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See differently**

RNIB Cymru

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To: Members of the Equality and
Social Justice Committee

23 July 2021

RE: RNIB's latest research into the voting experiences of blind and partially sighted people

I am writing to members of the Equality and Social Justice Committee to make you aware of recent research RNIB has published into the voting experiences of blind and partially sighted people which highlights that almost 150 years after the Ballot Act guaranteed the right to vote in secret, people with sight loss still face unacceptable barriers in exercising this fundamental democratic right.

RNIB's research outlined in the attached 'Turned Out' report found that only one in five (19 per cent) of blind voters and less than half (46 per cent) of partially sighted voters were able to vote independently and in secret in the elections which took place across the UK in May 2021, which included the Senedd elections. Additionally, less than a third of blind voters were satisfied with their voting experience in this year's elections.

The problem with the current system

Currently, each polling station must have a large print version of the ballot paper and a tactile voting device (TVD). The TVD is a plastic template which is placed over the ballot paper to enable blind and partially sighted people to locate the voting boxes and find where to make their mark.

However, it does not tell the voter the names or parties of the candidates. This means that most people with sight loss require assistance from a family member, friend, or polling station staff member to provide this information so that they can mark the right box. In May 2019, this system was declared unlawful by a court ruling.

Audio device trial

In May's elections, RNIB worked with the Cabinet Office to trial a more accessible option for people with sight loss. This involved using an audio device at polling stations that enable individuals to listen to the candidates' names and used alongside the TVD this means that there is no need for another person to be present while the list of candidates is reviewed and the vote cast. The introduction of the audio device made a huge difference to making voting an inclusive and accessible experience for those who took part.

Other issues raised in the report include the lack of accessible information available to blind and partially sighted people in the run up to the elections; the inconsistencies in the training of polling station staff and levels of knowledge in how best to support blind and partially sighted voters on polling day; and issues with the inaccessibility of the postal voting system.

Recommendations

RNIB is calling for urgent action to improve the experiences of blind and partially sighted voters in time for the Welsh local elections taking place in May 2022. These include:

- Ensuring the audio player and TVD is rolled out to polling stations in Wales to enable blind and partially sighted people to vote more independently, and in secret
- Ensuring Presiding Officers and their staff are trained on sight loss, and the support they should offer blind and partially sighted people
- Ensuring information provided by electoral services in the run up to the elections is provided in accessible formats
- Ensuring the postal voting system is fully accessible for blind and partially sighted people

We would be happy to arrange a presentation on the report's findings for the Committee if this would be helpful to you. If you would like to

take up this offer the Committee's officials can contact Elin Edwards,
External Affairs Manager, RNIB Cymru, at Elin.Edwards@rnib.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Ansley Workman
Director, RNIB Cymru