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First published: 6 February 2023 Last updated: 8 February 2023 Summary There should be no barriers to voting for disabled people. Everyone should have the right to vote on their own and in secret. The Elections Act 2022 includes provisions requiring Returning Officers (ROs) to provide such equipment as is reasonable to enable, or make it easier for, disabled people to vote independently and in secret at the polling station. Between 5 December 2022 and 16 January 2023, we conducted a statutory consultation on our draft guidance for ROs on assistance with voting for disabled people. The consultation received 41 responses from members of the public, electoral administrators, and a range of charity, civil society and third sector organisations. We are grateful to everyone who provided us with feedback, including as part of our initial consultation earlier in 2022. We have used this to inform the further development of the guidance which will be used for the May 2023 polls. View the guidance We set out below a summary of the key themes and issues that emerged in the statutory consultation, and how we have considered them in updating the guidance and in our wider work to support making elections accessible for all. Background

Elections Act 2022 The Elections Act 2022 includes amendments to the Representation of the People Act 1983 which introduce a new requirement for ROs to provide such equipment as is reasonable for the purposes of enabling, or making it easier for, relevant persons to vote independently and in secret at the polling station. We must give guidance to ROs on this duty, and to consult on this guidance. ROs must have regard to this guidance in performing their duty. 'Relevant persons' are defined in the legislation as those who find it difficult or impossible to vote due to blindness, partial sight or another disability. 'Independently' refers to voting without assistance from another person, not without any form of assistive device. These provisions will apply to: UK parliamentary elections Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales Northern Ireland Assembly and local elections Local elections in England ROs are personally responsible for the conduct of elections in their area. In Northern Ireland, the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) is the RO, so references to 'ROs' should be read to include the CEO. Development of the guidance The guidance was developed in three phases: A pre-consultation phase: We engaged with representatives from the electoral administrator sector and a range of civil society, charity and third-sector organisations across the whole of the UK. An initial six-week public consultation on draft guidance : We received 67 responses from members of the public, electoral administrators and a range of organisations. We also engaged with electoral administrators from across the UK at a national seminar. A statutory consultation on the updated guidance. Themes raised through consultation Here is a summary of the key themes and issues that emerged in the statutory consultation. This includes how we have considered them when updating the guidance, and in our wider work to support making elections accessible for all. Addressing barriers to voting Overall, respondents welcomed the updated guidance and felt it provided a comprehensive overview of the barriers faced by disabled voters and how these might be addressed. We have made the following updates to our guidance as a result of comments received on barriers to voting: We included those with cognitive impairments in the list of people for whom instructions may not always be provided in an accessible format. We expanded on the specific additional barriers that blind and

partially sighted people face, due to the method of voting, making a cross in a specific location on a piece of paper, being principally a visual exercise. We expanded on areas to be covered in training for polling station staff, to include: awareness that there are no legal barriers to prevent disabled people from voting, including voters with any learning disability or cognitive impairment awareness that not all disabilities are visible or obvious, and that polling station staff should not make assumptions about what equipment voters might need awareness that a companion, if they have completed the declaration, can accompany a voter into the polling booth to assist them awareness of equipment with which staff may be less familiar, such as hearing loop systems awareness of Makaton and British Sign Language as alternative methods of communication that voters may use We included making information available in large print to support elderly voters, dyslexic voters, and voters who have dementia. We clarified that support and auxiliary aids need to be easily accessible to help people to vote independently and in secret. Supporting ROs to help make voting accessible Some respondents asked for additional information to be provided to ROs to support them in delivering accessible elections. We also received requests for more guidance on ROs' statutory duties under the Elections Act and the wider framework of equalities legislation. We have made the following changes to the guidance as a result: We clarified that the strength of magnifier needed will vary depending on the amount of vision a voter has. Therefore, ROs may need to provide more than one strength of magnifier. We made clear that tactile voting devices on their own do not allow blind voters to vote independently, unless they also have accessible information about the order of the candidates on the ballot paper. We expanded on and updated the language in the guidance around the legislative framework, including: ensuring the wording in the guidance consistently and more closely mirrored the relevant wording in the Elections Act 2022 referring more consistently to ROs' anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 and how ROs must consider requests for adjustments, including keeping a record of requests for future planning purposes referencing the Public Sector Equality Duty and how this interacts with ROs' other duties under the Equality Act 2010. We expanded on how ROs can proactively use local data to inform their decisions about the additional support and equipment they provide at polling stations to enable or make it easier for disabled people to vote independently and in secret. For example, we have referenced how ROs might use the sight loss registers or the Sight Loss Data Tool provided by the RNIB, to help them identify how many electors in their area are affected by sight loss. This could help ROs to anticipate the needs of blind and partially sighted people in their area and comply with their duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments to assist individuals on the register to participate in electoral events. Equipment to be provided in polling stations Some points were raised about the suggested minimum requirements for equipment at the polling station and around ensuring consistent provision across all polling stations: We received some suggestions that audio devices should be included on our list of equipment that all ROs should provide as a minimum in every polling station. We have recommended that ROs consider providing audio devices at specific polling stations where they identify, or are made aware, that an audio device would enable or make it easier for a voter in a specific polling station to vote independently and in secret. We highlight how ROs can use sight loss registers or the Sight Loss Data Tool as a way of identifying blind and partially sighted voters in their area who may need such a device, as part of meeting their anticipatory duty under the Equality Act 2010. Some respondents raised concerns about the possible lack

of consistency across the UK in terms of equipment and support provided at different polling stations. Under the Equality Act 2010, ROs have an anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments. This means they must take steps to understand and anticipate on an ongoing basis the needs of disabled voters with different types of disability, support and access requirements. Such adjustments will necessarily reflect local circumstances and approaches, which means that a standardised list alone would not be appropriate. Our guidance aims to support ROs in meeting their duties under the Elections Act and the wider framework of equalities legislation. We also received feedback asking us to mandate, rather than suggest, provisions and equipment in the guidance. The Elections Act does not give us scope to prescribe a list of items or equipment that ROs must make available in each polling station. ROs must have regard to our guidance to help them decide, based on ongoing review of local needs. We will keep the guidance under regular review, including in relation to the equipment that should be provided as a minimum, and any additional equipment and support. We will ask for feedback from voters and electoral administrators on the equipment provided to support disabled voters. This will be as part of our reporting on elections and to support the identification and sharing of good practice. Additional resources for ROs

We have included some suggestions in the polling station handbook, rather than in the guidance. This includes: a checklist for equipment to be provided at the polling station, as part of the polling station set-up checklist information on providing directional signage at the polling station ensuring that polling station staff know how to use equipment in order to support voters ensuring that equipment is visible and readily available for voters to use ensuring that polling station staff are aware that there are no legal barriers to prevent disabled people from voting, including voters with any learning disability or cognitive impairment. The polling station handbook is a resource designed to assist polling station staff. The handbook describes the procedures to be followed and how to deal with any issues that may arise. Supporting ROs with public awareness and partnerships work

Some respondents asked for more support for ROs to help them identify and communicate with disabled voters in their local area and provide them with information in accessible alternative formats, including on their voting rights. We also received feedback about the lack of information in alternative formats for voters who are digitally excluded, and about providing ROs with a list of partners, including in other local authority teams, with whom they could work. We expanded on how ROs can communicate directly with disabled voters to provide information and find out more about the types of provision they might need. This includes how ROs can work with others across a local authority. We highlighted how ROs can use local authority sight loss registers to ensure that they communicate with people in their preferred formats, including those who are digitally excluded. We expanded on how ROs can communicate with voters about the voting process and the support that is available to voters. We clarified that, in addition to providing a dedicated web page, ROs may display advance information on voting at the polling station on public notice boards. We referenced the fact ROs can work with care homes and day centres in their local area. We referenced existing guidance from the Government Communication Service on making communications accessible. We have also developed additional resources to support the delivery of accessible elections. This includes resources to help organisations raise awareness of the voter ID requirement, which contain information about registering to vote and voting in the elections. These are printable resources that organisations can disseminate with their users and members. In previous years, we have co-created voter information materials in accessible formats, including easy read guides (co-

produced with Mencap), mock ballot papers (co-created with United Response), and a suite of videos and guides in BSL. We are working to build on our offering and to co-create voter information resources and programmes for disabled voters with partner organisations for future elections, to ensure that they are fit for purpose and impactful. We anticipate that new resources will be evergreen, for year-round use, beyond election periods. We will continue to grow our partner network and seek further opportunities for co-creation, and to refine resources and programmes in response to voter feedback. Evaluation and learning lessons for the future

Most respondents welcomed the additional information and resources we will provide to help ROs to evaluate and learn lessons for future polls. They also welcomed the activity we will undertake to report on the implementation of the new accessibility provisions. Many respondents also appreciated the emphasis on the guidance being a living document, which will be kept under regular review. Some respondents asked us to provide ROs with a questionnaire to collect feedback from the disabled community. Others suggested making surveys available in easy read and print formats, and that voters should be able to complete these outside the polling station environment. We intend to provide a template survey that can be used by ROs to gather feedback from disabled voters. We will consider making this template survey available in easy read format for the 2023 elections. We will gather feedback from disabled voters by two main routes: Our public opinion survey will include a boosted sample of disabled people, including voters and non-voters, asking questions about their experience and perceptions of the recent elections. We will not survey voters in the polling station environment. We will also gather feedback from representative organisations through a survey that they can share with their members and service users. This survey will be available as a Word document, which can be printed, filled out and returned by post for those who are digitally excluded. As part of our post-poll surveys of poll staff and electoral administrators, we will ask for feedback about the accessibility support provided to voters, and about any specific support requested and provided to voters. We will also use our new performance standards to support and challenge ROs around the accessibility of elections, and to inform our reporting on the support and equipment provided. Comments received which were out of scope

Some responses raised issues outside the scope of this consultation and the guidance, some of which would require further legislative change in order to be actioned. Issues included: The suitability and location of polling stations The availability of telephone or electronic voting Publication of candidate and party information in accessible formats, well ahead of an election Providing the canvass and postal vote application forms, and the invitation to register letter in alternative formats (including Welsh or other language versions) Allowing voters to declare specific requirements when registering to vote Creating a national risk list where difficulties with accessible voting are recorded While we have not addressed these here, we will continue to consider how we can take these into account in our guidance, research and public awareness work. Some respondents also raised wider concerns around staff capacity, recruiting staff, and funding. We will continue to monitor these as part of our wider engagement with ROs. Funding remains a matter for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Breakdown of statutory consultation responses by question

The breakdown of statutory consultation responses by question does not include those respondents who chose to submit feedback in other formats or as free text only. All responses have been considered when updating the guidance and in our wider work to support making elections accessible to all. Questions

Questions	Yes (total and %)	No (total and %)	DK (total and %)
Total responses			
Question 1 Does the updated guidance give ROs			

enough information to help them understand the types of barriers that voters may experience when voting at the polling station? 14 (42%) 15 (45%) 4 (12%) 33 Question 2 Do you think the updated guidance and additional resources provided will sufficiently support ROs in assisting disabled voters to vote independently and in secret at the polling station? 13 (39%) 14 (42%) 6 (18%) 33 Question 3 Will the additional partnership activity and production of resources outlined help voters to understand what to expect at the polling station and what support is available? 16 (47%) 6 (18%) 12 (35%) 34 Question 4 Does the updated guidance and additional resources provide ROs with the tools they need to evaluate and learn lessons for future polls? 17 (52%) 7 (21%) 9 (27%) 33