

POLLS APART 5 – disabled voters' experiences in the 2007 Scottish elections

KEY FINDINGS

Introduction

Capability Scotland is one of Scotland's leading disability organisations working for a just Scotland. We work with children, adults and families living with disability to support them in their everyday lives. We also work with disabled people, family members and carers to influence legislation, policy, practice and attitudes.

Capability Scotland has been campaigning on the issue of accessible elections since 1997. As well as working with local authorities and disabled people to improve access, we have also conducted surveys of disabled voters after each election. What follows are the results of our accessibility survey for the 2007 Scottish elections.

'It was helpful to have seen the Capability Scotland voting website before I had to vote.' (respondent)

Conclusions

The survey results show a general improvement in the accessibility of the voting process for disabled people, although the trend is not consistent in all areas. The improvement is particularly welcome as the results of our 2005 survey showed a worrying dip in accessibility indicators. It is worth noting that local authority election planners were contending with complicating factors such as a new system of voting and re-structured council wards which will have impacted on their ability to deliver improved accessibility.

Key areas of improvement include:

- **Level access to polling station** – 67% of respondents reported that there was level access to their polling station, in comparison to 57% in 2005.
- **Doors to polling stations propped open to enable access for disabled people**– Two thirds of respondents reported that doors were propped

open in 2007, as compared to just under a half in 2005. Propping open doors is a simple and cost free way of improving physical access to polling stations.

- **Separate entrances for disabled people** – 17% of polling stations had separate entrances for disabled people, another improvement on the 26% of polling stations recorded in the 2005 elections.

‘I was asked on entry if I needed any assistance which was good.’
(respondent)

Nevertheless, areas of concern remain, including:

- **Designated parking for disabled people** – Less than half of respondents reported that there was a designated parking space at their polling station.
- **Low level polling booths** – Two thirds of respondents reported that the polling station had a low level booth to enable voting in private for people with mobility impairments. However, this was less than in 2005. All polling stations should provide low level booths.
- **Large print notices of ballot papers** – Approximately half of respondents reported that a large print version of the ballot papers was on display, again a drop on 2005 figures. All polling stations should provide large print notices.

‘Had to vote at a table not a booth, with other people around me.’
(respondent)

Changes to the voting system

One quarter of respondents reported that they had found voting to be more difficult than in previous elections. This is a significantly larger percentage than has been recorded in our previous polls. The likely explanation is that a new voting system, coupled with well publicised problems with the Scottish election ballot paper, have contributed to this figure. We specifically asked survey participants about their experiences of the single transferable voting system, with 36% reporting that this made it more difficult to vote, compared with 16% who felt it made it easier to vote.

Comments from survey participants indicate some of the areas of concern:

- ‘Separate sheets for each vote would’ve allowed bigger print and made instructions easier to follow.’
- ‘Number system for council elections was very complicated for disabled people unable to use their hands properly.’
- ‘Don’t think all three should’ve been done on the same day.’
- ‘Had to read the instructions twice, more difficult than putting cross in a box.’

People with learning disabilities

The survey included an 'easyread' questionnaire for people with learning disabilities. Although more people with learning disabilities (65%) rated polling station staff as friendly and helpful than in 2005, the figure still falls far short of the percentage for disabled people generally (90% +). This suggests that people with learning disabilities are still not being treated equally when they exercise their right to vote.

Capability Scotland recommendations:

- Local authorities are responsible for election planning. We recommend that they receive sufficient resources to allow them to improve disabled access, both to polling stations and to the voting process as a whole.
- The attitudes of polling station staff play a key part in the voting experience for disabled voters. We recommend that polling staff receive disability equality training as part of their induction to the job.
- The complexity of the voting process clearly caused problems for some voters. We recommend that the views of disabled people are considered during the design of future Scottish election ballot papers. We also recommend that more accessible information about the single transferable vote system is made available.

'There's still a considerable lack of knowledge about access needs of disabled people.' (respondent)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is the 1 in 4 poll?

The '1 in 4' poll is a panel of disabled people, their family members and carers across Scotland. Capability Scotland surveys 1 in 4 poll members up to four times a year on a wide range of issues. The aim is to give disabled people a voice and to ensure that voice is heard by decision makers and influencers. 1 in 4 refers to the number of households in Scotland with a disabled member.

Methodology and Sample

A self-complete questionnaire was sent to 358 Poll members. A total of 138 questionnaires were returned: a 39% response rate. 84% of respondents had a disability or medical condition, with 18% categorising themselves as carers or family members. Note that a small proportion of respondents are both disabled and carers.

Voting in person

62% of the sample voted in person. 3% were not able to vote, either because they chose not to vote or because their health prevented them from doing so.

General trends

Although the general trend is towards improved accessibility in comparison to 2005 figures, the picture is not consistent in all areas. This year's survey included a 'did not notice' option for respondents, as well as 'Yes' and 'No' responses, which has affected the ability to directly compare responses with previous years.

Accessibility of polling stations

- 41% of respondents stated that there was designated parking for disabled people at their polling station, which is a slight decrease on 2005. However, only one third of respondents noted that there **was no** designated parking, which is an improvement on 2005 results.
- 67% of respondents said that there was level access to the polling station. This is an improvement on 2005 results, where 57% reported level access.
- 17% of polling stations had separate entrances for disabled people, another improvement on the 26% of polling stations recorded in the 2005 elections.
- Two thirds of polling station doors were propped open, aiding access for disabled people. This compares to less than half in 2005.
- 92% of respondents found it easy to move around inside the polling station.
- 94% of respondents stated that polling station staff were friendly and helpful.

Availability of support for disabled voters

Certain adaptations, such as low level booths and tactile voting devices, should be available at all polling stations. Our survey results show that this is not yet the case: indeed, support may have been less available than in previous elections.

- Only 63% of respondents reported that a low level booth was available in their polling station, compared with 72% in 2005.
- Only half of respondents reported that large print versions of the ballot papers were displayed, in comparison to two thirds in 2005. However, this picture is contradicted by the fact that only one tenth stated that large print ballot papers **were not** displayed, compared with one quarter in 2005.
- A similar picture is presented in relation to tactile voting devices (which enable visually impaired people to vote independently). While fewer respondents stated that tactile voting devices were available (19% in 2007 versus 32% in 2005), fewer people also reported that tactile voting devices **were not** available.

Postal voting

33% of respondents voted by post, compared with 26% in the 2005 elections – showing an increase of a quarter. Most postal voters had a positive experience,

with 91% of respondents stating that voting by post was easy. Note that some disabled voters use a postal vote, but would prefer to vote in person.

‘Found no difficulty voting by post but would’ve preferred voting in person had I been able to get to the village hall in a wheelchair.’
(respondent)

Comparison of voting experience

Almost one quarter of respondents stated that they found voting to be harder than it had been in the previous election, suggesting that problems with the design of the ballot paper coupled with the introduction of the single transferable vote system did create barriers for disabled voters. In all, 24% of voters found voting harder than last time, 21% found it easier and 47% found it to be the same. This compares to 2% of voters who found voting harder in 2005.

‘Colour blind problems; pastels not good, neither are secondary colours, blue and yellow are easier to see.’ (respondent)

Single transferable vote system

Respondents were specifically asked to comment on their experiences of voting under the single transferable vote (STV) system for local elections. 36% stated that STV made it more difficult to vote, in comparison to 16% who stated that it made it easier to vote. 46% felt that the new system made no difference to the difficulty of voting.

‘Couldn’t manage it on my own, my mum helped, I have reading and learning difficulties’. (respondent)

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