



**ACCESS TO POLLING STATIONS
EUROPEAN ELECTIONS
JUNE 10 2004**

A STUDY BY DISABILITY ACTION

July 2004

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INTRODUCTION

- 1 Further to Disability Action's previous study of the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections in November 2003. The Access Team undertook a much smaller follow-up study of the European Elections held in Northern Ireland on 10 June 2004.
- 2 The intention of this study was to ascertain whether any of the recommendations from the previous study had been implemented in order to improve upon the accessibility of the voting process to disabled people in Northern Ireland.
- 3 Based on the findings of the previous study (Disability Action Polls Apart 2003) the Electoral Commission recommended in their report "The Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2003 The official report on the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 26 November 2003" that the Electoral Office adhere to the following recommendations.
 - Consideration should be given to alternative venues for polling places as a large proportion of primary schools in Northern Ireland are inaccessible to disabled voters. Accessible buildings such as some secondary schools, community centres and other public buildings, for example council offices, could be used as polling stations.
 - Polling places should have an accessible entrance which is either level or ramped. The ramp does not have to be permanent, but should not be too steep. Staff should not be put in a position where they have to lift a wheelchair user in and out of the polling place. This practice poses obvious risks to both the voter and the polling place staff.
 - All electoral staff working with the general public from the registration process through to the voting process should be given disability awareness training. This would ensure that they have a clearer understanding of the varying requirements of people with a range of disabilities.
 - The EONI should ensure that an access audit of polling places is undertaken prior to election day in order to identify access issues which may prevent people with disabilities from voting.

Disability awareness training should highlight the issues that EONI staff need to take account of.

- The EONI should consult with local disability groups and gauge their views on measures needed to ensure that local polling places are made more accessible.

4 The Commission added a further note.

“In our view it would also be beneficial for voters to be able to obtain advance information from the EONI about the accessibility of each polling station and what measures will be taken to overcome any barriers to access. Information to this effect should be posted on the EONI website”.

5 The Disability Action Polls Apart Report had included a number of recommendations.

- * Polling places should have an accessible entrance which has either level or ramped access. The ramp does not have to be permanent, but should not be too steep. Staff should not be put in a position where they have to lift a wheelchair user in and out of the polling place. This practice poses obvious risks to both the voter and the polling place staff.
- * The doors into the polling place should either be wedged open or automatic.
- * In polling places which have steps at the main entrance, handrails should be provided in order to ensure safe passage for people with visual impairments and people with walking difficulties.
- Consideration should be given to alternative venues for polling places as so many primary schools in Northern Ireland are inaccessible. Accessible buildings such as some secondary schools, community centres and other public buildings for example council offices should be used as polling places.
- * There should be the provision of travel and assistance if required, from a disabled person's home to the polling place. Many disabled people are unable to vote without the provision of travel or assistance.

- * Staff should be available at the entrances to all polling places in order to ensure that there is someone in a position to offer assistance.
- * There should be the provision of seats at all polling places to ensure that people with disabilities as well as older people have somewhere to rest, if required.
- * All material from the registration process through to the ballot paper should be made available in accessible formats and should be available at all polling places. When material is made available in accessible formats, this fact should be more widely advertised and all electoral staff should be made aware of their existence and trained in their use.
- * The issue of ID should be looked at in order to encourage rather than discourage disabled people from voting. Other forms of ID such as the Blue Badge and the Blind Persons Pass should be accepted. Many people with disabilities do not hold passports or driving licences. In many cases the mobile ID centres are not in a convenient location for people with disabilities.
- * There should be the introduction of legislation which deals with the issues of learning disability and mental health in the voting process. The final decision on whether a person can vote or not should not be left to polling place staff who may have little knowledge of disability.
- * All electoral staff working with the general public from the registration process through to the voting process should be given disability awareness training. This would ensure that they have a clearer understanding of the varying requirements of people with a range of disabilities.
- * The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland should ensure that an access audit of their polling places is undertaken prior to election day in order to identify access issues which may prevent people with disabilities from voting. Disability awareness training should highlight the issues which Presiding Officers need to take into account.

- * The Electoral Office should consult with local disability groups and gauge their views on measures needed to ensure local polling places are made more accessible.
 - * Whatever measures are put in place to make a polling place accessible, the issue of the voters' confidentiality must not be compromised. Disabled people should be able to place their voting slip in the ballot box in the same manner as everyone else and not depend on a member of staff to undertake this particular task on their behalf.
 - * Polling places should advertise in advance what measures have been taken to make them accessible. This would ensure that people with disabilities are aware of any obstacles before they set out to vote.
- 6 Unlike the previous study, which was financially supported by the Electoral Commission, this 2004 study was not funded and was therefore restricted in scope and methodology.

METHODOLOGY

- 7 The purpose of this study was to ascertain whether the recommendations had been adhered to in the administration of the elections held in June 2004.

- 8 The test applied was a simple assessment of seven factors. Namely :
 - Whether designated parking was reserved for disabled people;
 - Whether there was a ramped or level entrance to the polling place;
 - Whether the doors at the entrance were kept open or held open;
 - Whether chairs had been provided for people to rest;
 - Whether a low level polling booth was available;
 - Whether a low level ballot box was available; and
 - Whether the ballot papers were available in alternative formats.

People were also given an opportunity to make any other comments they desired.

- 9 As there was no budget to support this study the methodology employed was restricted. All Disability Action staff were asked to participate as were key groups from the previous study, and representatives of other disability organisations and key contacts.

RESULTS

- 10 In total 30 responses were received. (220 responses were received in 2003) The results are disappointing.
- 11 It was appreciated that the proximity of reporting on the November 03 election and the June 04 election date may not have allowed for some of the recommendations to be implemented, therefore Disability Action had asked the Electoral Office to ensure that a few simple measures be taken to improve upon accessibility. Namely:
- that parking be reserved
 - that the accessible entrance be made the entrance for all
 - or where that was not possible that the accessible entrance be clearly signposted
 - that the doors be kept open or held open by staff
 - that chairs be placed at various points within the polling stations for disabled people to rest
 - and that polling station staff be well versed in the availability of low level booths the height of the ballot box, the availability of alternative formats, and the Braille template etc

The following is an assessment of the implementation of these recommendations.

ISSUE ONE

Parking

- 12 Disability Action had requested that designated parking areas be set-aside for people with disabilities on polling day. These did not necessarily need to be marked out on the ground as the Electoral Office was only making use of the premises for one day however they should be signposted.
- 13 57% of respondents said that parking had **not** been reserved for disabled people. In one example it was noted that parking was available but it was behind locked gates, another respondent was not sure whether there was access to parking within the polling station grounds as it was not made clear. Another respondent pointed out that parking could have been made available for election day in a bus lay by but this has not been the case.

ISSUE TWO

Entrance

- 14 The Electoral Commission Report recommended that polling places should have an entrance which is either level or ramped. The Electoral Office were encouraged to look elsewhere if a polling station was not accessible.
- 15 53% of respondents indicated that there was a level or ramped access to the polling station. In the previous study November 2003 50.3% of entrances were not accessible.
- 16 This therefore illustrates a small improvement. However it should be noted that at least 3 respondents referred to the same polling station in Dungannon which had been moved to a more accessible location, not as a response to our request but because of construction work at the traditional polling station. Five respondents noted that the entrance for disabled people was either a side or rear entrance, only one noted that this was signposted.

ISSUE THREE

Doors

- 17 70% of respondents indicated that the doors were either kept open or held open. This simple provision can dramatically improve upon accessibility for many people with disabilities, and should be brought to the attention of polling staff.

ISSUE FOUR

Rest Points

- 18 40% said that chairs had **not** been provided. This is disappointing given that seats or rest areas are crucial for many people who are ambulant but disabled including many older people. Combined with a lack of reserved parking convenient to the polling place and the distances involved inside the polling place this can be a major factor in discouraging people from voting.

ISSUE FIVE

Low Level Polling Booth

- 19 50% of respondents said that there was **not** a low level polling booth and a further 13% did not know whether a low level polling booth had been provided. This is worrying given that the Electoral Office committed to the provision of one low level booth at every polling station (i.e. per ballot box) and that special equipment was purchased for the purpose.
- 20 The statistics suggest that either the equipment is not being used or is being set up in a way, which does not ensure that the low level booth is obvious.
- 21 Care is required in this matter as wheelchair users can feel that their privacy is compromised where others can overlook the low level booth. The low level booth should be obvious but it should also be located where it cannot be overlooked, where these two cannot be married the booth should be clearly signposted and care taken to ensure adequate circulation and turning space is available for a wheelchair user.

ISSUE SIX

- 22 The availability of a low-level ballot box is of particular concern given the ease with which the matter could be remedied. 43% said that a low level ballot box was **not** available. Many said that the box was located on top of a table and it was assumed that this would be alright for wheelchair users. Often a ballot box placed on top of a table will mean that a wheelchair user is unable to see or reach the slot and must rely on someone else to cast their vote.

ISSUE SEVEN

Alternative Formats

- 23 Many respondents (47%) were **not** aware whether or not the ballot papers were available in alternative formats. An equal number said they were **not**.

- 24 Only two respondents reported that a Braille template was available. In another two cases the polling staff said that a template was available but they were unable to provide it.
- 25 Comments on this matter included the following :-
- * A Braille card was available which could be overlaid on the ballot paper.
 - * Didn't actually see other formats, but I enquired and was assured they were available.
 - On request Braille (was) available but they were unable to trace one at the time.
 - When asked was told they (papers in alternative formats) are available in Braille but none could be produced, no large print ballot papers but a large print poster was in each booth.
 - Accessible formats were zero"

OTHER COMMENTS

- 26 Respondents were given an opportunity to raise any other issues of concern. Two issues again came to light. As in the 2003 study disabled people were concerned about a lack of accessible transport and about voter I.D.
- 27 One respondent highlighted an example where three wheelchair users and one visually impaired person had been left stranded at a polling station because of the lack of accessible transport.
- 28 Another wanted to raise the issue of electoral I.D. They felt that the Translink Half-Fare Smart Pass should be accepted as a form of I.D. given that the older peoples equivalent was accepted. The respondent had attempted to use this form of I.D. and was not allowed to vote.

CONCLUSION

- 29 It is noted that the proximity in reporting on the previous Assembly Election and the timing of the European Election restricted the actions which could have been taken to improve upon accessibility in terms of actual physical adjustments to premises. However many easy measures can vastly improve upon accessibility and required only improved awareness amongst polling station staff.
- 30 These measures were brought to the attention of the Electoral Office in advance of the European Election and could have easily been introduced prior to the June 10th election date. A number of the provisions were already Electoral Office requirements, i.e. the low level booths and provision of a Braille template, therefore their absence or at least lack of awareness of their availability on the part of voters and electoral staff is a matter of concern.
- 31 Staff awareness was not been measured in either the November 2003 or the June 2004 studies. Staff training will be crucial to the successful administration of election day in terms of accessibility. Therefore it is crucial that the training provided be assessed to ensure a focus on disability awareness.
- 32 Polling places must be assessed for accessibility prior to the election date and information on measures taken should be given to disabled people both on site and prior to arriving at the polling place. The November 2003 study was the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, a comprehensive review of administration in terms of accessibility should be a requirement of every election.
- 33 This limited study illustrates that there has been little improvement in relation to the overall accessibility of the voting process to disabled people in Northern Ireland.
- There is a continued failure to make parking provision for people with disabilities at polling stations across Northern Ireland. This is a factor which is crucial to disabled people many of whom rely on private transport.
 - The lack of accessible transport to polling stations has again been raised as an issue for disabled people. This matter should be addressed by the Electoral Office in partnership with the political parties and transport providers.

- Accessibility is about independence and inclusion Disabled people should be able to enter a polling place unassisted and via the same entrance as everyone else. It is not acceptable that disabled people continue to be segregated. Where a separate entrance must be used it should be made the main entrance. Premises which are not accessible should not be used.
- Information about the access provisions made should be provided both on site on the day and prior to election day. Staff training will again impact upon this. It should be noted that the absence of the police service at the polling places has impacted upon the provision of information regarding accessibility.
- Doors being held or kept open vastly improves upon accessibility - it should be noted that the timing of an election in November was unusual and summer time elections may make it easier to prop external doors open. However continued care should be taken at doors along corridors given the potential clash with fire precautions.
- The failure to provide chairs and rest places is frustrating particularly as this compounds the other access failures.
- The lack of, or at least the lack of awareness of, low level booths is also worrying in that there has been an investment made by the Electoral Office in specialist equipment for the purpose. Staff awareness may again be a factor to be taken into account in setting out the polling booth.
- The location and height of the ballot box is another factor which could be easily remedied with staff training.
- Again the lack of availability, or lack of awareness of the availability, of the Braille template is a concern. The availability of alternative formats is crucial to accessibility but as the November 2003 study clearly illustrated the provision is wasted if disabled people are not made aware of their existence.

- Staff must also be made aware of the alternate formats and how to use them - it is of great concern that staff on two occasions could not produce a Braille template when asked.
- The Electoral Office should also work with disability organisations in developing effective alternative formats, particularly for complicated voting systems such as proportional representation.
- The restriction on acceptable identification as required by the Electoral Fraud Act has adversely impacted upon the accessibility of the voting process for disabled people. The legislation needs to be changed to include other forms of ID such as the Blue Badge, and the Translink SmartPass and Blind Persons Pass

34 Many of the factors identified above are issues which could be easily remedied with effective staff training and a focus upon accessibility. However others will require legislative change or additional effort on the part of the Electoral Office and others. Disability Action will be pleased to assist in bringing these matters forward and working with the Electoral Office toward improving the accessibility of all of the voting process for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland.



SURVEY RESULTS

	Questions	Yes	No	Don't Know
1	Was parking reserved for disabled people?	13	17	
2	Was there level access or a ramped entrance?	16	14	5 – back door
3	Were the doors kept open or held open?	21	9	
4	Were chairs provided for people to rest?	17	12	1
5	Was there a low level polling booth?	11	15	4
6	Was there a low level ballot box?	17	13	
7	Were the papers available in alternative formats?	2	14	14
8	Any other comments :-			
	* ID Issue – acceptance of the half price smart pass – was refused			
	* Better this time as felt more private without people standing over me.			
	* Accessible formats were zero.			
	* Many unacceptable polling stations continue to be used.			
	* Some election officials are extremely unhelpful.			
	* 3 wheelchair users and a visually impaired person were left stranded.			
	* The polling station was better this time (2 steps) than the one previously used which had 6 steps at the entrance.			

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * No obvious signs or notices for people with disabilities. But if a person with a disability were present presumably assistance would be offered.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Level access at front door but there are three steps to room where voting took place. No ramp provided.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Stepped access at the front door (main entrance). Directional sign indicating wheelchair access to the side/rear of the building.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Facilities were very good.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * A Braille card was available which could be overlaid on the ballot paper.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * There was parking but the gate had to be requested to be open..... no one at the front to open gate.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * You had to go around to the back of the building to get a ramp access, this still had to be requested and no signs available to point in the direction of disabled access.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * When asked (papers in alternative formats) are available in Braille but none could be produced, no large print ballot paper but a large print poster was on each booth. None available in other languages was told there was no need for it.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * No posters for information on what is available re: access and parking arrangements/other ballot formats.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * On request Braille available but they were unable to trace one at the time.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * As the school only opened this year the architects have obviously considered the needs of people with disabilities, however the following issues were not addressed by the Electoral Office :- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no chairs were provided for waiting or resting - handwritten notices were placed on the doors to indicate the register numbers – these may not have been legible to all - no staff were provided to assist with locating the room they were to vote in – previously PSNI were in position and they addressed this need - there was no evidence of ballot papers in alternative formats - disabled parking could have been provided closer to the entrance to the building by utilizing the bus lay by for that day
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Did not see ramp at entrance but they said it was accessible
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * No – 3 steps and a steep hill
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Didn't actually see other formats, but I enquired and was assured they were available
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Polling station was a relatively new primary school so access to the building was good anyway. Staff told me they had received instruction about facilitating disabled people and generally had a helpful attitude. Generally much improved from years gone by