

Y Pwyllgor Cyfle Cyfartal

The Committee on Equality of Opportunity

Dydd Iau, 25 Hydref 2007
Thursday, 25 October 2007

Cynnwys
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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynndi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee. In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol

Committee members in attendance

Christine Chapman	Llafur Labour
Michael German	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru (yn dirprwyo ar ran Mick Bates) Welsh Liberal Democrats (substitute for Mick Bates)
Mark Isherwood	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Bethan Jenkins	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Ann Jones	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Labour (Committee Chair)

Eraill yn bresennol

Others in attendance

Naomi Alleyne	Cyfarwyddwr Cydraddoldebau a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru Director of Equalities and Social Justice, Welsh Local Government Association
Graham Findlay	Prif Swyddog Mynediad, Anabledd Cymru Principal Access Officer, Disability Wales

Alan Hunt	Y Gymdeithas Fynediad The Access Association
Philip Johnson	Is-gadeirydd, Cymdeithas Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol Vice Chairman, Association of Electoral Administrators
Bob Screen	Cadeirydd, Cymdeithas Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol Chairman, Association of Electoral Administrators
Paula Walters	Cynghorydd Polisi, Cydraddoldebau, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru Policy Adviser, Equalities, Welsh Local Government Association
Peter Woodward	Trysorydd, Cymdeithas Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol Treasurer, Association of Electoral Administrators

Swyddogion Gwasanaeth Seneddol y Cynulliad yn bresennol Assembly Parliamentary Service officials in attendance

Claire Griffiths	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Claire Morris	Clerc Clerk

"Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.33 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.33 a.m."

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau, Dirprwyon a Datgan Buddiannau Introduction, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

<p>Ann Jones: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Committee on Equality of Opportunity. I have a number of apologies this morning: from Joyce Watson, Lynne Neagle, Angela Burns and Helen Mary Jones. We have also had an apology from Mick Bates, and Mike German is substituting for Mick, so welcome back, Mike.</p>
<p>If anyone has a mobile phone, BlackBerry or pager, or any other device that will interfere with the broadcasting system, please switch it off now. I will just check that I have switched off mine as well.</p>
<p>It is nice to welcome back Claire Griffiths, our deputy clerk, who has been missing for a few weeks. It is good to have you back with us, Claire.</p>

9.34 a.m.

Ymchwiliad i Hygyrchedd Gorsafoedd Pleidleisio yng Nghymru Inquiry into the Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales

Ann Jones: We have desperately been trying to find returning officers who would come and give us evidence, but, unfortunately, we could not find any, so we will have some written evidence instead. However, we are delighted to have with us representatives of the Association of Electoral Administrators. Bob Screen is the chairman, Philip Johnson is the vice-chair, and Peter Woodward is the treasurer. It is great to have you back, Bob; we have seen you at meetings of the old Local Government and Public Services Committee, when it was discussing electoral arrangements. As ever, Bob has brought us something to look at during the tea break—a portable polling booth. I will let you explain that, Bob. I ask you to make some brief introductory comments before we move to questions, Bob, or whoever will lead off.

Mr Screen: We have provided a report for you, so, at this stage, before answering questions, all that I will do is stress how supportive we are of everything that Scope is doing and of the importance of disabled access and so on. We have worked tremendously hard on this throughout Wales. We still have a heck of a way to go, but we are moving in the right direction and we have overcome some of the obstacles, certainly in physical access to buildings. As I said, there is still a long way to go. It is also important to stress that no-one holds the moral high ground on this. Democracy and the furtherance of democracy are not the monopoly of any one organisation: this is partnership work, and we must be seen to be working together. We are going along the right lines on that.

I will not say much more, Chair, because the report is before you. One comment that I will make is that we looked at the Scope report and we have some small issues with the methodology that it used and the small numbers that it used. I estimate that there are around 6,000 polling stations in Wales and the report looked at 133, which is about 2 per cent. We would very much like to work with Scope on this and look at its methodology, asking whether we can help it and whether it can help us to get the right picture of what is happening across Wales. I do not think that it is right to apply this across Wales, and say that such and such per cent of polling stations are still not working. That is the only comment that I would make at this stage, Chair, but the three of us are open to questions.

Ann Jones: That is fine. As Chair, I will kick off with a question, Bob, before the others get in and we run out of time. From Scope's Polls Apart surveys in 2003 and 2007, we can see that the large-print version of the ballot paper was on display in roughly 77 per cent of stations in 2003, and that was down to 49 per cent in 2007. Can you comment on that and on what you see as the difficulties there? Was it just overlooked?

Mr Screen: It has to be appreciated that the Assembly elections were one of the most difficult elections that we had. We had late legislation, which was slightly flawed, that came in at a time when we were introducing postal vote identifiers. As I have said in the report, quite frankly, we were lucky to get ordinary ballot papers delivered; some were delivered to presiding officers on the day of the election. A large version of the ballot paper can be done, but if you look at the size of the regional ballot paper—do you have the sample, Peter?

Mr Woodward: These are the ones that were used in Cardiff. If you look at the regional ballot, you can see that even in the A2 size, the names are pretty small—they are probably in 14-point font. In the constituency ballot they appear at that sort of size, as you can see.

One issue may be that which Bob alluded to a little earlier, which is that, with the greatest respect to Scope's officers, who obviously have an awful lot of hard work to do, they took a very small sample. We would like nothing better than to work positively with Scope and any other organisation representing disabled electors. However, as I said, the sample was small and we have failed to get any feedback as to specific reports about particular local authorities or returning officers who are failing in this area. Without that support and knowledge, it is very difficult for us to address the issue. That is basically my point.

Ann Jones: I can see the practical difficulties with a large-print ballot paper, but it is an issue of large print rather than a large size. I know that the larger the font, the bigger the piece of paper will be, but I do not necessarily think that the A2 sample that you showed us with 14-point font is what those with a sight impairment require: what they want is a larger print. Sometimes it also about the colour as well—the colour of the print against the paper can often be a problem. So, it was the font size that was more important than having the A2 paper, but I can see the difficulty if you have more than five or six candidates. Is there a way in which that could be looked at in terms of font sizes?

9.40 a.m.

Mr Screen: The ballot papers are prescribed in legislation, so there is not much that we can do on that. There must be a 2.5 cm gap for every candidate. That went to 3.5 cm for the regional candidates, because of the party listings. That is another issue that may not be for this forum, but we did not think that there was a need to put the party names on the ballot paper, which would have helped, but there we are. That is design.

I am conscious that when you go to vote yourselves, you do not vote as disabled people, so you may not be see things such as the disabled booths. Also, there are the templates for the visually impaired—have you seen these?

Ann Jones: I have, because I have taken an interest in it.

Mr Screen: Not every Member would have seen them. Every polling station in Wales should have had one of these, which would have matched the 2.5 cm, and one of these, which would have matched the 3.5 cm for the regional candidates. If they were not on display, that is the fault of the returning officer or the returning officer's staff. We work with Pakflatt, the only company that makes these. I will leave some of these for Members, on the polling booth. It has numbers in Braille, albeit that I understand that Braille is not widely used by blind people. Also, the ordinary numbers are raised and they stick on to the back and match up with the candidates. So, you have candidate No. 1 and then you can mark across by lifting the window. They are re-useable. So there are raised numbers and windows. The presiding officers in the polling station have also always been able to assist a blind or disabled voter. However, I accept that many disabled people would want the ability to fend for themselves and to do the work themselves and that is why these templates were designed.

There is legislation on that, so there is not much that we can do unless the legislation is changed to say that ballot papers should be bigger. That, in turn, would cause problems for the suppliers. That was one of the reasons why, as I mentioned, we were lucky, in some instances, to get the ordinary ballot papers delivered on time. The legislation has changed so much that your local printer is more or less unable to do the work: in-house printing needs to be considered. There are fewer and fewer large suppliers trying to feed a greater and greater demand. That has caused a huge problem throughout the UK, let alone Wales, and, as I say, some people just could not deliver ballot papers on time. That is one of the reasons why I think that the size of the templates and the large-scale ballot papers probably took a bit of a knock in this election.

Ann Jones: Peter, did you want to say anything else?

Mr Woodward: I am speaking off the top of my head now, but I am pretty sure that the regulations talk about a large-print version of the ballot paper. To get the font any bigger, we would have to have a different format. Rather than a large-scale print of the ballot paper, it would have to be a large-print notice of the information on the ballot paper.

Michael German: I have three questions, and I am going to start with that issue. I know that we will have been up all night reading the Gould report. One of its major suggestions to Government is that there should be a single—["Inaudible".]—for all elections, whatever they might be. So, in other words, for Wales, presumably, that would be the National Assembly and for Scotland that would be the Scottish Parliament. How much of an impact does the different legislation for different types of elections have on your ability to be able to prepare in advance? To follow up on the point that Peter made about the size of the large-print version, for you to provide a large-print ballot version to match the requirements that people who are sight-impaired would want would mean a change in legislation. That would mean preparation and a change in legislation, so there are a whole bunch of issues about who legislates on that. That means colour determination as well, because I presume that if the original ballot paper was in green—as the one that you have there is—the big ballot paper would have to be green too. I suspect that it is probably a legislation issue. Perhaps you could clear that up and tell us what you would like to happen, and then the Chair will make sure that it happens.

Ann Jones: There is no pressure then. ["Laughter."]

Michael German: My second question is about disability awareness training. One problem expressed to us is that there is no uniform pattern for training presiding officers and their staff on disability awareness. I do not know whether you have carried out a survey of that activity to know whether disability awareness training is provided, but, if you have, how is it funded? Is it funded externally from here, by central Government or by local authorities, which would have to pick this up in addition to every other thing that they do? My third question is therefore about the support that you get in funding. Does it find its way to you for the sorts of issues that we have been talking about?

Mr Screen: There were a host of questions there. First, perhaps I can put to bed the question about the large-scale fonts. A change in legislation is not really needed to increase it. This example is a photocopy enlarged to A3 size. However, what I have here is a sample that we did for either the last parliamentary election or the one before, and it is not a photocopy of that; it is a camera shot of a ballot paper, which is then enlarged so that the font size is increased. Do you see the difference? The firm that provided this no longer exists, and I certainly do not have the equipment to do it. You can see the difference between enlarging the paper using a photocopier and a camera shot of a master. As you can see, the font on the camera shot version is near-perfect, or as close as you are going to get. Is there anyone here from Disability Wales, or will they be here later?

Ann Jones: Yes. They are listening, but they will give us evidence later.

Mr Screen: The difference is that the second is a camera shot of the original. The time allowed in elections and the pressures on suppliers are making us use A3 copies. Therefore, a change in legislation may be required, but that would not be necessary if you look at the camera shot versions. However, the time pressure on us is causing us problems.

Mr Woodward: The problem was really with the Assembly regional ballot paper. We did not have a great problem with the constituency paper, which is similar to this version, which is reasonable. It is the regional paper, which includes the party names, that causes the problem. It contains so much information that it is difficult to enlarge.

Mr Screen: We argued with the elections working group about whether there was a need to include the party names. It was a political decision to say yes, because the party list has no relevance to the people voting. My suggestion was to put only the party names on the paper and, for those who are interested, to have a separate list of who was standing on the list in the polling stations, on websites and so on. In that way, we could have got this paper down to this size and we could have done something with the font. I understand that you are looking to reduce the names from up to 12 to up to six, which will help.

Michael German: That would not be us, but Westminster.

Mr Screen: Yes. Those are the issues around large-scale fonts. To pick up on the training issues, you must remember that I employ some 140 presiding officers at 140 polling stations and some 200 or so polling clerks. I do not have a huge turnover of staff, although, as Peter mentioned earlier, we have a blacklist of people whom we will not employ again. There are some staff who are getting a bit long in the tooth now who should not really be working at polling stations from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m., but we do not have a huge turnover. I have them for a two-hour briefing session about once in the year of an election. It would be extremely difficult for me to find the time to hold a training session on disability issues, bearing in mind that most of the staff are council employees who work for planning departments, legal sections, social services, education and so on. My briefing sessions last between an hour and a half and two hours, because you will lose their interest if it takes any more.

9.50 a.m.

We hold briefing sessions, which should have been rolled out throughout Wales, on disabled issues and saying that these are the templates. We tell them to make sure that, when they put the booth up, it faces out, and make sure that they look at access within the polling station. I cannot speak for the whole of Wales, but I employ 10 polling station inspectors. That was an innovation that came out in 2001, I think—during one of the European elections—when they put some money up to fund polling station inspectors. I can see the inspectors more often, on a training-session basis, when I can get them trained for disabled issues. They look at every polling station and they must fill in a chart that has a scoring system. The difficulty is that, if the inspectors change, you lose some consistency, and they do not have Disability Discrimination Act 1995 training. However, if I have consistency with my 10 inspectors—and I am doing this now—I work with my DDA officer to give them specific training on DDA issues. They visit every polling station, and there is a report from the last four or five elections on polling station access. It is a little bit more scientific, but it still needs some work to be done on it. So, yes—

Michael German: I am sorry to interrupt, but that is your local authority; it is not the uniform pattern for the whole of Wales, is it?

Mr Screen: We are promoting that that should be standard, and that inspectors should be appointed at every election.

Michael German: However, it is not standard.

<p>Mr Screen: I do not have the evidence or the facts on that.</p>
<p>Michael German: Also, you do not have the authority to do it.</p>
<p>Mr Screen: No, we give encouragement.</p>
<p>Michael German: Just to clarify, who would be able to say, 'Let us follow what Bob Screen is doing and have it everywhere'?</p>
<p>Mr Woodward: That could initially come through the Electoral Commission, which issues best practice guidelines, time and again. It is just hearsay evidence, but I am quite sure that the appointment of polling station inspectors is fairly widely established in Wales. We do it in Cardiff. We have a checklist, and the inspectors look at various issues, among which are references to disabled facilities or to making life easier inside and outside the polling station for disabled electors. Initially, I would think that it would come as best practice guidance from the Electoral Commission.</p>
<p>Mr Screen: We, through our branch meetings, will promote this as best practice.</p>
<p>Mr Johnson: One difficulty is that one hour's training once a year is not enough. In an ideal world, I would love to see my presiding officers and a healthy number of polling clerks undertake some sort of certificate in competency each year, which could be a 12 or 13-week course involving in-depth training on DDA issues, and other issues such as fraud. Unfortunately, that would be a very costly exercise.</p>
<p>Mr Woodward: We all have difficulty in recruiting staff, let alone competent staff, to do this work. By their nature, they are casual staff, working one day per year for us, on average. So, it is difficult to establish a fundamental training programme for people of such a transitory nature.</p>
<p>Christine Chapman: From reading the paper, I can see that there are huge practical difficulties that you have tried to address, and I hope that lessons will be learnt for the next elections—that is why we are here. We know that there are huge issues for disabled people in accessing polling stations, and, from reading the paper, I see that you talk about ordinary ballot papers as if the other ballot papers are extraordinary. The issue is mainstreaming, which is my point.</p>
<p>You also made a comment about the balance to be struck between turnout for elections and access. Do you have any further comments on that? I know from my own area that there have been difficulties with that, so how would you address that and what further discussions are you having on it?</p>
<p>Mr Woodward: This comes down to the identification of polling stations within polling districts. Our overriding aims are to provide a polling station within a geographical polling district that has the best access to the greatest number of electors and that is readily accessible for disabled electors. So, those are the two main drivers on identifying a polling station.</p>
<p>Christine Chapman: Was there an issue about moving stations further and then having an effect on the turnout? Have you had any further discussions on that?</p>
<p>Mr Screen: This touches a little on the Electoral Administration Act 2006 and on the review of polling districts and polling stations. Reviewing polling stations every four years is, quite frankly, nonsense; it should be done after every election, and it should be done regularly and routinely. You should be proactive and say what you are going to do. Monitoring should happen after an election, and, if there are problems, they should be addressed. That should be an ongoing exercise.</p>
<p>Polling districts are more complex, and you mentioned turnout. As an example, does anyone know the polling district of Risca Fernlea? It is on a slope, and you can tell who comes from Risca Fernlea, because they all have one leg longer than the other. It is a polling district with 265 electors. I have to use a portakabin, because there is nothing there, not even a shop. I could look at houses—it is mentioned somewhere in one of the reports that we should be looking at houses—but most houses are not DDA compatible. My house would be no good for a polling station; I have looked at it.</p>

The only other alternative at Risca Fernlea, which covers some farms, and so on—and some have done this—is to close the polling district. Turnout in 2001 was 68 per cent in that district. If I moved the polling station to the next polling district, down the main road, people would have a 2.5 or 3 mile trip to get there. They would not vote. If people have to go more than 0.5 mile to vote, if it rains or if it is a bit cold, they will not vote. However, if it is on their doorstep, they will vote. Convenience, in my view, is one of the most significant things about voting—if it is convenient, people will vote. Turnout at the next polling district down from there, which has 1,200 electors, was 58 per cent. I could try moving the polling station for the 265 electors at Risca Fernlea there, but for a local election, that will be quite critical.

I have to balance turnout with accessibility issues. The report of my polling station inspectors will focus on DDA issues and will say whether it is a good polling station, because it is central to the population, and whether it is also generally accessible. So, there is a huge range of issues. We then break the information down into charts, which will give a grading. A polling station that is given an A grade may be marked down on disabled access, but, it may be central to the population and have easy access, and so on. You have to take all these issues into account when you look at polling stations, but that is not to dismiss the need to look at DDA issues, because it is of prime importance.

The information can then be split down into a chart. We have done a huge amount of work in Caerphilly over a number of years breaking this down into bar charts on DDA access, centrality to the population, polling stations by grade, DDA access ratings, and so on. Doing that might not improve a particular polling station, but it shows you where the priorities are. I cannot look at 50 stations that need to be looked at, because I do not have the money and because they are not council properties, but I will put them as a priority to be looked at as another building becomes available. I have gone slightly off your question, but turnout is a factor.

10.00 a.m.

Christine Chapman: May I just come back on that? I know exactly what you are talking about, because there are none on my estate, and we have had portakabins for a number of years. Last time, they went across the road to another area, and I can see that turnout may have been affected. From what I can remember, however, people grumbled about having to walk further, but what about a bigger campaign to explain to people why? I know there were mutterings about disabled access, but I am wondering whether you, as an organisation, should be promoting the reasons why this is happening, so that you are engaging the voters themselves. I think that people would be reasonable, and if they realised what the issues are—

Mr Screen: You have more faith in human nature than I do. ["Laughter."]

Christine Chapman: Well, you have to in my job. I just think that we need to be a bit more proactive in this.

Mr Screen: You are absolutely right, and we can be more positive in looking at that point, and we can try to get that across to people.

The defining matter is the fact that turnout has declined anyway, and not so much because of accessibility issues, but due to lack of engagement from the politicians. That has to go down to the politicians as well. We can do all we can, but if there is a lack of trust or engagement or anything like that with politicians, then—

Christine Chapman: I think that we are doing our bit as well. ["Laughter."]

Mr Screen: You are doing your bit as well. As you say, there is no moral high ground; we have to work together on this one, and we can take that on board.

Mr Johnson: In my experience in Newport, to put things in context, I did not receive any complaints from any member of the public claiming to be disabled or otherwise about access issues. However, I had moved some 10 polling stations since the last election. In the case of one of those polling stations, I was inundated by complaints from able-bodied people who still wanted to go to their portakabin. There was also quite a lot of pressure from political quarters to reinstate that portakabin, which was situated at the side of a road, with no car parking or toilet facilities, and no hot and cold running water. It was an absolute health-and-safety nightmare for the staff, let alone the electors, and yet we came under immense pressure to restore that polling station. I am glad to say that I resisted that pressure, because the alternative station had proper disabled access ramps, disabled parking, disabled toilets and all the facilities that the Scope survey scores highly. I am glad to say that, certainly for the Assembly elections, turnout did not seem to be affected. As administrators, we do come under pressure from the public, and from you, for sometimes not implementing the ideal solution.

Mr Screen: You take away a polling station that people have been going to for years and years, and you get more complaints than you would for anything else. I have never had a complaint related to the portakabins there. It may well be that there are no disability issues or, if there are, disabled electors use a postal vote or whatever. I had one complaint from a young lady, which I mention because the polling station in this instance was in an OAP complex. At the last election, the lady in question wanted to vote elsewhere. This is not shown on the map, but going there along Risca's main road means following a winding and torturous route. She did not want to go to an OAP complex because of the smell of urine. That is the type of comments that we get. I have not even answered the letter on that one yet.

We do not get many positives—I did get one positive—because you only get letters when people want to complain; you do not get letters saying, 'That was fantastic'. However, I did get one from a disabled woman who comes from South Africa and now has British citizenship. She contacted me before the elections to tell me that the polling station was fine at the last election, but that her only problem was that the car park was on a bit of a slope, which meant that she had to get up the slope in her wheelchair to the polling station. She asked whether I could allocate parking. I rang the headteacher, explained the situation, saying that this person was desperate to vote in a polling station, and he cleared the teachers' car parking spaces. This is an example where things worked well. We do not always get that, I must stress. The lady phoned afterwards and she e-mailed me to thank me, saying that it was brilliant. We do not get that very often, because people tend not to give you praise, do they? What we do get is criticism, and I had a similar experience to Phil. I moved two stations and I was inundated with calls by people who wanted to go back to their old polling station. When I tell them that the stations are not suitable under the Disability Discrimination Act, these people reply, 'Yeah, but they are convenient'. You are right; we need to work to educate people by telling why we are doing something.

The last point to make is that, in your elections, and in parliamentary elections, any small change probably has no consequence. A polling district defines the candidates people will vote for, and there is no major consequence if it is a small change. However, in a local election, politically, taking 250 people out of a district could affect the local candidates. So, we are also under huge political pressure, because council members will say, 'I do not want to move that from there because I know that they always vote for me, but if you put it there, they always vote for them.'. These are the problems and issues that we have to deal with. From our point of view, and on the basis of disabled access, we say, 'No, we are not moving the station'. However, we come under huge pressure politically and from able-bodied people.

Ann Jones: Mike and I rehearsed much of this in the electoral arrangements report by the Local Government and Public Services Committee. However, when we saw systems in Europe, we were most taken with one system, were we not, Mike? Under that system, the voters could cast their votes electronically and what was nice about that was that the result was issued 20 minutes after the polling station closed, which is good for everyone. What was also done, and you have touched on this, was that a report on any complaints was submitted immediately after every election. So, if you had complained on the day that the presiding officer could not find your name on the list or that you could not get into the polling station because there was a trip wire, or for whatever reason, that was dealt with after the event. You touched on the fact that we review polling stations every four years, but perhaps we should be doing it straight away.

The other point that you raised was that you do not have the staff—you do not have presiding officers and you draw your staff from councils and outside agencies. So, how could you administer such a system, if that were the way to go? For example, if your presiding officers suddenly took on another life on the Friday morning and went back to work, how would you, as electoral administrators, be able to bring those people in and call them to account?

Mr Woodward: Some returning officers supply the presiding officers and the polling staff with a form to report on any problems that occurred on the day, such as problems relating to the station or problems relating to any inconvenience experienced by an elector. That is one way of doing it. As I have said before, because these are transient, casual staff, it is difficult to pull them in after the event, but we can rely on the day reports submitted by the polling staff. That is one way of doing it.

Mr Screen: I think that the possibility of conducting a customer satisfaction survey was touched on. There is no problem with that other than the fact that the last thing you want is a queue of people coming to hot and small polling stations, sitting down and filling in a survey form to hand to the presiding officer who is dealing with other things. Polling stations are not under pressure for the whole day, but there are peak times and that system would cause problems. I have toyed with the idea of a customer survey that asks questions such as, 'What was your experience at the polling station?' and 'Are you happy with the polling station or is there another area where you would rather vote?'. We could give people a stamped-addressed envelope in order to respond, because if you do not pay the postage, they will not send them back. We cannot get the canvas forms back unless we do that. There is a huge cost involved, but we could look at that.

Mr Woodward: The only problem with that, possibly, is that any survey of that nature will only get responses from those who are eager to respond and we want to try to get through to those people who are not eager and who are a little apathetic about things.

Mark Isherwood: I apologise for my lateness.

10.10 a.m.

You referred to lack of training for returning officers and their staff, and you may have touched on training beforehand. You seem to be talking about training in the physical aspects of the problem with reference, for example, to temporary ramps. Much of the discussion that we have in this context, and other contexts, is about awareness training—equality awareness training, disability awareness training, and so on. If people, certainly the main decision makers, receive that training and cascade it, then the physical problems should take care of themselves, because they are aware, proactively, of the situation. How can that be addressed, because we seem to have been talking about it in different contexts for years? What role could local access groups, or users, have in that? The most powerful message that I had was when a constituent of mine, who is a wheelchair user, asked me to spend a day with them and push them around. I spent a day car parking, shopping, and so on, with them, and it made me see things differently after the event. Therefore, how could that be done?

Mr Screen: In an ideal world, we should be doing that; the difficulty is getting 140 presiding officers and key poll clerks together over a period of time to do that training. I am not saying that it cannot be done. There are strains on our departments; it is often a case of one man and a dog—that may not be the correct expression, but it is two or three members of staff. Our electoral services calendar is chock-a-block. Taking the past year as an example, from December onwards we were looking at postal vote identifiers, we were working on the May elections, and we were looking at the legislation. We then got the election over and done with. We were then up and running with our canvas forms, and that is not just a case of having certain homes to which they are sent. We were preparing the canvas figures, and, at the same time, we were looking at the possibility of a parliamentary election. In the old days, the workloads of electoral services used to come in peaks and troughs, and you could have filled the troughs by doing things like that, but we now have peaks and no troughs—just bigger peaks.

It is difficult because of the staffing and the resources that we have. It is difficult to get these 140 to 200 people, who are working for legal departments, together, and, let us be honest, local authorities have slimmed down considerably, and further cutbacks are coming. Therefore, it would be difficult to get existing staff, who we use for one day a year, together for an hour or two of training; it is not impossible, but it is difficult, although I agree with you that it should be looked at.

Bethan Jenkins: You say that it would be hard to get people together. In your paper, you say that you would welcome any Assembly Government funding. Would it be different if it was instigated from a higher level, as opposed to your having to do it from your end, and if there was additional funding for training? Would you find that easier?

Mr Screen: We should be looking at it.

Bethan Jenkins: Do you have any ideas as to what you would like to see as part of that process?

Mr Screen: I do not know whether it is a money problem as much as a resource problem.

Mr Johnson: I believe that it is both.

Mr Woodward: It is a question of what investment you make in individuals who may be with you just for one occasion. I am sure that there is a reluctance on our part to invest too heavily in the expensive training, in terms of cost and time, of someone who is with us for one day and who may not be employed in that capacity again in the future.

Ann Jones: If most of your presiding officers and polling clerks are council staff, which you have alluded to, and I believe that that is probably the main practice across the 22 local authorities, they must surely be trained in disability awareness. I am aware that you supplement the number with members of the public, or people from other organisations. For example, counters are usually people from banks, and so on, are they not? Therefore, I would have thought that council staff would just need a refresher course to say, 'You need to be aware of this or that particular point', rather than a full-blown training exercise. I would hope that most council staff are pretty well-versed in what is required of them when dealing with members of the public who have a disability. Therefore, if you have a pool of people on whom you rely, if you only have to train and refresh a certain percentage, does that not reduce the cost of training?

Mr Woodward: Absolutely, and that is exactly what is happening now. I believe that most of us have a core of polling staff who do it time and again. As you say, in the normal course of their full-time job, they are trained in the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, or they are certainly aware of the requirements. It is not that we do not provide any DDA training for other members of staff, because we do. We always train them and supply them with literature containing the salient issues that emerge at polling stations. The Electoral Commission provides a comprehensive training manual for staff, which includes the requirements of the DDA. I am sure that we all issue that to our staff. Getting them to read it is the problem, but that is enforced at the training sessions that we provide for our staff, which last around an hour and a half.

Ann Jones: Thank you. We are running out of time, I am afraid. You are welcome to stay with us—at least until the coffee break—so that we can have a good look at the portable polling booth. I looked at it prior to the meeting, and I do not think that the elements of it that are to help disabled people in wheelchairs will stop able-bodied people from using it. If we took the common denominator that we looked at, I think that we would solve a lot of our problems. I understand that there are privacy issues as regards taller people, but I would quite like to have a chair to sit on when I go to vote. We all think that we must stand there and mark a cross with a blunt pencil tied to a piece of string that does not reach the ballot paper—that was my experience of voting, a few years back. If we provided a chair, it would be another way of encouraging people. We need to make it friendlier, as it can sometimes be slightly intimidating and daunting for voters, particularly first-time voters, to stand in a rickety booth that feels like it might fall on you. I would welcome it if you stayed so that we can have a look at the booth during the coffee break. Thank you for your evidence. I was pleased to hear you say that you are willing to work with Scope and similar organisations. If they are not watching this meeting, they can read the transcript. I am sure that we can put people in touch with you as an organisation. I thank you for starting with that positive move, because that shows that we can move forward on that. Thanks for your time this morning. Are you going to stay with us?

Mr Screen: I do not about the other two, but I certainly will stay. Apart from the fact of my interest, I need to take the booth back with me. ["Laughter."]

Ann Jones: Yes, you do. You are really a captive audience, I am afraid. If you need to go, perhaps we could arrange to bring it over to you.

Mr Screen: I would be delighted to stay.

Ann Jones: Thank you. We will move on to our next set of witnesses, from the Welsh Local Government Association. We are pleased to have Naomi and Paula with us. We are grateful for the paper that the WLGA has provided. Naomi, will you make just a brief introduction, and we will then move to Members' questions?

Ms Alleyn: Thank you. As you stated, we have submitted a paper to the committee, in which we refer to previous evidence provided to the committee on access to polling stations. Having gone back to review some of that evidence, in preparing for our contribution to the committee, it became clear that some of the issues that were raised in 2002 still need to be addressed. However, the evidence provided by the Electoral Commission and the discussion with the Association of Electoral Administrators and its work point to an improving picture of access to polling to stations. I think that we all agree that more improvements need to be made, but there is a feeling that we are travelling in the right direction and that there have been improvements.

One issue that the committee has picked up on is the consistency of access to polling stations across Wales. That is obviously an issue that we need to look at. I think that the AEA has just talked about the fact that there are many examples of good practice across Wales, and we need to ensure that they are rolled out more widely across all polling stations.

10.20 a.m.

Without wishing to be overly negative about the report from Scope Cymru, I would say that we need to put it into context. Bob just said that there were around 6,000 polling stations in Wales, and Scope looked at 133 for the survey, so that works out at a little more than 2 per cent. We must ensure that we have firm, robust evidence that we can use to assess where we are now, and where those improvements need to be made in the future. That leads on to some of the recommendations that we made in the paper.

I will not rehearse the issues, as I know that you are more than familiar with them. Having looked through the evidence and the submissions that you have received—and I am fortunate to have also seen the Disability Wales submission in advance—I think that we would agree that there is a need for more disability equality training for polling station staff. I do not want to steal Disability Wales's thunder, but it is about ensuring disability equality and not just awareness of disability issues. People must be equipped with the knowledge that they need to assist and support people as and when required. It is not just about awareness of the legislation; there are practical steps that need to be addressed as well.

As the AEA just said, a lot of the polling station staff are council staff, so we need to ensure that there is ongoing disability equality training across all councils. Staff who will be working in the polling stations will then be picked up through that training, so that when it gets to the stage of discussions with the AEA, it is about reinforcing that guidance rather than starting from scratch.

We would also support the use of the polling station inspectors who were referred to. We should look at their role in providing advice on the ground on polling day to ensure that some of the issues that have been raised in the Polls Apart survey are addressed. Although I was aware of the Welsh Assembly Government's strategic equality and diversity unit's work on accessible buildings, I am not sure that people outside are particularly aware of it. We must increase public awareness that lists of accessible buildings are being compiled. So, that information is out there, and people can use it.

Going through some of our recommendations, the work of Scope Cymru has brought this next issue to our attention very forcefully over the last few years, but we need to look at the robustness of polling station surveys, and it may be that we look at some kind of longitudinal survey that has consistency. The surveys that were conducted in 2007 may involve completely different polling stations to those surveyed previously, so we do not have any idea of the consistency of those improvements.

I will finish by saying that I am pleased that all the submissions so far seem to indicate that the direction of travel is towards improvement, and that there is far greater awareness of the issues. It is not just willingness; practical steps are being taken by administrators to address these issues at the local level.

Ann Jones: Thank you. I will kick off with one question while my voice holds out. Should the Welsh Local Government Association be asking all its members to ensure that, at budget rounds, electoral administration departments are made a priority, though perhaps not a major priority? We should not assume that the election administration office does not need funding in years when there are no elections. That will not happen this year, as there are local government elections in May—but it will happen for next year's budget round, as we do not have any elections. So, should the local government association take a view that it should be a permanent fixture in the budget to be reviewed, so that work can be done between elections? It seems to me that there is always a pinch point. We pull the funding back, because it not deemed necessary, but then, during election year, we expect the earth to be moved a lot faster, though we are effectively giving people a plastic shovel rather than a JCB to do that job.

Ms Alleyne: It would be difficult for the WLGA to take that line, because we agree with non-hypothecation, and there are several competing local government finance priorities across the piece. We could highlight the importance of this issue, not only for access to democracy by voters, but also because a lot of the buildings that are used are public and council buildings, and so there is often a timetable for their improvement. However, it would be difficult for us to say to local authorities that they should have a budget line for this, or to say what amount it should be, because we agree with the non-hypothecation of the funding that goes to local authorities, for them to allocate that funding depending on local priorities. However, we could make sure that we highlight this as an important issue, not just because of access to polling stations, but because of the wider issues of access to public buildings.

Christine Chapman: First, I want to raise a general point. In your report, you talked about local authorities undertaking a range of involvement activities with disabled people. I am aware of some of the fora, but how effective do you think they are at the moment and how much monitoring or auditing is your organisation doing of these fora in their work with local authorities?

Ms Walters: To put that into context, we were referring to authorities' involvement activities in establishing their priorities under their disability equality schemes. Some authorities have found that quite easy to do, but some have found it very difficult. The recent Disability Rights Commission report stated that improvements in involvement could be made; however, it also pointed out that some of the more effective involvement activities that were undertaken could be done in partnership. So, there are some really good examples of partnership working between local authorities, local health boards and NHS trusts, for example, in certain parts of Wales.

A key measure of how successful they were was the feedback that the authorities had on their schemes' priorities, when those schemes went out to consultation, as the involvement activities were there to involve disabled people in setting the priorities. So, they were not just one-off events; there needed to be a continuous dialogue in setting the schemes' direction, which meant that it was not just a pure consultation. In addition, the legislation calls for that relationship to be sustainable over time. The critical issue for local authorities is that it is all very well to involve individuals at the beginning of the scheme but, if you do not talk to people or involve them throughout the duration of the scheme—that is, if you do not feed back to them on progress, and monitor that—you will open yourself up to external challenge and scrutiny. If you do not report back to the individuals who were involved, in three years' time, when you want to go back out and instigate new involvement activities, you will not have that level of support again, and it will be extremely difficult. I suppose that my point is that, as long as authorities are reporting back, we should have some idea in a few years' time of how successful they were. If they find it difficult to do again, that means that perhaps something in the system has slipped.

Ms Alleyn: In the Disability Rights Commission report, some local authorities are congratulated on the steps that they have taken to involve disabled people. Given that we are talking about consistency, some areas need to improve on that the next time around. It would be interesting to see—and something that we could probably follow up—whether access to polling stations featured in discussions with disabled people on the local priorities around addressing inequalities.

10.30 a.m.

I think that we could probably take a quick straw poll from local authority equality officers, who very often facilitated those events, to get some feedback as to whether those issues featured in those discussions. There are some issues, such as car parking—not just at election time, but generally—which are major issues for disabled people. I know that, in some instances, that was among the feedback that they were receiving. As Paula said, we need to go through this process a few times for disabled people to understand how the information that they feed in will be addressed and, if you like, to bring in support to make sure that some of those issues are more strategic. I think that it would be interesting to find out how many people raised access to polling stations as a key issue that they felt that local authorities should address in those involvement events. We will do that and let you know.

Ann Jones: That will be handy.

Christine Chapman: I think that you are right; it is communication and feedback to the people involved that is really important. I am pleased that, as an organisation, you are looking at this carefully.

Michael German: May I just explore some of the practical issues relating to disability awareness and training? You make the broad recommendation that the Assembly Government should fund this—I would not expect anything else from the WLGA. There is, however, a very practical issue. You referred to the fact that electoral registration officers have only one or two hours, at the most, with people, for one day's work a year. They are not really in the driving seat although they have the responsibility for it. These people usually work elsewhere in local authorities or other public bodies. How would you see that obligation being carried out, if there were an obligation to include training of this sort, given the problems that have just been identified?

Ms Alleyn: Do you mean the problems of covering the polling station or just in general?

Michael German: Let us assume that the Welsh Assembly Government gives you the money to fund disability and equality training for all presiding officers and staff who are going to manage polling stations. You now have another problem: how are you going to get the people together? How are you going to organise that, when you have just one or two hours a year, which is all that they get, and they also have to do all the other things that they are currently doing? It is going to cost a lot more money because you would then ask the Welsh Assembly Government to fund the time spent away from their main employment to allow them to do that training. It is not a question of funding for the training, it is getting time off for people from their other jobs and that is very expensive.

Ms Alleyne: Yes. It was identified by the Access Association that the timeframe presented some of the difficulty in doing that. That is why, to a certain degree, we need to build that into the ongoing training that is provided across councils for their staff on the equality agenda, because these issues should be picked up. It is not to do with them being polling station staff: they should already be going through a programme of training around these issues in relation to legislative requirements.

There are some other innovative ways that also need to be looked at. We undertook some training-needs analysis in relation to equality training—in that instance, for elected members—and one issue that arose was that training, awareness and the understanding of the requirements should not be done on a one-off basis: on this day, you go for this training. We need to ensure that we have continuous drip, drip of information and guidance to staff and elected members around the equality agenda, so that it is not something that happens once every four years, and people say, 'I went on a training course'. You can have newsletters from councils to their staff that talk about the importance of disability awareness and disability equality training, the issues and the impact of not having appropriate services for disabled people.

We have also been working with an organisation around developing e-learning tools for council staff, which, again, are being rolled out in a number of local authorities. In some local authorities, they are starting to get to 100 per cent of staff having been through those e-learning processes. The effectiveness of those has been evaluated. They can be done individually, not in people's own time, but at least you do not have to turn up to a course on a specific day; you can undertake the training when it is suitable for you. We have also had authorities that have brought people together within departments to share that learning as they use those e-learning tools.

We need to be innovative on this. I think that for the Assembly elections in 2003, the WLGA, with the Disability Rights Commission, went to talk to the Association of Electoral Administrators, and provided some written guidance that could be disseminated to polling station staff on the day to give them some pointers and guidance on these issues. It is important that we do not see that as a one-off, but continue to ensure that we are informing people on these agendas. However, we still need to consider how we could ensure that all staff had been appropriately trained.

Michael German: The 'how' is particularly important, because people sign up for one day a year; I do not know how far in advance of the elections you recruit people from local authorities to be presiding officers. Do you know how many people sign up every year? Do you think that what we really need is more of an ongoing commitment from people? So that, if they are going to get some support in managing these things, we do not want people to just sign up once a year for that year only; we want them to sign up to doing it for as long as they work for the local authority.

Ms Alleyne: I am sorry, but I could not comment on that. I am not aware of the recruitment process.

Michael German: We are looking for uniformity, for guidance, and to make a change that does not leave it up to X or Y local authority. We want to ensure that this happens universally. To do that, we may have to go back to the fundamentals, such as how you recruit people from local authority staff. Do you have data on that? Is there any way of knowing whether people tend to sign up to do the job once, forever, or for a period of time while they are working for a local authority? If you want to ensure that they get, as you put it, the drip, drip of help, information and support, you must consider whether it is worth providing that for just one day a year. You really need to get people to do the job over a certain period, in which case you must revise the whole process of appointing these people. That is the point that I was trying to get at. If we are seeking uniformity, how do you, as the Welsh Local Government Association, achieve that? What is your view on how we can get that?

Ms Alleyne: I can see the sense in asking people to commit to undertaking those roles over a certain period. That would help with the consistency of training and ensure that people had a much better knowledge of the polling stations in their areas and an awareness of the improvements needed to ensure that they are fully accessible. I can see the sense in that, but the difficulty is that staff will always move on and there will always be some level of turnover. However, perhaps we could look at how we could recruit and retain presiding officers over a longer period.

Michael German: Do you accept that your initial comment that we need to provide continuing support and training—for this as one of their roles—goes hand in hand with having consistency in staff, for as long as they may be employed by the local authority?

Ms Alleyne: Yes.

Mark Isherwood: You refer to the fact that councils have undertaken extensive stakeholder consultations, and your comments are generally based on the feedback that you have had from your members. You say that 14 authorities provided feedback, so what about the other eight? Do you suspect that there is any link between this and good or bad practice? Is it simply the case that those 14 authorities are very good at filling in forms, or are they simply doing this better? Are the other eight so busy doing it right that they are not filling in forms, or is it the opposite?

My second point builds on Mike's comments. It is about moving from 'Why not?', which is the first stage of change management, to 'How?', and then selling that to everyone so that everyone feels that they own the agenda. In my previous work, in both the voluntary and private sectors, the choice did not exist; it had to be done. I have been to breakfast meetings and lunch meetings, with business organisations and solicitors and others providing presentations on recruitment, development and employment in reference to these agendas.

10.40 a.m.

I have been to training days with staff where the staff finish the day by proposing solutions—this was a housing association, and I was a board member—and we developed our policies from what the staff had agreed in those meetings. You are right about e-learning; in my previous paid job, we covered this through e-learning, modules and tests and then it was the manager's job through performance management to ensure that they were embedded, understood and delivered. So, again, it is down to the performance management aspect and the continuous aspect. I am a little concerned, because, from my first-hand experience in the voluntary and private sector, going back a decade, I know that this has been happening. Certainly that was the case with the organisations that I was involved in. Why are we still putting up barriers at this level?

Ms Walters: In terms of our scoping exercise, I contacted all 22 authorities and I also received extra feedback from another authority yesterday. So, it is a slightly higher number. In terms of those who have not responded, to be honest, I gave a very tight timescale to authorities in which to respond. I wrote out on Thursday afternoon and asked for feedback on Monday, because I needed to turn the report around. Of the feedback that I received, I have given an idea of the themes, which are common themes, and the response that I received yesterday reflected many of the issues that I have included in the paper. I am not involved with the eight authorities, so I cannot state whether or not those eight authorities are good or bad. However, I gave a very short timescale and it could be that there were people on leave, and so on, but in terms of feedback, I was quite pleased by it and it came through very quickly. In some cases, it was explicit feedback, and there was much interest in this particular area due to the fact that it is high on the agendas of electoral officers. I have tried to choose the examples of good practice that seem to emerge from the majority of the responses in that regard.

Ms Alleyne: Can you clarify the second part of your question?

Mark Isherwood: You explained the barriers and the difficulties that must be overcome. Mike has explored the need to move to considering how it can be done, that is, how we overcome those barriers. I was just expressing my concern, because I know from my previous experience of the voluntary and private sectors, there was no choice—they knew that the requirements would be statutory. So, whether or not they liked it, it had to be done and embedded. Yet, here we are still talking about barriers and why it cannot be done, or saying that it can be done but that it will take a long time and we will never really get it right. However, all organisations in the private sector and voluntary sector work within tight budgets as we have heard from other evidence that we have taken in committee, but they have had to do it, and imaginatively. You mentioned e-learning and I also referred to distance learning, and embedding this in the performance culture, and a systematic human resource management tool through change management. Why is this not happening, and how can we make sure that it does happen rather than it simply being a paper exercise for the likes of us to consider at reviews?

Ms Alleyne: With regard to training or in general?

Mark Isherwood: Training and the cultural shift—performance management as a continuous process, rather than an annual appraisal for someone to put away in a file for a year. That is how successful organisations work, and it is the other two legs on the three-legged stool. The question is how to get the third leg to take it on board and deliver it within the resources available, rather than find reasons not to do so.

Ms Alleyne: It is a difficult question to answer. There is a variety of reasons why there is not enough training; not just disability equality training, but enough equality training across the board within public bodies across Wales. Some of that is to do with the cost, some of it is to do with the appropriateness, and some of it could be people saying, 'We conducted a round of training a couple of years ago; we feel that the staff have been through that'. So, it may be that they are developing a cyclical process and this has not yet come back around.

We would like to see a more structured and strategic approach to training across local government, because, under the public sector duties, there are requirements to provide that training. It is important to make sure that the training is not just general awareness, but can link back to people's roles and what it means at a practical level in terms of embedding it into their day jobs. So, it is how they conduct their business rather than, 'This is how I have developed a policy, and now I need to consider the equality dimensions as part of that'. The issue is rising up the agenda, but still has some way to go in terms of making sure that it is fully mainstreamed across everything and all of the business that local authorities and public authorities undertake.

To bring it back to the issue about there still being barriers in terms of access to polling stations, as has been mentioned, there are 6,000 polling stations, and they can change. In some of them, it is nigh on impossible to make sure that there is physical access. The Scope survey picks up on other issues that need to be addressed and need to be improved upon. There is a general willingness to make that happen. I appreciate the frustration that you feel, but any change management programme will take a long period of time. When you have large and complex organisations, like local authorities, it takes time to turn the ship. We are just in the process of finalising a new equality improvement framework for local authorities that builds on the equality standard, but links much more closely to the Wales programme for improvement. So, again, in terms of following the improvement processes, this would ensure that the equality dimensions are part and parcel of the joint risk assessment, how they identify their improvement priorities. Having looked at some of our experience on implementing the equality standard, we are keen to ensure that this work now focuses very much on the service level, because that is where the front-line services are being delivered. We need to ensure that staff within the services are aware of, and fully equipped to fulfil, not only their responsibilities, but that the systems that they follow in developing their business plans have equality as an integral part. In terms of access to polling stations, it is not the only issue that we are still grappling with in terms of ensuring that there is full equality of access. I agree that there are still a number of barriers, and we need to look at this. There is a positive direction of travel, but, in identifying where the gaps are, we need to focus our attention on those areas for the future.

Ann Jones: Are there any further questions? I see not. Thank you, Naomi and Paula, for coming in and presenting your paper.

We will break until 11.05 a.m., but I urge you to have a look at that polling booth to see what you think. We could then, perhaps, make some recommendations based on that.

"Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod rhwng 10.49 a.m. ac 11.06 a.m."

"The meeting adjourned between 10.49 a.m. and 11.06 a.m."

Ann Jones: I remind Members and others to ensure that mobile phones, pagers or BlackBerrys are switched off.

For the final session this morning, I welcome Graham Findlay, the principal access officer for Disability Wales, and Alan Hunt, from the Access Association. I thank you for agreeing to come at such short notice, but Members were keen that we should hear from you, as representatives of people who use the services. Will one of you please make a short presentation before we move to questions?

Mr Findlay: I will kick off if that is okay, Chair. I will just refer to some of the key points in my report. I think that one thing in the report to make clear is that, from the brief access group survey that Disability Wales conducted, it seems that disabled people's experience of the voting process is quite patchy. There are some very good experiences and some quite bad ones, which is to be expected in a way, and which is reflected in what the Welsh Local Government Association has been saying as well. The key things to come out, which are reinforced by the WLGA, are around staff awareness and attitudes and the issue about the need for training. There has been quite a lot of focus, quite understandably until quite recently, on physical access to polling stations, and I think that we need to start thinking about looking beyond the physical access issues and at having an inclusive approach. What has also come out from our members is that disability is a diverse issue, and that disability affects people in different walks of life, different genders, and so on. We need to include local authorities to make some of these partnerships with local access groups and disabled people's groups work to help the situation improve.

Ann Jones: Alan, do you have anything to add?

Mr Hunt: As secretary of the Welsh region of the Access Association, I think that the role of access officers is crucial. I have not made any comparison, but it would be interesting for me to do a comparison between the patchy facilities that Graham has reported on and what the access officer for that authority has to say. Within our authority, the access officer's role is crucial in assessing the polling stations before the event and in giving advice.

11.10 a.m.

As the Association of Electoral Administrators has said, it is a very steep learning curve for polling station officers to go through to ensure that polling stations are accessible. They are not likely to get it right; it needs somebody with greater expertise and more general knowledge, and only an access officer, I feel, can do that.

Michael German: May I start with that point about access officers? I note your point that only nine of the 22 local authorities have one, and you say that those posts are part-time and shared. What was the stimulus for local authorities to get these people in the first place? Was there a bit of policy pressure from somewhere or some funding? Is that funding available to all local authorities, with just some having chosen not to pick it up? As a corollary, are these posts seen as offering a good career progression, or are these people who are kept in the background who, when they come out, are felt to cause a bit of inconvenience?

Mr Hunt: Initially, the arrival of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was the spur for employing access officers. I am not sure whether, originally, there was any funding—I do not think that there was. Some authorities went the whole hog and employed full-time access officers, while others thought that the job could perhaps be done by tacking it on to a building control officer's post or an equality officer's post. The reality is much more than that as it covers everything, from education and transportation to the built environment, advising the general public and advising the council, but specifically, on the DDA and everything that surrounds it.

On your question about the status of an access officer, that also depends on the authority. I happen to be based in the transportation and environment department. I cannot say that my status is high, but being based in that department has certain advantages. I know of other officers who are in policy or personnel, and they seem to have a higher status, but that depends on the authority. I feel that access officers should have a high status, because they are promoting equality and inclusivity across the board. We are here today to talk about procedures at polling stations, but the principles that we are discussing apply across the board.

There are broader principles. We have already talked about training. I am not convinced that there is enough robust training in local authorities, but there should be. If the training was robust in the first place, then picking presiding officers and officers to man polling stations would not be so difficult. What we are having to do at present is more of a knee-jerk reaction, because the training is not there as it should be.

Michael German: Presumably, you heard what the Welsh Local Government Association said about having a continuous programme of improvement in training, which seemed sensible to me, and which means that you have to link, as you said before, much more carefully in making sure that the job of the polling clerk or presiding officer is mainstreamed into the role of the local authority. Who would be best placed within local authorities to deliver what is, in fact, your first recommendation, that there should be this attitudinal training and compulsory disability equality training? Who would be the right people? Would it be the access officer, the equalities officer, or who?

Mr Hunt: To deliver disability equality training, it really needs to be from a disabled person or disability groups. We have trainers in the authorities, but their main role is not to teach or give disability equality training. It is not the same; in our authority, it is included in the induction training as part of everything else, such as health and safety and so on. That seems to be it. It would be more useful and valid if it were provided by a disabled person who is trained as a trainer. There is then the opportunity to interact, to ask questions and to appreciate the specific problems for that individual, but even that individual might not know all the issues. For example, a wheelchair user might not fully appreciate what a blind or visually impaired person experiences. However, they are networking and meeting all sorts of people and have a much greater awareness than your standard trainer who has picked it up from a book or may have had some sort of training but not specific disability equality training.

Mr Findlay: We recommend disability equality training. Different labels are bandied around in terms of DDA training, disability awareness training and so on. Disability equality training is quite specific—it is about removing barriers and it promotes the social model of disability, and it explains processes and ways to remove those barriers. Probably an element of that would be awareness training. We strongly suggest and promote the idea that such training should be run by a suitably qualified disabled person. That is important.

Christine Chapman: In your recommendations, you talk about looking at a creative approach to providing accessible venues for polling stations. You talk about supermarkets, which is an interesting idea. I know that we have talked today about the fact that people can have postal votes, but I know many people who like to go to polling stations because they like the public statement of committing to democracy, which is important for many people. However, have you done much work on looking at a creative approach, using alternative venues that we would tend not to use or that we have not used up until now because we have tended to go for schools and community centres? Have you looked at that in any depth as an organisation?

Mr Hunt: We have not as an organisation. We would recommend that authorities expand their horizons and not only look to the obvious. Anywhere that is accessible can be used as a polling station. I suppose that you are right and it would be worth suggesting that, or it could be a campaign by the Access Association, or maybe it would be worth running a poll of superstores—your Tescos and the like—to see what issues arise from that. Superficially, they may be accessible, but there may be issues that we need to resolve. That would be an interesting exercise for the Access Association to consider. That is a good point.

Ann Jones: Are there any other questions? I see that there are not. You raised the question of whether access officers should go around and look at polling stations. We have heard from the Association of Electoral Administrators and from the Welsh Local Government Association that staffing is always a problem and that they always use a pool of people. So, there is not that core of people who are always involved in that. In your report, you say that perhaps they should work with the access groups. Who would you see as being the ultimate person to make the decision if an access officer said that a particular polling station was unsuitable, but that they were many weeks into the election campaign? You will also have heard the AEA talking about problems associated with the printing of ballot papers and polling cards, for example. So, at what point should people should go around and survey polling stations? I notice that you say that they should be there, but at what point should access officers do a survey of polling stations?

11.20 a.m.

Mr Hunt: It should be as early as possible. However, there are, for example in my area, polling stations that are consistent, and it is only the last-resort ones, where they have not been able to secure the building that they had before, that are usually the problem. Therefore, if you can identify polling stations sufficiently well in advance—a year, or two years even—it gives you more time. When I first started, I literally had two weeks to go around 100-odd polling stations to try to provide some sort of report on their accessibility. The authority already had a store of ramps for those that were not completely accessible, to improve their accessibility. However, the problem ones were the ones that were last-minute ones; there was one in particular where the slope was 1:4—that is very steep, and it would cause most wheelchairs to tip over backwards. However, as far as the person who arranged the room was concerned, it had a ramp, but there was no concept of who was going to use it.

Therefore, it should be done as early as possible, but it is not always easy to get in there that early. However, having done the exercise once, the next election acts as a mopping-up exercise, and I have found that facilities are improving. Village halls, community halls, and schools are all slowly improving their accessibility, and they have permanent ramps, good wayfinding and good lighting. We tend to have spare ramps now, whereas when I first started we were scrabbling around trying to find extra ramps; everyone was looking for extra ramps, and you could not buy one for love or money. It is an improving situation, but only an access officer has the expertise to look from every angle.

Mr Findlay: As my colleague said, an even more powerful driver for change would be working with access groups in tandem with access officers. The expertise in an access group is often considerable. It also covers many impairments and issues. Therefore, if you get an access group involved—people with learning difficulties, visually impaired and deaf people, and so on—you get a spectrum of experience. Not all access groups are like that, but it should be encouraged.

Mr Hunt: In the absence of an access officer, connection with an access group is vital. In conjunction with an access officer, the feedback is easier. Therefore, it is vital that authorities facilitate access groups.

Ann Jones: On your point, Graham, it is about different types of impairment or disability. We talk about ramps, and ramps are okay, but I notice that, in your report, you make the point that a ramp can often be bouncy if there is a handrail on one side and not on the other. For someone who has a mobility problem, but not necessarily total immobility, a ramp like that can be as dangerous as attempting to use steps with handrails on both sides. However, a ramp on a steep gradient can be no good for someone in a wheelchair, or if someone is trying to push them up. There are also many other impairments.

At what point does reasonability come into all this? We want the ultimate, but, looking at some of the buildings, we are not going to get the ultimate. At what point do you believe access groups have to accept that there may be an occasion when a person may have to say, 'I need some help to vote; I cannot do this on my own.'? What sort of training should there be for staff about such things as closing polling stations to maintain secrecy—for the secret ballot? I have sometimes had to ask presiding officers to close a polling station so that a person with a visual impairment could tell someone who they wanted to vote for and could trust that that person would follow their instructions, because that is what they have always done and that is what they feel comfortable doing. They would not have been comfortable using the Braille ballot paper or the tactile voting device. There is sometimes an issue regarding what is reasonable. Some access groups would say that that is appalling because that person should be allowed to place the cross on the ballot paper themselves and we should make it as easy as possible for them to do that. However, some people do not want to do that, and we should consider at what point we consider reasonability.

Mr Findlay: To pick up on that, Chair, most disabled people are reasonable, and I think that the issue there is about how we work together to achieve a solution. There should be best practice guidance and clear standards that we should all try to achieve. I recognise, as a disabled person and an access officer, that some buildings will not be accessible. It would be difficult to make some listed buildings accessible, and it is about how we solve that problem together. It may be about providing alternative services or different types of voting systems. That is the direction in which we should be going. It is about partnership working to try to solve the problem together. People encounter gross discrimination, with quite bad practice, bad attitudes and appalling situations, and that makes them angry.

Mr Hunt: On the point that you raised about closing the polling station temporarily so that a blind person can vote, who would give that authority? The flexibility is there to allow that to happen as far as I am concerned, but would the officer in charge of the polling station feel comfortable in doing that?

Ann Jones: It comes down to training.

Mr Hunt: Yes. It is about having specific training in this area.

Ann Jones: I think that that is sometimes overlooked. I am not having a go at anyone in particular, but if you are aware that that can be done, it is different to someone saying, 'I am having difficulty voting', and the officer asking, 'Who did you say that you wanted to vote for?', when the polling station is full. That takes away the secrecy of the ballot. If you close the polling station and the person is just in the presence of the presiding officer, who has signed the Official Secrets Act 1989, you then trust implicitly that he or she will put the cross in the right place. I am not saying for one moment that they would not do that, but there is a world of difference between closing the polling station for just the presiding officer and the voter and pulling the voter to one side to vote. Most people will feel that, when they are speaking to a disabled person, they have to shout very loudly at them, whatever their disability. That is a real problem, and that is where disability equality training, as opposed to disability awareness training, comes in. I am pleased that you said that you would work together on that, because that would be helpful to electoral administration departments in councils.

Mr Finlay: The issue for our access groups is capacity, which I mentioned in my report. Some groups are doing quite well with support from their local authority, but others are in a dire situation with no support or funding coming from the local authority. They are expected to work quite closely with the local authorities, and that situation obviously generates resentment.

Mr Hunt: Yes, it does. I hear about authorities that make great use of the access groups but do not feel that they have to pay them as consultants. That makes it very difficult, as the groups have to rely totally on voluntary work. People have a lot of expertise to offer, and if they could be paid to provide it, they are more likely to be available to do it. It is a vicious circle. The whole issue of access group funding needs to be given more priority.

11.30 a.m.

Mr Findlay: Another issue is that, about 15 years ago, there was a real ambition to have all of Wales covered with a consistent standard of access group work, and so on. Sadly, that has not happened; indeed, it has declined, to a degree, and some access groups have folded, and yet there is still a demand for their input and their work.

Mark Isherwood: On the training aspect, thank you for explaining and re-emphasising the difference between awareness and equality duties. However, an understanding of the social model and the statutory obligations is essential to tackle barriers. Is the awareness aspect not required to make that holistic, rather than simply a case of ticking certain boxes—for deaf people, visually impaired people, wheelchair users, and so on? There should be a broader awareness of barriers that may not be on the list, or linkages that are perhaps not in a document but which you might pick up on if you were aware.

My second point is that you refer to only nine authorities having disability access officers. Could we approach this through the regional partnership boards—not only in terms of sharing corporate services, but also in delivering training systematically and culturally on a regionalised basis? It also occurs to me that, certainly in north Wales, Citizens Advice has a disability access officer, who is very active in identifying barriers in all sorts of different scenarios—this is obviously one of them, leisure facilities is another, and so on. He has perceived the inequalities between different local authorities, which may breach the duty in itself. I am aware that Citizens Advice is contracted by some local authorities on the parent partnership service. Could it have a role, on a contracted basis, to help the local authorities at a regional level to take this agenda forward?

Mr Findlay: Yes, absolutely. We have worked with Citizens Advice in Flintshire and Newport, helping people to make potential cases under the Disability and Discrimination Acts. As for training, I think that it is a specific skill as regards disability equality. There is a core group of trainers in Wales that I would say is competent to deliver that training, but it is not a huge group of people.

I would wholly agree with you on the regional partnerships. We are certainly looking to set up regional structures for our organisation so that we can help local groups on a regional basis. Unfortunately, we have not secured the funding to do that, but we would be looking at regional partnerships, absolutely.

Ann Jones: I see that there are no further questions. Thank you very much for coming, and thank you for staying for the whole of the meeting. I hope that you found it interesting, and I hope that we will find a partnership developing here. I know that, when Bob gave his presentation, he was keen to work with anybody who would make life easier. Thank you as well for your review, your annual report, and your 'More than Words' document, which we have all had a copy of. Keep up the good work. It is good to have you here, and to hear your evidence.

A copy of the transcript will be sent to all presenters to check for accuracy. Your evidence will then form part of our report. Thank you.

That concludes the meeting today. Our next meeting is on 8 November.

"Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 11.34 a.m.
The meeting ended at 11.34 a.m."