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# Disabled people: political participation

## 1 Barriers to disabled people's political participation

Many disabled voters still experience barriers to political participation.

In 2017 the Government issued a [call for evidence about the experience of disabled people in participating in elections](#), including registration.<sup>1</sup> The Government received over 250 responses and published its response in August 2018. The responses came were mainly from

- people affected by sight loss,
- wheelchair users
- people with learning disabilities; and,
- people affected by mental illness.

### Blind and partially sighted people

A report by RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People), [Turned Out 2019](#), found more than one in ten of blind voters (13 per cent), and less than half of

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<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Office, [Call for Evidence: access to elections](#), September 2017.

partially sighted voters (44 per cent), said they could vote independently and in secret. Nearly a quarter had to rely on a member of polling station staff to help them to vote.<sup>2</sup>

## Wheelchair users

Wheelchair users and voters who use other mobility aids often find polling stations inaccessible. In 2015 the charity Revitalise surveyed local authority websites. It found that 88 per cent did not provide accessibility information about polling stations on their website.<sup>3</sup>

## People with learning disabilities

A survey of voters with learning disabilities conducted in 2014 indicated 17% were turned away at the polling station because of their learning disability. 60% said that registering to vote was too hard.<sup>4</sup>

## 2

## Access to the polls

Those involved in running elections have duties under the [Equality Act 2010](#) in the same way as any other service provider. They must make reasonable adjustments to avoid putting people with disabilities at a substantial disadvantage compared to people who are not disabled.

Returning Officers must consider this when setting up and running polling stations. The Electoral Commissions, the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance, has provided practical guidance on ensuring the polls are accessible in appendix one of its [handbook for polling station staff](#).

Local councils must consider their Equality Act 2010 duties when they conduct polling place reviews – the five-yearly review of where polling places and polling stations in each ward are situated.

Election rules also:

- require that Returning Officers provide necessary equipment to assist disabled voters;<sup>5</sup> and,

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<sup>2</sup> RNIB, [Turn Out 2019](#), undated.

<sup>3</sup> Revitalise, [Disabled voters are still being overlooked, finds Revitalise study](#), May 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Mencap, [People with a learning disability's passion for politics thwarted by system that excludes them](#), Oct 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Paragraph 29, Schedule 1, Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended).

- allow for disabled voters to be accompanied by a companion when voting.<sup>6</sup>

These rules were recently amended by the Elections Act 2022 (see below).

## 2.1 Elections Act 2022 changes

The Elections Act 2022 amended the elections rules in the Representation of the People Act 1983 designed to improve the accessibility of voting to those with disabilities. Passing the legislation formed part of the Government's [National Disability Strategy](#), published in July 2021.

The 2022 Act removed and replaced a requirement to provide a tactile voting device for voters with visual impairment. Returning Officers are now required to provide each polling station with “such equipment as is reasonable to enable, or make it easier, for voters with disabilities (including, but not limited to, sight loss) to vote”.

The 2022 Act also removed the requirement for a companion assisting a disabled voter in a polling station to be someone either entitled to vote in the election or a close family member of the voter who has attained the age of 18. Anyone of the age of 18 or over can now act as a companion. Companions are still required to make a written declaration that they have been requested to assist but the form is altered to reflect the new arrangement.

The Electoral Commission [consulted on draft guidance to Returning Officers on assistance with voting for disabled people](#). The Commission expects to publish the finalised guidance in time to assist those preparing for the May 2023 local elections.

The draft guidance provides advice on the equipment that Returning Officers should provide for disabled voters. It says polling stations must be equipped with notices providing information on how to vote and large copies of a ballot paper (at least one displayed on a wall and one hand-held copy). It also lists other equipment that Returning Officers should consider providing. Including (amongst other things):

- Chairs/seating for those who need to rest
- Magnifiers
- Tactile voting devices to support voters who are visually impaired
- A booth at wheelchair level

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<sup>6</sup> Paragraph 39, Schedule 1, Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended).

- Pencil grips
- Ramps (for buildings with steps)
- Where applicable, reserved parking spaces for disabled voters.

### 3 Easy read materials

The form of voter registration forms, such as postal voting forms, guidance at polling stations and ballot papers are set out in legislation.<sup>7</sup> The Government can change election forms using secondary legislation. Between 2014 and 2015 it made changes to poll cards, postal voting statements, polling station guidance and the ballot paper to make them easier to read.<sup>8</sup> At around the same time the Cabinet Office published an [easy read guide to voting and registering to vote](#) in collaboration with Mencap, a learning disability charity.

Despite the changes, the Electoral Commission is still calling on the Government to change election forms so that they are easier to understand.<sup>9</sup> The Commission says certain election forms can be hard for some people to read due to difficult language, small print and black and white colour contrast.<sup>10</sup>

### 4 Support for disabled candidates

The Local Government Association provides [support to disabled councillors and those considering standing for election to their local council](#). The support offer includes training and one-to-one coaching. The scheme is funded by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities.

In the past grant funding was available to disabled candidates standing in a range of elections to support them with the extra costs they can face. The [Access to Elected Office Fund](#) provided grants before 2018. It was replaced by the [EnAble fund](#). The Government says the “responsibility for supporting disabled candidates sits with political parties”. It described the EnAble fund as an “interim measure to give parties time to put their own support in place”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Schedule 1, [Appendix of forms](#), Representation of the People Act 1983; Schedule 2, [para 3B](#), Representation of the People Act 1983.

<sup>8</sup> [Explanatory memorandum to The Representation of the People \(Ballot Paper\) Regulations 2015](#)

<sup>9</sup> Electoral Commission, [Accessibility of elections](#), undated.

<sup>10</sup> Electoral Commission, [Report: Elections for everyone](#), May 2019.

<sup>11</sup> [PQ59307. Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund and EnAble Fund for Elected Office](#), answered on 31 October 2022.

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