

Draft guidance for Returning Officers: Assistance with voting for persons with disabilities | Electoral Commission Search Draft guidance for Returning Officers: Assistance with voting for persons with disabilities You are in the Consultation on draft guidance for Returning Officers: Assistance with voting for persons with disabilities section Home Our consultations Consultation on draft guidance for Returning Officers: Assistance with voting for persons with disabilities On this page Summary How to use this guidance Ensuring that voting is accessible Understanding the barriers to voting for voters with disabilities Providing equipment at the polling station that enables or makes voting easier for voters with disabilities Making decisions about providing additional support and equipment for voters Ensuring those working to support the poll are aware of accessibility needs Raising awareness about the voting process and support available Communicating the voting process and support available Working with local networks and civil society organisations in your area Reviewing the election First published: 5 September 2022 Last updated: 5 September 2022 Summary Every person should be able to register and vote without facing barriers. This guidance provides information and advice on the actions you and your staff can take to help remove physical, psychological and information barriers at the polling station. It also aims to support you in identifying and providing equipment for polling stations which will help to make voting easier for voters with disabilities. It has been informed by feedback received from a range of civil society organisations who have shared the experiences of voting at polling stations of those they represent as well as highlighting practices and equipment that could help to improve their experience. How to use this guidance Throughout this guidance we use the word must to refer to a specific legal requirement and the word should for recommended practice. As Returning Officer (RO), you must have regard to the guidance on equipment to be provided in polling stations 1 as part of your wider duties to consider the needs of disabled voters at polling stations, make reasonable adjustments and provide equipment. Ensuring that voting is accessible Every voter should be able to vote independently and in secret. However, we know that those with a disability often report facing barriers including: not knowing about their voting rights not having the confidence to register or vote experiencing issues when they go to a polling station Having a disability means a person's physical or mental abilities are reduced in some way compared to most people. A person's disability can be as a result of a medical condition: for example, someone with arthritis in their hands may not be able to grip or carry things as well as some other people. But a disability does not have to be a diagnosed medical condition and can include physical and psychological impairments that can be both visible and invisible. For example, if a person is suffering from anxiety, they might have mental impairments - like difficulty concentrating - as well as physical impairments, such as extreme tiredness and difficulty sleeping. This guidance will help you to consider some of the known barriers to voting highlighted by those with disabilities, how you can ensure you and your staff are aware of them, and how you can identify what support and equipment to provide at polling stations to ensure that voting is as accessible as possible for everyone. There is a general framework of legal provisions which sit alongside specific provisions in electoral law to help to safeguard and improve the experience of voters with disabilities, which you will need to have regard to in identifying how to administer the voting process in your area. Equality Act 2010 In Great Britain, ROs have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to anticipate the needs of people with disabilities and consider reasonable adjustments that may remove any substantial disadvantage. As RO, you are

required to ensure that all people with disabilities, are not offered a lower standard of service than other voters. To do this, you need to consider the needs of voters with disabilities and anticipate the types of reasonable adjustments that could be needed by voters with different types of disability. Northern Ireland Act 1998 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires all government bodies, which includes the Chief Electoral Officer to promote equality of opportunity for those with a disability and those without when carrying out its functions,. These duties apply in the construction of policies, policy implementation and the provision of services. Disability Discrimination Act 1995 In Northern Ireland, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requires that public authorities, which includes the Chief Electoral Officer, make reasonable adjustments to remove any substantial disadvantage for people with disabilities. Representation of the People Act 1983 There are specific provisions contained in the RPA 1983 providing a duty to support accessibility of voting. Section 199B of the RPA 1983 You are required, where you consider it appropriate to do so, to ensure election notices are translated or provided in alternative formats. You may produce them in: Braille 1 In languages other than (or, in Wales, and Welsh) 2 Using graphical representations 3 In audio format 4 Using any other means of making information accessible 5 Schedule A1 RPA 1983 You must consider the accessibility of potential polling station when considering designating or reviewing a polling place. 6 The relevant authority must seek representations from those who have a particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability. 7 Our polling district review guidance contains more information about this duty. Elections Act 2022 The Elections Act 2022 introduced provisions to assist those with disabilities with voting at polling stations. The Act: creates a requirement for you to provide each polling station with such equipment as it is reasonable to provide for the purposes of enabling, or making it easier for, relevant persons to vote independently and in secret. 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. requires you to have regard to the Commission's guidance on the equipment to provide at polling stations. 8 This guidance can be found in Providing equipment at the polling station that enables or makes voting easier for voters with disabilities extends the rules on who can act as a companion to include anyone who is over the age of 18. 9 These provisions apply to the following election types: UK Parliamentary elections Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales Local elections in England and Northern Ireland Mayoral elections in England GLA elections Assembly elections in Northern Ireland These requirements do not apply to elections to the Scottish Parliament or the Senedd, or to local elections in Scotland and Wales. However, the duties under the Equalities Act 2010 and the RPA 1983 which relate to ensuring voting is accessible to voters with disabilities do apply.

Understanding the barriers to voting for voters with disabilities People with disabilities face different types of barriers when they want to go to a polling station to vote. For example, some people do not have the confidence to go to the polling station, and some have physical obstacles to overcome in order to be able to vote. By identifying and understanding the physical, psychological and information barriers people may face, you will be better able to make arrangements to help people to vote. Some of the barriers and challenges faced include: Not understanding the voting process Written instructions not being available in plain or easy read format Not being aware that a companion can assist with voting Anxiety about: going to the polling station, especially if they've not been there before being able to get into

the polling station knowing what will happen there knowing what the process for voting is the possibility of lots of people being there at the same time the possibility that there will be lots of noise feeling rushed to make decisions quickly queueing previously having had a negative experience in the polling station Not being able to access the building/polling station For example, if there are steps or the layout inside is unsuitable for wheelchairs to access Being unable to read or understand instructions given due to: Visual impairments or blindness Hearing impairment or hearing loss Dyslexia Learning disabilities Not being able to communicate effectively with polling station staff Being unable to use the pen or pencil provided Being unable to wait in a queue Providing equipment at the polling station that enables or makes voting easier for voters with disabilities This section outlines the equipment that should always be provided at polling stations to help address the known barriers and ensure that voting is as accessible as possible for voters with disabilities. It also highlights further additional equipment that may be appropriate to provide if you identify or are made aware of specific needs of voters with disabilities. To help voters understand the voting process and how to mark their ballot paper you must provide:

- 1 A notice inside and outside the polling station providing instructions on how to vote at the election
- 2 A notice in each polling booth providing information on how to mark the ballot paper at the election
- 3 You must consider whether it is appropriate to make these notices more accessible for a wider range of voters by providing them in alternative languages and formats, e.g. in Braille, in languages other than or Welsh, in pictorial formats or in audible form.
- 4 At least one large sample copy of the ballot paper must be displayed inside the polling station, ideally in a well-lit location where voters can easily see it before being issued with their ballot paper. Large print sample ballot papers displayed in the station will assist voters who are partially sighted and also voters who would like some time to look at the ballot paper before entering the booth. An enlarged hand-held copy of the ballot paper. This can be given to voters who are partially sighted to take into the polling booth for reference when marking their ballot paper.

Equipment to support voters to participate You have a duty to provide each polling station with such equipment as it is reasonable to provide for the purposes of enabling, or making it easier for, relevant persons to vote independently and in secret.

- 7 We have a duty to give guidance in relation to your duty to provide this equipment
- 8 and you must have regard to this guidance.
- 9 Through our work with civil society organisations and charities we have identified a range of equipment that can help to overcome the known barriers faced by people with disabilities. Many of these items are readily available at limited cost and can have a real and positive impact on the experience of voters in the polling station. The following equipment should, as a minimum, be provided in all polling stations to support voters with disabilities:

- Chair/seating – this provides a place to rest for voters who cannot stand for long periods and a seat for voters who would like to take some time to think before entering the polling booth
- Magnifiers – these increase the size of the text on a document providing support for voters who are visually impaired to vote independently
- Tactile voting device –this provides support for voters who are visually impaired to mark their vote on the ballot paper in the correct place.
- Polling booth at wheelchair level –helps to ensure that voters who use a wheelchair are able access a lower writing surface to ensure they can cast their vote in secret in a booth that is accessible
- Staff name badges – these help voters more easily identify that a person is a member of staff in the polling station and is someone they can approach for assistance
- Pencil grip – these can help voters with dexterity

impairments to more easily hold and use a pencil independently Ramps (for buildings with steps) – these support access to a polling station for voters who use a wheelchair or have difficulty using steps Temporary alerters or doorbells for any doors that are required to remain shut during the day (for example, fire doors) – these provide a way for voters to let polling station staff know that they need assistance to open the door so they can access the polling station Appropriate lighting – some polling station venues have good lighting but others may need additional lighting at the desk; to ensure that voters can clearly see the faces of staff, and in the polling booths; to support voters with visual impairments to be able to read and complete the ballot paper. Reserved parking spaces reserved for voters with disabilities (where parking is available at the venue) – this ensures that disabled voters can park as close as possible to the polling station You are not limited to providing only the equipment shown in the list above, and indeed should not reduce or remove any equipment that you have provided to support disabled voters at polling stations in your area at previous polls. There are other types of equipment that could support voters to participate, which could also be provided in polling stations. Examples of additional provision you could make include the following: Hearing induction loop – these provide support to voters with hearing loss to communicate in the polling station. Some buildings have an induction loop installed as standard, in which case you should make use of it, and where this is not one available then a portable hearing loop could be used. Audio devices – audio devices are pieces of equipment that reproduce, record or process sound. An audio device can be used together with the tactile voting device enabling blind and partially sighted voters to listen to candidate lists and then mark their ballot paper independently. Information available in easy read format – Easy read refers to the presentation of text in an accessible, easy to understand format. It is often useful for people with learning disabilities, and may also be beneficial for people with other conditions affecting how they process information. Making decisions about providing additional support and equipment for voters As RO you may receive requests for additional support or equipment to be provided, beyond that which you are already planning to put in place. For example, you may be informed by a voter with a particular type of disability that they remain at a substantial disadvantage (i.e. a disadvantage that is more than minor or trivial) despite your adjustments, as they have specialist or additional needs. In such instances, you should consider the request and decide if it is reasonable to provide additional support and/or equipment to remove the substantial disadvantage the voter has identified and brought to your attention. Each request should be considered on its merits and with a view to continuing to support the right of every voter to be able to cast their vote. When making your decision, there are a range of factors you should take into account, including: Will providing the additional support or equipment that has been requested enable or make voting easier for voters with a range of disabilities? How easy or practical is it to provide the additional support or supply the equipment requested? For example: Is the equipment readily available for purchase? Are the cost implications reasonable? Are there any more cost-effective or readily available alternatives? Is the equipment single-use or can it be used for future polls? Is the requested equipment portable and able to be transferred to another polling station if required (for example, due to a last minute polling station change)? Are there any training implications to consider in order for staff to provide the required support or to support the use of the equipment? You are not required to record or grant a request from every individual voter with a disability who contacts you, but you

should keep a clear audit trail of your decision making process. Retention of information when contacted by a voter with disabilities for additional support or equipment Where you are contacted by a voter with a disability asking for additional support or equipment, you may receive sensitive special category data about that individual and their specific needs. You will be considered the data controller for this sensitive data and it is your responsibility to ensure that you manage it in line with data protection requirements, and ensure that the individual is aware of how their data will be managed. You should take advice from your Data Protection Officer about what to do with the data once processed and whether you need to update any privacy notices relating to the processing. More information on managing special category data can be found in our guidance on data protection. Ensuring those working to support the poll are aware of accessibility needs To help ensure that all voters are provided with equal access to voting and receive a high quality of customer care it is important that all of those who work to deliver the election or provide information to voters are aware of the needs of those with disabilities. You should provide accessibility awareness training for all staff who interact with voters, including staff who support electoral services, to help improve their understanding of the needs of those with disabilities and the importance of clear communication. Working with external partners, we have developed resources that could help your staff to understand barriers to voting and experiences of voters with disabilities at the polling station including: RNIB video which shares the experiences of voting in the polling station for those with sight loss Mencap videos which share the experiences of Charlotte and Harry of voting in a polling station with a learning disability You can take advice from your Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) officer or HR department on other accessibility awareness training that you could access. Staff should also be made aware of the resources we have available on our website and YouTube channel to assist votes with particular disabilities to help with understanding about voting and what to expect at the polling station. For more information and updates about our resources we create you can subscribe to Roll Call our voter registration newsletter and your guide to supporting voter registration and participation. In addition to all of this you could think about sourcing or developing evergreen resources that are not election specific and so can be used year round over multiple years in partnership with civil society organisations that advocate for and support their stakeholders on issues surrounding the accessibility of voting. Training for polling station staff to support accessibility It is also vital that your training for polling station staff addresses the importance of being aware of accessibility needs of voters at the polling station and what steps they should take to support them. Our resources for training polling station staff include accessibility awareness information throughout them. The actions and behaviours that polling station staff demonstrate are key to making voters' experience in the polling station a positive one. Simple things like offering assistance and listening to voters' questions can make a real difference. In addition to general awareness raising of accessibility needs, it is important that your training for polling station staff covers: the barriers faced by voters with disabilities at the polling station and how polling station staff can help reduce them awareness that not all disabilities are visible the importance of considering the needs of the person, not a specific disability awareness that some voters may have more than one disability – for example, a visual impairment and dementia the importance of clear communication about the voting process the importance of clearly communicating that assistance is available if required awareness of the equipment provided at the polling station to

enable and make easier voting in the polling station for voters with disabilities, and how to use it awareness that a companion assisting a voter can be anyone over the age of 18 In our core guidance for Returning Officers for each type of election , we link to resources for training polling station staff which contain information on accessibility which you should highlight when briefing polling station staff. Raising awareness about the voting process and support available This section of the guidance covers the actions you can take to raise awareness of the voting process and the support that is available for voters. It is important that you have a clear communications strategy to help tackle the barriers some voters face, as well as to ensure voters are aware of the support available to enable them to vote confidently. This is equally important for by-elections or unscheduled polls, which may take place at short notice, as for scheduled elections. You should update your public awareness strategy by identifying how and when you will: Identify and communicate with relevant partners and disability organisations to explore opportunities to work together to raise awareness Promote and communicate information to voters with disabilities about the process of voting at a polling station and the support and equipment available Ask for feedback on the support and equipment provided – for example, by proactively inviting comment via your website or social media Communicating the voting process and support available There are a range of ways that you can provide and promote information about the voting process and support available to voters. This can help to overcome some of the known barriers for voters with disabilities and can make a real difference to helping them participate with confidence. You may hold contact details for residents who are disabled. Having access to these details provides you with an opportunity to communicate directly with residents with disabilities about accessibility at polling stations. Providing information on the location of polling stations Feedback from organisations representing people with disabilities is that some voters find it difficult to access information on polling station locations. We provide, in partnership with Democracy Club, a postcode look-up tool on our website . To increase the visibility of this information, you should promote the postcode search tool as widely as possible. You could embed the tool on your own website, using the widget we've made available, or add a link to our website. You could also share the link with existing internal networks or external organisations you are working with and encourage them to share it with their stakeholders. Additionally, you could include the link on the notice of situation of polling stations. Should you need any further information or support in using the search tool, please visit Democracy Club's website . Providing advance information on voting at the polling station To help overcome concerns and anxiety about what voting at the polling station will be like, you could provide a dedicated page on your website that contains accessible content to help voters who want to know more about voting at the polling station. This could include: information about the assistance and support available in the polling station including: That a companion is able to assist a voter That a Presiding Officer is able to help a voter The types of equipment that will be available at the polling stations information about what to expect when voting at the polling station including: Links to videos about voting in BSL Easy guides to voting videos by Mencap When the station is likely to be busy and when it is likely to be quiet Availability of quiet space Including additional information on poll cards and making the information accessible Although the content that must be included on poll cards is prescribed in legislation, you may also add further information that you think is appropriate. 1 The only exception to this is for Northern Ireland local elections where the poll card is prescribed exactly and makes

no allowance for any other information to be included. 2 Other changes to the process as a result of the Election Act will introduce additional information that needs to be communicated to voters in advance of the poll. This will mean for relevant elections the poll card will need to become a letter to enable the relevant information to be included. This change of format of the poll card will provide a good opportunity for you to include additional information to voters about their polling station and the accessibility of the voting process . You could include a link to an accessible web page or provide a QR code on the poll card letter that takes the voter directly to a web page that provides information about the voting process or the equipment that will be available. As some voters find the information provided on the poll card inaccessible, you should also think about how you can make the information contained on the poll card more accessible by additionally publishing it in an alternative way. For example, you could put the poll card information on your website in an accessible format, compatible with screen readers. You could also make easy-read or large print versions available on request, and publicise this via the poll card itself and on your website. If you hold email addresses for voters, you could also email them the information - ensuring it is emailed in an accessible format. Sending these additional communications could also provide an opportunity to raise awareness about what will happen on polling day, what to expect in the polling station and the equipment that will be available. Providing accessible sample ballot papers Some voters may find it useful to look at the ballot paper in advance of going to the polling station to help them to prepare for the process of voting. You could provide sample ballot papers on your website to support this, and ensure that any you do provide are accessible to electors who use screen readers. Providing information to political parties, candidates and agents about accessible voting at polling stations You should include information in the briefings you provide for candidates and agents about the support and equipment available at polling stations. Candidates and agents may know individual voters who require support or specific equipment and can help ensure that they are aware of the support that is available for them and how they can access it. Working with local networks and civil society organisations in your area You may have existing relationships with networks of disability groups and civil society organisations. If you do not have these relationships, you may need to work with others who do, for example: Social care providers Equalities officers Communications teams Housing officers Partnership/Community Engagement officers County Voluntary Councils/People First Groups (Wales) Establishing relationships with disability groups and civil society organisations that are active in your local area can be beneficial as they can advise you on specific steps you can take to improve the accessibility of voting at polling stations in certain locations. They can also provide advice on the types and methods of communication you should use to promote the equipment and support available at polling stations as well as information on elections more generally. These local organisations may also have access to specialist equipment which may benefit voters locally with particular disabilities and needs which you could borrow or hire. Reviewing the election After each election you should evaluate the equipment and support provided in polling stations and how you communicated with voters on their needs and what they could expect. You should invite feedback from voters and accessibility groups on their experience of voting in polling stations, about what worked well and what didn't, to help inform what you do to support voters with disabilities at future polls. We have a statutory duty to report at UK Parliamentary elections, Parliamentary by-elections, PCC elections, PCC by-election and NI Assembly elections. We will ask for feedback on the steps you have

taken to assist voters with disabilities by providing equipment in the polling station to inform our reports. Mechanisms you could use to gather feedback include:

- Providing an easy read survey at the polling station about the voting experience
- Inviting voters and partnership organisations to attend focus groups to discuss their experiences of voting in the polling station
- Inviting polling station staff to discuss their experience working in a polling station where specific equipment was provided, how they dealt with any difficult situations on the day, and their feedback on the training they received
- Reviewing any feedback provided in reports returned by Presiding Officers and polling station inspectors
- Monitoring the use of the equipment you provide in polling stations by asking polling station staff to keep a record in the polling station log book or via post poll surveys or feedback.

To ensure you get a wide range of external feedback you should consider providing a range of options. A good way of finding out the most appropriate approach to reaching specific groups of voters would be to ask the partnership organisations you work with what would work best for the voters they support.

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1. Sch 1, Rule 28(3)(e) RPA 1983 ■ Back to content at footnote 1
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