider issues such as a perceived lack of information, a disconnect from politics and a distrust of politicians. The research, however, notes that, whilst these attitudes held true across demographics, accessibility issues and a lack of information about the process of voting were likely to have some effect on inclination to participate.
- 1.13 The 2021 'Locked Out' report ([Welsh Government, 2021](#)) provides a comprehensive review of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on disabled people, and about the wider state of accessibility in Welsh public life over the course of the pandemic and beyond. The results demonstrate that the measures taken to deal with the pandemic resulted in a loss of independence and an effective rolling back of disabled people's rights. It further underlines the fact that consideration for disabled people's lives is often an afterthought in policymaking, and that the root cause of this is not malice or active discrimination but thoughtlessness.
- 1.14 A recent report published by the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) ([Peixoto G. et al., 2022](#)) collates evidence on changes to electoral administration. The report suggests, among other things, that various electoral reforms, such as early voting and an expansion of remote forms of voting, would be potentially beneficial in improving both accessibility and turnout.
- 1.15 In addition to its agenda for reform, Welsh Government has several legislative commitments which are pertinent to this to this review. The Welsh Government's own Programme for Government committed to the incorporation of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People](#) (CRDP) into Welsh law. As a legally binding international human rights treaty on disability rights, the Convention requires, in Article 29, that disabled people be guaranteed "political rights and an opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others". Articles 9 and 21 also

require signatories to ensure the full accessibility of public information, providing appropriate adjustments for this purpose (Lord et al., 2014).

- 1.16 Teglbjaerg (2021) notes that the continued existence of barriers to democratic participation in jurisdictions, such as Wales, where the UNCRDP has been ratified constitutes a contravention of the Convention, and thus a violation of the human rights of disabled people. It is therefore imperative that the Welsh Government takes steps to meet its obligations under the UN Convention by removing these barriers.
- 1.17 The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015), and within it the wellbeing goal for 'a more equal Wales', dictate that efforts must be made to increase diversity and tackle inequalities across public life. The [Future Generations Report \(2020\)](#) noted that some progress had been made in this regard but that there is still much further to go. In addition, the Welsh Government's [Socio-economic Duty](#), which came into force on 31 March 2021 places a statutory duty on public bodies to ensure that, in the process of taking strategic decisions, due regard be given to the need to reduce socio-economic disadvantages.
- 1.18 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 social model of disability**

- 1.19 In 2002, the Welsh Government committed to the implementation of the [social model of disability](#). The social model views disability as structured by society, as opposed to the more common medical model, which frames disability as intrinsic to the individual and/or their impairment. The social model of disability instead recognises that disability derives from the barriers placed in the way of people with impairments and health conditions, and that it is the existence of these barriers that is disabling. By removing such barriers or providing reasonable adjustments to overcome them, disability itself can be eradicated. The social model focuses on what people can do if barriers are removed, rather than what they cannot do because of their differences.

- 1.20 Those individuals disadvantaged by the ongoing existence of societal barriers are therefore referred to as 'disabled people', rather than 'people with disabilities', and this report will consistently adhere to this phrasing, as well as using the terms 'impairments' and 'conditions' rather than 'disabilities' to describe individual health.
- 1.21 Much of the literature and legislation cited here, whilst fundamental to the understanding and expansion of accessibility, uses different terminology which appears to be informed by the medical model of disability. Where possible, the language used by these studies has been adapted throughout this review to fit the terms used by the social model. For instance, the CRDP, cited throughout this review using social model terminology, was originally drafted - and is still commonly referred to in some literature - as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, or CRPD.
- 1.22 Beyond the legal obligations detailed above, the Welsh Government's stated commitment to the social model of disability ought to provide additional impetus for the removal of barriers across society, including in democratic processes.

### **Structure**

- 1.23 Following this introductory chapter, Section 2 outlines the methodology used to collect and analyse evidence for the present review. It goes on to describe the limited nature of the project and the effect of this on its applicability or otherwise to wider policy discussions.
- 1.24 Section 3 begins the discussion of the review's findings. It looks at the barriers which prevent equal access to elections and democratic processes, starting with the wider societal barriers which disabled people face and their overlap with access issues in elections, and moving to discuss the specific access issues in the Welsh democratic process. Section 4 then moves on to address a variety of adjustments and electoral reforms which have emerged from international and domestic literature, with a view to removing the barriers discussed. Section 5 considers the possible effects of any changes to electoral processes in Wales, based in part on examples of such interventions elsewhere.

1.25 Section 6 provides a summary of the main findings of the evidence review and section 7 sets out the recommendations from the report for policymakers in Wales.

## **2. Methodology**

- 2.1 In order to gain a wide-spanning understanding of issues regarding election accessibility, an evidence review of extant literature was undertaken, encompassing both academic and policy-oriented material. This allowed for the inclusion of a variety of international examples, as well as an in-depth discussion of the barriers and possible improvements to democratic participation in Wales. Additional supplementary information was also provided by policy teams across Welsh Government which enabled a full understanding of the key issues being examined.
- 2.2 The information gathered departs from the Welsh Government's own research and aims to bring in a variety of comparable case studies and analyses which address the accessibility issues faced by disabled people when participating in the democratic process. This includes UK-based studies from the Electoral Commission and Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP), advocacy groups and academic literature. Further international examples are provided from the USA, Australia and several European states. The review goes on to use these studies to recommend improvements to the democratic process in Wales, encompassing both adjustments to the current voting system and wider electoral reform, and to address the possible effects of any such changes.
- 2.3 The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used to arrange, code, and analyse the literature. The structure of this report and many of its general findings have been developed via thematic organisation of the data, which has allowed for the identification of common themes, both regarding barriers to access and their possible solutions.

### **Limitations**

- 2.4 There are several limitations in this review which should be accounted for from the outset. Its major drawback is the dearth and inconsistency of evidence on the relationship between disability and elections both in Wales and further afield, which leads this review to be patchy in some areas. More research is required to fill these gaps, the specifics of which will be dealt with in the later sections.

- 2.5 In part, as a result of the above, the review contains a significant amount of research from some international comparators (e.g., the USA) but far fewer examples, or none at all, from others. Many of those which do appear depart from radically different starting points regarding electoral administration and legislation to the current state of affairs in Wales, and thus it is difficult to make accurate assumptions about the effects of similar policy interventions when applied to a Welsh context.
- 2.6 Again, due to an absence of official information and in-depth research on the topic in Wales, the evidence on the accessibility of e.g. polling stations is limited to observational reporting and, as such, may not be entirely robust.
- 2.7 Many of the proposed solutions (particularly those relating to electoral reform) are speculative. They will require further scoping and testing through, for instance, pilot schemes before they can be fully assessed for their potential effects. The evidence is also often inconclusive on some such policy ideas, not least as many of them carry possible negative downsides, yet again due to lack of evidence cannot be fully analysed.
- 2.8 As a piece of research on wider democratic engagement, this research falls short of being able to provide substantive evidence of measures which are likely to improve voter turnout. It is better used as a baseline for improving accessibility, with the possibility that improved turnout might be a potential positive knock-on effect, and, this being the case, improved turnout may serve as an indicator (although far from the only indicator) of improved accessibility.

### **3. Barriers to an accessible electoral system**

#### **Social and environmental barriers**

- 3.1 Research undertaken in the US and in Europe in recent decades on the political participation of disabled people have 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). Studies in the US have shown that disabled people on average report lower levels of both internal and external political efficacy (Gastil, 2000; Schur et al., 2003) and are also less likely to perceive the political system as responsive to them (Mattila and Papageorgiou, 2016).
- 3.2 Analysis of data from the Netherlands, where nearly one in eight citizens have long-term conditions indicates that people with cognitive impairments and learning difficulties experienced particularly low turnout (Van Hees, Boeije and de Putter, 2019). Furthermore, 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).
- 3.3 Grammenos' (2013) study which also drew on ESS data to investigate voting activity among disabled people in Europe found a difference of eight percentage points between disabled and non-disabled citizens. The lowest turnout rates within the group of disabled people were found among those who were unemployed and among senior citizens.
- 3.4 This pattern of low turnout 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). It is shaped by a range of factors related to resourcing and recruitment, hence the emphasis in the academic and policy literature on improving accessibility to, and awareness of, the electoral process (Atkinson et al., 2017).
- 3.5 Despite the development and implementation of legislation in recent decades giving effect to the CRDP, this gap have 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)

- 3.6 The CRPD, requires that states take proactive measures to ensure that disabled voters can exercise their rights in practice. Article 9 of the convention, therefore, provides for accessibility measures to be undertaken in order to facilitate physical, communication and information access, all of which are important to enabling political participation among disabled people. In the context of Article 29, for example, accessible formats would be required to facilitate inclusive voting by blind or visually impaired voters, and physical barriers would need to be removed not only on the way into a polling centre, but inside the polling station itself (Lord et al., 2014). This has clear implications for states in ensuring political participation for disabled people, by ensuring the accessibility of polling stations, voting machines, media and internet communications, campaign material, public meetings or the suitable training of election officials (Priestley, 2016).
- 3.7 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.
- 3.8 Disappointment with the political system, for example, can encourage certain types of political activities. 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). The pioneering study by Söderlund and Rapeli (2015) found that among Nordic citizens, poor health can actually motivate people to participate. Poor health can intensify the importance of politics for individuals because welfare policies, particularly those related to healthcare services and transfers, become more important for people with health problems (Mattila, 2022).
- 3.9 Disabled people have a right to the same access to the democratic process as non-disabled people, regardless of whether this impacts on turnout. Improvements in



turnout may, however, be used in research as an indicator of the success of a policy. Tackling the disability gap is also an objective of many interventions and, thus, its reduction or eradication is taken as a positive sign for the effectiveness of such changes in improving the accessibility of democratic processes.

- 3.10 Accessibility itself, however, cannot be measured only by the numbers of people who vote or the characteristics of these voters. Rather, it is worth noting that the research on election accessibility goes far beyond looking at access to polling stations. It needs to be factored in that various day-to-day barriers which fall outside the remit of this research (e.g. housing, care, transport, inaccessible information and so on) are likely to have an effect on disabled people's access to all public services and amenities. Ongoing dialogue is therefore required with citizens and advocacy groups in order to ensure that no-one who wishes to participate is prevented or discouraged from doing so due to the inaccessibility of the democratic system itself.
- 3.11 The findings of the 'Locked Out' report by Welsh Government show the ways that disabled people's lives changed over the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The report highlighted many worrying signs about the deterioration of the quality of people's lives and their access to basic services during this time, but also small encouraging signals regarding the increased use of technology among disabled people, not only to maintain social connections and mitigate loneliness but also to make use of technology and remote solutions for everyday tasks. Further research is therefore needed to examine the way in which the pandemic has influenced or changed disabled people's everyday practices and voting habits.

### **Barriers within the electoral administration process**

- 3.12 There are many aspects of election administration that may adversely affect voter turnout of both disabled people and non-disabled people. Disabled voters face numerous potential barriers to their political participation compared to non-disabled people, 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.

### *Barriers to information access*

- 3.13 Amongst the general public, a misunderstanding of the voting process is not a major issue, or at the very least not one which has a significant impact on turnout. As regards information, what prevents some people from voting is a lack of knowledge about why they should vote and how to make a decision. Disabled people face a variety of barriers to all types of information, depending on the nature of their impairment or condition.
- 3.14 Many of the barriers to democratic engagement stem from a lack of access to information. This is a broad category and includes the 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.
- 3.15 Research undertaken by the Electoral Commission during the 2017 UK general election (Electoral Commission, 2017) highlighted a significant number of issues faced by disabled voters. Disabled people use and rely on a number of mechanisms to find out how to register and vote, including general sources such as newspapers, television, key government and other public websites of relevance to political participation. For many there is also a reliance on more dedicated resources such as support workers and Easy Read guides.
- 3.16 Access to mass media communications is vital to informed political knowledge, but accessible forms of communication are needed to ensure participation for disabled people (notably for disabled people with sensory or cognitive impairments). Promoting information accessibility is one of the obligations that states have under Article 9 CRDP in the global governance framework. Research undertaken by Priestley (2016) on the political participation of disabled people in Europe, suggests that only in half (14) of the EU Member States that were surveyed as part of the research were both public and private broadcast providers subject to statutory accessibility standards to provide subtitles, sign language interpretation and/or audio descriptions for all or part of their programming.

- 3.17 The study also examined a sample of key government websites and other public websites to assess their accessibility for disabled people and found that in at least six EU Member States (the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Spain and Sweden) the website providing information on how to complain about infringement of voting rights met internationally accepted web accessibility standards (the WCAG 2.0 AA standards<sup>2</sup>). In Finland, the Parliamentary Ombudsman's website provided information on compensation in sign language, as did the Chancellor of Justice's website. In most countries, however, important web-based information was only partially accessible and only 10 countries met the required standard for providing instructions on voting and information on candidates on the main website of the department responsible for organizing elections (although in a further 12 countries some accessibility measures had been implemented) (Priestley, 2016).
- 3.18 Across the board, there is an issue regarding access to appropriately adjusted formats for election information. This includes easy-read and illustrated versions; large print; audio and video; literature available in colours other than black and white; braille and tactile versions; sign language; and electronic text. The research undertaken by the Electoral Commission after the general election in June 2017 on disabled people's experiences of voting indicated that some voters did not know that alternative formats of instructions and information, such as those provided in large print, was available (Electoral Commission, 2017).
- 3.19 Even where accessible formats, such as Easy Read documents, were offered, they often need to be requested or are made available later than other formats, leaving those who require these versions with less time than others to digest the information. This has been highlighted as a particular issue in relation to literature such as manifestos produced by political parties and candidates (Cabinet Office, 2007) with a number of disability organisations reporting that whilst they urged candidates and parties to produce the accessible documents, they were often made available later than the standard manifesto was published. This meant reduced time

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<sup>2</sup> The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (known as [WCAG](#)) are an internationally recognised set of recommendations for improving web accessibility. They explain how to make digital services, websites and apps accessible to everyone, including users with impairments to their vision, hearing, mobility, thinking and understanding.

for people to be able to understand the proposed policies. Having limited information from political parties in accessible formats and also a lack of contact with party workers, presents specific challenges for disabled people and those with mental health conditions in participating in the democratic process (Cabinet Office, 2017).

- 3.20 Disabled people also lack information on how to find extra support should they need it, particularly on polling day. This includes information on where and how to vote, but also where they could find a quieter polling station, or someone who could offer moral or practical support when voting. Research undertaken by the Electoral Commission (Electoral Commission, 2017) found that whilst most respondents knew they could vote, some were not aware that they could take someone with them to assist in a polling station, or that polling station staff could help them. Linked to this, some voters found it hard to find someone who could accompany them to the polling station, especially given the requirement that a person who assists must either be someone entitled to vote or an immediate family member.
- 3.21 Research which examined the perspectives of people with cognitive impairments and learning difficulties on their experience of voting in the 2017 and 2019 UK general elections (Manteklow et al., 2023) indicated that participants were offered, or received support, across a variety of areas, including election information assistance, polling station assistance, voting choice assistance, voting promotion support, postal voting information and registration form assistance. It was common for participants to receive multiple types of assistance, with over half of those interviewed receiving three different types of assistance.
- 3.22 Election information assistance was the most common type provided; this included verbal explanations, clarifications, breaking down complicated information and/or help finding information. Less common assistance types included voting choice assistance (typically advice from family and friends), voting promotion support (including families encouraging voting and attending a voting promotion meeting) and verbal explanations concerning postal voting and registration forms (Manktelow et al., 2023). Almost all participants who received assistance positively evaluated

this. A few participants regarded assistance as important because without it they would not have voted/understood election information.

- 3.23 A few participants who voted in the 2017 UK general election raised concerns over accessing election information concerning polling stations and the political process, and reported there being too much information or that they were unable to understand information. Election information was consistently criticised by over half of participants, with many describing it as confusing, unhelpful, untrustworthy, biased, uninteresting, hard to remember, being overly focused on criticising other parties/politicians, containing jargon and in formats that were difficult to access. Some participants reported difficulties finding election information, whilst others who had managed to find material reported finding large quantities of information, most of which was difficult to comprehend and remember (Manktelow, 2023). Some respondents also noted that they often felt too nervous to talk to candidates to find out more.
- 3.24 In respect of the registration process, research has suggested that some voters with cognitive impairments find that the registration form, both online and in hard copy, difficult to understand as it includes too much jargon and the font used is not easy to read (Electoral Commission, 2017).
- 3.25 Research undertaken by Capability Scotland (2003) after the Scottish Parliament and Local Government Elections in 2003, which involved reviewing and scoring the accessibility of a sample of voter registration forms, highlighted a number of issues with the registration process. All of the registration forms reviewed failed to meet the basic requirements for font size, which meant that they were inaccessible for people with visual impairments and were difficult to read for many people with learning difficulties or poor literacy skills. In addition, the design and layout of the forms varied, and whilst most adopted a well laid out format, a few were cluttered with information and the spaces available for inserting handwritten details were too small. This was seen to pose a particular problem for disabled people who have problems writing; although they may have been able to read the information, they would have been unable to complete the form without assistance.

- 3.26 In addition, the option of registering to vote online may not be feasible or indeed possible for some disabled people. A report published by Lloyds Banking Group in 2021 on Essential Digital Skills, which measured the fundamental digital tasks needed to access the online world, as well as the digital skills needed for life, highlights the scale of digital barriers faced by many disabled people and people with learning disabilities. It indicated that around a third (32 per cent) of people with an impairment do not have even the most basic digital skills, and that people with multiple impairments are at the greatest risk of digital exclusion (Good Things Foundation, 2024).
- 3.27 Polling cards are also frequently cited as a problem for disabled voters, particularly those with visual impairments. A review of disabled people's experiences in registering to vote and voting in England in 2017 (Cabinet Office, 2018) highlighted a number of issues, with blind and partially sighted people reporting that they did not recognise polling cards amongst other items of post. They also noted that they required assistance to read the cards as the information was often difficult to read due to the font size and the amount of information presented. The Electoral Commission research (2017) highlighted similar concerns in respect of polling cards issued to voters, with disabled people reporting a number of issues with the cards, including that the print was too small, the use of black words on white paper made it difficult to read, and forms often included unfamiliar words and jargon, which made them difficult to read and understand.
- 3.28 Widening access to the process through information and initiatives is crucial to ensuring that all voters, not least disabled people, do not lose the right to vote (Capability Scotland, 2003).

*Barriers to in-person voting*

- 3.29 Research suggests that disabled voters have, and do face, numerous potential barriers to voting in person at a polling station compared to non-disabled people. These include problems with finding or getting to the voting location, accessing the polling station itself and waiting in line (Schur et al., 2017); reading or seeing the ballot paper and figuring out how to vote; difficulties with voting technology; and experiences of hostile or ignorant electoral officials.

- 3.30 Given mobility impairments and other conditions, disabled people may struggle to negotiate the environment of their designated polling station. Issues relating to a lack of level access into the polling station and incorrectly installed equipment such as temporary ramps to improve access, a general lack of seating or handrails, as well as inaccessible pathways and a lack of accessible parking outside polling stations, have all been reported as barriers to casting a vote (Cabinet Office, 2018; Schur et al., 2017).
- 3.31 Disabled voters also encounter barriers once inside the polling station, with many noting a lack of sufficient space inside polling station venues to enable disabled people to move around with ease and numerous obstacles. The use of church halls and community centres as polling places was highlighted as particularly problematic in this context. Many of these buildings had features that could not easily be adapted, for example, narrow corridors and small spaces, closed doors and a mix of badly-fitted carpets and wooden flooring with lips between each type, all of which presented potential hazards for blind and partially sighted people, and wheelchair users and people with mobility impairments (Capability Scotland, 2003).
- 3.32 Research also emphasises that the experience of voting is particularly important in the context of people with mental health conditions and cognitive impairments, and neurodivergent voters who can find interaction with authorities and formal processes disconcerting and stressful. The study by Manteklow et al. (2023) found that that the political process made participants feel scared and unwelcome, and that polling stations made them feel 'nervous, anxious, awkward and frightened'. In addition, loud noises, congestion, long queues and unfamiliarity of the polling station on election day can be overwhelming for neurodivergent voters (Electoral Commission, 2017; Manteklow et al., 2023). These commonly-reported barriers can make the experience of voting in-person stressful, intimidating and confusing for many neurodivergent voters due to them not knowing what to expect on arrival, and they may experience anxiety related to queues (or the expectation of queues) on polling days (Cabinet Office, 2018).
- 3.33 As disabled people often require more time at the polling station itself because of the need for accommodations, the requirement to wait in long lines

disproportionately falls upon disabled voters. Even minimal to moderate waiting times could be problematic for those with mental health and other conditions and impairments who can find it intolerable to wait in long lines and may not be identified by officials and volunteers as in need of assistance and may make voting an impossibility for some people with impairments such as frailty or old age. As Belt (2016) notes, long lines can make voters less confident in the voting process and that their votes will count.

- 3.34 Research also suggests that processes to ensure appropriate equipment and resources are provided to support disabled voters at polling stations are in need of significant improvement. Many disabled voters have reported problems reading or seeing the ballot paper; difficulties with voting technology or a lack of suitable equipment (Electoral Commission, 2017); and experiences of hostile or ignorant electoral officials who did not know how to use specialist equipment or did not offer it to people who might need it (Stanford, 2019).
- 3.35 All polling stations must be equipped with a tactile voting device (TVD), a reusable plastic template with Braille and raised numbers that can be attached to the ballot paper and is designed to allow blind and partially sighted voters to vote independently without revealing their voting intentions to a third party. The device was originally developed ahead of and first used at the 2001 General Election, in conjunction with RNIB, to provide an option for blind and partially sighted voters to cast their own vote, where previously the process was for polling station staff or a companion to do it for them.
- 3.36 The RNIB's response to the UK Government's Call for Evidence on Access to Elections (Cabinet Office, 2018) indicated mixed experiences with the implementation of the TVD, with many viewing the device as not fit for purpose and providing examples of it not being available, of the wrong version being provided and of staff not knowing how to use it. There was also concern that the device often did not fit the ballot paper correctly and there was no way for voters to know they had marked the ballot paper in the right place. This was particularly the case in devolved elections with long ballot papers. Asking staff to confirm the mark could potentially remove the secrecy of their vote (Cabinet Office, 2018).



- 3.37 Research undertaken by Capability Scotland in 2003 also indicated that use of the device was low, despite its possible use being extended to a much wider group of disabled people in the Scottish Parliament election. It was not clear why the TVD was not displayed prominently in polling stations, or indeed used by disabled voters. Volunteers who visited a range of polling places found many devices under tables, in boxes and not generally on display, which raised questions over how disabled voters would know it was available without asking for it. This echoes the findings of research by Belt (2016) which emphasised that disabled voters may not know to ask for accommodations such as TVDs if there is no signage indicating its availability at the polling station. Participants also noted that the device was cumbersome and it was suggested that understanding how it works and having the dexterity to work it may be a barrier for many disabled people. Blind and partially sighted voters therefore cannot currently always rely on the TVD alone as a reasonable adjustment.
- 3.38 The Capability Scotland research (2003) also reported that few polling stations appeared to have had portable induction loops available for voters who are deaf or hard of hearing, and therefore usage was also low. It was suggested that the low level of availability might simply be that it was a new measure - as we have seen over the years with accessible polling booths, it can take a series of elections to create wide availability of non-statutory initiatives. It was also noted that it may also be that the cost of meeting this measure was prohibitive. Moreover, induction loop systems are not suitable for all people with hearing impairments - many rely on lip reading or sign language to communicate.
- 3.39 Some disabled voters will require languages other than English and Welsh to be available on ballot papers and information around polling stations, including braille. There is no evidence from the literature that this is being provided universally, although more may be able to be gauged from discussion with local authorities and returning officers.
- 3.40 Belt (2016) suggests a key problem in this respect is a lack of knowledge by election officials and polling station staff about accommodations, and discomfort among poll workers to help people use accessible technology. Because of poor

training, officials and volunteers may not know what accommodations they can employ to help disabled people.

- 3.41 Because of these and other barriers, it has been suggested that the anticipation of issues, based on prior experience, can increase perceptions of intimidation and discrimination among those requiring assistance and adjustments and create a “chilling effect” for potential voters who may not want to face an inaccessible polling place or hostile poll workers again (Johnson and Powell, 2019). Thus, previous barriers may create future low participation even if these problems are solved, therefore making it all the more crucial to address barriers as quickly as possible (Belt, 2016).

#### *Barriers to remote voting*

- 3.42 Remote voting is often put forward as a solution to the inaccessibility of in-person voting and used as an adjustment for some people; its take-up is higher amongst disabled people than amongst the rest of the population, particularly those with physical impairments, due to barriers (whether experienced or anticipated) in accessing polling stations (Electoral Commission, 2017). Yet, remote voting is replete with its own issues and evidence shows that many people, including disabled people, prefer to vote in person for a variety of reasons.
- 3.43 Findings from the Electoral Commission (2017) research indicated that some respondents “did not understand the instructions on their postal vote” whilst others said there were “too many bits of paper and it was not easy to know which bits of the postal vote went in which envelope”. Similarly, some of the barriers that have been reported by people with cognitive impairments and learning difficulty when voting by post, for example, include the small print of forms; having to provide a required signature; the complexity of accompanying instructions resulting in not all requirements being understood; and difficulties completing and folding the ballot paper (Cabinet Office, 2018). It has also been reported that disabled people may have to rely on others to vote and also post their ballot paper, which raises concern regarding the secrecy and security of their vote (Cabinet Office, 2018).

- 3.44 On the other hand, disabled people may also want to be able to vote in person - they, like most people, see it as part of the theatre of the occasion, and trust the process more when it is done in person.
- 3.45 Disabled people have a right to be able to access all aspects of voting in the same manner as everyone else and it could be argued that suggesting remote voting as an option diverts from this right. In this light, the suggestion for remote voting as an alternative seems more like a quick fix to improve turnout, rather than an attempt to deal with the accessibility issue at its root. Instead, we should be trying to ensure that disabled people have the same access to in-person voting as others, whilst at the same time exploring options for those who choose to vote remotely. It is about offering voters with impairments the same choice as non-disabled voters.
- 3.46 Another drawback is that remote voting itself is not always accessible. Evidence has indicated that some European election administration measures adopted in order to boost turnout, such as advanced voting and postal voting, instead depressed turnout amongst people with different impairments and conditions (Wass et al. 2017; Johnson and Powell, 2019). The reason for this may be that when new measures are not directly targeted specifically at disabled people (such as advance voting), these measures may motivate other voter groups even more than those with impairments or conditions (Mattila, 2022).
- 3.47 There is, however, contrary evidence relating to the usefulness of such reforms, which has helped to close the turnout gap to some extent. In the US context, allowing voting by post has increased the turnout among disabled people (Landwehr and Ojeda, 2021). Furthermore, providing more polling stations closer to where people live might help, as increasing physical distance from polling stations decreases the likelihood of voting among people with impairments or conditions (Mattila and Rapeli, 2018; Mattila, 2022).
- 3.48 Postal voting offers electors more time to digest information than in-person voting, yet postal applications and ballots contain similar issues to pre-election information in that they are often not 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.

- 3.49 This inaccessibility of formats means that disabled people often require help with their postal ballot, even when they would prefer to be able to complete the ballot alone. This may infringe on disabled people's right to a private and independent vote (as stipulated by the UN CRPD, Article 29), something which, for many disabled people, is already an outstanding issue (e.g. The Royal National Institute of Blind People, 2021).
- 3.50 Proxy voting is not a popular option amongst disabled people for the same reasons that it is not popular amongst the population at large. Principally, this is because people feel that proxy voting creates a disconnect between them and the democratic process (Clark and James, 2016). Where disabled people do use a proxy, the main reason cited for doing so is the inaccessibility of in-person voting. The application form for proxy voting is subject to the same issues regarding inaccessibility of formats as voter registration forms and postal voting (Keeley et al., 2008).
- 3.51 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.

#### **4. Adjustments and interventions to improve accessibility**

- 4.1 This section considers possible adjustments which could be implemented in order to attempt to improve the accessibility of the democratic process in Wales.
- 4.2 It should be noted that, in the majority of cases, adjustments and interventions to improve accessibility overwhelmingly tend to benefit those groups already most mobilised to vote. That is, they may not significantly improve turnout, and indeed may not necessarily reduce the 'disability gap' in turnout, as many such interventions will improve access to democratic engagement for both disabled and non-disabled people.
- 4.3 Further, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' strategy with regard to making the democratic process more accessible. Those adjustments which help some people in their

engagement may not benefit others and may in fact have unforeseen negative knock-on effects.

4.4 Those interventions which have been most successful have been those which have imbedded an ongoing, self-reflective strategy of reform to the electoral process over time, with monitoring and evaluation at the heart of the process, in order to see whether adjustments work and how well they work. Whilst voting is of course not mandatory in Wales, from an accessibility viewpoint it should be treated as though it were compulsory, in order to ensure standardisation of practice and access to all voters (Peixoto Gomes et al, 2022).

4.5 As such, this section is structured in such a way as to give an idea of what such an ongoing, standardised cycle of reform to improve accessibility might include, based on the evidence from both domestic and international examples. It deals with adjustments to electoral processes in the lead up to elections, during election periods, between election cycles and possible longer-term reforms.

#### **Pre-election adjustments**

4.6 The development of inclusive voter education and information campaigns or initiatives can enhance voters' awareness of their voting rights; knowledge about the registration and election processes; understanding of key election and party issues; and levels of confidence in the electoral system (Lord et al., 2014). Differences in communication and information needs should be taken into account in order to accommodate the diversity of the electorate and variables such as language, literacy, cultural traditions and gender considered in planning for effective education and outreach. Likewise, ensuring the accessibility of voter education and information for disabled people will require various accommodations and adjustments, many of which will also enhance access for a variety of other marginalised groups (ibid.).

4.7 In Quebec, for example, informational materials for electors have been adapted to accessible format such as Braille, audiocassette and large print, as well as video cassettes in both Quebec Sign Language and American Sign Language (Leclerc, 2010). In addition, during previous elections all televised messages were subtitled for people with hearing impairments and a teletypewriter made available for people

who were deaf or hard of hearing provided access to qualified election information officers, who could provide voter information through an adapted mode of communication (ibid.). In addition, throughout each election period, information on the specific accommodations and adjustments provided for disabled voters was disseminated to all media in Quebec (Lord et al., 2014).

- 4.8 Those managing elections in Wales should therefore ensure that all pre-election materials (including registration forms and ballot papers) sent out via post are available in accessible formats, as well as multiple languages. Accessible formats include easy-read, illustrated and large print versions; bullet point explanations; literature available in colours other than black and white; and braille and tactile versions.
- 4.9 Any 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, and with closed captions available. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea is an example here, as it offers print-out versions of the electoral registration form in several languages (Peixoto Gomes et al, 2022). This should be emulated and expanded to include all necessary information for participation in elections.
- 4.10 Previous research also suggests that voter education and information can be improved by using illustrative or pictorial information in election material to enhance potential voters' awareness of their voting rights, increase knowledge about the election processes and improve the understanding of procedures before and during the election, including aspects of candidates, parties and key issues (Lord et al., 2014; Hees et al., 2017).
- 4.11 The duty on political parties should be used as an instrument to ensure that all parties and candidates publish all of their campaign literature, including manifestos, in accessible formats. These formats should be released at the same time as standard formats, so that those who require accessible formats have as much time to study them as other electors.
- 4.12 More widespread changes, whether by legislation or other means, should be made to ensure that the media coverage surrounding elections is made fully accessible,

including the provision of closed captions and sign language interpretation on party political broadcasts, debates, discussions and so on.

- 4.13 Specific multi-platform 'get-out-the-vote' campaigns, which are frequently employed by actors engaged in the electoral process to mobilise voters' turnout and engagement with elections (Green and Gerber, 2004), should be run in collaboration with disabled people's organisations. This is vital as it allows electors to plan for what to expect and what to do on polling day. Although some research has investigated the success of get-out-the-vote campaigns in general (e.g. Howard and Posler, 2012; Nickerson, 2006), little is known about how effective they are in helping to address the important democratic problem of disengagement among particular groups such as disabled voters, and importantly whether they shape longer lasting types of political engagement. Therefore, the differential effects of election campaign interventions specifically aimed at disabled voters need to be explored in order to plan future campaigns.
- 4.14 Disabled people, and those with cognitive impairments and learning difficulties in particular, 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 and tailoring election materials to a level of understanding for people with cognitive impairments, for example by using pictures logos on voting paper, producing simple text, using videos and providing courses about voting and elections (Hees et al., 2017).
- 4.15 There needs to be better awareness about the support available to disabled people to help them, their carers and 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).
- 4.16 The selection of suitable polling station sites can have a major impact on accessibility to balloting (Waterstone, 2010). A number of factors should therefore be taken into account in order to achieve barrier-free access to polling stations. As Lord et al. (2014) suggest, consultation with disabled people's organisations is part

and parcel of this process and can help identify the specific needs of disabled people, such as wheelchair users. The selection of suitable sites, such as the identification of polling stations with level ground floor entry, will not only facilitate access for voters with mobility impairments, but will also benefit pregnant women, older persons and individuals with temporary or permanent health conditions that limit mobility. In Canada, where level access at a polling centre is not possible, transfer passes are provided to enable voters with mobility impairments to use an alternative and accessible polling centre (Elections Canada, 2004; Lord et al., 2014).

- 4.17 Increased attention is now being paid to the use of accessibility audits to ensure effective access to political processes for disabled people, and best practice highlights that such initiatives are most effectively implemented jointly by disabled people's organisations in conjunction with electoral officials. In the US, for example, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) conducted compliance reviews at polling places in 82 communities across the United States as part of its 'Project Access Initiative' and worked to enforce the accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act in the voting context. Likewise, the city of Philadelphia implemented accessibility improvements at more than 500 polling places and some US states also initiated their own accessibility programmes to address ongoing barrier removal (Waterstone, 2010).
- 4.18 Scotland is also a good example to follow here, with research undertaken following the Scottish Parliament and Local Government Elections in 2003 indicating good awareness and knowledge of the need to ensure buildings used as polling places were accessible (in accordance with section 18(3)a) of RoPA 1983). Many election teams carried out access audits and complete reviews of polling places ahead of the election in collaboration with local disabled people's groups and Capability Scotland. As a result, it was reported that changes were made, either by shifting to more accessible buildings or by putting in permanent or temporary improvements (Capability Scotland, 2003).
- 4.19 Voters' experiences could therefore 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 disability groups and relevant disabled people's organisations to ensure they consider locations and layout from the perspective of disabled people with health conditions or impairments.

4.20 In 2021, the Welsh Government worked with principal councils across Wales to implement a selection of advance voting pilots to test different forms of advanced voting ahead of the May 2022 elections, as part of its [Framework for electoral reform](#). An evaluation of the pilots undertaken by [The Electoral Commission \(2022\)](#) indicated that whilst voters who used the different methods of advance voting were satisfied with their experience of voting and the additional choice if offered, the opportunity to vote in-person ahead of polling day did not, on its own, boost turnout significantly.

4.21 The experience of the pilots provides some useful information on how advance voting could work in practice. For example, the use of electronic registers was successful, allowing the register for any area within the local authority to be accessed via a single device. However, the small number of pilots and the selection of locations in which they were tested means there is still work to do to develop any future policy and to understand how it could be implemented. The evaluation also identified several specific areas that need to be addressed if a further roll out of advance voting is to be considered in future, including the location and number of polling venues; the number and choice of advance voting days; the costs and benefits of wider implementation; enhancing existing capacity within electoral services; the benefits of a coordinated and centrally-funded wider public awareness activity around elections and adequate time for electoral administrators to implement any changes (The Electoral Commission, 2022).

### **Adjustments during elections: Polling stations**

4.22 There are several adjustments to polling stations which are necessary in order to make them fully accessible. Possible adaptations that could be made to in-person voting at polling stations include:

- Ensuring that all polling stations are in locations accessible by all modes of transport, with accessible parking provided;

- Ensuring step-free and hands-free access to every polling station (i.e., the ability to bypass step hazards and non-automated doors). There should be a level, clear and obstacle-free route through the polling station, including to the ballot box and to the exit;
- Creating possibilities to deal with queues for those who require it. This should include the availability of seating, but also some form of 'queue jump' or priority pass for those who are unable to queue for long periods. This latter adjustment has been shown to operate well, for example, in Georgia, USA (Johnson and Powell, 2020);
- Offering 'curb-side voting' (i.e., bringing the ballot box out to the voter) can also function as a means of allowing disabled people to by-pass queues, as undertaken in Texas (ibid.).

4.23 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). When casting their ballot, blind or partially sighted voters very often have their right to vote independently and in secret compromised (Lord et al., 2014).

4.24 This was highlighted in a judicial review brought to the High Court in 2019, and further challenged in 2021, relating to the voting provisions for blind and partially sighted people. The claimant, Rachel Andrews who has myopic macular degeneration and has been registered blind since 2000, successfully challenged the UK Government's provision for blind and partially sighted voters. She argued that the arrangements in place for the December 2019 general election were unlawful as they did not allow her to vote independently and secretly at the polling station.

4.25 The case was centred around the argument that TVDs do not allow for an independent voting process because assistance is required to help the voter read the names of the candidates and the order in which they appear on the ballot paper. The claimant argued that the lack of accessibility in the system discouraged blind people from voting and described TVDs as "not fit for purpose", and that as a result

the UK lagged behind other countries who use systems such as audio voting booths and telephone voting to aid blind and partially sighted voters.

- 4.26 During the review, the RNIB provided a witness statement in support of the case and highlighted findings from research it had undertaken into the challenges faced by blind and partially sighted voters, which indicated that only one in four blind and partially sighted voters felt the current system let them vote independently and in secret (RNIB, 2021).
- 4.27 The High Court declared the Government's arrangements to be unlawful on the basis that TVDs do not allow blind and partially sighted people to vote without any need for assistance. The judgement stated that:
- “Enabling a blind voter to mark ballot papers without being able to know which candidate she is voting for is a parody of the electoral process established under the rules.”*
- 4.28 In some countries, electronic voting machines are enhancing access for persons with visual impairments (Mindes, 2002; Ghana Association of the Blind, 2002). In Western Australia, for example, computer software called 'Vote Assist' allows electors with visual impairments to listen to an audio recording, and by following the instructions and using a numeric keypad, they can cast their vote, obtain a printed ballot paper, and place the ballot paper into the ballot box, thereby preserving both independence and secrecy (Palmer, 2013; Lord et al., 2014).
- 4.29 There is also evidence from the USA to suggest that disabled people with cognitive impairments and learning difficulties find electronic voting machines easier to use compared to paper ballots (Friedman, 2018).
- 4.30 Other solutions can also be effectively introduced at relatively low cost. Tactile ballot guides, for example, have been effectively used in Sierra Leone, Ghana, Peru and elsewhere to help secure the right to vote in secret and independently (Global Initiative to Enfranchise People with Disabilities, undated). Where designed properly, the guides enable ballot papers to be inserted into the guide in one direction only, allowing blind and partially sighted voters to place the ballot paper in the guide without assistance, thereby ensuring independence and secrecy in the ballot casting process. In Liberia in 2004, key representatives from disabled people's organisations worked collaboratively with the National Election

Commission and international assistance partners to design and pilot such tactile ballot guides in designated electoral districts (Mindes, 2002). Materials on the use of the guide were developed, poll workers were trained on its use, and outreach was undertaken to ensure that blind and partially sighted voters were aware of its availability (Lord et al., 2014).

- 4.31 The tactile voting device (TVD) should therefore 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. Following a positive response to the trial of an audio device accompanying the TVD in Norfolk in 2021, and a subsequent recommendation from the RNIB (2021) that this audio device be rolled out across the UK, polling stations in Wales should also consider piloting this adjustment. 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.
- 4.32 It has also been suggested that 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.
- 4.33 Research has also suggested that it would be more accessible for some voters, particularly blind and partially sighted people, to use a different instrument, such as a stamp with a cross to vote, rather than having to mark the paper with a pen or pencil. Large grip pencils and pens should also be made available for those who require them in standard polling booths.
- 4.34 All information at polling stations should be available in a variety of accessible formats, as well as in multiple different languages.
- 4.35 All polling stations should have good lighting and magnifying glasses and portable lighting should be provided for those who require additional visual enhancement.
- 4.36 Polling stations should also provide noise-cancelling headphones for people who struggle with noisy and crowded spaces and make available a separate room for those who prefer to vote away from crowds or crowded areas,

- 4.37 It would also be useful for many disabled voters to have additional illustrations (e.g., symbols next to candidates' names) and larger voting slips, to prevent the vote from being designated as spoilt if crosses are oversized.
- 4.38 The Welsh Government's Locked Out report (2021), suggested the development of a 'coronavirus courtesy code' to raise awareness of disabled people's right to safely access public spaces. Whilst COVID-19-specific restrictions have now been lifted, general behavioural guidance for polling stations may be worth consideration.
- 4.39 After consultation with members of the Visual Impairment Consultative Forum (a consortium of nine organisations that work with blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland), the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland established a new Helpline for the 2022 Assembly elections that blind and partially sighted voters can call to hear the list of candidates in their area, in the order they will appear on the ballot paper, to help them with their choice (Disability Action, 2022). Those managing elections in Wales should pay attention to any evaluation of this helpline and consider implementing a similar scheme. It should be considered whether this could be expanded to a wider programme of on-the-day assistance for all voters.
- 4.40 All of the above will require additional training for those working at polling stations, to ensure that staff are aware of any new adjustments and how to assist those who wish to use them. Training needs to be informed more by disabled people's understanding of accessibility or indeed, that their views inform polling station layout plans (Capability Scotland, 2003).

### **Adjustments during elections: Remote voting**

- 4.41 As previously mentioned, 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.
- 4.42 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 not be able to attend a polling station (hospitals, care homes, nursing homes, sheltered accommodation, etc.).

- 4.43 As with pre-election information, postal ballots, and the information associated with postal voting, should be in accessible formats, as well as multiple languages. As above, accessible formats include easy-read and illustrated versions; bullet point explanations; large print (16-20 font size); literature available in colours other than black and white; and braille and tactile versions.
- 4.44 This should be supplemented by online information in the form of text, audio, and video, with videos adapted to various languages including sign language, and with closed captions available.
- 4.45 Proxy voting and its associated paperwork should also be available in all of these accessible formats and with online information provided as listed above.
- 4.46 Steps should be taken to ensure that those voting remotely can do so privately and independently rather than depending on others for help. As in-person voting, a dedicated phone helpline for assistance would be worth consideration.

### **Adjustments between elections**

- 4.47 As mentioned above, the most successful systems at providing accessibility of democratic processes have been those which have incorporated large numbers of changes over time and engaged in a constant process of revaluation. Below are some recommendations for changes that could be made between election periods which would facilitate this process in Wales.
- 4.48 Polling stations should be audited for accessibility issues. The 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.
- 4.49 All polling station staff should be trained to be aware of the possible needs of electors, and to manage any adjustments on polling day.
- 4.50 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.

- 4.51 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.
- 4.52 It has been shown that making necessary changes between elections is fundamental in improving the voting experience for disabled people. Through the adoption of the above methods combined, the state of Wisconsin successfully removed the 'disability gap' in voter turnout (Belt, 2016).
- 4.53 All of the above should be supported by legislation guaranteeing mandatory minimum standards for accessibility, which are themselves reassessed regularly. International evidence shows that this is a much more effective strategy for removing barriers than voluntary adherence to guidelines (World Health Organisation, 2011).
- 4.54 Strengthening the political participation of disabled people should be an ongoing concern and continuous monitoring should take place both pre- and post-election.

## **5. Electoral reform**

- 5.1 The final aspect considered with regard to improving accessibility is wider electoral reform. This section includes commentary on possible changes to the electoral system which may improve access to the democratic process.

### **Flexible voting**

- 5.2 Flexible voting would constitute a relaxation of the restrictions regarding when and where voters would be required to vote. There is some indication that this might improve the accessibility of elections (Peixoto Gomes et al., 2022).
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 The ability to vote on multiple days may 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.

- 5.5 The extension of the voting period over a longer period of time may mean a reduction in the amount of people going to polling stations at any one time, and therefore easier access to voting through a reduction in queues (Rojas and Muller, 2014).

### **Same-day and automatic voter registration**

- 5.6 Automatically registering voters, or allowing voters to register to vote on polling day, has also been suggested to be a possible means of mobilising those groups currently less likely to vote (Hunt and Nickson, 2019).
- 5.7 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, and thus a removal of one of these layers would represent the removal of such a barrier (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**

- 5.8 Moving from First Past the Post (FPTP) to an alternative, more proportional voting system may bolster voter engagement and turnout, including among disabled people. However, an alternative system, particularly one, 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.
- 5.9 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.

### **Good practice in relation to accessibility**

- 5.10 There is also much to learn from successes in other countries' response to improving the accessibility of the electoral process. As an example, the UK Government's call for evidence on improving access to elections highlighted good practice from a number of local authorities across England and Scotland, and from the Scottish Electoral Management Board, in relation to improving accessibility. These included adherence to Electoral Commission guidelines and providing assistance for disabled people to complete their ballot papers, including at care homes and hospitals. A number of local authorities also noted that they liaised with local disabled people's organisations to provide information and receive advice, including on buying new equipment, employing trained outreach workers within the community, holding events, attending open days and providing targeted training to public-facing staff (Cabinet Office, 2019).

## **6. Conclusions**

### **Barriers to an accessible electoral system**

- 6.1 Being a disabled person is itself a statistically significant determining characteristic for turnout and is associated with a lower likelihood of voting.
- 6.2 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).
- 6.3 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).
- 6.4 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).

- 6.5 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).
- 6.6 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.
- 6.7 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**

- 6.8 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 parking facilities; problems within the polling station itself; and difficulties with the experience of voting.
- 6.9 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).
- 6.10 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).

- 6.11 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.
- 6.12 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**

- 6.13 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.
- 6.14 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.
- 6.15 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).
- 6.16 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).

6.17 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 people with health conditions or impairments.

### **Adjustments and interventions to improve accessibility**

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

6.19 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, clear 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.

6.20 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).

6.21 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.

6.22 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.

- 6.23 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.
- 6.24 Mobile polling stations 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).
- 6.25 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.
- 6.26 Steps should be taken to ensure that those voting remotely can do so privately and independently rather than depending on others for help.
- 6.27 Making necessary changes between elections is fundamental in improving outcomes for disabled people.
- 6.28 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.
- 6.29 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.

6.30 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**

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

6.32 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.

6.33 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.

6.34 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).

6.35 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.

## **7. Recommendations**

- 7.1 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.
- 7.2 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.
- 7.3 Inclusive voter education and information campaigns or initiatives should be developed to enhance voters knowledge of the system and their voting rights.
- 7.4 Disabled people should receive a summary of what to expect on polling day.
- 7.5 Consultations should take place with disabled people to inform the selection of suitable sites for polling stations.
- 7.6 It should be ensured that all polling stations are in accessible 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.
- 7.7 All polling stations should have good lighting and magnifying glasses for those who require additional visual enhancements.
- 7.8 All polling staff should be correctly trained to recognise and respond to the potential needs of all electors.

7.9 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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