



CAPABILITY SCOTLAND

T U R N I N G D I S A B I L I T Y I N T O A B I L I T Y

Polls Apart 3 Campaigning for Accessible Democracy The Scottish Dimension

Polls Apart 3 is a UK wide study of access to polling stations undertaken on 7 June 2001 when the UK General Election was held. The campaign was co-ordinated by Scope and supported by the Disability Rights Commission, with Capability Scotland conducting the survey in Scotland through its 1 in 4 poll panel. Scope has recently published its report which provides survey results, conclusions and recommendations for future action. This report from Capability Scotland provides the Scottish dimension.



Disability Rights Commission

Change by advice, conciliation and legal enforcement



**“There was no privacy”
One voter’s experience**

“Having heard about voting booths suitable for people in wheelchairs, I was looking forward to voting. However, my experience was not good.

I went to the polling station with my support worker but when I arrived the Returning Officer spoke to him instead of me. When she did speak to me she assumed that I needed help and had not voted before. Being in my thirties I had voted many times before.

My support worker asked if there were any lower booths, but as there were none I had to lean on a chair in the middle of the hall. There was no privacy.

The woman was very patronising, pushed my chair and touched my hair as if I was a young girl.

My support worker asked if she had Disability Awareness Training but she appeared not to have heard of it.

In the end I was so angry and flustered I ended up voting for the wrong person. We were glad to get out.”

Summary of Key Findings and Conclusions

- **accessibility to polling places and stations appears to have improved in Scotland since 1997**
- **in the 1997 Referendum 73% of polling places had accessibility problems - in 2001 this figure had dropped to 60%**
- **general accessibility to polling places and stations is better in Scotland than in the UK as a whole**
- **few disabled voters were aware of changes brought in by government to make voting more accessible**
- **the whole voting experience from start to finish is rarely fully accessible**
- **there is still disparity across local authority areas with some better than others at providing accessible voting arrangements**
- **most participants prefer to vote in person than by post**
- **most participants found voting in 2001 to be a positive experience**
- **the vast majority of staff in polling stations were friendly and helpful**

Sample and Methodology

In Scotland, 260 Polls Apart questionnaires were distributed to 1 in 4 poll panel members by Scotinform Ltd on behalf of Capability Scotland. A further 100 questionnaires were distributed to people who use Capability Scotland's services and other contacts who requested a copy of the survey form.

The response rate was 34% and forms were forwarded to Scope for analysis and inclusion in the UK wide report.

Over three-quarters of respondents were disabled and questionnaires were received from all local authority areas in Scotland. The largest number of responses were received from Edinburgh, Glasgow, Fife and Renfrewshire.

Introduction

Polls Apart is an ongoing campaign to make polling stations in the UK accessible to disabled voters. Scope (a disability organisation in England and Wales) and Capability Scotland (Scotland's largest disability organisation) conducted separate surveys on access to polling stations in the 1997 UK General Election. The survey in Scotland found that 60% of polling stations were inaccessible. Capability Scotland linked up with the Scottish Executive and returning officers in Scotland to provide training and guidance on accessibility issues in advance of the referendum on devolution held in September 1997. We also surveyed access to polling stations during the referendum. This survey was more detailed and found that 73% of polling places had accessibility problems making it difficult or impossible to vote. A report, **Poll Position**, was produced providing strong recommendations and technical advice on improving access, some of which was taken up by returning officers and incorporated into their operational arrangements for the conduct of elections.

The Representation of the People Act 2000 marked a stride forward in the campaign for accessible voting arrangements, with a range of measures designed to widen opportunities for participation in democracy. Polls Apart 3 was conducted in part to test the success or otherwise of these measures. As with previous campaigns, people were asked to survey their polling places when they voted. They were asked questions on a wide range of access issues. Respondents were also asked to comment on their experiences.

Knowing how, when and where to vote

This represents the first step in participating in democracy. Information on how, when and where to vote is vital and for disabled voters, it must be available in accessible formats. **When asked if the details on the polling card were in large print and plain English, 58% of all respondents in Scotland said yes.** This is significantly higher than the figure for the UK as a whole - 32%. Yet, while the situation is clearly better in local authority areas in Scotland, it is still inadequate. Polling cards need to be accessible to every voter. Small print, elaborate type and coloured backgrounds can all make accessing important information about voting arrangements impossible or very difficult. The same can be said of using language which is difficult to understand and expressed in legalistic form. Inability to know how, when and where to vote might prevent people going to vote at all. Providing polling cards in accessible print sizes and plain language will benefit everybody and ensure that everyone has the information they need to go and vote in person.

Over half of respondents were unaware of changes introduced by the Government to make polling more accessible. Many people were unaware of changes introduced by the Representation of the People Act 2000. These included the provision of large print sample ballot papers, a blind voter template for ballot papers and allowing any physically disabled person to have assistance to cast their vote. However many of our respondents did not know of these important changes in advance of going to the polls. The UK government undertook two advertising campaigns using national and local TV and radio before the 2001 General Election.

One was to publicise new voter registration arrangements and the second was to publicise the new postal vote application process. Disability Agenda Scotland, a consortium of six of Scotland's leading organisations including Capability Scotland, wrote to the Scottish Executive enquiring whether a similar advertising campaign would be conducted to publicise the measures for improving access to voting for disabled people. The reply indicated that there would not be. Yet, Polls Apart 3 clearly shows that many disabled people in Scotland, and elsewhere in the UK, would have benefited from such a campaign which might have encouraged more disabled people to vote in person on 7 June.

Location, location, location

The location of polling stations is an important first issue in determining accessibility. Respondents were asked to identify the type of building used for their local polling station. The most common buildings were schools or community halls, accounting for 86% of polling stations. Only 6% were in a town hall and 4% in a place of worship. This finding paralleled the UK one. However, in Scotland, schools are still used more frequently - 58% compared to 26% for the UK - and community halls less so - 28% compared to 38%. The fact that the majority of polling stations in Scotland were located in buildings owned by local authorities was no guarantee of full accessibility.

Getting there....

Nearly three quarters of respondents thought that the polling station was clearly signposted. This is less than for the UK as a whole, where the finding indicated that 80% thought so. There should, as a matter of course, be signposting for all polling stations and this issue clearly needs to be addressed for future elections. Many polling stations also had signposting for disabled access prominently on display. However, provision and location of such signs was patchy, even within local authority areas and it apparently fell to Presiding Officers of individual polling stations to ensure that such signage was provided. Again, steps should be taken to ensure that every polling station has disabled access clearly signed and that Presiding Officers place such signs where people can clearly see them.

Many disabled people need to rely on getting to their polling station by car in order to vote in person. **Only 30% of respondents in Scotland said that there was designated parking for disabled people at the polling station.** This is by no means good but was certainly better than the situation in the UK where only 19% of polling stations had designated parking. Again, this is an issue that must be addressed before the next election. Many disabled people simply cannot access their polling stations without being able to park as close to the entrance as possible. Designated disabled parking should be provided close to disabled access. Where there is no permanent provision, temporary places could and should be designated and clearly marked.

....Getting in....

Three quarters of respondents stated that there was level access to the polling station. Again, this finding points to a better picture in Scotland than in the UK as a whole, where only half of respondents found level access at their polling station. Barriers identified included steps (47%), no dropped kerb (25%) and no ramp (22%). Without alternative disabled access, steps or the lack of a ramp are an absolute barrier to many physically disabled people, particularly those who use wheelchairs. There is funding available from the Scottish Executive to provide permanent and temporary ramps but it is not clear that the fund available is sufficient to meet the level of need or request by local authority Returning Officers. The issue of the lack of dropped kerbs is also important as it prevents individuals who use wheelchairs from gaining access to their polling stations. Whatever the barrier, the result is the same. Many disabled people turning up at their polling station were denied the right to participate in the electoral process and the right to vote in person.

Of wider concern is the fact that disabled people are still routinely denied access to public buildings in their communities. If a school is inaccessible for someone wanting to vote because it has steps, then it is inaccessible to children with disabilities. Community halls in Scotland are used for a wide range of purposes, including leisure activities and community social events. If they are inaccessible, disabled people are marginalised and denied the same opportunities as others living in the area.

The situation is not all gloom and doom. Only a minority of polling stations in Scotland remain physically inaccessible. **Two thirds of polling stations with ramps had permanent ramps with a third of ramps being temporary. 79% of ramps were considered to be appropriately designed.** Involving disabled people in consultation about the type and nature of ramp required would ensure that all ramps are appropriately designed.

Another finding confirms that access has improved and indeed, that the situation in Scotland is better than that in England. **Only 15% of polling stations had separate disabled access compared to 39% for the UK as a whole.** This apparently minor finding is in fact significant. It indicates that most disabled people in Scotland are able to access their polling station through the same entrance as every other voter. So disabled people going to vote are visible in their communities. They also have the same opportunity to talk with representatives of the political parties before going into vote. In short, it enables them to be just like other voters.

Respondents were also asked about the doors used at the entrance. **Respondents said 61% of doors were propped open, 3% were automatic and 12% of doors were easy to open.** Polling day in June was dry and warm in most parts of Scotland - if the weather had been different, then no doubt fewer doors would have been propped open. **Nearly one in four respondents found doors heavy to open in Scotland.** This is a much higher finding than the 6% of respondents who encountered heavy doors in the UK. It follows that had more doors been closed, many disabled people in Scotland would have encountered difficulty in gaining access to polling stations. This finding shows how fragmented and fragile the issue of access is. There is clearly no

point in there being a ramp if access is then denied at the door. More thought needs to be given to the whole process from arrival through to departure. Moreover, the previous comments about access to public buildings for everyday use are relevant here too. Local authorities must do more to ensure that all public buildings have easy to open doors, preferably automatic ones, to ensure accessibility all year round.

....Getting to the booth...

Respondents were asked a number of questions about access inside the building. **Nearly 90% found level access inside the polling station, 23% felt that there was enough space for disabled people to get around easily, 85% considered the flooring to be appropriate, 90% found the interior well lit and 75% said there were seats available if people needed to rest.** These findings compare favourably with the situation across the UK. However, the finding on space is much lower. This may be explained by the higher reliance on the use of schools in Scotland compared to the rest of the UK. Because schools are polling stations for one day only, school equipment, displays and materials are unlikely to be removed in order to cause minimum disruption. Corridors therefore, may be narrow because of obstacles not because of their physical width. The same would apply to classrooms where the temptation will always be to cause the minimum amount of disruption to the class layout. This might mean that the space available between the polling clerk's desk and the polling booths is tight, causing real problems for disabled people during a busy spell in the station. The wish to cause minimum disruption is understandable but local authorities must ensure that their electoral arrangements provide full accessibility inside the whole polling station and that moveable obstacles are removed and returned at the end of the day. Alternatively, they should consider other venues which have fewer access problems or best of all, none at all.

....Getting to vote

Over three quarters of respondents stated that there was a large print version of the ballot paper on display. This is considerably higher than the figure for the UK as a whole - 62%. Yet, this is now a statutory provision. Every polling station should provide such a large print notice and it is therefore disappointing that nearly one in four polling stations in Scotland appeared not to have such a notice on display. It suggests that more training is required on the measures introduced in the Representation of the People Act 2000 to ensure that every disabled voter in the UK enjoys the same voting experience no matter where they live or which polling station they use. Even where the notice was on display there was huge disparity in its location. Many polling stations appeared to have only one notice and where there were several rooms being used for different streets or polling districts, the notice was placed close to the entrance. Yet, it would be of most benefit if displayed close to the polling booths. These anomalies need to be addressed to make this measure more effective and maximise the benefit for disabled voters.

Just over one fifth of respondents reported that there was no low level accessible polling booth available nor was there a low level ballot box. The provision of this equipment is enabled by grants from the Scottish Executive. Again, it is unclear if

there is sufficient funding available to ensure that every polling station in the country has a low level booth. Ballot boxes can be made more accessible very easily by siting one on a chair rather than on a table. However, there is a case for providing specially designed ballot boxes to maximise accessibility.

It is acknowledged that the limited budgets available for financing arrangements for elections mean that returning officers must choose where to site low level polling booths, but such selective locating does mean that there are many disabled people being denied the right to vote in secret - which is their legal right. Many respondents provided accounts of having to vote in open, by leaning on a box or a desk, and this experience caused some of them distress and spoiled the experience of voting. The current solution is clearly not working. A more imaginative, long term and cost effective solution should be sought and disabled people themselves should be involved in that process.

How was it for you?

It was important to rate the overall experience and a number of questions were asked in relation to this. Staff are a key factor in any experience of using a good or a service and in Scotland, respondents indicated that polling clerks had contributed greatly to the enjoyment of their voting experience. **92% of respondents found staff friendly and helpful.** This is 10% higher than the finding in the UK survey. A minority however, were unhelpful with some causing great distress to some disabled voters. However, it is clear that staff in polling stations are not the big issue. Very often their positive attitude is being undermined by other problems with the voting experience, notably access into the polling station and to the actual voting process. Staff cannot really be criticised either for failing to know about some of the new measures introduced by the 2000 Act. This is essentially a training issue and that must be adequately addressed and resourced at local authority level.

Over 80% of respondents in Scotland said that overall their experience of voting had been positive. Views differed among local authority areas, however, which indicates that the experience of voting depends very much on local circumstances and the attitude of the local authority. Some, such as South Lanarkshire council, take the issue very seriously and have worked hard to ensure that the electoral process is as accessible as possible. They can now claim to have fully accessible polling stations in operation all over their area which covers both rural and urban settings. It is clear that a number of local authorities have taken steps to improve the accessibility of the process in their area, as evidenced by the responses to the question if the experience of voting was better than last time. **45% indicated that it was a better experience.** In Renfrewshire council area, 88% said that it was better which surely indicates that steps have been taken to improve access.

However, nearly one in three indicated that their experience of voting was not better than last time. This can be explained in a number of ways. Either the experience was so good last time, there was nothing to be improved upon. Or no improvement could be detected at all. Or a previous problem had been improved, only to find a new one or another one that had not been addressed. The other findings showing patchy levels

of accessibility on a range of issues would appear to indicate that this latter explanation is the most likely.

Who cares anyway?

Accessibility to polling stations matters for a number of reasons, not least because it is the law. Under Representation of the People legislation, every UK citizen has the right to vote in UK elections. They have the right to vote in person and to cast their ballot in secret. In principle and in law, there are no caveats. As a society we should all care that everyone is enabled and empowered to exercise that right. Most importantly of all, disabled people care.

It has been argued that the simplification of the postal vote application process negates the need to ensure that voting in person is fully accessible. Disabled people can vote by post from the comfort of their own home if they cannot access their local polling station. **But 84% of respondents in the Polls Apart survey in Scotland stated that they would prefer to vote in person rather than by post.** That in itself should be enough to ensure that we all care enough to make voting in person an option for all disabled people in Scotland.

Conclusion

The findings of the Polls Apart survey in Scotland show that access to polling stations has improved since the last survey in 1997. Polls Apart 3 also provides good news for Scotland, as the situation is generally better here than in the UK as a whole. However, there is no room for complacency and there is still much room for improvement. Some polling stations in some parts of Scotland are totally inaccessible. Others are partially inaccessible and still more are only accessible with difficulty.

Sections 18 and 19 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 place a duty on local authorities to provide polling stations and to provide polling stations which are accessible to disabled people. This is a statutory duty which in some local authority areas, at worst is being brazenly ignored and at best being given only a sideways glance. Strengthening this provision and providing clear guidance that expects it to be followed with penalties available for not doing so would go some way to improving the situation.

Yet, physical access to buildings is only part of the issue. Access to the actual electoral process - casting your vote in person - is still much more of a lottery. Disabled people are being denied the rights afforded to other voters, particularly the right to cast the ballot in secret. This is clearly unacceptable. It is government's duty to ensure that this discrimination ends. The application of the Disability Discrimination Act to voting arrangements would help. Just as importantly, more training, better guidance and greater resources must all be deployed to deliver equality.

Even with the steps taken under the Representation of the People Act 2000 more can and should be done to ensure that access to the democratic process is enjoyed fully by disabled people. Other issues still require to be addressed. Here in Scotland, some of the measures of the 2000 Act cannot even be implemented because they apply only to local authority elections in England and Wales. To implement them in council elections here requires Scottish Parliament legislation. Bringing Scotland up to the standards of the UK in these areas also presents a unique opportunity to put Scotland in the driving seat in this vital area of equal rights. The Scottish Parliament could legislate to enact other measures for local authority elections which will improve access to the electoral process for disabled people still further.

Capability Scotland would urge the Scottish Parliament to address this issue as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, the voting arrangements for the Scottish Parliament elections in 2003 and the forthcoming local authority elections could show minimal improvement in the accessibility of voting arrangements. With political commitment to some simple, non-contentious legislative measures and a national strategy to co-ordinate training, guidance and resources, Scotland could so easily find itself in the vanguard on this important issue.

Copies of this report are available in a range of accessible formats on request.

The 1 in 4 poll has been established by Capability Scotland to gather views and information from disabled people, carers and family members on a wide range of issues. Poll members are asked to participate in up to 4 surveys a year, sometimes on disability issues and other times on issues of general interest. The aim is to use the 1 in 4 poll as a way of telling Scotland what disabled people really think. Individuals' views remain anonymous but general findings are presented to the media and politicians. The intention is to use the surveys to help change people's attitudes and to influence decisions made about services for disabled people.

For more information on Polls Apart or the 1 in 4 poll, please contact Kate Higgins, Policy and Parliamentary Affairs Manager, Capability Scotland.

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