

Equality of Opportunity Committee

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Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales

Access to Polling Stations -Assembly Government Evidence Paper by the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government

Purpose

To inform the Committee of the Assembly Government's position in relation to access to polling stations.

Background

Responsibility for ensuring that polling stations are fully accessible lies with the relevant Returning Officer. Section 18B of the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended by the Electoral Administration Act 2006, places a duty on local authorities to keep polling places under review and to ensure that, as far as is reasonable and practical, every polling place should be accessible to electors who are disabled. Local Authorities also have a duty to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 and to make reasonable adjustments to premises to give access to disabled and non-disabled people.

The duty on local authorities to review their polling places must be completed every 4 years. Initial reviews were carried out by Welsh local authorities in the Autumn of 2007 under guidance produced by the Electoral Commission and so are due again next year.

The Assembly Government funds the elections to the National Assembly, although responsibility for the conduct of these elections lies with the UK Government. Assembly Government funding covers the training of poll clerks and presiding officers, the costs of polling station equipment and temporary adaptations.

Recent developments

Prior to the General Election, I met with the newly appointed chief executive of Scope, to discuss their Polls Apart campaign which is designed to open up democracy in Britain to disabled people. A Welsh version of the report of the Polls Apart survey was launched by Scope's event in the National Assembly on the 6th July. This report gives a detailed breakdown of the results from those who surveyed polling stations in Wales.

At the General Election, on 6 May 2010, Scope campaigners visited over a hundred different polling stations, covering every parliamentary constituency in Wales. Their investigations revealed that, in their view, 67 per cent of polling stations had one or more significant access barriers to disabled voters; the same percentage reported for the UK as a whole. This represents just a 2 per cent improvement from the last General Election, a 3 per cent improvement on the elections for the National Assembly for Wales in May 2007 (70 per cent) and a 10 per cent improvement from the National Assembly for Wales in 2003 (77 per cent).

Scope's report suggests there are particular challenges in making elections accessible in Wales. The need for documents to be produced in two languages can increase the cost to electoral administrators as well as making it difficult to have large fonts on documents. While it is right that all documents are bilingual it can create additional potential barriers to accessibility.

Scope's findings illustrate that whilst legislation and guidance have created the impetus for significant improvement, more recent experience shows that the implementation and enforcement of this on the ground falls short. This resulted in many disabled people, in 2010, being unable to cast their vote without assistance and in secret.

In the Electoral Commission's report on the conduct of the 2009 European Elections, they considered that improvements had been made to the accessibility of polling stations and that the vast majority of electors were satisfied with the process. The Electoral Commission's report on the General Election was published on 28th July 2010.

The observations in the Commission's report suggest that polling stations across the UK were accessible meaning that disabled entrances were clearly signposted, ramps were in place to improve access, low polling booths were available for wheelchair users and large print ballot papers and tactile voting devices were available for those with visual impairments. The Commission also identified that access issues had formed part of the training for polling centre staff.

The Commission highlights the need for well-designed polling stations so as not to limit access for those with mobility problems and recommends that Returning Officers should be given powers to use any public building as a polling station.

Whilst the report found that the election was well run in the vast majority of areas, there was evidence that voter confidence was fragile. The Commission's research found that while over two-thirds of the voters in Wales were confident that the elections were well run, three in ten were not very or not at all confident in the process.

Next steps

I am currently considering the Electoral Commission's and Scope's reports on the general election. I am minded to write to all local authority Chief Executives to remind them of their duties under the Electoral Administration Act ahead of the 2011 Assembly Elections and to ask them what initiatives they are taking to ensure accessibility.