



POLLS APART
ACCESS TO POLLING STATIONS
WESTMINISTER AND LOCAL ELECTIONS
5 MAY 2005

A STUDY BY DISABILITY ACTION

August 05

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Capability Scotland

Scope Cymru in Wales

Scope UK

The Pollen Shop

C O N T E N T S

	Page
Executive Summary	4
Introduction	7
Methodology	7
Results	9
Conclusion	17
References	20

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This is the third study undertaken by Disability Action into the accessibility of the voting process for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland. The methodology has been designed to enable comparison with England, Scotland and Wales.
- 1.2 The findings contained within this report are based upon disabled people's real life experiences of voting in the 2005 Westminster and Local Elections.
- 1.3 Following upon previous studies in 2003 and 2004 Disability Action had recommended that simple measures be taken to improve the voting process for people with disabilities in terms of
- Registration and identification
 - Getting to the polling station
 - Parking at the polling Station
 - Getting into the polling station
 - Getting around the polling station
 - Casting the vote
 - The accessibility of polling and party information
 - Staff training
- 1.4 The following is a summary of the issues pertaining to the administration of the 2005 Westminster and Local Elections in terms of accessibility.
- 1.5 Registration and Identification
The onerous requirements of the Electoral Fraud Act in terms of annual, individual registration and the restriction on acceptable forms of identification are barriers to voting for many disabled people and need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The Electoral Office and Electoral Commission should work together to press for the legislative changes required to redress this imbalance.
- 1.6 Transport and Parking
Travel to the polling station and the availability of parking close to the entrance remain essential factors in ensuring the accessibility of the election to disabled people. The Electoral Office should work with others to ensure that polling stations can be reached using accessible transport. Only 40% of polling stations reported

upon had parking available for disabled people. It is important that staff is made aware of the arrangements relating to parking provision and that this is communicated to voters. External routes need to be accessible and kept clear from obstruction.

1.7 Access into the polling station

Only buildings which are accessible should be used as polling places. Many participants reported that a building had access at a side or back door but that this was locked and it was difficult to get staff's attention to open it. The accessible entrance should be used as the entrance for everyone and should be clearly signposted from the boundary of the site. Information regarding the accessibility of polling places should be made available in advance of Election Day.

1.8 Access within the polling station

Only rooms accessible to disabled people should be used as polling stations. Routes should be clearly signposted, rest points provided, and doors should be kept open.

1.9 Casting the vote

The Electoral Office has committed to providing low-level booths and ballot boxes, and large print ballot papers and tactile voting devices at all polling stations. Therefore it is of concern that almost 50% of disabled people were not aware of these provisions.

1.10 Accessible information

The design of the ballot papers have been criticised in terms of their accessibility to people with visual impairments, as well as their accessibility to all in relation to confusion surrounding the double election and the use of two different voting styles.

1.11 A separate review of the accessibility of all information pertaining to the election was commissioned by the Electoral Commission and has been reported upon separately.

1.12 Staff training

Almost 95% of participants were complimentary about the staff of this year's election particularly in relation to the level of personal attention given regarding the format of the double election. Where criticism was levied at staff it related to system failures rather than the individuals concerned.

1.13 CONCLUSION

- 1.14 Disability Action and others have drawn attention to the barriers in the voting system for disabled people over a number of years. It is disappointing and of real concern that disabled people continue to be disenfranchised by barriers built into the system and the continued failure on the part of the administration to deal with this issue.
- 1.15 The accessibility of the entire voting process should be subject to continued review. Simple, achievable and measurable objectives should be identified and a work programme established to ensure the future accessibility of election in Northern Ireland.
- 1.16 A comprehensive study of all aspects of accessibility should take place at the next and all future elections.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Further to Disability Action's previous studies of the accessibility of the voting process for disabled people in Northern Ireland which took place in 2003 and 2004, Disability Action undertook a further study to assess the accessibility of the 2005 Local and Westminster Elections held on 05th May 2005.
- 2.2 In previous years Disability Action has consulted with colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales and designed our survey methodology to enable cross comparison of our findings with those in the other regions.
- 2.2 This year a partnership was established between Capability Scotland, Scope, The Pollen Shop and Disability Action, and the same methodology applied across all regions. Scope has reported on the findings of the survey across the UK in the report "Polls Apart 4".
- 2.3 In parallel to this study, which focussed on the accessibility of polling places, Disability Action and partners undertook a review of the accessibility of the information pertaining to the election. This was also reported in a UK context.
- 2.4 The following Report relates to the findings of the Northern Ireland study into the accessibility of the voting process. It can be read in conjunction with the above UK reports and with the previous studies, which related to Northern Ireland only.

3 METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 The study utilised a questionnaire survey, a focus group, and a post election workshop to gather disabled people's real life experiences of voting in both the Local Elections and the Westminster Election (May 2005). The questionnaire survey could be completed on-line, by return post or utilising a telephone/text phone help line. The survey was also available in alternate formats on request.
- 3.2 The survey was distributed using Disability Action's 180 Member Groups which in turn distributed the survey amongst their membership, and we also utilised other Disability Action contacts to ensure a wide distribution.

- 3.3 Each of the partners used the same questions, recording disabled people's experiences whether they had voted at a polling station or by post.
- 3.4 If people had voted at a polling station they were asked about:
The proximity of the polling station to their home.
The availability of designated parking.
If there was level or ramped access into the premises.
If there was level access internally.
If there was a low level polling booth.
If there was a large print version of the ballot paper.
If there was a tactile voting device available.
If the polling station was well lit. And,
If polling station staff were helpful and friendly.
- 3.5 If people had voted by post they were asked about:
The availability of large print.
If instructions were easy to understand.
Voting with assistance.
Voting in secret.
And returning the ballot papers.
- 3.6 In both instances people were asked to provide any other information they felt appropriate.
- 3.7 As with the questionnaire survey each of the focus groups across the UK were asked the same questions relating to:
The accessibility of information,
The method of voting,
The accessibility of the polling station, and
The staff at the polling station.
- 3.8 People were also asked to compare their voting experience this year to previous years.
- 3.9 The post election workshop discussed the accessibility of information, the availability of support, and the accessibility of the process in general with a particular focus upon accessibility for people with low literacy.

4 RESULTS

4.1 In total 56 responses were received relating to voting at a polling station, and 15 relating to postal voting. This result is a respectable response given the current level of consultation requests being made to the disability sector in Northern Ireland, and given that this survey was one of three important consultations circulated pertaining to accessibility of services in the space of three months.

4.2 Survey Results

Is the polling station less than 1 mile from where you live?

4.3 71.7% of those who answered this question said that the polling station they used was within one mile of their home. This is lower than the finding of the 2003 survey when 82% said that the polling station was within one mile of their home. It is also lower than the UK result in this year's study which was 83.3%.

4.4 Transport to the polling station remains a major factor in the accessibility of the voting process for disabled people. In previous studies this has been highlighted as an issue but was not included in this year's study. Discussions at the focus group highlighted that the political parties had previously provided transport to the polling stations but that this does not seem to be the case any longer. Transport has never been provided by the electoral administration however as it is an essential factor in ensuring the accessibility of the process it should be explored.

4.5 Is there designated parking for disabled voters close to the polling station?

In the 2003 study 60.5% of respondents indicated that they had travelled to the polling place by car, therefore the availability of accessible parking close to the entrance and reserved for use by disabled people is critical.

4.6 In this year's survey only 39.6% said that parking was available close to the polling station. This is a disappointing result given that the availability of parking has been highlighted in both of the previous Disability Action reports as an essential factor in ensuring accessibility.

4.7 There is no financial implication to the creation of parking close to the entrance, nor would it mean a permanent physical change as it

does not necessarily need to be permanent provision but could be managed by staff for Election Day only.

4.8 A number of respondents reported that parking had been available but that the staff were not aware of this and that therefore disabled people had endured a longer pedestrian travel distance than was actually required.

4.9 “I asked about specific disabled parking spaces and was told that disabled drivers could drive down to the school door and spaces there could be used. If you did not know the school area you would not have known this.”

4.10 The reduction in security presence at polling places has impacted negatively upon accessibility as the police had traditionally fulfilled an advisory function in terms of directing disabled people to the parking area and accessible entrance. This should be taken into account in the management of polling stations and in the equipment provided to the polling station staff. For example staff are provided with signage to mark the polling place but are restricted in their ability to make signage site specific, i.e. to give directions in terms of the availability of designated parking, or the accessible entrance from the boundary of the site.

4.11 “It seemed like they had fulfilled all the instructions but not actually had a person with a disability where access is an issue try things out. So for example you couldn’t drive right up to the door but instead had to park 100 yards away on the road where the pavement did not have a ramp.”

4.12 Finally the accessibility of the pedestrian access into polling places was influenced by the location of caravans, etc belonging to the political parties. This matter was raised at the post election seminar where participants reported that caravans had blocked access in that they were parked over dropped kerbs or on the footpath. The workshop questioned what role or influence the Electoral Office had in terms of policing the boundary of the site.

4.13 Is there level access into the polling station? If there is a ramp is it appropriately designed?

46% of respondents said that there was level access into the polling station, compared to 59.7% in the UK as a whole. 37.5% said that there was ramped access compared to 63.8% in the UK as a whole. Again these findings are disappointing.

4.14 The Electoral Commission in their 2003 report into the administration of the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections recommended that polling places should have an accessible entrance with either level or ramped access, if a polling station was not accessible The Electoral Office were encouraged to look elsewhere. It is disappointing therefore that the statistics remain unfavourable despite the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act in October 2004.

4.15 It is preferable that the accessible entrance be the entrance for everyone. Comments made by respondents included the fact that the accessible entrance was not obvious, was not signposted or that one had to attract the attention of staff inside the polling station in order to gain access into the building.

4.16 “No ramp was on view. I asked in the polling station and was told that there was a ramp and if you required it you should ask a member of staff. However the only members of staff available were in the polling area so if I required a ramp and was on my own I would not have been able to get in.”

4.17 (My) son went to get help to open (the) ramped door, (this) might have been difficult for an independent voter.”

4.18 “I enquired when I entered the building was there a ramp if a voter was wheelchair bound or had a walking difficulty. The person at the door checking the polling cards didn’t know and asked me to check with one of the officials inside the building. When I enquired I was informed that there was a key, which was made available by the school secretary to officials to open a side entrance, which was on a level with the hall in which the voting took place. My only concern about this arrangement was that if a person arrived on their own, they would have to wait outside until the side door was opened for them. It wasn’t helpful that the person at the entrance did not know about this arrangement, he should have been better briefed.”

- 4.19 “Advised by the presiding officer that wooden portable ramps were available in previous years but those have been vandalised – no ramps available this year.”
- 4.20 “(There was level access) at the front door but not at the gate and the front door did not have a waist height bell or buzzer and no-one was standing there.”
- 4.21 “Level access at the back of the school - Conlig PS is a small, not very new school, I thought that it would be a nuisance having to go around the back and you would have to get the door unlocked, and there was no parking for disabled.”
- 4.22 “Saw a person leave in a wheelchair, had brought his own ramp with him!”
- 4.23 “While the Model School is pretty accessible neither the double gate into the school nor the double doors were fully open so a person with a wheelchair would have to ask for the second door to be opened.”

4.24 Is there level access inside the polling station and can a disabled person move around easily and safely?

90.2% of respondents answered positively to this question. This is better than the UK finding which was 87.3%

- 4.25 “Ground floor split level, polling room accessed by stair lift.”
- 4.26 “Corridors in the school were narrow and double doors had one door closed therefore it would have been difficult for a wheelchair user to move easily to the polling booths. Once inside the floor access was level.”
- 4.27 “Polling room was very small, may have been difficult to move around it for wheelchair user”.

4.28 The availability of directional signage and guidance is important in terms of improving accessibility. This is a factor which requires care, as an excess of signage can be equally as confusing as too little in the way of directional guidance, and it includes information

sharing amongst all polling station staff especially those stationed at entrance points.

4.29 “Signs advising voters on where to go and what to do...there were far too many signs which would cause confusion, were all at different heights, were poorly designed for legibility, font, contrast, etc. This could cause difficulties for voters who have visual and/or cognitive disabilities.”

4.30 Is there a low level polling booth?

76.5% of respondents said that there was a low level booth; this is a marked improvement upon the statistics from the previous year (2004) when 50% said no and a further 13% did not know. Given that all polling stations have a low level booth it is likely that the placing of the booth has caused confusion. This is a matter which needs to be treated with care, as the low level booth should be located so as to be obvious but not placed in a position which could compromise privacy.

4.31 Is there a large print version of the ballot paper on display?

Only 48.9% of participants responded that there was a large print ballot paper on display. As this was a requirement in all polling stations this finding is a concern. The need for a large print version of the ballot paper was compounded by the fact that two elections took place on the same day and that voters had to remember many more candidates across two ballot papers. It is possible that some participants did not notice or note the large print version and a number of participants commented that they had voted early in the morning and that staff may not have had the opportunity to set up fully.

4.32 The availability of, and design of a large print version of the ballot papers, are issues which arose at both the focus group and post election workshop. Comments included that it would be useful if the ballot papers could include photographs of the candidates and related to the format of candidate names, i.e. surname first as a barrier. It was also felt that some of the material produced by the political parties had added to the confusion, as some had ticks or crosses and others had 1,2,3, etc. when this did not correspond to the method required to validate a vote.

4.33 “Only Westminster (large print version on display)”.

4.34 “I voted at 7.10am and the staff were not really ready yet so it is possible that they were going to put up a large print ballot paper or some other aid for visually impaired people”

4.35 The ballot papers themselves were not considered accessible.
(See below in Other Comments).

4.36 Is there a tactile voting device to help visually impaired voters vote independently?

50% of participants said that there was a tactile device available, as before it is a legal requirement that every polling station have a tactile device available. In previous years staff awareness of the purpose of the device or how to use it has been identified as an issue. This year confusion with the different types of election and different ballot papers has been identified as a problem; also there were problem relating to the design of the device.

4.37 “There was no information on view to say that a tactile device was available. I was informed that each polling booth had one which had to be asked for.”

4.38 “Very helpful staff who willingly showed me the tactile device and explained how it worked.”

4.39 Is the polling station well lit?

A high proportion of participants (92.5%) responded that the polling station was well lit. The timing of the election in summer influences the availability of natural light. This factor should also be taken into account in room layout etc to maximise natural light at the polling booths.

4.40 Are polling station staff helpful and friendly?

The staff at this year’s election has been praised for the level of personal attention given to all voters in relation to the double election. 94.2% of participants said that they found staff helpful and friendly. Other comments included the following:

4.41 “Staff were extremely helpful all instructions were given verbally explaining how to vote in each of the elections.”

4.42 “The staff were friendly and helpful, they answered any queries courteously and in a discreet manner.”

4.43 “The staff within the centre explained the voting process without me having to ask, I went early in the morning, so possibly if the polling station were busy they may not be as helpful.”

4.44 Participants at the focus group and workshop commented that staff were helpful within their remit but that there were other things which would they were not allowed to do that would have assisted the disabled voter. For example staff (pre-election) cannot complete a registration form.

4.45 “Not a staff problem it is a system problem.”

4.46 **Other comments.**

4.47 **Registration**

As in previous years the system of annual individual registration, and the issue of acceptable forms of identification have been raised as a barriers to the voting process for people with disabilities. In particular participants identified the following issues:

- That staff (pre-election) cannot assist an individual to complete the registration forms.
- That the process must be repeated annually.
- The declaration of capacity on behalf of a person with a learning disability was considered as “a step too far” required on the part of the individual, which discouraged people from registering.
- It was felt that the system in Northern Ireland was designed to be complicated especially for people with learning disabilities and those with low literacy.
- The forms of acceptable identification should be expanded to include other Government issued identification such as the Blue Badge, and other forms issued by Translink for disabled people.
- The process of getting Electoral ID was fraught with barriers in itself, including getting photographs taken, having the photograph verified by a doctor, and getting to the Electoral Office or outreach post, all of which also have cost implications to the individual.

4.48 Finally there was frustration amongst participants in that the register does not record an individuals need or preference for an

alternate format, it was felt that this could be easily achieved and would overcome many of the access barriers associated with the electoral process.

4.49 **Ballot papers**

The design of the ballot papers has come in for particular criticism this year given that two elections were run in parallel. The ballot papers although different shapes were very similar in colour, which could have caused confusion amongst voters with visual impairments.

4.50 “The colours of the two different voting papers were white and cream and some able bodied people were confused. Anyone with poor eyesight may have had trouble discerning the difference.”

4.51 “Severe lack of colour contrast between the two ballot papers one was white and the other was a buff colour – not enough contrast here. I advised the polling clerk to tell people that the X goes on the short paper and the 1.2.3.etc. goes on the long paper.”

4.52 It was suggested that the use of candidates photographs on the ballot paper and to change the format of the wording and case type (i.e. to put the candidates first name first followed by surname in sentence case) would make the papers more accessible to people with learning disabilities and therefore more accessible in general.

4.53 **Loop Systems**

“There was no loop in evidence, this could cause difficulties for voters who have hearing impairment.”

4.54 **Postal Voting**

Registering for a Postal Vote is also more difficult in Northern Ireland than elsewhere and may require a declaration of medical need. This was felt to be unacceptable for a number of reasons, firstly someone who is disabled is not necessarily ill, and secondly the declaration requires a doctor’s signature and can also incur a cost.

4.55 One respondent said that they declared they were not in ill health but rather that the polling station was inaccessible, and that a postal vote was issued.

4.56 “I applied for a postal vote for me and my Mum as it is not only very difficult for me to access the Polling Station but I would never have got my Mum who is 87 into it.”

4.57 None of the respondents in this section of the survey had difficulty in terms of understanding or following the instructions, or in voting independently and in secret. However some were unsure as to whether papers were available in large print (26.6% said no, 20% did not know) or whether the instructions had included information on how to get help (20% said no, 26.6% did not know).

4.58 One respondent who did not complete the survey form suggested that voting by post was a reasonable compromise.

4.59 “Who cares? There is voting by post and there are far more important issues such as housing etc. I feel you would be better off putting action into these.”

4.60 However it is fair to say that their opinion is not shared by many as illustrated in the debate that ensued on the Stephen Nolan radio show following one caller who expressed a similar attitude the morning after the election.

5 CONCLUSION

5.1 This study has illustrated that there has been little progress in terms of improved accessibility to all aspects of the voting process. This is disappointing given that previous studies have pointed out simple adjustments which could have been easily implemented prior to and on election day which would have improved accessibility for all.

5.2 A number of the provisions are already Electoral Office requirements such as the provision of a low level booth, a large print version of the ballot paper and a Braille template. Therefore their continued absence or a continued lack of awareness of their availability on the part of the disabled electorate is a matter of concern.

- 5.3 The Electoral Commission, which has a remit to report on the administration of elections including the accessibility of the process, has chosen this year to report on the accessibility of information in the Westminster and Local Elections. Whilst this is to be welcomed it is essential that polling places be assessed for accessibility as well.
- 5.4 Disability Action undertook this study without financial support. We are happy to make the findings of this study available to both the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office in order to advise on access improvements that will be required in advance of the next election. However we strongly recommend that a comprehensive review of the accessibility of all aspects of the voting process be taken at the next election.
- 5.5 This study has identified a number of other issues which need to be reviewed, including the availability of transport to the polling place, the accessibility of the external environment, the type of building used etc. but which could not be included given the restricted scope of this study.
- 5.6 Staff awareness has not been measured in detail in this review or in the previous studies. Staff training will be crucial to the successful administration of Election Day in terms of accessibility; therefore it is crucial that the training provided be assessed to ensure a focus on disability and access awareness.
- 5.7 The electoral system continues to discriminate against people with learning disabilities in terms of registration and the assessment of capacity. Recent legislative changes have exaggerated this problem. It cannot be allowed to continue.
- 5.8 Accessibility should be applied as standard rather than considered as an additional requirement and therefore addressed as an extra provision and extra cost. Everyone can read accessible formats, everyone can use accessible buildings, and a more accessible system will be open to everyone.
- 5.9 The following are issues which must be addressed in advance of the next election.
- The Electoral Office and Electoral Commission should press for the legislative changes needed to address the access barriers built

into the electoral system, i.e. those which relate to registration, the availability of postal voting, acceptable forms of identification, and the use of alternate venues as polling places.

- There is a continued failure to make parking provision available for disabled people, or where parking was available to advise people including staff that this is the case. This must be made available.
- The lack of accessible transport to the polling place is a matter which needs to be addressed by the Electoral Office in partnership with the relevant public, private and community transport providers.
- Only accessible premises should be used as polling places. Where access to a polling place is by a side or back door this should be made the main entrance used by everyone.
- Information about access arrangements should be available both on site on the day and prior to Election Day. It should be noted that the absence of police on Election Day has significantly impacted upon the provision of information and in many cases assistance.
- Staff should be trained in, and consult on, how to provide easy, convenient and effective access into and around the polling place.
- The lack of availability or lack of awareness of the availability, of the low level booth, the low ballot box, the large print ballot paper and Braille template must be addressed. Given that there has been considerable investment in this specialist equipment and that the Electoral Office insists that these are readily and always available, the failure to utilise it properly is a waste.
- The failure of alternate formats to meet the needs of disabled people is a cause for concern. The Electoral Office should work with disability organisations in developing effective tools to make the voting system more accessible to everyone.

5.10 Many of the barriers experienced by disabled people in exercising their right to vote can be easily remedied with effective staff training and an improved focus upon accessibility. Improvements have been made in recent years but change is slow. The Electoral

Office must embrace the spirit of the Disability Discrimination Act and the wider equality agenda, identify examples of good practice and replicate these across all polling stations.

- 5.11 Disability Action will be pleased to assist in bringing these matters forward and working with the Electoral Office and the Electoral Commission toward improving the accessibility of all of the voting process for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland.

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