

# Equality of Opportunity Committee

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## Accessibility of polling stations in Wales

### A briefing from Scope Cymru

#### Polls Apart Cymru 2007

Scope has been campaigning on the issue of accessible democracy since 1992. The campaign and its associated research have been given the name of Polls Apart. In 2003 Polls Apart Cymru was created to assess the accessibility of Welsh elections. Since the 2003 elections for the National Assembly, Polls Apart Cymru has looked at every major election held in Wales. Denying disabled people their democratic right to vote is both a practical and symbolic indication of disabled people's continuing inequality. The Polls Apart campaign exists to challenge this inequality and ensure that everyone can participate as equals in our democracy.

#### Methodology

Polls Apart Cymru research is based on the hard work of individual disability campaigners. Each Polls Apart Cymru campaigner completes an access survey of the polling stations they use to vote. This is known as a "user evaluation". Surveys are returned to us, collated and analysed. Collectively they help to build up a picture of the accessibility of an election. Polls Apart Cymru 2007 received 133 surveys from campaigners in 25 constituencies.

#### Key findings

Disabled people are still being excluded from the voting process - 70% of polling stations in Wales still have significant obstacles that prevent or hinder disabled people from voting.

There has been a marked improvement since the last Assembly elections in 2003, reflecting the fact that many local authorities have made changes, particularly to physical access to polling stations. However, a third of polling stations still have significant physical access problems.

Though there have been significant improvements in physical access to polling stations, other access considerations have been neglected. For example 51% of polling stations surveyed did not provide large print notices of ballot paper to assist visually impaired voters - despite the fact that this is a statutory requirement under the Electoral Administration Act 2003.

Many of the barriers identified at this year's election could have been easily removed if polling station staff had been aware that they caused access problems for disabled people. There is a clear need for more training in this area.

17% of disabled respondents said that they would like to vote using an e-voting method. This includes voting on the internet, via SMS or over the phone. Given that these systems can be much more accessible than traditional paper-based voting system this is a technological development worth exploring.

The Disability Equality Duty (DED), which came into force in December 2006, places a legal obligation on all public bodies to take the needs of disabled people into account when planning services and facilities. In addition the Electoral Administration Act 2006 requires polling stations to be reviewed every four years. **Some comments from disabled voters:** "I was unable to get into the polling station. Both the voting papers and ballot boxes were brought outside through the exit door on the side of the building. I complained." Polls Apart Cymru respondent, 2007 "The polling station used to be the parish hall but it was changed because of access problems at the previous venue." Polls Apart Cymru respondent, 2007 "I spent around 25 minutes at my polling station trying to cast my vote whereas the average voting time for my friends and neighbours was about two to three minutes. The reason? I have sight loss and have a guide dog. The presiding officer had not prepared the polling station for ANYONE other than able-bodied voters." Polls Apart Cymru respondent, 2007 "There was access through the exit clearly labelled for disabled people but there wasn't a low-level booth for wheelchair users." Polls Apart Cymru respondent, 2007 "It was not possible to use the ramp due to 90 degree angle." Polls Apart Cymru respondent, 2007

#### Recommendations:

##### Welsh Assembly Government

Fund a training programme for electoral administrators to enable them to better meet the access needs of disabled voters, especially deaf and visually impaired voters and those with learning difficulties and multiple impairments.

Create an award for the 'most accessible polling station' and the 'most improved polling station' in Wales. Run this as part of the four-yearly review of polling stations required by the Electoral Administration Act 2006.

Encourage local authorities to apply to run e-voting pilot in Wales to trial new, fully accessible systems of voting and promote this to disabled voters.

Encourage the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) to monitor the numbers of disabled people in residential care who have the opportunity to register to vote and support to vote.

Introduce best practice guidance on accessible layout and design of bi-lingual polling cards and other electoral information.

Encourage the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills to fund democratic literacy materials so all young people, including those in special schools, understand, and can participate in, the electoral process.

## Local Authorities

Continue the good progress being made towards ensuring all polling stations are physically accessible. One person who has to vote in the street is one too many.

Develop and monitor formal links with local groups of disabled people to assist with the review of polling places and evaluate access to the voting process overall. Focus in particular on hard-to-reach groups of disabled people such as those with mental health conditions and learning difficulties and disabled and older people who live in residential settings.

Ensure all voting information is produced in plain English and plain Welsh and includes clear information on how to request further assistance.

Compile and monitor a register of accessible buildings in the local authority area that are suitable for use as polling stations.

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