

Equality of Opportunity Committee

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Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales – Evidence from Scope Cymru

Background

Polls Apart¹ is a campaign to open up Britain's democracy to disabled people. Scope has been reviewing disabled people's access to the UK electoral system at every General Election since 1992 and Welsh Assembly elections since 2003.

At the last General Election, volunteers surveyed over 2,000 polling stations across the UK and found that 68% of polling stations had one or more access problems that could make the experience of voting inaccessible to a disabled person. Access barriers included poor physical access, inaccessible information and staff who were not trained to support disabled voters.

Polling stations are housed in public buildings such as schools, libraries, Town Halls and community centres; as such the campaign for accessible polling stations extends beyond access at election time.

1. Accessibility at the last General Election (2005)

In 2005, 70% of polling stations in Wales had one or more serious access barriers that could prevent a disabled voter voting independently. In general, we found that results for Wales were slightly poorer than those for the UK overall.

Disappointingly, just 59% of polling stations in Wales had level access, compared to 60% UK wide. The fact that over 40% of polling stations were not physically accessible prompts some serious questions about the extent to which service providers are complying with the duties under the *Disability Discrimination Act*² of 2005.

Disabled people also reported that buildings that had ramps or accessible entrances could not always use them as they were locked away or not used. The increase in the use of poorly designed and unsafe ramps suggests that temporary ramps are widely being used as an inappropriate alternative to permanent access adjustments. Badly

¹ Scope (2005) *Polls Apart 4: Access to the General Election 2005 (Regional Report: Wales)*, Cardiff: Scope

² *Disability Discrimination Act* [2005]:

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2005/ukpga_20050013_en_1

designed or fitted ramps are dangerous and do nothing to improve access, yet in Wales 36% of ramps were inappropriately designed or dangerous.

64% of polling stations in Wales had low-level polling booths compared to 66% nationwide. Low-level ballot booths guarantee privacy for wheelchair users and disabled and older voters who may need to sit down to vote and are one of the simplest ways to improve access at a polling station.

There were a number of areas where the results from Welsh respondents indicated a stronger performance than the UK average. Some 74% of polling stations in Wales provided a large print notice of the ballot paper and 69% provided a tactile voting device compared to UK-wide results of 71% and 68% respectively. Though this is encouraging it must be noted that these are legal requirements under the *Representation of the People Act*³(2000) so there is still significant work to be done to ensure that 100% of polling stations are compliant.

Surprisingly for a country with a large rural population, 89% of survey respondents lived within a mile of their polling station compared to 84% across the UK.

2. Accessibility at the last Welsh Assembly Elections (2007)

Polls Apart Cymru 2007⁴ was an evaluation of the accessibility of the elections for the National Assembly for Wales on 3rd May 2007. Its purpose was to identify whether Wales' electoral processes have become more accessible to disabled voters since the last National Assembly for Wales election. This election was also covered by the *Electoral Administration Act*⁵ of 2006, which requires polling stations to be reviewed every four years, and the Disability Equality Duty⁶, which requires public bodies to promote disabled people's participation in public life.

Polls Apart Cymru 2007 found that 70% of the polling stations that were surveyed did not meet the five simple access tests highlighted below. This compares with 77% at the 2003 Assembly Elections. The 2007 results show that while improvements have been made in certain areas, significant access issues still exist. Taken as a group, research

³ *Representation of the People Act* [2000]:

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/pdf/ukpga_20000002_en.pdf

⁴ Scope (2007) *Polls Apart Cymru 2007: A reassessment of the accessibility of Welsh polling stations during the 2007*, Cardiff: Scope

⁵ *Electoral Administration Act* [2006]:

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/pdf/ukpga_20060022_en.pdf

⁶ *Disability Discrimination Act* [2005]:

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2005/ukpga_20050013_en_1

in 2003, 2005 and 2007 indicates that about two-thirds of polling stations in Wales remain inaccessible.

The results can be separated into five broad areas:

- a. **Registering to vote:** The process of registering to vote is just as important as voting itself. Some 17% of respondents said they did not find it easy registering to vote and, perhaps tellingly, 17% of those who said they would prefer to vote by post, voted at a polling station at this election. Providing information in plain English and plain Welsh and in alternative formats is vital to ensuring that people are able to register to vote. Particular attention needs to be paid to groups of voters who are traditionally excluded, including people with mental health conditions and learning difficulties and disabled and older people who live in residential settings.
- b. **Physical access:** Almost 70% of polling stations in Wales now have level access entrances. This is a significant improvement and local authorities in Wales should be commended for their work in ensuring more polling stations are physically accessible. There was a decrease in polling stations without level access to the entrance from 54% in 2003 to 32% in 2007. Similarly, polling stations without level access inside decreased from 10% in 2003 to 5% in 2007.
- c. **Ramps:** Where ramps are used it is important that they are useable and safe. This means that they have the correct gradient for wheelchair users and people with mobility impairments and are strong and securely fitted. Poor-quality ramps were a particular problem in the 2004 election. This year saw significant improvements but one in four of the ramps remained inappropriately designed; with a decrease in inappropriately designed ramps from 43% in 2003 to 27% in 2007. Ramps on their own will not guarantee good access; they have to be set up as part of a holistically accessible environment.
- d. **Accessible information:** The *Electoral Administration Act*⁷ requires all polling stations to display a large print copy of the ballot paper to assist voters with visual impairments. This is one of the simplest statutory requirements and we were surprised and disappointed that half of all polling stations surveyed did not comply with it. We saw an increase in polling stations without a large print copy of the ballot paper from 23% in 2003 to 51% in 2007.

⁷ Ibid

- e. **Modes of voting:** Paper-based voting systems are inherently inaccessible to some groups of voters. In recent years there have been a number of e-voting pilots that have tested new methods of voting using the internet, telephone and SMS/text message. These offer greater flexibility and the ability to tailor the user interface to meet an individual's particular access needs. Interestingly 17% of respondents said they would prefer to vote using an e-voting system (i.e. via the internet, telephone or SMS/text message). This suggests that there is an appetite amongst disabled people in Wales to try new methods of voting. In 2007, 64% of Welsh disabled voters told us that they wanted to vote at a polling station, 18% by post and 17% through e-voting (internet, telephone or SMS/text message).

3. Welsh Council's Compliance with S. 16 of the Electoral Administration Act of 2006 for the 2010 General Election

Between 16th December 2009 and 19th December 2009 Scope sent Freedom of Information requests⁸ to councils throughout the UK to ascertain compliance with S. 16 of the *Electoral Administration Act*⁹ (2006) which creates a duty to review the accessibility of polling stations. Of the 22 councils we contacted in Wales, 14 responded to our request¹⁰ and only 6 in the accessible format in which we requested it¹¹. In total, the information we received gave us data about 1,168 polling stations across Wales.

We asked councils to provide us with information about:

1. The name of every designated polling place.
2. The address of each polling place.
3. The postcode of each polling place
4. The current Parliamentary Constituency that each polling place falls within.
5. If the polling place has been reviewed under Section 16 of Electoral Administration Act 2006.

⁸ Under the *Freedom of Information Act* [2000]:

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2000/pdf/ukpga_20000036_en.pdf

⁹ S. 16 of the *Electoral Administration Act* [2006]:

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/pdf/ukpga_20060022_en.pdf, which amends S. 18C and Schedule 1A of the *Representation of the People Act* [1983]:

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1983/cukpga_19830002_en_1

¹⁰ Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, Bridgend County Borough Council, Carmarthenshire County Council, Ceredigion County Council, Gwynedd County Council, Isle of Anglesey County Council, Monmouthshire County Council, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Newport City Council, Pembrokeshire County Council, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Torfaen County Borough Council, Vale of Glamorgan Council and Wrexham County Borough Council

¹¹ Gwynedd County Council, Monmouthshire County Council, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Torfaen County Borough Council, Vale of Glamorgan Council and Wrexham County Borough Council

6. If it is considered accessible to electors who are disabled persons.
7. If it has been subject to alteration as a result of a Section 16 review.
8. Details of any alterations that have been made.

Based on the information we received, 20% of polling stations (n=301) may not have been reviewed under the Act. Of similar concern is the 24% of polling stations (n=366) which may not be currently accessible to disabled voters. Despite this, just 18% of polling stations (n=254) had been subject to alteration as a result of a S. 16 review. Only seven councils provided us with any information about the alterations that had been made¹² and Pembrokeshire County Council was the exception in giving us comprehensive details about all of the polling stations in their area.

4. Polls Apart 2010

In the run up to this year's General Election Scope will once again be running its Polls Apart campaign, and will be encouraging disabled people to fill in surveys when they vote.

The campaign website www.pollsapart.org.uk will be launched at the beginning of March and will provide information for voters, elected officials and local authority officers with responsibility for election delivery.

Ahead of the General Election the Committee can help open up voting to disabled people in Wales by asking Returning Officers and Electoral Administrators to complete the Polls Apart Access Check List, addressing any problems that they identify. There is still time to find temporary ramps, order information in accessible formats and train staff.¹³

We recognise the good will that exists within the Welsh Assembly and local government on improving access to democracy and we look forward to working with you to make sure that the 2010 elections are as accessible as possible.

Further Information

If you would like any further information please contact:

¹² Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, Carmarthenshire County Council, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Newport City Council, Pembrokeshire County Council, Torfaen County Borough Council and Vale of Glamorgan Council

¹³ The attached spreadsheet can help the Committee identify particular areas of concern.

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