

Accessibility Template

A checklist for local authorities to consider
when implementing new methods of voting

vote2003



CAPABILITY SCOTLAND
TURNING DISABILITY INTO ABILITY

Supported by the Community Fund

Introduction

In 2002, the Scottish Executive introduced new legislation, which enables Local Authorities to implement and test new methods of voting. The Executive will look at several different factors in deciding whether to grant approval for a local authority to undertake a pilot voting scheme. One of these factors will include the level of accessibility for disabled people of the alternative voting method.

There are a variety of alternative voting methods that local authorities could use in a pilot scheme. This template is intended to help local authorities understand some of the potential barriers that disabled people might face in accessing these alternative voting methods.

This guide looks at the accessibility issues involved in introducing the following pilot schemes:

- All Postal Vote
- Electronic Kiosks
- Voting using the Internet
- Telephone Voting
- Voting by Text Messages via a Mobile Phone

Further guidance is available from the Electoral Commission on the issues that need to be addressed to ensure that the traditional method of voting at a polling station is accessible for disabled people. Capability Scotland can also offer practical support and learning from its Vote2003 project.

Prior to introducing any pilot scheme the following issues should be addressed –

Minimum Font Size

12 pt is the suggested minimum size for text within printed documents using an accessible typeface¹. See Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF) guidelines, available from www.saifscotland.org.uk.

¹ For example Capability Scotland use Helvetica Neue Roman, a sans serif typeface.

Plain English

Any information provided, including polling cards, should be in plain English. This means using straightforward language that the intended user will be able to read, understand and act upon the first time they read it.

Everyone benefits from information in plain English but it is particularly helpful for people with learning disabilities and/or literacy problems. Using plain, simple language is particularly important when describing a process that people are unfamiliar with.

Languages and Other Formats

It's important to offer and provide different languages and formats including large print, audio tape, easy read version and braille. Having different formats will make it easier for people who have difficulty with reading or writing to participate. Information should signpost clearly where alternative formats are available from.

A contact free-phone number should be available

Well publicised, free-phone numbers are very helpful for anyone who has an enquiry, requires further assistance or needs to get information in alternative formats. People with a disability may be nervous about different voting formats and may want to know what to expect when going out to vote. The people who answer these phone calls should have full disability equality training. It is also best practice to have a textphone number or to publicise the Tynetalk² number (0800 959598) for people with a hearing impairment.

Email address & postal address

Some people with a disability may also have a communication difficulty. A well-publicised e-mail address and/or postal address should be made available alongside the telephone number as an option for getting more information.

² Tynetalk is a service run by the RNID which enables people with a hearing impairment to communicate via an operator.

All postal vote

This method of voting requires everyone to vote by post. There is no need to visit the polling station on Election Day. The majority of the accessibility issues are to do with the information sent out to voters.

Minimum Font Size

As stated above, pt 12 should be the minimum size of font for printed materials and it is preferable to use a clear accessible typeface.

Plain English

All processes and information should be presented in clear, uncomplicated language

Presentation

Everyone benefits from a well laid out and clearly presented document. This is especially important for people who have literacy problems, impaired vision or learning disabilities. If the information is presented well then people are more likely to respond.

Languages and Other Formats

It's important to offer and provide different formats including large print, audio tape, easy read version and braille. Having different formats will make it easier for people who have difficulty with reading or writing to complete postal votes. Information should signpost clearly where alternative formats are available from.

Electronic Format

Some people find it easier if they have the option of filling the voting form in on the Internet or via e-mail using their PC. The form could also be made available on disk and be sent out on request.

Preferred Ballot Paper Format

If voters can request the format of the ballot paper on the initial form for a postal vote, it will save them having to phone up the local authority to get the format that they require. Some disabled people have communication difficulties, so reducing their dependence on the telephone will make the process more accessible.

Adding this type of request to the Electoral Register would save people having to make this type of request each time there is an election.

Assistance

Some people will find filling out forms difficult regardless of what format it is in. Voters should have the option of filling the application form in over the phone or having a member of staff visit their house to provide the assistance that they require.

People who live by themselves might find it useful if they could take their form to a library or post office to get assistance with proving their identity. This option could be offered on the form.

Signature Alternatives

People who have difficulty in signing their name would be reassured if the form could indicate that a mark would suffice for a signature.

Venue Alternatives

Some people do not like to rely on the Royal Mail (especially for their secret vote.) Local Authorities could provide a separate location to drop off ballot papers for people who do not want to put their paper in the post.

Freepost envelope

Capability Scotland's research³ has uncovered that a significant percentage of disabled people rely on benefits. It is important that cost does not become a barrier to voting. The provision of freepost envelopes would ensure that voters on low incomes could still participate in the electoral process without having to pay.

³ 1in4 poll, Living on the Edge, December 2001

Electronic kiosks

The kiosk replaces the ballot paper with a touch screen on which there is a graphical representation of the ballot paper. People touch the screen to register their vote. The design of the kiosk is important in making sure that the voting process is accessible.

Larger text size

When choosing the design of the kiosk, it would be helpful to remember that some voters, e.g. those with visual impairments, may find it easier if they can choose the size of text to suit their needs.

Brightness of Screen

Some voters may find the kiosk screen easier to read if they can adjust the brightness.

Audio feedback

If the kiosk had an audio option it would enable voters who are visually impaired to vote independently. It would be useful if headphones were available to ensure that other voters were not distracted.

Well laid out screen

People who find it difficult to control fine hand movements would benefit from screens that have large well spaced out buttons that are easy to use.

Confirmation prompts

Some voters may find it difficult to press the right buttons, so confirmation prompts could ensure that they voted in the way they intended. This would be especially useful for people with learning disabilities and/or impaired dexterity.

Testing sessions

People who are not confident in using Kiosks may find it helpful if Local Authorities set them up in public places so that they could try using them before the election starts.

Mobile Testing Kiosks

Kiosks could be taken into day and residential services and other accessible places where disabled people are likely to be present. If people have tried the kiosk they could be more likely to go and vote.

Height Adjustable

This will allow people who need to sit down to operate the booth or wheelchair users to see the screen whilst casting their vote. It is also important that a wheelchair user can wheel under the kiosk so they can reach the screen without having to operate it side on.

Easy system to verify personal identity

It is best to avoid having systems that require good hand dexterity or good vision to verify personal identity e.g. putting a card in a slot or typing a long registration code as these can make it difficult for some electors to cast their vote.

Accessible venue

As with voting in polling stations, it is important that all kiosks are placed in an accessible venue. From our research the best venues have accessible parking close by, level access and an internal layout with non-slip flooring and contrasting lighting.

Voting via the internet

Voting using the Internet is very similar to kiosk voting. However it can take place anywhere there is a computer with a connection to the web. This means that security considerations are somewhat more complicated.

In order to make voting via the Internet as accessible as possible the following facilities need to be considered.

Designed to meet Web Access Initiative (WAI) Standards

The best way of making sure that a website is accessible to everyone is to ensure that it meets all of the level 1 checkpoints within these standards. More information on the standards and how to check your website can be found at the website www.w3.org

Help facility

Some people may not be comfortable voting in an unsupported venue (i.e. their home) Therefore it would be important for assistance to be made available to all via a telephone help line. This help line should have a textphone number or the typetalk facility should be publicised for people with a hearing impairment.

Larger text size

When choosing the design of the website, it would be helpful to remember that some voters, e.g. those with visual impairments, may find it easier to choose the size of text to suit their needs. The font size should not be any less than 12 point.

Audio feedback

This may enable voters who have a visual impairment to vote independently. It may be useful if headphones are made available in public places to avoid distracting other voters.

Confirmation prompts

This would ensure that people did not make mistakes when voting by enabling them to check they voted in the way that they intended. This could be especially useful for people with learning disabilities and/or impaired dexterity.

Testing Sessions

People who are not confident in using the Internet may find it beneficial if Local Authorities could set up a similar 'dummy' website. This would help people increase their confidence in voting via the Internet before casting their actual vote.

Easy system to verify personal identity

It is best to avoid having systems that require good hand dexterity or good vision to verify personal identity e.g. putting a card in a slot or typing a long registration code as these can make it difficult for some electors to cast their vote.

Provide adaptations

People who cannot use a standard monitor, keyboard or mouse could be encouraged to vote if adaptations (e.g. joysticks, screen readers) were available in places where the general public can access the Internet e.g. libraries.

Alternative systems

It is important to remember that not everyone can access the Internet and an accessible alternative method of voting should always be in place to enable disabled people to vote.

Telephone voting

Telephone voting usually takes place through a touch-tone system. The voter dials a number and then uses the keypad to verify that they are a voter before making their voting selection. The accessibility of this scheme is of primary importance to people who find it difficult to use the phone due to their disability i.e. people with dexterity difficulties or people who experience a hearing impairment.

Help facility

Some people may not be comfortable voting in an unsupported venue (i.e. their home) Therefore it would be important for assistance to be made available to all via a telephone help line. This help line should have a textphone number or the typetalk facility should be publicised for people with a hearing impairment.

Free-phone Number

It is important that cost does not become a barrier to voting. A free telephone number would ensure that voters on low incomes would not be put off by financial constraints

Available in different languages

People who do not understand English would need a method of voting in their own language.

Confirmation prompts

This would ensure that people did not make mistakes when voting and could check that they voted the way they intended. This would be especially useful for people with learning disabilities and/or impaired dexterity.

Testing Sessions

People who are not confident in voting using the telephone may find it beneficial if Local Authorities could allow people to use the telephone system before having to cast their vote.

Text-phone/Alternative Facility

It is important to ensure that people who find it difficult to use the phone due to their disability i.e. people with dexterity difficulties or people who experience a hearing impairment could register their vote either using a textphone, the typetalk number or via a website.

Voting by short messaging system (text messaging via mobile phone)

This method of voting can be in many ways one of the most simple of the electronic voting methods with voters just sending a string of numbers to an election phone number using their mobile phone and in return, voters receiving a reply if their vote has been verified.

Alternative Facility

It is important to remember that not everyone is able to use a mobile phone, this could be for a variety of reasons e.g. the size and shape of the phone may be too small for people who have sight difficulties or poor co-ordination. An accessible alternative method of voting should be provided for disabled people to cast their vote.

No writing should be required

One of the benefits of voting by mobile phone is that no writing is required to vote. In order to maintain this advantage, it would be important that if any forms need to be completed prior to voting that these are simple and can be completed in a variety of ways as outlined above.

Confirmation prompts

This would ensure that people did not make mistakes when voting and make sure that their vote was cast in the way they intended. This would be especially useful for people with learning disabilities and/or impaired dexterity.

Testing Sessions

For people who are not confident in this system of voting, Local Authorities could set up a system that would allow people to try voting using text messaging to increase confidence in voting using this method before casting their actual vote.

Free-phone Number

It is important that cost does not become a barrier to voting. A free phone telephone number would ensure that voters on low incomes would not be put off by financial constraints. This help line should have a textphone number or the typetalk facility should be publicised for people with a hearing impairment.

How to evaluate the accessibility of any voting method

The best way of evaluating the accessibility of pilot voting methods is in consultation with disabled people themselves.

This can be done through contacting the local Access Panel or different support groups/disability organisations throughout your council area.

Remember to consult with people who have different disabilities as different voters will have different issues and views depending on the nature of their impairment.

The different groups of disabled voters should be consulted throughout the whole electoral process from the purchasing of any equipment right through to Election Day itself.

The evaluation of the pilot scheme should demonstrate the effect that the consultation had on the practicalities of setting up the pilot scheme. The evaluation should also show disabled people's experiences and views on the new method of voting.

Conclusion

Capability Scotland is committed to improving disabled people's access to the electoral system. Copies of our research reports into access at polling stations and information on the vote 2003 project are available from www.capability-scotland.org.uk or by contacting our national advice and information service.

We would like to thank the Community Fund for supporting Vote2003.



For further information on a range of disability issues and cerebral palsy specifically please contact:

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Alternatively please visit www.capability-scotland.org.uk where you can also register to receive regular monthly updates on our services and campaigns.

The information in this document can be made available in a variety of formats including tape, large print and several minority languages. Please contact ASCS to discuss what you need.

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