



NIADA PROJECT

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY
ELECTIONS
DISABILITY ACCESS REVIEW**

FINAL REPORT

30th JANUARY 2004

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was commissioned by the Electoral Commission to provide an assessment of access to polling stations by people with disabilities.

Disability Action would like to thank all of those who participated in the Polls Apart Survey. The many issues raised in surveys completed by disabled people have been highlighted in this report which we hope will make a significant contribution to addressing the issue of inaccessible polling places in Northern Ireland.

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SUMMARY

- 1.** The Disability Action Polls Apart Campaign has for the first time sought to highlight the extent that the electoral process is inaccessible to people with disabilities in Northern Ireland.
- 2.** This report seeks to highlight the many measures that need to be taken in the first instance to make the entire electoral process accessible to all people with disabilities.
- 3.** The report is based on the real experience of disabled people in the November 2003 Assembly Election. The responses from 220 questionnaires form the basis of the findings in this report. 85.7% of the responses are from people with disabilities.
- 4.** The survey highlights significant deficiencies in the registration process, with difficulties experienced in reading registration forms and obtaining appropriate identification cited as major issues for people with disabilities.
- 5.** Despite the many difficulties experienced in the voting process, disabled people still want to be able to vote at their local polling place. Using the postal voting system and voting three weeks before Election Day is not recognised as a viable alternative to voting at a local polling place.
- 6.** Despite 82% of the survey respondents living within one mile of the nearest polling place, a lack of accessible transport to and from the polling place is cited as a major issue.
- 7.** 82.6% of the respondents highlight that a local school is used as the polling place, over half of which are physically inaccessible.

8. Some respondents questioned the use of schools given that school buildings are currently exempt from Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act, which will require the physical alteration of premises where physical features act as a barrier to access.
9. There is clear evidence of a failure in staff training in that staff either failed to offer assistance to disabled voters or have known little about the adjustments made available such as ballot papers in accessible formats.
10. The presence of heavy doors at the entrance to the polling place or the absence of designated parking spaces both impact on the accessibility of a polling place just as much as the presence of steps.
11. Other issues such as poor signage, little circulation space, a lack of staff assistance, unsuitable flooring and the absence of seats for people to rest on also impact significantly on a disabled person's voting experience.
12. Highlighting the range of measures that need to be taken to make the voting process more accessible, the respondents make the fundamental point that people with disabilities have a right to vote.
13. The many difficulties faced by people with disabilities as they try to vote at their local polling place are highlighted in the access audit of polling stations from across Northern Ireland and the series of case studies detailed in Section Three.
14. The feedback from other organisations also demonstrates that the voting experience is often a difficult one, with many people with disabilities experiencing a series of obstacles in voting.
15. The feedback from the surveys as well as other organisations demonstrates that no polling place highlighted in this report is **fully** accessible.

- 16.** This report offers a series of action points which need to be addressed in order to ensure a more accessible electoral process. Measures range from assistance at the registration stage of the voting process, to providing accessible transport to and from the polling place. There are recommendations for practical measures which will make the polling place physically accessible and the need for staff training to ensure that disabled people are assisted in the correct manner and their individual needs are addressed.
- 17.** The survey has demonstrated the need to assess the accessibility of all polling stations in advance of every election. Presiding officers should ensure that measures are in place to improve the accessibility of every polling station. Only accessible polling places should be used.
- 18.** Furthermore disabled people need to be told in advance about the measures which have been taken to improve the accessibility of the voting experience in order to encourage more disabled people to exercise their right to vote.

PREFACE

With one in five people in Northern Ireland having a recognised disability, service provision as well as public policy should take account of the views of people with disabilities, given the fact that they represent such a significant proportion of the population.

Too often, policy makers within political parties in Northern Ireland fail to take account of the views of people with disabilities. The manifestos of the political parties in the majority of cases fail to recognise the safeguarding of disability rights as a major issue.

This explains to some extent the reason why few people with disabilities have an interest in voting in elections. The other main reason for a low turnout of disabled voters is the inaccessibility of many polling places¹, not just in Northern Ireland, but right across the United Kingdom. For many years it has been accepted by non-disabled people that the postal voting system serves the purpose, although many people with disabilities do not find it an acceptable option to vote three weeks before everyone else.

The Polls Apart campaign which has been active in England and Wales over the course of the last decade has sought to change the nature of voting for people with disabilities, highlighting the need to make polling places accessible and enabling disabled people to vote in the same way as everyone else. In 2003, the Polls Apart campaign was launched in Northern Ireland ahead of the November elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly. The campaign delivered by Disability Action and supported by the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland aimed to highlight the issue of inaccessible polling places in Northern Ireland and to relay the views of disabled voters on the voting process.

¹ Please note that some of the terminology used in this report is based upon that used by the electoral legislation and electoral administrators etc. Therefore “polling place” refers to the room or building in which the desk, polling booths and polling boxes are located.

INTRODUCTION

Disability Action is the only pan-disability rights-based non-profit making organisation in Northern Ireland. Over 180 organisations are in membership, representing people with physical, hidden, learning, sensory disabilities, and mental health difficulties.

Disability Action campaigns, lobbies and acts as advocate for equal rights for people with disabilities. We provide a wide range of services from a network of 5 local offices, with 100 staff and 250 volunteers.

This report is based on the real life voting experiences of people with disabilities as reported to Disability Action in the Northern Ireland Assembly Election of November 2003.

THE HISTORY OF POLLS APART

Over a number of years disability campaigners across the UK felt too little was being done to remove the barriers that people with disabilities encountered at polling places. Although disabled people knew they were being excluded from the democratic process they felt that too few people in power took the issue seriously.

To counter this, Polls Apart was launched in Great Britain in 1992. The campaign focused on getting as much evidence as possible on the accessibility of polling places throughout England and Wales. The results were startling. Over 90% of all polling places were inaccessible in some way.

At every General Election since 1992 the survey has been repeated. Campaigners have worked with politicians, electoral administrators and other organisations with an interest in democracy to try to improve access. Changes to legislation have helped, as disabled people are now protected in law from discrimination. Many authorities have also taken on board the need to run accessible elections. But progress is slow and by the 2001 General Election, 66% of polling places in Wales for example, were still inaccessible.

Against this background and the need to establish to what extent polling places in Northern Ireland are inaccessible, Disability Action in partnership with Polls Apart undertook a survey of the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections held on 26th November 2003. This survey would not have been possible without the support of the Electoral Commission for Northern Ireland. By using the Polls Apart methodology, cross comparison with the findings of previous surveys in England and Wales can be made.

Disabled people across Northern Ireland were encouraged to participate in the survey. Individuals were targeted by direct mailout and by utilising radio, television and print media. In addition, Disability Action worked with pan-

disability groups in; Ballymoney, Dungannon, Magherafelt, Newry, Armagh and Belfast amongst others.

In order to encourage the highest possible return, Disability Action provided the survey material in a range of formats. Assistance was also offered to those who required support in filling in their questionnaires.

Overall there was a very good response to the survey, given the fact that there is a high level of voter apathy amongst people with disabilities due to their belief that politicians in Northern Ireland have failed to address their needs. A trawl of the manifestos of the main parties in Northern Ireland would support that point of view in that few raised the issue of safeguarding the rights of disabled people in Northern Ireland. Only some of the smaller parties and independent candidates highlighted this issue in the election materials which were sent to homes across Northern Ireland. Despite this, 220 questionnaires were completed, either online or by return within two weeks of the Assembly Elections.

This survey aims to highlight the views of disabled people from across Northern Ireland. It aims to gauge their views on whether or not they vote, whether they vote at a polling place, and to gather feedback on their voting experience. Disability Action recognises that the accessibility of voting for people with disabilities is dependant upon much more than the physical accessibility of the polling place and this was reflected in the questions asked.

The participants in this survey were given the opportunity to comment on their experiences of the registration process, of getting to and entering the polling place. As well as being given the opportunity to highlight examples of good and poor practice, they were asked to comment on how the voting experience could be improved for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland.

The participants who took part in this survey come from various backgrounds and all areas of impairment are represented. The majority of the survey participants have responded to those questions which were relevant to them

and highlighted the issues which have affected them personally in their voting experience.

MAKING A POLLING PLACE FULLY ACCESSIBLE

There are many measures that need to be taken into account in order to make a polling place^{*2} fully accessible to people with disabilities. Measures taken to make the polling place accessible for some, may fail to take account of the requirements of others.

It is important to note at the outset, that many people with disabilities prefer to vote at a polling place. It cannot be assumed that postal voting is a reasonable alternative to voting at a polling place. The postal voting process takes place several weeks before the end of an election campaign, therefore a final voting decision may not have been reached by the individual.

People with disabilities want to be able to undertake this task in a manner which promotes independence and equality in terms of being able to vote at the same time as everyone else.

Below are listed the main areas of impairment and some of the issues which need to be considered in order to make the entire electoral process accessible.

Physical Impairment

- Assistance may be required in the registration process, such as assistance in completing the form.
- Accessible transport may be required for travelling to and from the polling place.
- There is a need for accessible parking bays as well as accessible toilets at the polling place.
- Ramped or level access is required into the polling place. This should be to the main entrance.
- Corridors should be kept clear of all obstructions.

² As before footnote 1

- Staff assistance may be required at the polling place in order to facilitate the voting process.
- There should be sufficient space for wheelchair users to move around the voting area.
- Low level polling booths and ballot boxes should be provided.
- Seats should also be provided for people who have difficulty standing or walking for any length of time.
- Clear directions should be given those polling booths which are accessible.

Visual Impairment

- Assistance may be required in filling out the registration forms.
- Registration forms and other written material from the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Office and the political parties should be provided in alternative formats such as large print, Braille, cd rom and audio tape.
- Transport should be provided to and from the polling place.
- At the polling place, corridors should be cleared of all obstructions.
- There should be clear directions to the polling booths.
- Staff should be available to offer assistance such as guiding the individual to and from the polling booths.
- Ballot papers should be provided in alternative formats such as large print and Braille. Stencils should also be provided if requested.

Hearing Impairment

- Contact/helpline numbers for the Electoral Commission, Electoral Office and the Political Parties should be accompanied by a Textphone number.
- Where requested, interpreters and other communication aids such as a notepad and pen should be made available.
- Clear directions to the polling booths and ballot boxes.

Learning Disability

- There is a need for legislation which recognises the needs of people with learning disabilities. Current legislation means that many people with learning disabilities are not placed on the Electoral Register.
- Staff at a polling station may also refuse to allow a person with a learning disability the right to vote at the polling place. The final decision on someone's eligibility to vote should not be left to polling station staff.
- At all stages of the electoral process staff should be able to explain the process to people with learning disabilities.
- Clear directions to the polling booths and ballot boxes.

Mental Health

- In many cases, people with mental health disabilities may not be able to register to vote and/or may have difficulty with the registration process. As in the case of people with learning disabilities this survey has identified that there is no voter legislation which deals with people with mental health disabilities.
- Provisions should be made to ensure that people with mental health difficulties are given the opportunity to vote by means of a postal vote.

Hidden Disability³

- As a result of a hidden disability, a voter may require assistance at any stage of the voting process. This may entail assistance in filling in registration forms or actually voting on Election Day itself.
- Persons with hidden disabilities which affect their health may need somewhere to sit and rest at the polling place or may need transport provided.
- Staff at polling places should be made aware that despite it not being physically obvious, a potential

³ A 'hidden disability' is one which is not visibly obvious. For example on first impressions it would not be obvious that someone had Dyslexia, but they may still request assistance either at the registration stage or when filling in the ballot paper.

voter may have a hidden disability and should be provided with assistance on request.

THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

At the very heart of the election is the right of people with disabilities to vote for the political representatives they feel may safeguard the rights of people with disabilities. As part of this survey, Disability Action requested information from the political parties in Northern Ireland asking to what extent their election material was available in accessible formats. A survey of the party manifestos was also undertaken and the results are detailed below.

Alliance Party for Northern Ireland: Highlights the rights of people with disabilities in the areas of education, health care and through the need to support all people in society.

Democratic Unionist Party: Calls for better community care provision for people with disabilities.

Northern Ireland Unionist Party: No specific reference to disability issues.

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition: Makes reference to safeguarding the rights of disabled people in areas of transport and health.

Progressive Unionist Party: No specific reference to disability issues.

Sinn Fein: While discussing equality issues at length, there is no specific reference to disability issues.

Social Democratic and Labour Party: Makes reference to safeguarding the rights of disabled people in the areas of employment, education, health and human rights.

The Green Party: Highlights the rights of people with disabilities in the areas of health care and equality.

Ulster Unionist Party: While supporting equality of opportunity, there is no specific reference to safeguarding the rights of people with disabilities.

United Kingdom Unionist Party: No specific reference to disability issues.

A more detailed summary of the actual content of the various party manifestos in relation to disability is included as Appendix One.

METHODOLOGY

As noted earlier there was a very good response to the survey with 220 surveys returned by post or completed online. The majority of the respondents completed the sections of the form which were most relevant to their experiences. For example, the majority of wheelchair users are unlikely to have responded to questions on alternative formats for people with visual impairments. In cases where a significant majority of the respondents replied, the percentage of respondents which have answered a question has been specified. However in cases where fewer respondents have answered a particular question, the actual number of respondents who have made a particular point has been specified.

The majority of the questions offered respondents a multiple choice, ensuring that it was user friendly. Where respondents were offered the opportunity to comment further, comments have been recorded and the main points raised are highlighted in this report. The surveys also highlight the point that although some may recognise a place as accessible, others may have a different view. For example if a ramp is too steep, this makes a building inaccessible to many wheelchair users. A further consideration is while there may be an alternative entrance for people with disabilities which enables access, this leads to a situation in which people are being segregated as a result of their disability.

Section One will use statistics to focus on the profile of the respondents and ascertain the extent to which people with disabilities take part in the voting process. Section Two will assess the overall voting experience according to the respondents of the survey.

As well as capturing feedback from the questionnaires, Disability Action also undertook a consultation process with a number of voluntary and community organisations representing the views of people with a range of disabilities. As a result of this process, there has been

considerable feedback from a number of organisations, who in turn consulted with their membership. This demonstrates the level of interest which Disability Action has succeeded in generating on the issue of accessible polling places. The feedback which has been obtained from other community and voluntary organisations is included in Section Three of this report.

At the heart of the questionnaires and their responses are the personal experiences of disabled people as they go to the polling places to exercise their democratic right. In order to capture some of the personal experiences and highlight some of the major issues raised as a result of the survey, this report will also include a number of case studies. The experiences of six participants from across Northern Ireland will be explored in depth in Section Three. An audit of a range of polling places has also been undertaken. In the majority of cases one or two major issues of inaccessibility are highlighted where applicable. The audit demonstrates the high level of polling places which remain inaccessible in one way or another to people with disabilities.

The final section of this report will sum up the evidence obtained before offering a series of recommendations on how the voting experience can be improved for people with disabilities.

The survey form used has been included as Appendix Three.



SECTION ONE

PARTICIPATION IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS BY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

With the continued suspension of the political institutions in Northern Ireland, there was always a risk that voter apathy would become a major factor in the 2003 Assembly Election. The overall turnout for the Assembly Elections on 26 November 2003 was 64% which was 6% down on the turnout for the Assembly Elections of June 1998.

The figures demonstrate the task which confronts the Electoral Office when it comes to organising an election in Northern Ireland. A total of 612 polling places were used throughout Northern Ireland, the highest number to date. The Electoral Office employed 5,000 part time staff for the maintenance of polling places and the counting of votes. The Electoral Office also confirmed that out of a total 1,500 presiding officers, 400 did not report for election duty. This still left at least one available for each polling station in Northern Ireland.

For people with disabilities in Northern Ireland, the problem of voter apathy is much more acute. As so many polling places are either inaccessible or perceived to be so and as people with disabilities are forced towards the use of the postal voting system (deemed to be complex by many disabled people), many people with disabilities are discouraged from exercising their democratic right.

THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Of the 220 respondents to the survey, 85.7% indicated that they had a recognised disability.⁴ Table 1 illustrates the proportion of survey respondents in relation to the type of their impairment.⁵

⁴ Recognised disability includes; physical, visual, hearing or mental impairment as well as learning disability and hidden disability. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day to day activities.”

⁵ Note: The % scores in relation to this aspect of the survey will not necessarily total 100% due to the fact that respondents had the option to select multiple options.

Table 1

Type of Impairment	% Respondents⁶
Physical Impairment (Wheelchair User)	42.1
Physical Impairment (Other)	45.2
Visual Impairment	18.3
Hearing Impairment	19.0
Learning Disability	15.1
Mental Health Disability	7.1
Hidden Disability	15.9

86.2% of the survey respondents indicated that they would be voting in the elections. The remainder of the respondents were asked to outline why they would not be voting in the election. Some of those who indicated that they would not be voting at all, cited a lack of faith in the ability of local politicians to deliver meaningful change in Northern Ireland. However issues in relation to the respondent's disability accounted for the majority of the remainder of the respondents who indicated that they would not be voting. Several respondents pointed to difficulties in understanding the voting system while others indicated that they were not registered or did not have the appropriate identification. The time of year also influenced people's decision. A number of respondents also highlighted the issue of a lack of transport to and from the polling place. And one respondent highlighted that the legislation which governs eligibility to vote by postal vote as the factor which prevented him/her from voting.

Asked how they would be voting in this election, 79.5% of those who responded to this question indicated they would be voting at the polling place. For the purposes of this survey, it is encouraging that the majority of the respondents wanted to vote at their local polling place, and could therefore assess its accessibility at the same time. In light of this point, it can also be reasonably argued that postal voting does not represent an acceptable alternative for people with disabilities. Many people with disabilities

⁶ The total may exceed 100% as a number of respondents have indicated that they fall into more than one category as a result of their disability.

want to vote in the same way as everyone else – that is at the polling place on Election Day.

15.9% of the respondents to the survey stated that they would continue to use the postal voting system while the remaining 4.5% said they would vote by proxy.

Nearly half of those who used the postal voting system, indicated that they used a postal vote because they could not vote at their polling place as a result of their disability. The major issues which were highlighted here included a lack of accessible transport and the polling place itself not being accessible to wheelchair users. It is safe to assume that a survey of those on the permanent postal register would support the assumption that people with disabilities would prefer to vote at a polling place.

THE REGISTRATION PROCESS

95.7% of the respondents to this question indicated that they did register to vote in this election. The changes in legislation which saw the introduction of the Electoral Fraud Act, has created many disadvantages for marginalised groups such as people with disabilities. One of the difficulties is the need to register on an annual basis in order to remain on the register. Before the introduction of the Act, those who failed to register on an annual basis had their names ‘carried forward’ on the electoral register for one more year. As a result many people with disabilities have not been able to register for the Assembly Election in 2003.

There is also the issue of registration for people with learning disabilities and mental health disabilities. A recent article in *Viewpoint*, for example highlights the ‘dumping’ process which has seen many people with learning disabilities not being placed on the electoral register, or being refused the right to vote, even though they had been present on it for many years.⁷ Maureen Piggot, Director of Mencap Northern Ireland argues; “Having a learning disability does not automatically mean that a person does

⁷ ‘Democracy Denied’, *Viewpoint*, September/October 2003, pp.13-15.

not understand the choices available to them and the role of politicians. One of the biggest barriers that people with a learning disability face is the attitude of others about their ability to take part in the elections”⁸

The difficulties faced by many people with disabilities in the registration process, is highlighted by the fact that 23.6% of the survey respondents could not read the registration forms. A variety of reasons for this included having a visual impairment or the extent of someone’s learning disability. Only 36.1% of the survey respondents were given assistance in filling in the registration forms. While many people with disabilities are unable to read registration forms for a variety of reasons, it is likely that many others are unable to fill in the forms because of not being able to understand them or knowing what sections should be filled in.

20.9% of the survey respondents indicated that registration forms were provided in alternative formats such as Braille, large print on audio tape. The fact that information is being made available in alternative formats is more likely to encourage people with disabilities to take part in the voting process. There is however a need to highlight the fact that such formats are available and that assistance in filling them in is also available.

The survey respondents were given the opportunity to outline how the registration process could be improved for people with disabilities. The overwhelming view was that the process needed to be made more accessible, whether this be through the wider provision of accessible formats or a more user-friendly voting process. 44 respondents highlighted the need for registration forms to be produced in alternative formats which would make them accessible. This could be achieved by providing the registration form in large print, Braille, audio tape or online. Assuming that registration forms are available in these formats, this fact should be promoted more widely. The fact that so many respondents highlighted this particular issue illustrates the

⁸ ‘Democracy Denied’, *Viewpoint*, September/October 2003, pp.13-15.

need for people with disabilities to be made aware that registration forms are available in alternative formats. Several respondents highlighted the need for more assistance from electoral staff in the registration process and the provision of disability awareness training for electoral staff. A number of respondents argued that a wider range of forms of identification should be made acceptable as the current range of acceptable identification restricted people with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairments who hold a Translink (blind person's) smart pass. Many people with disabilities are unable to drive and consequentially do not hold a driving licence and often to not hold a passport.

While a number of respondents to this question commented on the helpfulness of electoral officers in filling in the registration form, it was suggested by one respondent that a free helpline should be established to allow people to register or obtain assistance over the telephone or via a text phone facility.

INFORMATION IN RELATION TO THE ELECTION

The Political Parties

There was an overwhelming view that the information received from the political parties in Northern Ireland was easy to understand. 77.6% of the respondents to this section of the survey felt that the information they received from the political parties was user friendly and easy to understand. However on the issue of alternative formats, it was a markedly different case with 83.7% of respondents indicating that information from the political parties was not made available to them in an alternative format such as large print, on audio tape or in Braille.

Please refer to Appendix Two.

Electoral Commission Material

There was a similar response to this question with 70.5% of the respondents indicating that information from the Electoral Commission was easy to understand. However the lack of its availability in accessible formats was once again evident with 78.7% of the survey respondents indicating that they did not receive information from the Electoral Commission in an accessible format.

Electoral Office Materials

72.8% of the respondents to this question indicated that the information from this source was easy to understand while 82% of the respondents highlighted the fact that they did not receive information in an accessible format.

Disability Action investigated the issue of information in accessible formats in all cases. It was indicated by all of the providers that alternative formats were available or would be made available on request. This suggests that there is a need on everyone's part to raise awareness on the availability of accessible formats.

WHY NOT VOTE?

The survey respondents were given the opportunity to state why they would not be voting at a polling place in this election. The predominant reason was due to the unavailability of ballot papers in accessible formats. It was also clear that many of those using a postal vote had a visual impairment. 25 of the survey respondents once again highlighted the need for an accessible voting process which provided large print or Braille ballot papers. Five respondents highlighted the fact that interpreters for people with hearing impairments were not present at their local polling place. Several other respondents to this question noted the difficulty in getting accessible transport to the polling places.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While a significant number of people with disabilities have taken part in this survey, it is clear that the number attending their local polling place is significantly reduced due to an inherent belief that they are inaccessible. There is also a view amongst many people with disabilities, that the registration process needs to be made more accessible and assistance needs to be offered in a more pro-active manner. There is also a widely held view that the majority of the information from the Political Parties, Electoral Office and Electoral Commission is not available in accessible formats. When information is made available in accessible formats, this fact is not publicised enough and a wider range of people need to be made aware of their existence.

The first section of the survey has demonstrated the difficulties faced by people with disabilities in the earliest stages of the electoral process. The following section will highlight many of the difficulties faced by disabled people on Election Day as they vote at their local polling place.



SECTION TWO

DISABLED PEOPLE'S VOTING EXPERIENCE

The aim of this section is to highlight the issues which made voting inaccessible to people with disabilities. As will become evident there are a number of conditions which need to be fulfilled in order to make the voting experience fully accessible to people with disabilities.

People with disabilities need to be able to get to the polling place in an accessible form of transport. They need to be able to enter the polling place through fully accessible entrances, preferably the same entrance as everyone, and to cast their vote by using accessible polling booths and ballot papers in accessible formats. In many cases they also need to be provided with assistance from polling place staff, hence the need for staff to be given disability awareness training.

TRAVELLING TO THE POLLING PLACE

Table 2 highlights the forms of transport used by respondents to the survey when they were travelling to their local polling place.

Table 2

Form of Transport	% Respondents
Public Transport	1.3
Community Transport	1.9
By Car	60.5
On Foot	19.1
Using a Wheelchair	7.0
Other	10.2

Table 2 demonstrates that for the majority of people with disabilities, public transport is not a viable option in terms of travelling to the polling place. This is likely for two reasons; firstly, the majority of public transport services in Northern Ireland remain inaccessible and in many cases, polling places are not regularly served by public transport. As a result therefore there is a heavy reliance on the use of a car for people with disabilities. A surprisingly high number are able to walk to their polling place which suggests that it is located close to their home.

For those who normally use public or community transport to travel to the polling place, only ten out of thirty one respondents believed that this form of transport was fully accessible.

For the majority of the survey respondents, their local polling place is located less than a mile from where they live. 47.1% of the respondents to this question indicated that their local polling place is less than half a mile from where they live. A further 34.9% of respondents indicated that they live between a half mile and a mile from their local polling place. For 18% of respondents, their local polling place is located more than a mile away from where they live.

Even though many of the survey respondents live within a relatively short distance of their local polling place, the need for accessible transport remains a key issue. As Table 3 illustrates, the majority of polling places are located in local (primary) schools. Often these buildings are not regularly used by people with disabilities. As a result, someone with a visual impairment, for example, may need transport to the polling place due to the fact that they may not be aware of the route from their house to the location. For many wheelchair users, access to the building becomes a major issue, and this is highlighted later in this report.

THE LOCATION OF THE POLLING PLACE

Table 3 highlights the location of the local polling place for the respondents to the Polls Apart Survey.

As expected, for the majority of the survey respondents, local schools are used for polling places. Under the final phase of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), which comes into force on 1 October 2004), schools buildings (for the purposes of education) are exempt from the Disability Discrimination Act Part III. As a result it is highly likely that many polling places will be situated in an inaccessible location, as many schools remain inaccessible to people with disabilities. However the future introduction of the

Special Education Needs Bill may ensure that more school buildings will become more accessible as an increasing amount of children with disabilities are able to enrol in mainstream primary and secondary schools.

Table 3

Location	% Respondents
School	82.6
Community Centre	7.9
Town Hall	1.7
Library	0.6
Place of Worship	5.1
Portacabin	0
Other	2.2

Only 7.9% of the respondents to this section indicated that their polling place was in a local Community Centre. In contrast to many schools, buildings such as local Community Centres and Town Halls will be subject to the final phase of the Disability Discrimination Act. (see above) By putting more polling places in locations such as these, more polling places could be made more accessible.

The following section highlights many other aspects which make local polling places inaccessible to people with disabilities.

THE ACCESSIBILITY OF THE POLLING PLACE

There are many factors which make a polling place fully accessible. As noted in the introduction of this report, people with a range of disabilities have differing needs, therefore a measure, which may make a polling place accessible for some, may not achieve the same result for others. This section will highlight the overall accessibility of polling places in Northern Ireland in the view of the survey respondents.

Parking at the Polling Place

Only 31.2% of respondents indicated that there was designated parking for people with disabilities at their local polling place.

The Blue (Orange) Badge Scheme is a government parking concession scheme devised in recognition of the need for disabled people to park as close as possible to their destination.

Disabled people also require parking bays which are both wider and longer than standard parking bays and which include transfer strips and dropped kerbs.

A lack of reserved and convenient parking will impact upon the accessibility of a polling place and influence a disabled person's decision to vote in person.

Entering the Polling Place

For many of the respondents to the survey, the task of travelling to the polling place was made more difficult by obstructions. For 29.7% of respondents to this question, obstructions were cited as an issue on the route to the polling place, whether it was on the pavement on which the participant was walking or on the immediate approach to the polling place. One case cited that the obstruction to the polling place was that the gates into the carpark which were locked, ensuring no accessible parking space for people with disabilities.

As for the entrance to the polling place itself, over half of the polling places surveyed were inaccessible to people with disabilities. 50.3% of the survey respondents highlighted the fact that the entrance into their local polling place was not accessible. Even more respondents, 54.1%, cited that there was no level access into the polling place. Survey participants deemed entrances inaccessible for a number of reasons; either there was no ramped or level access or there was an issue concerning the doors such as them being too heavy. 37 of the survey respondents indicated that their

local polling place had been provided with ramped access in order to make it more accessible. The ramp provided was permanent in 27 cases while it was deemed temporary in ten cases. However, two respondents noted that the ramp was too steep while a third identified the ramp as being too narrow.

Eighteen survey respondents cited cases in which there was a separate entrance for people with disabilities. This factor in itself significantly reduces the number of polling places which had a fully accessible main entrance. It also highlights the issue of segregation of people with disabilities. One survey respondent highlighted the need for the accessible entrance to be used by everyone. This would promote equality and ensure that people with disabilities were able to undertake the voting experience in the same manner as everyone else.

Overall 91 out of 146 survey respondents highlighted the presence of steps at the entrance to their local polling place. In many cases there were several steps for people with disabilities to negotiate at polling places.

The convenience of the entrance to designated parking spaces and the polling booths was noted as a major problem for many survey respondents. 58 respondents noted that the entrance was not convenient to designated parking spaces for people with disabilities while 77 believed that it was not convenient to the polling booths.

These factors in themselves can have a significant impact on the voting experience of a disabled person. For example, if a designated parking space is situated in an inconvenient location in relation to the entrance, there is the possibility that the voter may not be able to access the polling place at all because of such factors as an obstruction near the parking space, in the form of steps or a steep hill.

As well as the need to provide a ramp or level access, the doors need to be either wedged open or automatic in order to ensure that a wheelchair user can enter the polling place without any difficulty. Only four respondents indicated that

their polling place had been provided with automatic doors, while 36 respondents found the doors heavy to open. However 79 respondents noted that the doors to their local polling place were wedged open and 49 people found the doors easy to open.

The Voting Process

For a significant majority of respondents, staff assistance was provided when required. 105 of the survey respondents were provided with staff assistance at their local polling place when it was required, however 44 respondents highlighted a lack of staff assistance at the polling place. For 85.6% of the survey respondents, the polling booths were on the same level as the entrance to the polling place. However 14.4% of the respondents highlighted the fact that the polling place facilities were not on one level. Seven survey respondents specifically highlighted the issue of steps inside the polling place while another stated that it was not suitable for wheelchair users. 20.3% of the survey respondents also noted obstructions on the route to the polling booths once inside the polling place. Obstructions inside the polling place pose a major hazard and create difficulties for people with physical disabilities as well as those with visual impairments.

In relation to the polling place and the surroundings, a significant proportion of the respondents to the survey noted the following points.

- 29 survey respondents, many of them wheelchair users, noted that within the polling place, there was not enough space in the corridors which made it difficult for them to get around the building easily.
- 21 survey respondents highlighted the fact that the route to the polling booth was not well lit.
- 40 respondents noted that there were not enough signs within the polling place which gave directions to the polling booths.

- 52 respondents to the survey also felt that the route to the polling booth was not well enough staffed.
- Some 99 respondents noted that there was no provision for seats for people to rest within the polling place. This was a constant theme raised throughout the case studies which are highlighted in Section Three of this report. This would be a particularly important addition to many disabled and older people who had difficulty in walking significant distances.
- 40 respondents to the survey felt that the flooring wasn't suitable for disabled people either because it was not non-slip or not suitable for wheelchair users. Several participants raised the point that floors and walls within polling places needed to have better colour contrasts which would assist people with visual impairments.

Casting the Vote

62 survey respondents highlighted the fact that there was no provision of a low level polling booth however the Electoral Office have stated that low level polling booths were provided at all 612 polling places in Northern Ireland. This raises the issue of awareness, that 62 survey respondents were not aware of their existence may be due to factors such as poor signage or lack of information from members of staff. 63 people also highlighted the fact that a low level ballot box was not provided, putting many wheelchair users at a clear disadvantage.

Similar points were made by those with an interest in the provision of aids for people with hearing impairments. Only 26 cases were cited by survey respondents in which the provision of a communication aid (such as a loop system, signer, or notepad and pen) were provided. Some 64 survey respondents noted cases where none of these provisions were made or the respondent was not made aware of their existence.

For voters with visual impairments, it was also the case that a minority of polling places provided the appropriate format of the ballot paper. The survey highlighted 32 cases where large print was provided, however it also highlights 56 cases in which large print was not provided or the respondent was not made aware of its existence. In only ten cases, a Braille template was provided. In 49 cases this was not provided or people were not made aware of its availability.

Survey respondents also noted positive aspects of the voting process. For example many of the respondents, (119 out of 145), noted that the polling booths were provided with adequate lighting. 125 out of 157 people also described staff as being welcoming and helpful. (see below)

Better or Worse?

The survey respondents were asked to give their view on the overall experience of voting in this election and to indicate if it was better than on previous occasions. Only 48 survey respondents were able to say that they found their voting experience better this time, in comparison to previous voting experiences. 59 people found the voting experience worse than on previous occasions.

Table 4 gives a breakdown of the impressions of the survey respondents overall voting experience in the November 2003 Assembly Elections.

Of most concern, Table 4 demonstrates that only 46 respondents to this question felt that their overall voting experience was above average. For some 105 respondents the voting experience was either average or below average. This suggests that for many people with disabilities their local polling place had significant deficiencies which made the voting process less accessible or not accessible at all. As the case studies in Section Three highlight, even a good voting experience did not necessarily mean a fully accessible experience.

Table 4

View of voting Experience	No Respondents	% Respondents
Excellent	14	8.7
Good	32	19.9
Average	70	43.5
Poor	23	14.3
Very Poor	22	13.7

Polling Place Staff – An Appraisal

The Electoral Office provided 50 training sessions for polling place staff in advance of the November 2003 Election. Trained staff were also provided with a manual which covered every aspect of the training including how to assist disabled voters. However while staff were obliged to attend the training course, it was not a requirement to read the manual. The majority of the survey respondents felt that staff at their local polling place were welcoming and helpful, however 32 respondents felt the need to highlight the opposite. For those who had negative experiences of staff assistance at their local polling place, the following points reflect the main issues raised.

- There were cases cited in which the voter was unable to find a member of staff near the entrance who could either assist them to the polling booth or offer directions.
- Several participants highlighted the lack of initiative from polling place staff. In several cases the voter had to ask the staff for assistance despite the fact that it was obvious some assistance was required. There was a view among some survey participants that polling place staff in instances such as these, need to be more pro-active and offer assistance rather than waiting to be asked.
- Despite having informed staff of their needs in advance, one participant highlighted the fact that

little was done to make their local polling place more accessible.

- While staff were willing to allow a disabled voter, who was a wheelchair user, to mark their ballot paper while sitting down, this process was undertaken in a separate room. The ballot paper was then taken by the presiding officer to the ballot box. The key issue of confidentiality being compromised was raised in this case.
- A case was cited in which staff knew little about reasonable adjustments such as the provision of a loop system. Another case was also cited in which polling place staff knew little about alternative formats for people with visual impairments.

One of the aims of this report is to highlight examples of good practice in order to ensure that an increasing number of polling places adopt particular policies and learn from others in the process.

Below is a summary of the main observations which the survey respondents noted in relation to instances where they felt that staff at their local polling place were particularly welcoming and helpful.

- A number of survey respondents noted the small contribution which staff could make in order to make the voting experience better. For example in a number of cases staff were available on entering the polling place and were able to provide directions either to the polling stations or in particular to low level polling booths when required.
- There were cases in which members of staff were able to offer other forms of assistance such as guiding voters with visual impairments to the polling booths or taking the initiative to provide alternative formats, such as Braille.

- A number of survey respondents highlighted cases in which staff showed people with disabilities what to do in the voting process – i.e. how to use the Proportional Representation (PR) voting system.
- In one case, staff at a polling place were particularly helpful offering to lift a voter, who was a wheelchair user up the steps into the entrance. However this is a situation which should not have arisen.
- Many cases were cited in which the staff at the polling place were willing to deal with any questions or queries which the voter may have had.

WHAT THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS RECOMMEND

The final part of the survey offered participants the opportunity to provide feedback on what measures should be taken to make the voting experience better and more accessible for people with disabilities. A number of themes are evident in the points made by the survey participants. The main issues raised as a result of the Polls Apart Survey are highlighted below. In all cases the following points were highlighted by several survey respondents.

- The need for more extensive staff training on disability issues. As well as disability awareness training, staff should also be provided with practical training in providing assistance to disabled voters. Staff should be trained in how to approach people with disabilities. A case was cited in our survey in which staff spoke to a person's companion and not the disabled person themselves.
- There should be a designated member of staff who can offer help to anyone who requires assistance.
- All elements of the voting process should be on one level within the polling place and there should be no steps on any part of the route from the entrance to the polling booths.
- Accessible entrances should remain open at all times.
- There needs to be sufficient lighting outside the polling place, particularly in the evenings.
- All materials need to be made available in a range of alternative formats. Staff should also be trained in their use.
- There also needs to be the provision of other communication aids such as a loop system or the presence of an interpreter.

- A wider range of ID should be accepted including Blue Badges.
- There needs to be the provision of an accessible transport service to ensure that all people with disabilities in a particular area can attend the polling place. This was the point raised most often in this section with some sixteen survey participants highlighting this as a major issue.
- As the majority of schools in Northern Ireland remain inaccessible, alternative venues should be considered.
- There should be more information sharing between local councils on how polling places can be made more accessible and good practice extended.
- Information should be provided in advance as to what extent local polling places are accessible or inaccessible.
- Provisions should be made for people to be able to vote either electronically at the polling place or online in future elections.
- For those using the postal voting system, people with disabilities should be given the option of voting in an accessible format such as Braille.

Other Comments

The survey participants were offered a final opportunity to provide comments in relation to their overall voting experience. The majority of the issues highlighted in this section have already been raised throughout the course of the survey.

Amongst the issues raised in this section was the view that the voting process should be made much more transparent. It was felt by a number of participants that the voting process remains complicated. It was argued that assistance should be provided at all stages of the registration and

voting process to ensure that people with disabilities were aware of the mechanisms of the voting system. Many survey respondents highlighted the need to raise awareness of the various voting systems such as PR and First Past the Post. The postal voting system was also criticised for being too complex and discouraging to disabled voters. It was suggested that the system could be made more accessible by allowing potential voters to collect and deliver postal votes at the local post office or another designated accessible public place.

The key point made by many of the survey participants in this section is that people with disabilities have a fundamental right to vote. Measures should be taken by all of those concerned to ensure that people with disabilities are able to exercise this right. Some participants highlighted the fact that one in five of the adult population in Northern Ireland has a disability. This fact in itself should be recognised, not only by the Electoral Office and the Electoral Commission, but also by the policy makers within the political parties.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This section has highlighted many cases in which reasonable adjustments have been made in order to make a polling place or booth more accessible to people with disabilities. However it has also highlighted that there are very few instances in which a majority of respondents have been able to report that a reasonable adjustment has been made.

Of concern to many is the fact that minor or in many cases low cost adjustments such as staff assistance or better lighting have not been provided, leaving many people with disabilities at a clear disadvantage in the voting process. Despite this there are examples of good practice which have been highlighted in this section and which should be noted by those polling places which have failed to make reasonable adjustments to date.

In order to gain a better insight into the voting experience of people with disabilities, a number of case studies will now be highlighted. While there are some examples of good practice, the case studies demonstrate that few, if any polling places in Northern Ireland have taken the appropriate measures to become fully accessible to all people with disabilities.

This section is in two parts, firstly summarising the comments made by some of the groups consulted and then citing actual examples as told to Disability Action.



SECTION THREE

CASE STUDIES

FEEDBACK FROM OTHER ORGANISATIONS

As highlighted in the introduction to this report, Disability Action invited other organisations representing the views of people with disabilities to comment on the voting process for people with disabilities.

In preparing the questionnaire and ensuring that issues affecting all people with disabilities were raised, Disability Action discussed the questionnaire content with a number of disability organisations including, RNIB, RNID, Mencap and Action Mental Health.

Smaller organisations and user groups were invited to consult with their membership and highlight the views raised in relation to disabled people's experiences of the Northern Ireland Assembly Election in November 2003. Overall there was a good response to this initiative and while many of the issues raised are reflected in the surveys, a brief summary of the views of organisations is provided below.

Equality 2000 is a pan disability volunteer group of disabled and non disabled adults living and/or working in the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council Area. By working together, Equality 2000 promotes inclusion for people with disabilities and movement towards a more active and equitable society.

Equality 2000's committee members highlighted a number of issues in relation to the voting process. It was highlighted that many people with disabilities don't know how to vote. Many people with disabilities are also unaware of the differences between postal and proxy voting. The issue of confidentiality was also highlighted with one postal vote being witnessed by a member of a political party. Difficulties in obtaining the correct form of identity were also highlighted by some committee members.

A lack of awareness on the part of electoral registration and polling place staff was also noted as a major issue. One member, who has a mobility impairment, cited the fact that members of staff asked her husband if she could vote herself when they arrived at their local polling place. Referring to the registration process, another highlighted the fact that he was denied help with filling in the registration form. This committee member has a visual impairment and was unable to complete the form himself.

For those members who did vote at a local polling place, physical access was not cited as a major problem, however the majority of Equality 2000's committee members use a postal vote believing that their local polling place is not fully accessible. It was concluded that if polling places cannot be made fully accessible, a fairer system would be the use of the postal vote for everyone.

Ballymoney Disability Forum which has a pan disability membership noted that out of all its members who voted in the election, only one found an accessible polling place in the North Antrim constituency. **Coleraine and District Hard of Hearing Club** raised concerns about the lighting levels in the polling booths at their local polling places. Members of the club also highlighted the fact that there was no provision of loop systems or interpreters at their local polling places.

The **Out and About Project** is also a pan disability organisation and seeks the integration of people with disabilities into wider society on their own terms. The project is primarily based in Armagh, but has committee members from a number of constituencies. The majority of Out and About's members used the postal vote due to inaccessible polling places. One member highlighted the difficulty which he had in obtaining acceptable ID for the election. This facility could not be provided in Armagh and, as a result he was forced to travel to Banbridge in order to obtain the relevant ID.

This was a particularly costly exercise as accessible transport was required for this person for a round trip from

Armagh to Banbridge. The Electoral Office confirmed that it had provided 36 mobile application centres for ID cards, but this particular example demonstrates that many more would be required in order to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

A significant point was raised by one of those present at the consultation with the Out and About Project. One participant highlighted the difficulties which people with learning disabilities face in becoming registered, despite having the capacity to vote. Several cases were cited in which people with learning disabilities were not placed on the electoral register as a result of their disability. Concerns were also raised as to the ability of staff to refuse someone with a learning disability the right to vote on Election Day, even when they were already registered. A client of the Out and About Project, who has a learning disability also highlighted this point. His knowledge of the political process was considerable, but as a result of his learning disability he had not been placed on the electoral register.

The concern that many people with learning disabilities are not being accepted onto the electoral register was highlighted by **Mencap** in a recent article in their publication, *Viewpoint*.⁹ The article, entitled 'Democracy Denied', highlighted the need for legislation to ensure that those people with the capacity to vote, were given the opportunity to do so. It was argued that the selection criteria, for registration should be reviewed ensuring that a person's capacity to vote was recognised and taken into account. It would mean that a significant proportion of people with learning disabilities would be given the right to vote.

The Regional Access Committee at Disability Action is made up of representatives of statutory bodies, professionals with influence upon the design of the built environment and people with disabilities including representatives of the local access groups. The Committee

⁹ 'Democracy Denied', *Viewpoint*, September/October 2003, pp.13-15, see also page 16 of this report which highlighted the difficulties faced by people with learning difficulties in the registration process.

highlighted the fact that primary schools are used for the majority of polling places. This created a significant problem in the sense that many primary schools remain inaccessible. It was suggested that primary schools were used in order to minimise disruption to secondary schools. However more secondary schools are accessible as a result of investment by Education and Library Boards in youth facilities such as common rooms. It was suggested that secondary schools should be used more often as a polling place, given this fact.

The Regional Access Committee agreed that the accessibility of a building to be used as a polling place is of paramount importance and should feature in the eligibility criteria applied in the judgement of premises to be used as a polling place. In places where there was the presence of steps, the absence of handrails was cited as a major hazard, particularly for people with visual impairments.

The Access Committee also raised concerns over acceptable ID. It was suggested that the Blue Badge and Blind Persons Travel Pass (Translink pass) should be accepted. The issue of ID was not the only one cited as a major problem for people with visual impairments.

It was highlighted that members of the Committee were not aware that information from the Electoral Office was available in Braille. This is of particular concern given that the Committee includes representatives of the Health and Social Services Visually Impaired Rehabilitation Teams. This once again highlighted the issue of awareness of accessible formats from information providers. The Committee suggested the use of audio formats and information technology as these were more widely used by visually impaired people in order to access information. It was noted that many blind and partially sighted people continued to use the postal vote as they needed someone to assist them at the polling place and this was not always available. Assistance at and transport to and from the polling place should therefore be considered as a measure which would ensure that more disabled people are able to vote at their local polling place on election day.

There was also considerable feedback from the **Newry and Mourne Users Consortium** which is also a pan disability group. Amongst the issues raised by members of that group was the need to ensure that there was adequate parking for disabled people at polling places. This was something which was not always provided at local polling places. Concern was also expressed that security issues seemed to override access concerns when it came to being allowed to park near to the polling place.

Group members also highlighted the need for entrance doors to be wedged open. The group questioned why polling places are always located in schools given that schools are currently not covered by the Disability Discrimination Act.

An important point raised by the group was the need to ensure that more people with disabilities are employed as polling place staff.

The Consortiums membership also argued that political parties remain far behind in their policies towards people with disabilities. As well as Councillors Constituencies Offices being situated in caravans with steps leading up to them, it was highlighted that election material from the political parties remains unavailable in accessible formats.

The issue of inaccessible polling places was raised at the **Cedar Users Forum Conference** in Jordanstown in November 2003. The issues of high polling booths and a lack of privacy for disabled people in the voting process, was highlighted by a number of the delegates present. Cases cited included that in which one person did not receive a registration form despite having made an application and another in which staff from the polling place had to come outside in order to witness the vote of a disabled person due to the inaccessibility of the polling place.

Amongst the other groups which took part in the Polls Apart campaign and surveyed local polling stations were, **Will to Wheel**, which is based in Finaghy, **The North West Forum of People with Disabilities**, **the Alliance for Human**

Rights for People with Disabilities Northern Ireland and Magherafelt and District Disability Forum. For the majority of their members the issues raised concerned the accessibility of local polling stations and these were highlighted in the surveys returned to Disability Action.

The points highlighted above demonstrate, that there is a widespread view within many groups and organisations which represent the views of people with disabilities, that overall polling places in Northern Ireland are inaccessible to people with disabilities in one way or another. The following individual case studies highlight this point even more clearly.

INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDIES

The aim of this section is to highlight the personal experiences of a number of the survey participants. They have been chosen at random from the 220 surveys which were returned to Disability Action. A range of disabilities is represented in the case studies noted below. Those who participated voted at a range of polling places from across Northern Ireland highlighting the fact that for people with disabilities, issues in relation to access affect all areas.

The names of the individuals have been kept confidential, however the polling place has been identified in order to highlight good and poor practices in relation to access.

CASE STUDY ONE

Constituency: Lagan Valley

Polling Place: Moira Primary School

The respondent to the survey in this case has a physical disability and is a wheelchair user. While this respondent could read the registration form, no assistance was given in terms of explaining the voting process or of filling in the registration form. It was suggested by this respondent that the registration process could be improved if people with disabilities were offered assistance.

In general this respondent found information from the political parties, Electoral Commission and Electoral Office easy to understand, however this respondent was not aware of the availability of alternative formats in all cases.

In terms of travelling to the polling place, this survey respondent travels by car to vote at the polling place which is between a half and one mile from the respondent's home. The polling place had an accessible entrance, but there was no designated parking for disabled people. The doors to the polling place were wedged open and there was level access

inside to the polling place. Staff were able to give assistance to the respondent when required and the route to the polling booths was well lit. There was enough space in the corridors for wheelchair users to move about and there were sufficient signs to the polling booths. The flooring was also deemed suitable for people with disabilities.

While there was the provision of low level polling booths, the respondent did not know if communication aids such as a loop system, large print ballot papers or a Braille template were provided.

Overall the respondent described this as a good experience and it was cited as a better experience than the last voting experience. Staff at the polling place were also described as welcoming and helpful on the day. The respondent in this case suggested that information should be made available in advance as to what extent polling places are accessible. This was suggested as a way of improving the voting experience and encouraging more people with disabilities to vote.

In general, this polling place can be cited as an example of good practice, however there are aspects which could affect a disabled person's ability to vote at this polling place, particularly the lack of a designated parking space for disabled people.

CASE STUDY TWO

Constituency: **East Antrim**

Polling Place: **Antrim Integrated Primary School**

The respondent in this case had both a visual and hearing impairment and voted at his/her local polling place in this election. The respondent had to register to vote, however while he/she was able to read the registration form which was made available in an alternative format, no assistance was given. While the information from the Electoral Commission was easy to understand, the information which

was received from the political parties and the Electoral Office was not as easy to understand.

In this case the polling place was located two miles from home therefore the respondent had to travel by car. As for the polling place itself, there was no designated parking and the entrance into the polling place was not accessible, due to the fact that it had heavy doors. There was however a permanent ramp. Inside the polling place, staff were available to give assistance and the route to the polling booths were well lit and free from any obstructions. Directions to the polling booths were not evident and there were no seats for people to rest. The floor in this case was also not deemed suitable for wheelchair users.

The survey respondent noted the provisions of a low level polling booth, low level ballot box and a large print ballot paper. While members of staff were described as welcoming and helpful, there were no occasions cited in which they went out of their way to help. This survey respondent found this voting experience worse than last time and felt that the school was inaccessible. From the perspective of a person with a disability, this voting experience was described as very poor.

CASE STUDY THREE

Constituency: Upper Bann

Polling Place: Seagoe Primary School

The respondent in this case described him/herself as having a physical disability which required the use of a wheelchair on some occasions. There was good feedback in relation to the registration process as the respondent was given an explanation of the voting process and assistance with the registration form. Registration forms were also available in alternative formats if required. The respondent commented that the registration process could be improved by dealing with the issue of voter identification for disabled people, noting that many do not have easy access to a passport. All sources of information received by the survey respondent

were easy to understand, although no opinion was expressed on the availability of alternative formats.

The respondent travelled to the polling place by wheelchair as it was situated less than a half mile from home. It was noted that there were obstructions on the route to the polling place and there was no designated parking for disabled people. The polling place's entrance was deemed inaccessible as there was one step into it and because of heavy doors. There was no separate entrance for disabled people. Members of staff were available to give assistance at the entrance but not on the route to the polling booths. There were also obstructions on the route to the polling booths, poor directions, and unsuitable flooring for wheelchair users.

At the polling booth, low level booth, but no low level ballot box was provided. Staff at the polling place were described as welcoming and helpful, however while assistance was given in entering and leaving the polling place, this was only forthcoming after it became obvious the respondent was having difficulty going down a step. The respondent also commented on the lack of training which members of staff had in terms of handling wheelchairs. As this respondent was nearly tipped out of his/her wheelchair, s/he emphasised the need for more staff training. Overall this respondent described the voting experience as very poor and recommended advance information on what polling places were accessible in future elections.

This case study demonstrates poor practice where the polling place has a range of deficiencies including the lack of wheelchair access, unsuitable floors and poorly trained staff. However it could be argued in cases such as this, staff should not need to be given training in lifting wheelchair users in and out of the polling place. Rather, ramped or level access should be provided to enable wheelchair users to enter and exit the polling place as they choose.

CASE STUDY FOUR

Constituency: Lagan Valley

Polling Place: Postal Vote (no polling place specified)

This case study highlights the experience of a physically disabled person using the postal voting process. The postal vote was used by this respondent as s/he was unable to arrange accessible transport to the polling place which was between a half and one mile from home. The polling place which would have been used was also described as not being “disabled” friendly. The respondent held this view due to the fact that there were steps into the polling place and there were no designated parking for disabled people, no low level polling booths and no low level ballot boxes.

While the respondent in this case could read the registration form, the voting process was not explained to him/her and no assistance was given in filling in the form. All other forms of information given to the respondent were cited as being easy to understand.

This case study highlights a situation in which a person with a disability was unable to get accessible transport to vote at their local polling place which was not fully accessible. The respondent in this case was forced into using the complex postal voting process.

CASE STUDY FIVE

Constituency: Foyle

Polling Place: St Eithne’s School, Derry

This case study highlights the experience of one visually impaired respondent who was unable to vote due to not being on the electoral register. This is despite completing the registration forms and sending them to the Electoral

Office. The respondent in this case also highlighted the fact that voting at the local polling place was impossible without assistance and the provision of transport to and from it. The respondent was not aware of registration forms being made available in alternative formats. However the respondent in this case did have the voting process explained and was given help to fill in the registration form. The respondent stated that the provision of registration forms in alternative formats would improve the registration process for people with disabilities in general. Information received from the political parties, Electoral Commission and Electoral Office was described as not being easy to understand. The preferred format of Braille was also not available for this respondent in all cases.

A recommendation of this respondent was the employment of people to explain and assist people with disabilities throughout the voting process, particularly with filling in forms.

CASE STUDY SIX

Constituency: Strangford

Polling Place: Portavogie

The respondent in this case has a physical disability but is not a wheelchair user. No assistance was given during the registration process, and while the respondent could read the registration form, it was recommended that forms should be made available in larger bolder print. Information from all other sources was described as being easy to understand.

The respondent in this case travelled to the polling place by car as it was located one and a half miles from home and there was no provision for accessible transport. There was no designated parking for disabled people at the polling place and there were obstructions cited on the approach to it. In this case the car park was locked and there was no member of staff available to unlock it for disabled people to park. There was also no accessible entrance for people

with disabilities as there was no level or ramped access into it. The doors were described as heavy to open and there were no staff available at the entrance to give assistance. While the route to the polling booths was on the same level, had good directions and was well lit, it was not well staffed. The flooring was also not suitable for disabled people and there were no seats.

There was no provision for low level polling booths, a loop system or other communication aid. Members of staff at the polling place were described as welcoming, but did not offer help. Overall the voting experience was described as average as disabled people in general 'struggle to vote' at this particular polling place. It was recommended by this respondent that polling places should advertise in advance if they are accessible.

This case study highlights many of the difficulties faced by people with disabilities living in rural areas. In cases such as this, the polling places are more likely to be inaccessible, there is less provision of aids and alternative formats and there is often not enough staff to help people with disabilities. The fact that people with disabilities could not drive into the yard highlights an extreme example of poor planning and a significant failure in terms of meeting the needs of people with disabilities.

CASE STUDY SEVEN

Constituency: North Down

Polling Place: Bloomfield Road South School, Bangor

This particular case was brought to the attention of Disability Action after a voter, whose wife has a disability observed another wheelchair user attempting to enter this polling place which did not have the provision of a ramp.

This particular voter made a number of observations and they are highlighted as follows. The voter noted the absence of security at the polling place, the first time this has been stepped down. When a member of staff at the door was

questioned about access, the member of staff seemed to think that it had nothing to do with him. The voter made a complaint at the polling booth on the lack of access for disabled people. When being provided with a complaints form, he was advised by a member of staff that the issue of access was not an appropriate complaint to include on the form. The voter made a similar complaint to an election candidate who turned up at the polling place.

The voter in this case contacted the Electoral Office to highlight the issues raised during the voting process, but at the time of writing has still to hear from them. As a result this voter felt very aggrieved over the whole voting process and wanted to highlight the difficulties faced by people with disabilities at this polling place.

This case study highlights an extreme example of poor staff training and a poor attitude to the provision of accessible voting for people with disabilities. It also highlights a case in which the Electoral Office has failed to address the complaints of a voter.

OTHER CASE STUDIES

A number of other case studies were cited in the survey which demonstrated the many problems faced by people with disabilities in the voting process.

Three case studies for example highlight the difficulties faced by people with hearing impairments in the electoral process. All three people with hearing impairments stated that they would not be voting in the election. The three respondents also cited the need for the provision of interpreters at polling places. One respondent had carried out an access audit of their local polling place at Mersey School in the constituency of East Belfast. That polling place had the provisions of designated parking, a separate entrance which was accessible, good directions to the polling booths and seats for people to rest on. It did not however have a low level polling booth, or a low level ballot box and there was no provision of an interpreter or other communication aid such as a loop system. Therefore while

some access needs were met albeit by segregating wheelchair users, the polling place was still inaccessible for people with hearing impairments.

A further case study highlighted the case of someone with a mental health disability. As this person experiences anxiety attacks s/he is unable to enter any kind of crowded situation, the respondent in this case was not able to register to vote at all as they were not entitled to a postal vote. This particular respondent highlighted the need for legislation to deal with this particular issue.

The case studies all highlight the differing voting experiences of people with disabilities. They also highlight the range of adjustments which are required in order to make a polling place fully accessible. The following access audit, demonstrates even more clearly the high number of polling places in Northern Ireland which are inaccessible to many people with disabilities. It is also based on the personal experiences of disabled voters from across Northern Ireland.

ACCESS AUDIT OF POLLING STATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Table 5 lists 105 polling places which were surveyed by disabled people and Presiding Officers across Northern Ireland and some of the reasons why they were inaccessible to people with disabilities. In all cases one or two of the major reasons for inaccessibility are highlighted. The survey in Table 5 is wide ranging as at least one polling place in every constituency has been surveyed.

Please note that (PO) indicates observations made by Presiding Officers at a number of polling places across the province. (This information was provided by the Electoral Office). Thirty one polling places in this list were observed exclusively by Presiding Officers.

Table 5

Constituency	Polling Place	Access Issue
East Belfast	St Donard's Church Hall	Respondent not made aware of the presence of low level polling booth
East Belfast	Orangefield Primary School	No seats for people to rest on
East Belfast	Braniel School	No designated parking Four steps at main entrance No seats for people to rest on
East Belfast	Eustin St Primary School	Steps at entrance Elderly find walk from entrance to polling booth too long (PO)
East Belfast	Mersey School	Not made aware of low level polling booth Not made aware of existence of communication aids
East Belfast	Beechfield Primary School	No seats for people to rest on Otherwise deemed

		accessible
East Belfast	Creggagh Primary School	No designated parking No seats for people to rest on
West Belfast	Woodvale Youth Club	No designated parking Not made aware of the existence of accessible formats
West Belfast	St John the Baptist Primary School	No designated parking Heavy doors at entrance
West Belfast	Malvern Street	Ramp into polling place was too steep
West Belfast	St Luke's Primary School	No designated parking Six steps at main entrance
West Belfast	Forthriver Primary School, Ballygomartin Road	No designated parking No seats for people to rest on
West Belfast	St Oliver Plunkett Primary School	Steps between entrance and polling booths Ballot box taken to Foyer for disabled person to cast their vote (PO)
West Belfast	Holy Trinity Primary School	Nine steps at entrance. (PO)
West Belfast	St Aidan's Primary School	Polling Place situated on a hill making it difficult for some voters to access. (PO)
West Belfast	Springhill School	Heavy doors at entrance No seats for people to rest on
North Belfast	Currie Primary School	Not enough space for wheelchair users to move around the inside of the polling place Poor signs inside the polling place
North Belfast	Carr's Glen Primary School	No designated parking Heavy doors at main

		entrance
North Belfast	Lowood School	Steps at main entrance No seats for people to rest on
North Belfast	Cliftonville Primary School	No designated parking Three steps at main entrance
North Belfast	Ballysillan Presbyterian Church	No designated parking
North Belfast	Holycross Primary School	No seats for people to rest on Not aware of existence of low level polling booth and ballot box
North Belfast	Glenwood Primary School	No ramp making it inaccessible for wheelchair users (PO)
North Belfast	MacCrory Memorial Church	No access for wheelchair users at entrance (PO)
North Belfast	Cliftonville Moravion Church	No access for wheelchair users at entrance (PO)
North Belfast	Ballygolan Primary School	Thirteen steps at entrance into polling place (PO)
South Belfast	Finaghy Youth Centre	No seats for people to rest on
South Belfast	St Bartholmew Stranmillis	No designated parking Three steps at entrance
South Belfast	St Nicholas Hall	No designated parking Not made aware of low level ballot box
South Belfast	Holy Rosary Primary School	No designated parking Two steps at main entrance
Lagan Valley	Moira Primary School	No designated parking No seats for people to rest on
Lagan Valley	Maghaberry	No designated parking

		Heavy doors at main entrance
Lagan Valley	Dromara Primary School	No designated parking Six steps at main entrance
North Antrim	Cairniny Primary School, Ballymena	No designated parking One step at the main entrance Stairs on route to polling booths (PO)
North Antrim	Laney Primary School, Ballymena	No designated parking Three steps at main entrance
North Antrim	Hazelbank Primary School, Ballymena	Two steps at entrance Heavy doors at main entrance
North Antrim	St Patrick's, Ahogill	No provision for ramp at entrance (PO)
North Antrim	All Saints Primary School, Ballymena	Stairs inside polling place difficult for elderly (PO)
South Antrim	Doagh Primary School	No designated parking No seats for people to rest on
South Antrim	Groggan Primary School	No designated parking Steps at main entrance Heavy doors at main entrance
South Antrim	Ashgrove Primary School	Two steps at main entrance
South Antrim	Antrim Integrated Primary School	No designated parking Doors at entrance heavy to open.
South Antrim	Parkhall Primary School, Antrim	No wheelchair access and some complaints from disabled people (PO)
South Antrim	Ballycraig Primary School	Long distance to walk to the polling booths for the elderly (PO)
South Antrim	Fairview Primary School	Situated on a steep hill which may cause difficulty for elderly (PO)

South Antrim	Ballyduff Primary School	Not wheelchair accessible (PO)
East Antrim	Whitehead Primary School	Two steps at main entrance
East Antrim	St John's Primary School	Steps at entrance (PO)
East Antrim	Antiville Primary School, Larne	Steps at entrance (PO)
East Antrim	Flynn Primary School, Larne	Not wheelchair accessible (PO)
Strangford	Portavogie	No designated parking Two steps at entrance Entrance doors heavy to open
Strangford (Shared with South Down)	Saintfield	No designated parking Four steps at main entrance Heavy doors at main entrance
Strangford	Alexander Dixon Primary School, Ballygowan	No designated parking Fifteen steps at main entrance
Strangford	Kircubbin Primary School	Not enough space inside the polling place for wheelchair users to move around Poor signs inside the polling place
Strangford	Carryduff Primary School	One step at main entrance Steps inside the polling place Not made aware of existence of low level ballot box (PO)
Strangford	Dundonald Primary School	Difficult access for elderly (PO)
Strangford	Comber Primary School	No ramps provided at entrance (PO)
North Down	Grange Park	One step at main entrance
North Down	Bloomfield	No designated parking

	Primary School, Bangor	Four steps at main entrance Heavy doors at main entrance
North Down	Ballyholme Primary School	Slippery ramp at entrance (PO)
North Down	Donaghadee Primary School	Steps at entrance (PO)
North Down	Millisle Primary School	Steps at entrance (PO)
South Down	Kilkeel Primary School	Heavy doors at main entrance Poor directions within the polling place
South Down	Warrenpoint Town Hall	No designated parking Steps at main entrance
South Down	Rostrevor Presbyterian Church Hall	Steps at entrance (PO)
South Down	Down Parochial Hall	Steps at entrance (PO)
Upper Bann	Carrick Primary School, Sloan Street, Lurgan	No seats for people to rest on Unsuitable flooring for people with disabilities
Upper Bann	Kings Park Primary School	Not made aware of existence of alternative formats Otherwise deemed accessible
Upper Bann	Abercorn Primary School	One step at main entrance No large print ballot papers available on request
Upper Bann	Seagoe Primary School	No designated parking One step at main entrance Doors heavy to open at main entrance
Upper Bann	St Patrick's Primary School,	Steps at entrance (PO)

	Aghacommon	
Upper Bann	St Mary's Primary School	Steps at entrance (PO)
Newry and Armagh	Kilmore Church Hall	No designated parking Poor signs inside the polling place No seats for people to rest on
Newry and Armagh	Bessbrook School	No designated parking Three steps at main entrance
Newry and Armagh	Newry High School	Six steps into main entrance Main doors heavy to open
Newry and Armagh	Armstrong School	No designated parking Steps onto path outside the entrance of the polling station
Newry and Armagh	Newry Sports Centre	Heavy doors at main entrance No seats for people to rest on
Newry and Armagh	St John's Primary School, Middletown	Heavy doors at main entrance Otherwise deemed accessible
Newry and Armagh	Dobbin Street Community Centre, Armagh	Not made aware of the existence of alternative formats Slippy floors
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Ballinamallard	No designated parking Steps at the main entrance
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Lisbellaw Primary School	Heavy doors at main entrance Voter not made aware of alternative formats for ballot paper
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	St Martin's Primary School	No designated parking One step at main entrance

		Heavy doors at main entrance
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Glack School, Aughnacloy	No designated parking
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Dungannon Technical College/Primary School	No interpreters Twenty steps at the main entrance making it inaccessible
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Lisnaskea High School	Five steps at main entrance (PO)
West Tyrone	Drumaboy	No designated parking Two steps at main entrance Heavy doors at main entrance
West Tyrone	St Mary's Boys School	Not made aware of alternative formats Otherwise deemed accessible
West Tyrone	Deane Maguire College, Carrickmore	No designated parking No seats to rest on Not made aware of existence of low level polling booth
West Tyrone	Bready County Primary School	Steps at entrance (PO)
West Tyrone	St Laurence's Primary School, Fintona	Stairs on the route to the polling booth (PO)
West Tyrone	St Bridgid's Primary School	Poor access for people with disabilities and poor lighting inside the polling place (PO)
Mid Ulster	Coalisland Primary School	No designated parking No seats for people to rest on
Mid Ulster	Magherafelt Primary School	No designated parking Two steps at main entrance
Mid Ulster	Mayogall	No seats for people to

	Primary School	rest on Otherwise deemed accessible
East Londonderry	Hezlett Primary School	No designated parking Six steps at main entrance Heavy doors at main entrance Wheelchair user had to be lifted into the polling place (PO)
East Londonderry	Dungiven Primary School	No designated parking No seats for people to rest on
East Londonderry	Portrush Primary School	Described as being very cold (PO)
Foyle	Trench Road Primary School	No designated parking Five steps at main entrance
Foyle	Lisnagelvin School	No designated parking Twelve steps at main entrance Heavy doors at main entrance
Foyle	Holy Child Primary School, Creggan	No designated parking One step at main entrance
Foyle	Mullabouy School, Lettershandoney	No designated parking Two steps at main entrance
Foyle	Central Primary School, Limavady	No designated parking No seats for people to rest on Poor directions inside the polling place
Foyle	Ebrington Primary School	No designated parking Three steps at main entrance
Foyle	Hollybush Primary School, Culmore	No designated parking No seats for people to rest on
Foyle	Pennyburn	No designated parking

	Nursery School	Not made aware of the existence of low level polling booth
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As can be seen from the table above, not only has this survey been wide ranging, but it has highlighted in every case, at least one issue which makes the polling place inaccessible to some people with disabilities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this section has been to give a more detailed analysis of individual voting experiences of people with disabilities. While the individual case studies outline the details of each aspect of a person's voting experience, the access audit of 105 polling places from across Northern Ireland demonstrates that in virtually every case, there is at least one issue which prevents some people with disabilities voting.

Of most concern in relation to the access audit is the high number of polling places which have inaccessible entrances. While other measures have been put in place such as the provision of low level polling booths and low level ballot boxes, the absence of a fully accessible entrance has meant that few people with physical disabilities have been able to take advantage of the facilities.

The feedback from other organisations was beneficial in terms of highlighting many issues which were not raised by individual participants. Many of the organisations consulted for this survey were able to highlight the many issues which discourage or prevent disabled people from voting altogether.

This section has demonstrated that for many people with disabilities there are issues from the registration process to completing the ballot paper which make voting in Northern Ireland a difficult and unnecessarily daunting task. Before offering some final thoughts, a series of key recommendations on the basis of the Polls Apart Survey will be highlighted.



SECTION FOUR

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this survey unfortunately confirm what many people with disabilities in Northern Ireland suspect. The vast majority of polling places in Northern Ireland are inaccessible to people with disabilities in one way or another. This may be a result of no level or ramped access or by the failure to provide alternative formats, the lack of staff assistance or the absence of appropriate lighting either in the polling place itself or the polling booth.

This survey has sought to highlight the range of measures that need to be taken in order to make a polling place fully accessible. With many of the issues cited in this report easily rectified (for example no designated parking or chairs to rest on) the Electoral Office should ensure that at least 90% of polling places should be made fully accessible in future elections with an eventual target of 100%. Based on the feedback from the survey participants, the vast majority of whom were disabled people, a series of recommendations as to how polling places can be made more accessible are noted below.

Recommendations

The following measures should be considered as a means of making the voting experience more accessible for disabled people.

- 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. It has been highlighted by a number of respondents to this survey, that just because someone has a learning disability or a mental

health difficulty, this does not automatically mean that they are unable to make a rational decision. In many cases the individual has the capacity to make a rational decision once the voting process has been explained to them. 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.

Conclusion

Overall, this survey has been particularly successful in highlighting the many obstacles which people with disabilities face in the voting process. There is a clear need to address the many deficiencies in the voting process. With voting apathy rising amongst the population as a whole, there is no better incentive to encourage more disabled people, who make up 20% of the adult population in Northern Ireland, to take an active part in the electoral process. The overwhelming response to the Polls Apart Survey demonstrates that people with disabilities want to fully engage in the voting process.

Nevertheless, the survey also demonstrates that measures have been taken in Northern Ireland to make polling places more accessible to people with disabilities. While an increasing number have an accessible entrance, others have been able to provide some alternative formats for the ballot paper. Many have also been able to provide low level polling booths and staff in the majority of cases, have offered assistance. As well as highlighting the many deficiencies in the voting process, the Polls Apart Survey respondents have also been willing to highlight the many examples of good practice that exist in Northern Ireland. Indeed some people with disabilities were able to describe their voting experience as excellent. The challenge now is for others to learn from these examples of good practice and contribute to their wider implementation.

However the main point which the survey has highlighted is that there are few, if any, polling places in Northern Ireland which have taken **all** of the necessary measures in order to be made fully accessible. Of those polling places named in the survey none was considered to be accessible to all disabled people. This is the critical point. Very few polling places in Northern Ireland are **fully** accessible and provide all the reasonable adjustments required to make them accessible to all people with disabilities.

For that reason, people with disabilities continue to encounter major obstacles in undertaking the simple task of

exercising their democratic right to vote. Furthermore a lack of information about the accessibility provision made on Election Day perpetuates a suspicion that polling stations are not accessible to disabled people and therefore discourages participation. With rising apathy among many voters, both the government and politicians need to encourage more voters to turn out on in elections.

This report has been based on the real life experiences of disabled people as reported to Disability Action in the light of the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly Election. By taking into account the views expressed in this report, and implementing the recommendations as a minimum, people with disabilities will be able to engage in the electoral process and have their say in who should be elected. By making polling places more accessible, more people with disabilities will be encouraged to take part in the voting process. The political parties as well as the Electoral Office in Northern Ireland should therefore seek to take advantage of the voting potential that exists.

APPENDIX ONE

SAFEGUARDING THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES – THE VIEW FROM THE MANIFESTOS OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The following information has been obtained from the manifestos of the political parties in Northern Ireland which took part in the Assembly Elections in November 2003. Where there has been no specific reference to disability issues, this has been indicated.

Alliance Party for Northern Ireland: There is specific reference to issues which affect people with disabilities in the following areas;

- Supports the principle of equality for all including people with disabilities.
- **“Realising Potential Through Education:** Special Needs – Devote additional resources to the education of children with learning difficulties, including additional numbers of teachers and classroom assistants. Alliance supports the right of choice for children with disabilities to go to the schools most appropriate for them, whether mainstream or special needs.
- Ensure adequate provision of resources to enable young adults to attend sheltered workshops, which provide valuable and rewarding environment. The lack of access to such facilities causes distress to these young adults and their parents.
- **Health and Social Services for a Better Life:** Develop community services for people with learning difficulties. We are particularly concerned at the shortfalls in day and respite care as well as in employment opportunities.
- Develop primary and community care-based mental health services, including out-of-hours services. This can ensure early, skilled intervention, as well as to prevent admission to hospital.

- Increase the provision for services to support families, to protect children from abuse and to assist children with disabilities. Spending in Northern Ireland is two-thirds of that in England. This poor performance by our local administration cannot be allowed to continue.
- **Transport:** Extend free travel to people with disabilities. Mobility must be assured for all sections of the community. Public transport is a necessity for people with disabilities and should be free and disability-friendly.
- **Supporting All in our Society:** Alliance believes that people with disabilities should have equal rights and opportunities within an inclusive society. They must be able to access mainstream services in all areas.
- Improve the efficiency for Disability Living Allowance applications and appeals.
- Ensure all public transport vehicles are disability-friendly.
- Improve access to public facilities for all disabled people. This will be achieved through comprehensive access policies.
- Ensure the choice of mainstream education is available for people with disabilities.
- Create a strategy for serving the needs of people with learning disabilities. This has already been done in Scotland and England.”

Democratic Unionist Party: There is specific reference to issues which affect people with disabilities in the area of health. The manifesto states;

- “Community Care provision requires massive improvement especially in the field of mental health, respite care and the needs of disabled people. They are sometimes overlooked and undervalued. We will continue to promote the needs of the disabled.”

Northern Ireland Unionist Party: No specific reference to disability issues.

Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition: Makes the following points on disability issues in its manifesto.

- **“Politics:** Sign language recognised as an official language of the Assembly.
- **Supporting Communities:** Accessible transport, community and play facilities in all new housing developments.
- **Improving Health:** More investment in mental health services including 24 hour psychiatric cover in accident and emergency.
- **A New Caring Society:** Extension of Disability Discrimination Act to small as well as large companies.”

Progressive Unionist Party: No specific reference to disability issues.

Sinn Fein: While discussing equality issues at length, there is no specific reference to disability issues.

Social Democratic and Labour Party: Makes the following points on disability issues in its manifesto.

- **“Developing Skills and Supporting Workers:** Dedicate specific extra funding for mature students, students with disabilities and students with dependants.
- **Education:** Every effort must be made to enable children with a disability to choose to attend mainstream school: extra teacher training and classroom support must be available to make this work in the interests of child, teacher and class mates.
- **Advancing good health for all:** Services have been under-resourced and neglected, even relative to other areas of medicine. Investment is required to offer support and early intervention in the community to improve the capacity and quality of hospital and residential care and address the worryingly high suicide rate, particularly among young men.

- **Supporting Carers:** Out of care and devotion, unpaid carers subsidise health and social services, often suffering financial hardship as a result and imperiling their own health. The Valuing Carers Strategy must be implemented to enhance support.
- **Combating poverty, promoting equality and human rights:** Implement the Disability Rights Taskforce report, so that people with disabilities enjoy comprehensive civil rights. Ensure full rights for children with special educational needs through new legislation.”

The Green Party: Refers to issues which affect people with disabilities in the following area;

- **Ensuring Social Justice:** “We support New Disability legislation that incorporates the principle of needs and rights – based assessment in consultation with disability groups.
- The removal of mental illness as a taboo subject in our society and a recognition of the role that alternative health practices can play in the treatment of mental illness.
- The expansion of domiciliary services and community healthcare to assist the elderly, chronically sick, and physically or mentally disabled to be cared for in the home rather than in institutions, and to provide support structures for those who are carers in the home.”

Ulster Unionist Party: While highlighting support for equality of opportunity and human rights, there are no specific policies which refer to safeguarding the rights of people with disabilities.

United Kingdom Unionist Party: No specific reference to disability issues.

APPENDIX TWO

THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND ALTERNATIVE FORMATS

Alliance Party of Northern Ireland	Large Print – Can also make Braille and Audio Tape available on request
Democratic Unionist Party	Can make any alternative format available on request
Northern Ireland Unionist Party	No one Available
Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition	Large Print – Did provide Braille Manifestos in the past but this was costly and there was no uptake. They would do so again in future if requested
Progressive Unionist Party	No alternative formats available – could probably make them available for specific requests
Sinn Fein	Audio tape versions of their manifesto are available – an audio version can also be downloaded from their website
SDLP	Large Print and Audio tape available
The Green Party	Large Print available on request. Andy Frew highlighted the issue of a lack of government funding for small parties such as the Green Party to be able to make other alternative formats available
The Workers Party	Large Print available on request – once again a lack of funding for small parties to provide alternative formats was highlighted
Ulster Unionist Party	Did make tape version available in 2001 General Election but there was little uptake. As a result of the costs incurred, they only made available large print copies of the manifesto which could be produced in house.

	They felt that overall there was not enough interest in alternative formats.
United Kingdom Unionist Party	No one available for comment

There were no contact details available for the Natural Law Party and the Conservative Party in Northern Ireland.

APPENDIX THREE

SURVEY FORM

Polls Apart Northern Ireland 2003

About Disability Action

Disability Action is the only pan-disability rights-based non-profit making organisation in Northern Ireland. Over 180 organisations are in membership, representing people with physical, hidden, learning, sensory disabilities, and mental health difficulties. Disability Action campaigns, lobbies and acts as advocate for equal rights for people with disabilities. We provide a wide range of services from a network of 5 local offices, with 100 staff and 250 volunteers.

About this survey

On 26th November 2003, the people of Northern Ireland will go to the polls to elect members to the next Assembly. Many polling stations remain inaccessible to people with disabilities. This means that people with disabilities in Northern Ireland will continue to be denied this basic Human Right.

We want to know how many of Northern Ireland's polling stations are inaccessible to people with disabilities. Please help us by filling out this form and sending it back to us.

It should take no longer than ten minutes to fill in and we will keep your answers private.

You can also fill in this form by using the internet at www.disabilityactionpollsapartsurvey.com

Paper copies should be returned as soon as possible to Disability Action, Portside Business Park, 189 Airport Road West, Belfast, BT3 9ED.

You must return the completed forms by the 10 December 2003

(Please tick the relevant box for each of the following questions)

About You

1. Are you a disabled person?

Yes

No

1a. What is the nature of your disability?

Physical (Wheelchair User)

Physical (Other)

Visual

Hearing

Learning

Mental Health

Hidden

2. Which constituency will you be voting in? (Please tick)

Foyle Mid Ulster

East Londonderry Upper Bann

North Antrim Newry and Armagh

East Antrim North Down

South Antrim Strangford

North Belfast Lagan Valley

South Belfast South Down

East Belfast Fermanagh/South Tyrone

West Belfast West Tyrone

2. Name of Polling Station (if known)

4. Are you voting in this election?

Yes

No

If no please tell us why?

5a. How will you be voting in this election? (please tick)

I will vote at the Polling Station

I have a Postal Vote

Someone will vote on my behalf i.e. by Proxy

4b. If you are not voting at a polling station, please state why?

Voter registration

6a You have to register to vote. Did you register to vote?

Yes

No

Don't Know

6b Did anyone explain to you about voting?

Yes

No

Don't Know

6c Did anyone ask you if you wanted to vote?

Yes

No

Don't Know

6d Could you read the Registration Form?

Yes

No

Know

6e Did anyone help you to register to vote?

Yes

No

Don't Know

7a. Was voter registration material provided in a range of formats, e.g. large print/Braille/tape?

Yes

No

Don't Know

7b. How do you think voter registration can be improved for disabled people?

Election information

8a. Please tell us about the information that you have received about the elections.

Tick whether the information was easy to understand and if it was available in alternative formats.

Information from	Easy to understand	Alternative formats
Political parties	Yes No	Yes No Don't know
Electoral Commission	Yes No	Yes No Don't know
Electoral Office	Yes No	Yes No Don't know

8a. If you require an alternative format please tell us what type of format you prefer.

Travelling to the polling station

9. How did you get to the polling station

- By public transport
- By community transport
- By car
- By foot
- Using a wheelchair
- Other (Please indicate)

10. If you used Public/Community Transport, was it accessible?

- Yes
- No

11. How far is the polling station from home

- Less than $\frac{1}{2}$ mile
- Between $\frac{1}{2}$ mile and 1 mile
- More than 1 mile
- If more than 1 mile, (please indicate)

12. Location of the polling station

Is the polling station in a -
School
Community centre
Town Hall
Library
Place of Worship
Portacabin
Other (please specify)

Outside the polling station

14. Was there designated parking for disabled people?

Yes
No
Don't Know

15. Were there any obstructions on the route to the polling station?

Yes
No
Don't Know

16a. Was the main entrance accessible to disabled people?

Yes
No
Don't Know

16b. If there was a separate entrance was this for disabled people only?

Yes
No
Don't Know

17a. Was the accessible entrance convenient to designated parking?

Yes
No
Don't Know

17b. Was the accessible entrance convenient to the polling booths?

Yes

No

Don't Know

18. Was there level access to the polling station?

Yes

No

Don't Know

19. Was there a ramp into the polling station?

Yes

No

Don't Know

If there was a ramp was it

Permanent Temporary

Too steep Too narrow

20. Were there steps into the polling station? If yes how many?

Yes

No

Don't Know

21. Were the doors -

Automatic Yes No Don't Know

Wedge open, Yes No Don't Know

Heavy to open, Yes No Don't Know

Easy to open Yes No Don't Know

22. Were staff available to give assistance or guidance?

Yes

No

Don't Know

Inside the polling station

23. Was the route from the entrance to the polling booths on one level? If no please describe.

Yes

No

Don't Know

24. Were there any obstructions on the route from the entrance to the polling booth?

Yes

No

Don't Know

25. Was the route well lit?

Yes

No

Don't Know

26. Was there enough space for disabled people to get around the building easily? (e.g. corridor widths and doorways)

Yes

No

Don't Know

27. Were there good directions (that is signs) to the polling booths?

Yes

No

Don't Know

28. Was the route from the entrance to the polling booths well staffed?

Yes

No

Don't Know

29. Were there seats for people to rest?

Yes

No

Don't Know

30. Was the flooring suitable for disabled people? (e.g. appropriate for wheelchair users; non-slip)

Yes

No

Don't Know

At the Polling Booth

31. Was there a low level polling booth?

Yes

No

Don't Know

32. Was there the provision of communication aids such as a Loop system, signer or notepad and pen?

Yes

No

Don't Know

Please specify

33. Was there a large print version of the ballot paper available for voters to look at?

Yes

No

Don't Know

34. Was a Braille template available?

Yes

No

Don't Know

35. Was the inside of the polling booth well lit?

Yes

No

Don't Know

36. Was there a low level ballot box?

Yes

No

Don't Know

Your experience

37. Did you find polling station staff welcoming and helpful?

Yes

No

Don't Know

38. If you have voted before, was this experience better than last time?

Yes

No

Not Applicable

39. Overall how would you describe your voting experience from the perspective of a person with a disability? (please tick)

Excellent

Good

Average

Poor

Very Poor

40. Can you think of any times when returning officers or their staff helped you?

41. How do you think things could be changed to encourage more disabled people to vote?

42. Do you have any other comments you would like to make – please state here.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return it to Disability Action, FREEPOST BEL2347, Belfast, BT3 9BR.

The closing date for completed questionnaires is 10th December 2003.

Would you like to know more about Disability Action?

Yes

No

If yes, please give contact details below:

Name:

Address:

Tel. No:

Fax:

Text:

E-Mail:

Would you like to be kept informed of the Polls Apart campaign in the future?

Yes

No