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Information from candidates and political parties Support we give at elections Why we wrote this report First published: 20 May 2019 Last updated: 9 June 2021 Summary

This report is about registering to vote and voting from the view of someone with a disability. It tells you about the problems voters with a disability have when they vote and how they would like to see things change for the better. It also tells you what should be done to help make elections more accessible for everyone.

Recommendations Recommendations there should be no barriers to voting for people with a disability everyone should have the right to vote on their own and in secret voting should be a good experience for everyone people with disabilities don't always know about their voting rights they need to know that they can vote and that they can have support to vote care and support workers need to know how they can support the people they care for when they vote people running elections need to understand the needs of people with disabilities so they can support them and make it easy for them to

register to vote and to vote candidates and parties should make sure information is in easy to read formats and available in good time before the election so people have the time to read it when political parties publish their manifestos, they should make sure accessible formats are available at the same time. People with a disability

should have just as much time as anyone else to understand what the parties stand for

Recommendations for the government The government should look at different ways that people with disabilities can vote so that they have greater flexibility and choice.

We want to work with people and organisations to help make sure everyone's experience of voting is as easy as possible. Elections for everyone We'd like to thank everyone who told us about their experience of registering to vote and voting at the 2017

general election. We heard from people with learning and physical disabilities as well as people living with mental illness. This report could not be written without

you. We help the people who run elections to make sure that everyone can register to vote and have a good experience of voting. There should be no barriers to voting for people with a disability. Everyone should have the right to vote on their own and in

secret. Some people told us they feel excluded from elections. We want voting to be a good experience for everyone. But voting can be a difficult and scary experience if:

you don't know how to complete the ballot paper you don't know what support is available if you need it Next steps We have listened to people's experiences of

registering to vote and voting. Government should: make changes to election forms so they can be easily understood look at different ways that people with disabilities

can vote so they have greater flexibility and choice change the law so that people with disabilities have more choice about who they can take to the polling station

with them Political parties and candidates should: make sure the information they send is easy to read make sure they publish easy read manifestos at the same time so

people with a disability have the same time as everyone else to understand what the parties stand for and make an informed decision make sure they send information in

good time so that people have time to read it People running elections should: look at ways they can make registering to vote and voting more accessible look to make

their helpline more helpful make sure they are ready to support anyone if they ask for help to vote Carers and support workers need to know: people with disabilities

can vote they can support the people they care for to register to vote and vote We will: continue to work with the government and disability organisations to see what

can be done to make registering to vote and voting accessible for everyone update the

information we give to people running elections and will talk to accessibility groups about what should be in it Making sure everyone can vote The people running elections need to make sure that everyone can register to vote and can cast a vote in elections. Most people with disabilities told us that they are happy with voting at elections. Most said it was easy to: register to vote vote by post vote in their polling station But not all people with disabilities have a good experience. Sometimes they cannot vote easily or in secret. People with disabilities face different types of barriers when they want to register to vote and cast their vote. Some people do not have the confidence to register or cast their vote. Other people have obstacles to overcome so that they can cast their vote. We work with disability organisations to provide information in accessible formats for voters on registering to vote and voting. We provide easy read guides at elections with: Mencap Enable Scotland Mencap Cymru People told us that some of the wording on election forms was difficult for them to understand. The wording on forms cannot be changed easily. The law says what should be written on: the registration form the postal voting form the information in the polling station the ballot paper To make wording easier to understand the Government would need to change the law. This would take time. However, we would like Government to make changes so that election forms can be easily understood by everyone. Some of the changes which people have told us would make registering to vote and voting easier would cost more money. But we would like to see things changed so everyone can register to vote and vote. Poll card Poll cards Before an election people who can vote are sent a poll card. This tells people where their polling station is. It also tells people if they have decided to vote by post. People told us what they thought about the poll card: the print was too small it used unfamiliar words and jargon it had an unhelpful map of the polling station it was difficult to read as it had black words on white paper People's experience of voting People's experience of voting "It was complicated and used unfamiliar words and was black on white which is horrible to try to read with dyslexia and Mears-Irlen Syndrome." "Not only did the map not cover the area where I live in order to relate it to the polling station, but the main road, the A230, which any voters from this area would need to use to reach the polling station barely clipped one corner and was unlabelled. I ended up having to use Google Earth to locate the polling station." how the poll card could be better People told us how the poll card could be better: larger print an easy read version pictures to show information bullet points • audible versions links to information online, such as a video to show someone where to vote and what they need to do to vote Voting by post Voting by post Some people need to vote by post because they can't get to the polling station. One person told us they vote by post: "because it is the most accessible option to me. I am registered blind and unsure if the location or setup of the polling station would be easy for me to navigate". Our bigger survey shows us that people with disabilities were more likely to say they voted by post than people without disabilities - 35% compared to 19%. But for some people, voting by post creates further barriers. Most people said it was easy to fill in and send back their postal vote, and that they could vote on their own and in secret. But this was not the same for everyone. Some people who voted by post told us they did not understand the instructions on their postal vote. Other people said there were too many bits of paper and it was not easy to know which bits of the postal vote went in which envelope. The law says that information must be sent to people who vote by post about how they can get: translations into other languages of any instructions sent with the ballot paper a translation into Braille of the instructions a graphical representation of the

instructions the instructions in any other form (including audible) But some people don't know that alternatives are available. One person told us that they did not know they could ask for their postal vote instructions in easy read or large print.

People's experience of voting by post People's experience of voting by post "Postal vote instructions are confusing and difficult to follow and postal vote papers are not available in alternative formats for Mears-Irlen Syndrome." How postal voting could be easier People told us how it could be made easier to vote by post: audible versions of the instructions telling people how to fill in their postal vote and send it back digital information online showing how to apply for a postal and proxy vote, and how to fill in the postal vote clearer information so that people know they can ask for an alternative versions of the postal voting instructions easy read version of the postal voting instructions pictures and symbols clearer instructions on what to do and less jargon using different colours to make it easier to read Voting at a polling station Voting at a polling station Most people said that they are happy with voting at the polling station, but it can be made better. We have heard of times when someone with a disability has not been able to vote. They have gone to the polling station and been sent away or they have not been able to get in. Other people said that voting at their polling station made them feel uncomfortable. Getting into the polling station Polling stations are more accessible than they used to be, but there are still some polling stations that are not accessible. Some people can't get in. Our bigger survey found that 5% of people with a disability said it was hard for them to get into the polling station. No one without a disability said it was difficult.

Making polling stations more accessible People's experience of voting in a polling station "I suffer from M.E. and walk with crutches. The polling station had steps at the doorway to get in and then more steps leading to the room being used for the election. There was no sign of any disabled access." "I'm lucky in that my local polling station is accessible, and if it weren't I can independently complete a postal vote. But many of my friends can't access their local stations. Whilst postal voting is an important and valuable 9 option (especially for those with mental health issues) the feeling of casting a vote into an actual ballot box should be open and accessible to everyone." Inside the polling station Inside the polling station is not just about getting into the polling station and it is not only about people with a 'visible' disability. People with different disabilities have problems once they are inside. Some people find it hard to move around inside the polling station. Some people find it hard to fill in their ballot paper. People's experience inside the polling station People's experience inside the polling station "There is nothing to help autistic people know that places are accessible for us too. For example warnings about flickering lighting, huge machinery noise in a space. Only people who get written guidance are wheelchair users, Blind, Deaf or Learning Disabled. 2 million autistic people get nothing written for us. And most staff don't know how to help autism, only LD {learning disability}. It's a different thing." What people found difficult when voting inside a polling station Here are some things people told us about why it was difficult for them to vote when they were inside their polling station: it was too noisy and too many people were inside which made it stressful and made them feel anxious the polling booth was not wide enough for their wheelchair staff did not know how to use the tactile voting device or did not offer it to people who might need it people did not know they could ask for a tactile voting device staff or other voters could see how people voted – they could not vote in secret people could not vote by themselves staff were unhelpful and unfriendly the pencil was too hard to hold the large print ballot paper was not useful the instructions

were not clear about how to vote Support that could be offered to people with a disability inside a polling station Additional support that could improve voting inside a polling station "More space to move around. Narrow space meant people bumped into me a lot. Also staff knowing how to remove the tactile device after I fill out the ballot so I could vote privately." Other ways to improve voting inside polling stations for people with a disability Our bigger survey found that people with a disability who told us it was hard to fill in their ballot paper said it was because there was no help, no tactile voting device or no large print format. There are changes that people said can be made both outside and inside the polling station to make things easier: making sure the building is accessible good lighting • clear instructions on how to vote staff who know what people with a range of disabilities need in order to vote bigger pencils that are easier to hold Flexibility and choice in when and how to vote Other ways to vote We think that the government should look at different ways that people with disabilities can vote so they have greater flexibility and choice. This would mean people would be able to choose which way of voting suited their needs. People told us it would be easier to vote online. But the people running elections would need to be sure it was safe before this could happen. This means the government should look at other ways to vote such as: choosing which polling station to vote in voting on days other than on a Thursday, for example the weekend voting in mobile polling stations in hospitals, nursing homes or care homes and in remote areas We would be happy to work with the government and disability organisations to see which methods are best. Any new ways of voting must make sure people are able to vote in secret and for who they want to. Helping people to vote Most people who filled in our questionnaire said they knew they could vote in elections. But some people didn't know that they could take someone with them to the polling station to help them or that polling station staff could help them. A person with a physical or visual disability can take someone with them to the polling station to help them to vote. Who they can take is in the law. The law says that the person must be: someone who is entitled to vote as an elector at the election, or the father, mother, brother, sister, spouse, civil partner, son or daughter of the voter who is more than 18 years old For some people, this makes it hard for them to find someone who can go with them to vote. We think the government should change the law so people with disabilities have more choice about who they can take to the polling station with them. Information needs to be available in care services which tells support workers how they can make sure people get the right information about how to register to vote and vote. It should also tell them how they can support someone to do this. People running the polling station must make sure that it is accessible for everyone and be ready to support anyone if they ask for help to vote. People with disabilities told us there needs to be better awareness about: the support available to help voters with disabilities when they register to vote and vote how carers and support workers can support the people they care for to register to vote and vote People running elections need to know what support and help people with disabilities can have. They said there should be: more information about the help people can ask for when they vote by post, proxy or in a polling station more information for people running the polling station accessible information about the help people can ask for when they vote by post, proxy or in a polling station accessible information available to carers and support workers a change to the law so more people can go with someone to help them vote at a polling station People's experience of candidate and political party content "1 million voters with a learning disability risk being overlooked if political parties fail to produce accessible Manifestos" – Mencap, 5

May 2017 How do candidates and parties tell people about themselves How candidates and political parties tell people about themselves Candidates and political parties send information to ask people to vote for them. People told us that they do not always find this information easy to read or to understand. This was because the information used complicated words, jargon, small font size, and had poor design and layout. People said that information from candidates and parties should: be in easy read include more pictures use plain and simple words use less words use bigger print use colour to help them to read different sections of text be available in audio be available online be sent by email be sent as paper copies People also said they would like to get information earlier because it gives them longer to look at it and decide who to vote for. Parties published their manifestos in good time before the election, but their easy read versions were not always available until later and often very close to Election Day. Easy read material makes confusing and difficult language accessible. People need to understand what the parties are promising so they can make an informed decision about who to vote for. Dates party manifestos were published Party Manifesto published Easy read version published Days before 2017 General Election easy read version published Lib Dems 17 May 17 May 22 Greens 22 May 22 May 17 Labour 16 May 24 May 15 Plaid Cymru 16 May 31 May 8 Conservative 18 May 1 June 7 SNP 30 May 2 June 6 The late publication of some party manifestos also meant that support workers had less time to tell the people they supported what the parties stood for, so that they could use this information to decide who to vote for. People have told us that political parties should publish accessible formats of their manifestos at the same time so that people with a disability have as much time as everyone else to understand what the parties stand for and make an informed decision. Some people said it was harder and more stressful for them to decide how to vote if they felt rushed. People also said that information must be in accessible formats and in good time before the election so people have the time to read it. Some people also suggested that candidates and parties should meet people with different disabilities to tell them in person what they stand for. Support we give at elections In the Call for Evidence, the Minister, Chris Skidmore MP, asks about what people and organisations do to help people with disabilities register to vote and vote in elections. We help the people who run elections make sure that everyone can register to vote and have a good experience of voting. Those running the elections must offer information in different formats such as: poll cards postal voting forms proxy forms They offer information in, for example: audio braille easy read large print British Sign Language telephone support (including textphone and text messaging) We give the people running elections information about voting that they can give to support workers and carers, so they can help the people they work with to register to vote and to vote. People running elections make sure that the polling stations are accessible for everyone, including voters with a disability. To help we give them: polling station handbooks which gives information on how to run the polling station information that can be used for training staff checklists for making sure that the polling station is accessible For example, our polling station checklist gives information on things they need to do such as: signs and entrances to polling stations car parking level access to the polling station set-up inside the polling station, including good lighting low-level polling booths and ballot boxes displaying information for voters on how to vote large-print ballot papers and hand-held sample copies tactile voting devices for use by blind or partially sighted voters seating for those who need it We say to the people running elections that the people who work in the polling station should: make sure that the tactile voting template should

always be available make sure that they can use the tactile voting device know how they and a companion can help someone to fill in their ballot paper We have a helpline which people can call if they have problems registering to vote and voting. We got calls from people just before election day and on election day not able to vote, for example people who use a wheelchair not being able to get into their polling station. We tell people to get in touch with the people running the election in their local area. After each election, we look at how well the people running the elections did and if they were accessible for everyone. We look at whether: there was accessible information on how to register to vote and to vote people had information in accessible formats people had information in time for them to be able to vote polling stations are fully accessible We have listened to what people have told us and will update the information that we give to the people running elections and will talk to accessibility groups about what should be in it. Why have we written this report? Why have we written this report? After the general election on 8 June 2017, we sent out a questionnaire asking people with different disabilities to tell us about their experiences of voting. This had not been done for a long time. We wanted to know about the experiences of people with disabilities today. RNIB also asked people with a visual impairment about their experience of voting in the general election. Here's what they found. These organisations helped us write and send out our questionnaire: MENCAP for people with learning disabilities SCOPE for people with disabilities and their families United Response for people with learning disabilities, mental health needs or physical disabilities RNIB for people with visual impairments MIND a mental health charity Central and North West London NHS Trust Inclusion Scotland the disabled people's organisation Cabinet Office Association of s Scottish Assessors Association Our questionnaire was filled in by 188 people. After the election we did a bigger survey. We asked 3,519 people across the UK about their experiences of voting at the general election. Generally, most people who filled in our questionnaire said they are happy with voting in elections. But people with a disability were less likely to say that the general election was well-run – 72%, compared to 80% of people without a disability. At the All Party Parliamentary Group on Learning Disability (5 September 2017) Chris Skidmore MP, who is the UK Government's Minister for the Constitution, launched a call for evidence on how people with disabilities experience registering to vote and voting. Mr Skidmore has held events with people with different disabilities to understand how voting is for them. This report is our response to Mr Skidmore. It looks at registering to vote and voting from the view of someone with a disability. It tells you: about the problems they face when registering to vote and voting and their ideas on how things can be made better what the Commission can do to help the people running elections to make elections more accessible how some other countries support voters with disabilities Related content Reforming electoral law Find out about electoral law and the changes we want to see A modern electoral register Find out about the changes we want to see to the electoral registration system in the UK Transparent digital campaigning Find out about digital campaigning and the changes we want to see of elections Find out about the accessibility of elections and the changes we want to see