



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Y Pwyllgor Cyfle Cyfartal
The Committee on Equality of Opportunity**

**Dydd Mawrth, 2 Mawrth 2010
Tuesday, 2 March 2010**

Cynnwys
Contents

- 3 Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions
- 4 Hygyrchedd Gorsafoedd Pleidleisio yng Nghymru—Y Diweddaraf—Tystiolaeth gan
Scope Cymru
Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales—Update on Progress—Evidence from
Scope Cymru
- 12 Hygyrchedd Gorsafoedd Pleidleisio yng Nghymru—Y Diweddaraf—Tystiolaeth gan
y Comisiwn Etholiadol
Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales—Progress Update—Evidence from the
Electoral Commission
- 18 Hygyrchedd Gorsafoedd Pleidleisio yng Nghymru—Y Diweddaraf—Tystiolaeth gan
Gymdeithas y Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol
Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales—Update on Progress—Evidence from the
Association of Electoral Administrators

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

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Mohammad Asghar | Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives |
| Eleanor Burnham | Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats |
| Ann Jones | Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Labour (Committee Chair) |
| Janet Ryder | Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales |
| Joyce Watson | Llafur Labour |

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Kay Jenkins | Ymgyrchydd Etholiadau'n Eithrio, Scope Cymru Polls Apart Campaigner, Scope Cymru |
| Kay Jenkins | Pennaeth Swyddfa Cymru, Y Comisiwn Etholiadol Head of Wales Office, The Electoral Commission |
| Philip Johnson | Cadeirydd, Cymdeithas y Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol Chair, Association of Electoral Administrators |
| Ruth Scott | Cyfarwyddwr Polisi ac Ymgyrchiadau, Scope Cymru Director of Policy and Campaigns, Scope Cymru |
| Bob Screen | Ysgrifennydd Dros Dro, Cymdeithas y Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol Acting Secretary, Association of Electoral Administrators |

Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol
National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Catherine Hunt | Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk |
| Claire Morris | Clerc Clerk |
| Helen Roberts | Cynghorydd Cyfreithiol i'r Pwyllgor Legal Adviser to the Committee |
| Denise Rogers | Gwasanaeth Ymchwil yr Aelodau Members' Research Service |

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.28 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.28 a.m.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

[1] **Ann Jones:** Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the Committee on Equality of Opportunity. I see that we have a full committee, so there will be no apologies, although I know that two Members will have to leave for other meetings during the course of this meeting. We will, therefore, move on to take as much evidence as we can.

[2] I remind everyone around the table to switch off their mobile phones, pagers and

anything else that may go off during the meeting. We are not expecting a fire alarm drill this morning, so, should the alarm sound, the ushers will direct us to the nearest exit point.

[3] Do Members have any declarations of interests that they wish to make before we start, other than that they are all voters, I should think? I see that they do not.

9.29 a.m.

**Hygyrchedd Gorsafoddd Pleidleisio yng Nghymru—Y Diweddaraaf—Tystiolaeth
gan Scope Cymru**
**Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales—Update on Progress—Evidence from
Scope Cymru**

[4] **Ann Jones:** Our main business today is to revisit our report on the accessibility of polling stations in Wales. I am delighted to welcome back to the table Kay Jenkins, Polls Apart campaigner, and Ruth Scott, director of policy and campaigns for Scope Cymru. I am sure that they will be able to tell us whether things have changed or not. Thank you both for providing your paper. Time is tight, so we will move straight to Members' questions. Is that okay?

9.30 a.m.

[5] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** That is fine.

[6] **Ann Jones:** The last Polls Apart evaluation took place in 2007, during the Assembly elections. From the brief overview of your conclusions with regard to that survey, which areas had improved most, and which were still a cause for concern?

[7] **Ms Scott:** The area of greatest concern was that we did not see an increase in the numbers of overall-accessible polling stations in comparison to the general election results from 2005. It was disappointing that we did not see a shift there. Overall, with the Assembly elections, from 2003 to 2005 to 2007, we have not really seen an improvement. It is still the case that roughly two thirds of polling stations have one or more access barriers. So, that is disappointing.

[8] We certainly saw an improvement with regard to physical access. Seventy per cent of polling stations that we surveyed in the last Assembly election had level-access entrances, which is fantastic, although there is a bit more work to be done. We are continuing to see some problems with the use of inappropriate ramps. Where ramps are required, it is important that the appropriate ramp is provided. There was still concern about ramps that were not secure, safe or appropriate for the use for which they were intended. Added to that point, we still have concerns about the way that access adjustments are funded. Local authorities can apply for grants for temporary ramps, but if you look at the expenditure year on year, you will see that it would be far more cost-effective in the long term to fund permanent access adjustments to some of these polling stations, which are used year on year.

[9] The National Assembly for Wales (Returning Officers' Charges) Order 2006 means that the Welsh Assembly Government is reimbursing returning officers for some of these access adjustments. We would like to see the Welsh Assembly Government consider funding permanent access adjustments, which would mean an end to this waste of money, in effect, on temporary ramps, which are only there for the day and which do not contribute to the overall accessibility of the building in the community all year round. Many of the buildings being used as polling stations are community buildings designed to be used by the community generally.

[10] **Ann Jones:** I will bring Eleanor in in a moment. You make a good point that, if we are funding temporary ramps for two days every four years, we should perhaps fund permanent changes so that the building can be accessible 365 days a year. From the evidence that you collected in 2007, was any part of Wales particularly badly off? Was there any part that stood out as a shining example? Was there any variation within local authority areas? Did one part serve itself better than other parts, or do you not have that level of detail?

[11] **Ms Scott:** I do not have that level of detail to hand, but I can go back to look at our records and send the information to the committee, if that would be helpful.

[12] **Ann Jones:** Yes, it would be helpful in trying to establish whether it is whole local authority areas that are not taking this seriously or whether it is a more localised issue.

[13] **Ms Scott:** Absolutely. The work that we have been doing recently on freedom of information requests demonstrates the situation. We have had responses from some local authorities, and I would single out Pembrokeshire as an authority that has done an incredibly good, comprehensive job of looking at all of its polling stations. It has sent us information about every adjustment and alteration it has made, and the electoral administration officer has done an incredibly good, comprehensive job of reviewing the situation. The information that we have gathered through freedom of information requests has indicated where there are local authorities that have clearly taken on their responsibilities with regard to reviewing polling stations and made adjustments where they are required. There are others who have not done that, and others from which we have not even had a response. That is indicative of some authorities taking this seriously and others that perhaps have more work to do.

[14] **Eleanor Burnham:** Thinking back to my first bite of the cherry on this, I was amazed at some of the venues that were being used. Should local authorities not only look at temporary venues becoming permanent ones, but also, as you have just indicated is the case in Pembrokeshire, take a proper look at some of the most inaccessible ones, which they should not spend a fortune on because they are the pits? I remember that one was an old chapel that was on a nasty corner; no-one could park there, and I do not know how on earth it was ever considered that that would be at all accessible. So, this is an ongoing affair. As you said, Pembrokeshire has done it, but others could save a lot of money by looking at more appropriate sites.

[15] **Ms Scott:** Absolutely. In the FOI data that we are receiving, we are still seeing caravans on the list, as well as temporary portakabins, which, as we have pointed out in previous reviews, are, in general, very inaccessible. The FOI data that we have received so far for Wales shows that 24 per cent of polling stations to be used are considered to be inaccessible. That is based on the data that we have received from the 14 authorities that have responded. So, we still have significant cause for concern. We have recommended in the past that local authorities need to be a bit more creative in thinking about the kinds of buildings that they could use. We have no objections to people using buildings that might not traditionally have been considered as polling stations, if they are more accessible or more appropriate, or to accessibility being considered in respect of transport, parking and public transport routes, instead of simply the physical access to the building. As you say, buildings that are on the top of high hills are not the most accessible things in the world.

[16] **Ann Jones:** Joyce, do you want to take the next couple of questions?

[17] **Joyce Watson.** Yes. Good morning to you both. Since the publication of 'Polls Apart Cymru 2007', local elections were held in 2008, and the European Parliament elections took place in 2009. Do you have any information about disabled voters in either of those elections?

[18] **Ms Scott:** We run the Polls Apart campaign only for general elections and Assembly elections, so we have not done a formal survey. Kay, as a voter, has had experience since 2007 and can comment.

[19] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** Obviously, I have told you this before, but do you want me to say it again?

[20] **Ann Jones:** It is handy for us to hear it again. I know that you said it powerfully last time. Do you think that it has changed?

[21] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** No. I am quite disappointed that it has not changed. I have become a governor of the school near where I live, which is a polling station. That is not the reason why I became a governor, but it will be the most accessible polling station in the Cynon valley, hopefully. It is disappointing, as this has been going on for years. I do not understand why it is such a problem, because they want our votes. We are a large population, which is made up of not just disabled people, but the elderly and others. We are not asking for anything different. We are asking for access to the building, for a booth that everyone can use, and for large print. I know that Ruth could tell you about findings on using the internet and the different choices in relation to voting. I do not understand why they do not want our vote—that is how it seems to me. I work full time, I pay my taxes, and I want to vote. It is very strange.

[22] **Ann Jones:** So, are you saying that you have not seen a change since you undertook the Polls Apart campaign in 2007?

[23] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** Yes.

[24] **Ann Jones:** So, really and truthfully, before we come back—

9.40 a.m.

[25] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** We came here, but nothing has really changed since that meeting. Accessibility may have changed a bit, but access was not the issue with my polling station—my problem was with what happened once you were in there. I said that I thought it was important to go to polling stations, because I work full time and do not see people very often. So, if you go up there, it is like a social evening. I took my niece and nephew with me, who are 12 and 13, because I think that it is important for them to know why we vote and how you do it and so on, and it is a good job that I took them because it opened their eyes. They saw that I could not vote in the same way as everyone else; I had to go to a corner. It is absolutely appalling.

[26] **Janet Ryder:** On what you have just said, and given that the statistics show that we still have to adapt polling stations to be accessible, would you say that mainstreaming disability access at polling stations has not happened? Is it still seen as an add-on, namely something that we have to do to comply with the law, instead of being something that is fundamentally embedded in how we think about disabled people and how we make all facilities accessible to everyone?

[27] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** Yes.

[28] **Ms Scott:** If you consider that the vast majority of polling stations are community buildings such as schools, church halls and leisure centres or social clubs and the fact that we are still facing problems in terms of physical access, that indicates that we still have a long way to go in terms of the impact of the Disability Discrimination Act 2004 and before the responsibility to make those adjustments is taken seriously.

[29] I would also add that many of the access problems that people continue to face are, as Kay says, related to the set-up of the inside of the polling station. Making the adjustments is not difficult, and we want to get that message across. Providing a low-level polling booth, arranging a station in such a way as to mean that disabled people can move around in it easily and ensuring that staff are properly trained so that they know what the needs of disabled voters are and can adapt to those appropriately is probably the most important message that we would want to give to committee today.

[30] It can make an experience accessible or inaccessible, if someone is provided with good or bad customer service, essentially. In that sense, investing in training and ensuring that polling clerks understand the needs of disabled people and how to meet those needs will mean that, for example, clerks will know what to do with a large-print template and that they will ensure that it is on the wall and, therefore, do not have to scurry around looking for it. Such training would also ensure that they know what to do with a tactile voting device—they will know what it is for and when to offer it. It will also ensure that they set up a low-level polling booth, that they put the ballot box in a place where everyone can reach it and that they understand how it is appropriate to support a disabled voter to vote. If you get all of those things right, you are essentially providing a much more accessible experience for a lot of people.

[31] So, while physical accessibility is really important, I would also highlight issues such as lighting, high visibility and things that work for people with sensory impairments. That sort of customer service that focuses on people's needs in polling stations is absolutely vital and much of the response that we had from 2007 reflected that issue. For example, people had gone into the polling station and had a really bad experience with someone treating them as though they were different and in such a way that made them stand out and made them feel a nuisance or an embarrassment. All of those things colour how someone experiences the process.

[32] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** There are a lot of people out there—you are not short of trainers. We are in most districts; there is a disabled person who could go along and train someone. So, there is no shortage of people who can do that.

[33] **Ann Jones:** That is a key point when you talk to people about this. I have said it so many times, but if we get it right for you, then it is right for everyone else who is coming up behind you. Perhaps they do not need access to the same facilities, but they can still get into the polling stations. If we can get it right for those who need to get into a polling station, then it is right for everyone else, is it not? Joyce and Eleanor have follow-up questions.

[34] **Joyce Watson:** You said that you have looked at accessibility with regard to getting into the polling station, and that Pembrokeshire is leading the way on that, which is excellent news and I am pleased to hear it. When you were asking those questions, did you ask about accessibility once someone has entered the polling station? Are you telling me that those people who ensure good accessibility also make it accessible once you are in?

[35] **Ms Scott:** The survey that we undertook in 2007 looked at a range of different accessibility issues, including physical access and access within the polling station, and things like customer service. So far, we have issued freedom of information requests to every local authority in Wales, asking them for data. Since 2006, there has been a duty to review polling stations every four years with a view to making them as accessible as possible to disabled people. We have asked local authorities to give us that information.

[36] That information largely concerns the physical accessibility of the building, but it also takes account of things like car parking and the physical environment. Obviously, it is not

possible to use that mechanism to assess the accessibility of a polling station internally, because it is only a polling station for polling day. However, we are using the FOI data and we will publish those on the Polls Apart website in the next couple of weeks. We will be encouraging campaigners and disabled people to look at the data and, if they have concerns about whether the information indicates that their polling station will be inaccessible, they can go back to their local authority and ask it what it will do to improve it. So, it is potentially a much more transparent system. People know what to expect. We will then ask people during the next general election to survey their polling station when they vote, and to feed those experiences back to us. So, we will get some data about the insides of polling stations on election day. However, it is obviously hard to do that before the election day itself.

[37] The message that we are trying to promote, and so what we are trying to do with the campaign this year, is that there is still time to make adjustments. If we think that things will not be right, and some local authorities have indicated that they still have inaccessible polling stations, then we will ask what alternative arrangements will be made. If they know that someone is going to have a problem voting at a polling station, then rather than just letting that happen, we need to ask whether there are other ways to make sure that people at least have that information and can make alternative arrangements. They could also ask people to comment or suggest ways in which they can improve that in time for the next election. So, the important message is that there are still things that we can do. The Welsh Assembly Government could really help us to get that message out.

[38] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** It is important for you to choose the people who will work at the polling stations as early as you can. They may be chosen a bit late, around a month before. We need them sooner than that so that we can train them up. That is also important. It is not just a matter of someone sitting behind a desk. We need a group of people in each area so that we can train them.

[39] **Ann Jones:** Eleanor, did you want to come in at this point?

[40] **Eleanor Burnham:** I will wait until I ask my question.

[41] **Ann Jones:** Joyce, did you want to explore training further?

[42] **Joyce Watson:** Yes. You mentioned training, and it is a question that we were going to put to you. Are you aware of any attempts by responsible organisations to involve disabled people in the administration or the training of electoral staff?

[43] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** I know that you are a good organisation, and we have good organisation when it comes to training staff—the Cardiff and Vale Coalition of Disabled People and Scope. I am sure that we could get together to do that.

[44] **Ms Scott:** I do not have any specific examples, but I know that some local authorities have certainly involved disabled people in helping to review their polling stations. I hope that they would also use those organisations and individuals to help and support with training.

9.50 a.m.

[45] As Kay said, there is an issue with the point at which they recruit polling clerks in particular. This can be done late in the day, which means that there can be issues regarding how much training they can get. The Electoral Commission has produced guidance on how to train polling clerks as well. There is quite a lot of information out there, and we certainly recommend that disabled people be involved in delivering that training, but that requires those people to be organised in getting people together to deliver that, and we recognise that there are other demands on their time, in the sense that one needs to know about many things to be

a presiding officer and a polling clerk. However, given the impact that customer service can have on someone's experience, it is really something that people ought to be prioritising, because it can make the difference between someone having an accessible experience or not.

[46] **Joyce Watson:** So, the answer is 'no', is it? [*Laughter.*]

[47] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** Sorry, I got confused with the question. I thought that you were asking for—

[48] **Joyce Watson:** The question asked whether you are aware of any attempts by responsible organisations to involve disabled people in the administration of elections and the training of electoral staff.

[49] **Ms Scott:** Yes, we are aware of people involving disabled people, particularly in access auditing. I do not have specific examples of people being involved in training, but I would hope that those organisations that have involved disabled people would have seen the benefits of doing so.

[50] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** I would say that it could be just a gesture to involve disabled people. I do not mean to be pessimistic, but it could be no more than a gesture in that, yes, Cynon valley has involved a disabled person, but we do not know what that has led to and, from this poll, it has not been much. We need to think about how they are involving people and why they are doing so. Clearly, they are not doing much to improve the situation. That is my opinion. I cannot prove that, but it is what I think.

[51] **Eleanor Burnham:** Nid wyf yn llwyr ddeall pam y mae'r swyddogion mor gyndyn i wella'r sefyllfa oherwydd, mewn llawer o amgylchiadau, nid yw'n fater o gost ariannol, ond agweddau pobl. Nid wyf yn deall hynny, ond yr wyf yn siŵr y cawn gwestiynu pobl eraill nes ymlaen.

Eleanor Burnham: I do not quite understand why officials are so reluctant to improve the situation because, in many circumstances, it is not a matter of financial cost, but people's attitudes. I do not understand that, but I am sure that we can question others about it later on.

[52] A oes gennych farn ynghylch pa mor briodol y mae'r ddeddfwriaeth bresennol o ran hygyrchedd gorsafoedd pleidleisio?

Do you have an opinion about how appropriate the current legislation is concerning polling station accessibility?

[53] **Ms Scott:** Over the past few years, we have seen pieces of legislation that have attempted to improve accessibility. We have seen such things as the Representation of People Act 2000 and the introduction of tactile voting templates and the large-print ballot. The impact of the DDA 2005 and the disability equality duty will be interesting to test, because public authorities now have a proactive duty to promote disabled people's participation in public life, and there have been some questions about the extent to which the DDA covered voting in previous elections. It is now clear that it does cover them, but we know that it is difficult to use the DDA—Kay and I were talking about this earlier and how much money it might cost an individual to pursue a case against a local authority for non-compliance. The duty to review polling stations, which was introduced under the Electoral Administration Act 2006, has been helpful, but we can see from the freedom of information data that a lot of authorities still have not complied.

[54] In response to the point about attitudes, there does seem to be an issue in that this still does not seem to have the level of leadership attached at the top of the council in the sense of really supporting and pushing electoral administrators to say that this is a fundamental part of delivering an accessible electoral system and that we need to ensure that we get this right.

[55] We would certainly welcome improvements in the way in which legislation covers the accessibility of polling stations, but we would also want to flag up the fact that the current, paper-based systems of voting are inherently inaccessible to some disabled people. At the last general election, we asked people which method of voting they would prefer to use and 17 per cent said that they would like an e-voting option. We were involved with a pilot of some of these different voting mechanisms a few years ago, and they certainly provided some disabled people with the opportunity to vote independently and in secret for the first time. We would like to see those options explored further. We will ask the same question at this general election and I would anticipate that the number of people interested in e-voting will increase, simply because people are becoming a bit more confident and au fait with technology.

[56] **Eleanor Burnham:** What percentage of disabled people want to physically go to the polling station as opposed to using a postal vote or voting electronically? Can you remind us, please?

[57] **Ann Jones:** It was 47 per cent.

[58] **Ms Scott:** Yes, 47 per cent and 17 per cent of people—

[59] **Eleanor Burnham:** So, 47 per cent want to go to the polling station.

[60] **Ms Scott:** Yes, and 17 per cent said that they would like an e-voting option. I think that 18 per cent said that they wanted a postal vote.

[61] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** Could I say something about the legal side of this? We were talking earlier about somebody perhaps taking legal action, because I think that we are too quiet. If I go to vote this year, and I am unable to do so, I am thinking of doing something about it. It is my right. We are too quiet about this in Wales. Years ago, we used to tie each other to buses, and I do not want to do stuff like that now—we have grown up—but this campaign has been going since 1991.

[62] **Eleanor Burnham:** Really, it is self-defeating to go to the courts, because it would just take such a long time. Obviously, it would raise the profile of this issue, but if we sorted this out, it would cost a lot less than you winning a court action, which would cost an enormous amount of money, and, in the end, it would not help to improve the situation.

[63] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** I really think that, one day, someone is going to do it.

[64] **Ms Scott:** We should not have to resort to legal action to exercise the right to vote.

[65] **Ann Jones:** That is why this committee is returning to the issue. The committee, and certainly the Chair, is quite clear about the need to sort this out. It has been a problem for far too long.

[66] Oscar, we strayed onto your patch, but you have the next question.

[67] **Mohammad Asghar:** This question is to Ruth. Have you had any discussion with the Equality and Human Rights Commission about the enforcement of legislation regarding the accessibility of polling stations?

[68] **Ms Scott:** I have not, but that is a very good idea, and I will take that away and act on it, because it is something that the Equality and Human Rights Commission could very well help us with.

[69] **Mohammad Asghar:** Could you inform us of the outcome when you have had a

discussion that with the commission?

[70] **Ms Scott:** Absolutely. Thank you for the suggestion.

[71] **Ann Jones:** That is a positive, which we like on this committee.

[72] **Janet Ryder:** Before I ask my question, could I just say that, having listened to what we have just heard, although we are looking at the accessibility of polling stations at elections, the issue is symbolic of how we have totally failed to mainstream disabled access. There is a fundamental failure and it is only coming through so clearly because we are carrying out a narrow review of services.

[73] My question is on something that you have touched on—the voting process for people with a sensory impairment. I know that the Electoral Commission has indicated that its future priorities will include a focus on the accessibility of the voting process, especially looking ahead to the Assembly elections in 2011. You have made some comments on it already, but is there anything that you would like to add on that subject?

[74] **Ms Scott:** I would add that, although adjustments have been introduced to support people with visual impairments in particular to enable them to vote, the evidence that has come back from disabled people is that they are not particularly helpful. On the introduction of the tactile voting device, the anecdotal feedback that we have had from respondents to a survey was that there were significant limitations to its usefulness, and that, combined with the fact that lots of polling station clerks do not know how to use it, has not made it a particularly helpful intervention. Similarly, the production of a large-print copy of the ballot paper has caused, in some cases, more confusion than it has helped to alleviate.

10.00 a.m.

[75] Some polling clerks think that people can vote on the large-print copy of the ballot paper, which they cannot. It is a large-print version of a small-print paper, which is not particularly helpful if you cannot see very well. While we recognise that the attempts that have been made to try to make the process easier, the conclusion is that the process is fundamentally inaccessible if you have a visual impairment. It is very difficult for someone who is blind to vote using the current postal voting system or a polling station ballot paper, and to do that independently and in secret as anyone else would expect to do. That is a problem. We know that some of the e-voting systems are much more accessible and allow people to change the formats of their ballot paper without compromising the secrecy or security of the ballot. We want to explore that because we recognise that, for some groups of disabled people, the system remains inaccessible. On the other hand, we are pleased that there has been a decision to go ahead with individual registration because that will help to provide people who have visual impairments with voting registration information in the right format for them, rather than the current system, where it is sent to the household in one format.

[76] **Ann Jones:** Thank you. We are bang on time. Did you want to finish off, Kay?

[77] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** Sorry to keep on; I just want to thank you for listening. This is the second time that I have been here and I want to see a change. If you invite us back again, it will be disappointing if the situation has not changed. You all seem interested and encouraged by what we have said, and that is all well and good, but people further up the chain need to be enthusiastic about what we have said. I hope that, the next time that I come here, I will be able to say, 'Well done', or that the situation has changed. Otherwise, we will be doing this every year and I do not want to repeat myself.

[78] **Ann Jones:** We appreciate that you have come back again. We are trying to follow

up on the report that we did and it is important that we do so. People get to the point where they think, 'It's a report; we'll weather the storm for a couple of months', and then they go on to something else. This is a fundamental right for everyone. That is the democracy that we live in. I want to protect that right and I know that committee members feel the same way. We will do everything that we can and work with you.

[79] **Ms Scott:** Thank you for continuing to show an interest in this issue. We would love to come back after the election to share our findings with you. We have a general election, followed by Assembly elections in two years' time, so this is a good opportunity for us to apply some serious pressure to see how much improvement can be made in the next 18 months.

[80] Our key message is that there is still time to make changes before the general election. Any support that this committee can give to the promotion of that message, particularly to those local authorities that have not been particularly forthcoming with their information so far, would be much appreciated. I will finish by saying that we started this campaign in 1992, and that people born in 1992 are 18 this year and eligible to vote. It is concerning that, 18 years on, those people will still face some of the barriers that we were identifying in 1992.

[81] **Ann Jones:** We are taking evidence from the Association of Electoral Administrators later, and some of these questions will be put to the witnesses. As you say, it is time to put the situation right, before the general election, and there is certainly time to do it before the Assembly elections, as they are fixed every four years. There should be no excuse because local authorities know when the elections are being called: they will be on the first Thursday of May, four years after the last elections. They ought to be able to work to that, to do the training and get the people in place in time. Those are the issues that we will concentrate on and we will work with you. Thank you both for coming this morning. We hope that we will have better news for you when you come back, Kay.

[82] **Ms Jenkins (Scope):** I will come back cheering if that is the case.

[83] **Ann Jones:** Absolutely.

10.05 a.m.

**Hygyrchedd Gorsafoddd Pleidleisio yng Nghymru—Y Diweddraf—Tystiolaeth
gan y Comisiwn Etholiadol**
**Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales—Progress Update—Evidence from the
Electoral Commission**

[84] **Ann Jones:** We will now move on to talk to, which sounds less formal than 'take evidence from', Kay Jenkins, who is head of the Wales office of the Electoral Commission. We thank Kay for coming in.

[85] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** You can just reuse the nameplate that was already there.

[86] **Ann Jones:** Absolutely. That is why we could not have you on the same panel for the same item, as we would have been confused.

[87] **Eleanor Burnham:** I do not think that we have ever had this happen before.

[88] **Ann Jones:** We have. It was the last time we looked at this, in fact.

[89] **Eleanor Burnham:** Not under other circumstances.

[90] **Ann Jones:** No, probably just under these circumstances. Thank you for coming in, Kay, and thank you for your paper, which has been circulated to Members. What can your report on the European parliamentary elections tell us about the experiences of disabled people in Wales during the election? I ask that as that was the last election, although you comment on them all. Can you tell us a bit about that?

[91] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** I am happy to do that and to expand on some points and react to what we have just heard about what was done for the European Parliament elections. Our report was published last October. It was done on a UK-wide basis, compiled from information from all parts of the UK, including from Wales. It was done on an exceptions basis, and the findings from Wales were no different from those for the UK.

[92] This time, we tried to approach our reporting from voters' perspective and experience of the elections. We undertook public opinion research, which came back with a surprisingly high level of voter satisfaction about the experience of voting in polling stations: 98 per cent of people surveyed were either highly or fairly satisfied with their experience. In addition, once they got inside the polling station, 99 per cent were fairly or very satisfied with their experience. The area for which less satisfaction was reported was in getting to the polling station: only about 83 per cent of respondents were satisfied. Of those who were not, the majority were disabled people and young people in the 18 to 25 age range, which might have been because they had not been there before and did not know where their local polling station was. So, those two groups were disproportionately represented.

[93] On how we put our findings together in Wales, as well as the public opinion research, we sent commission representatives around Wales to observe the elections. On polling day, we visited about 12 constituencies between us. I personally went to a dozen polling stations in mid Wales, between Libanus and Llangurig. So, we had a good spread. The vast majority of polling stations have improved significantly over the time that we have been recording. That is not to say that every one is perfect, but I would disagree with the evidence that I have just heard about the extent to which accessibility has been mainstreamed. When we first started reporting on elections, in 2001, we were concerned that accessibility and the needs of disabled people were not given sufficient attention. The improvements have been small, but they have been made year on year, and so, over the past decade, I would say that there has been a significant improvement and that accessibility issues are mainstreamed.

[94] I also disagree with what I have just heard about the lack of leadership shown on that, and I can address that specifically with regard to Wales. When we last came here to give evidence in 2008, I flagged up with you, as has the Association of Electoral Administrators on other occasions, that we would seek to undertake a specific initiative in advance of the European parliamentary elections, and that initiative went ahead. We worked with the regional returning officer for Wales, Bryn Parry-Jones, highlighting accessibility as a training issue. Meetings were held with all the returning officers in Wales and, with the exception of two who could not get there, they all attended personally.

10.10 a.m.

[95] The regional returning officer highlighted a number of issues to them and set out his expectations for the elections in Wales. A key expectation was that they would all offer training to polling station staff, and that accessibility would be a part of that training. They all did so and, as part of our observations, we went to look at many of those training sessions, sitting in on the training. Of course, training varies in quality, but we provide basic materials, such as PowerPoint presentations, quizzes and so on, which can be used as templates. So,

even someone who is relatively inexperienced can use those materials for training and all the accessibility issues will be covered. We know that training was offered throughout Wales to all polling station staff for the 2009 elections.

[96] **Ann Jones:** I do not know whether you heard what the other Kay said about the many disabled people who would be prepared to offer their services to polling stations and to electoral returning officers. Do you think that that is the way forward, so that they can ask a person who has a disability? What you might think is accessible may not be accessible to someone with a disability. Do you think that that is a way forward?

[97] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** I agree, and I think that it is best practice to encourage people to do so. It does not always happen. Some local authorities are very good at doing that and involve local disabled groups and charities in their training but, on the other hand, others simply use the template training materials and go through them. There are some exemplar local authorities, and I highlight Merthyr Tydfil in that regard. There, we saw a mock-up polling station, which had been set up so that many things were wrong, and the presiding officer and polling clerks were asked to identify everything that was wrong. So, there are some examples of good practice out there. Everyone does a basic level, but some undoubtedly do better than others.

[98] The issue for the general election this year is the uncertainty over when it is to be held. With the European parliamentaries and the National Assembly elections, there is a fixed term, so you know the election date and you can programme ahead to ensure that local authorities undertake all the training sessions that they need. This time, the general election will probably be held on 6 May, and authorities have their training sessions planned for that. If there were to be a truly short-notice election with a short timetable, it would be difficult to deliver that level of training. If the election does go ahead on 6 May, you will find that a lot of the training has been delivered.

[99] On the training front, there have been substantial improvements. That is not to say that every polling station is accessible, as that is clearly not the experience of disabled people. The difficulty often is that it is those presiding officers who have been in post for the longest time and who are the most experienced who can be the most difficult about changing their attitudes and improving the layout of the polling station. They have done it in a particular way for years and so it is difficult to change that mindset. Often, the younger ones who have not done it before will follow the guidance and do as they should. We are looking at those sorts of areas rather than the mainstreaming issue, in truth.

[100] **Janet Ryder:** I think that what you have just said underlines that it is a mainstreaming issue and that it has not been mainstreamed. You have highlighted a few things there. You said that only basic training will be offered now, but I assume that disability access training comes very high on that basic training list, so it will be offered in any case.

[101] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** Yes, it will.

[102] **Janet Ryder:** In that case, there is no need to say that, because if it is high on that list, it will be offered in any case. As a committee member, I would value knowing which other local authorities in your assessment practise good practice—apart from Merthyr Tydfil, which you have highlighted—and which do not. That would be valuable information for us. Are we talking about more than or fewer than 11 counties? If it is fewer, there is still a significant problem.

[103] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** Through our performance standards, we ask about the training that has been provided and what it includes. I could go back to the performance standards to look at the examples in which local people were involved. I cannot

give you that information off the top of my head, but we do have it, if it is of interest.

[104] **Janet Ryder:** It would be interesting to see that, as it meant involving disabled people in the training. There is also the issue of good practice. You say that you are now satisfied that a number of counties displays good practice, and you highlighted Merthyr Tydfil as an example, but how many others meet that mark?

[105] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** They all meet our performance standards, and we would regard cases in which local people were involved in the training as exceeding those standards. The requirement is that training be provided, and so training of good quality that involves local people would be viewed by us as exceeding those standards.

[106] **Eleanor Burnham:** I am concerned that there is such a gap between the reality described by Kay Jenkins and Ruth Scott of Scope and your perception that you are doing well, ticking the boxes. It seems that something is amiss. They have come to tell us about their ongoing concerns as they see no improvement, but you are sitting here telling us that everything is hunky-dory. That really concerns me. Something is wrong with either the criteria or the perception—and reality is perception, generally. I plead that something needs to be done. We would not be sitting here, otherwise: we are evaluating this because we have concerns. We all have individual experiences, and we are very lucky to be able bodied. Ann has more personal knowledge of some of the difficulties surrounding these issues. We are sitting here trying to encourage people to come out to vote. It is an important issue that more people vote in *The X Factor* than vote in democratic elections.

[107] **Ann Jones:** That is because they can vote by phone.

[108] **Eleanor Burnham:** Absolutely. It concerns me, because people have to be desperately passionate about wanting physically to go to the polling station, like the wonderful lady who told us about taking her—was it her children or grandchildren?

[109] **Ann Jones:** Her nephew and niece.

[110] **Eleanor Burnham:** The lady wanted to take her nephew and niece with her. This is extremely important. Unless we encourage people to come out to vote, our democracy will die.

[111] **Ann Jones:** I think that that was more of a statement than a question. [*Laughter.*]

[112] **Eleanor Burnham:** Sorry.

[113] **Ann Jones:** It is all right. We all care about this issue.

[114] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** I would not want to give the impression that I was saying that things are hunky-dory, as I would definitely not say that that is the case. I was trying to say that there has been a significant improvement, in our view, compared with what has been happening in the past. Our evidence in making assessments is objective, as we rely on public opinion research material and the evidence that we have gleaned from commission observers going to observe elections in Wales and throughout the UK. Our checklists are agreed with Scope and are provided in our polling station handbooks. When we are visiting polling stations, we go through a specific accessibility checklist. It is not merely a question of perception, but of objective evidence from what we have seen.

[115] **Eleanor Burnham:** Kay from Scope mentioned that she could not physically get into a booth in her polling station because it was in a corner. That is wrong. Are you happy about that?

[116] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** Well, clearly not, and I think that—

[117] **Ann Jones:** I think that what Kay is trying to say is that the Electoral Commission has seen an improvement. What we are trying to tease out is an answer to the question of why Polls Apart Cymru is still telling us the same thing about its experiences at polling booths years after first raising the issue. Janet, do you want to try to move us on a bit?

[118] **Janet Ryder:** We have seen improvements in disability access but it has not yet been mainstreamed. We would not have to repeat reviews like this one if it had. I can accept that there has been an increase in provision, but there still seems to be a long way to go. How many of the high number of respondents to the poll that you carried out were willing to tick the 'disabled' box?

10.20 a.m.

[119] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** Our public opinion research is demographically based, so I would have to come back to you to give you chapter and verse on that. I can do that.

[120] **Janet Ryder:** That would be quite significant.

[121] **Ann Jones:** Do you want to move on?

[122] **Janet Ryder:** I am satisfied with that.

[123] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** There was certainly a percentage of disabled people who said that they found difficulty in getting to the polling station, and we were able to identify from the research a disproportionate level of dissatisfaction.

[124] **Janet Ryder:** What I am interested to know is the proportion of people who answered the survey who are disabled and what proportion of them were dissatisfied. If 90 per cent of them were dissatisfied, I think that we can say that the disabled community is still not satisfied.

[125] **Ann Jones:** Perhaps we can have that information in writing.

[126] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** Yes.

[127] **Mohammad Asghar:** How do performance standards introduced for returning officers specifically address the issues of accessibility at polling stations?

[128] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** There is no specific performance standard relating to polling station accessibility. The performance standards relate to a number of areas, which include accessibility. They relate to planning for the election. We have template plans, and part of those include assessing the polling station accessibility. We look at whether the plans are in place, whether they include looking at accessibility, and the training of staff. I have mentioned that training on accessibility is a part of that, so that is addressed. There is a specific standard relating to the accessibility of voter materials. That relates to whether materials are provided in accessible formats, a variety of languages and so on. We have also produced additional guidance on accessible materials, 'Making your Mark: Designing for Democracy'. It is bilingual and in clear print, and it deals with what happens once someone is in the polling station. So, that is how our standards cover accessibility; there is no specific standard relating to polling station accessibility, because our standards cover 10 broad areas, of which polling station accessibility is a part.

[129] **Mohammad Asghar:** You said earlier that two returning officers did not turn up for the training but that the rest were there to be trained. What action does the Electoral Commission take when returning officers do not meet the minimum standards?

[130] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** We do not have any sanctions as such. We work with returning officers and electoral services managers on programmes of performance improvement. For example, following the election last year, we wrote to every returning officer in Wales with their individual performance evaluation, highlighting areas where they needed to improve and directing them to our template materials and the guidance that can help them to improve. We also help them by visiting them to talk through issues to improve, and we work with them in groups through seminars. So, our approach is performance-improvement directed, rather than sanction-based.

[131] **Eleanor Burnham:** I am going to speak in Welsh.

[132] **Ann Jones:** Your headsets should be set to channel 1.

[133] **Eleanor Burnham:** Pa gamau y mae grŵp cynllunio etholiadau neu unrhyw un o'i aelodau wedi eu cymryd i annog awdurdodau lleol i roi cyfle i staff anabl a staff sy'n arbenigo mewn cydraddoldeb anabledd i gynnig cyngor ac awgrymiadau yn ystod y broses o gynllunio etholiadau?

Eleanor Burnham: What action has been taken by the elections planning group or any of its members to encourage local authorities to give disabled staff and staff with expertise in disability the opportunity to provide advice and suggestions during the electoral planning process?

[134] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** The elections planning group, which is chaired by the Welsh Assembly Government, includes all the relevant organisations involved in planning for elections, such as the Electoral Commission, the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government, returning officers, electoral administrators and representatives of the political parties. It is a high-level planning forum. We have looked at accessibility through that and, as part of that group's work, plans were put in place for undertaking training across Wales on accessibility. So the plans that were subsequently put in place were floated, discussed and reviewed at that group.

[135] In the past year the group was given a presentation by a campaigner on deafness-related issues. Our focus for 2011 is on sensory impairments in particular and on doing more work with the Royal National Institute of Blind People and the Royal National Institute of Deaf People. That work has come out of the elections planning group, and it is an area that has been identified as one where we need to do more work. While we appreciate that many campaigners still feel that not enough is being done on physical accessibility, we feel that more focus is needed now on sensory impairments. The improvements that have been made in respect of physical accessibility need to be consolidated and the other areas also need to be looked at.

[136] **Ann Jones:** May I press you again on the work that has been going on in relation to sensory impairments in advance of the Assembly elections in 2011? You said that that work came out of the planning group. How do groups that represent people who have other disabilities feed into the planning group? Do they do that through the political parties, or through you?

[137] **Ms Jenkins (Electoral Commission):** It happens in a variety of ways. We have regular contacts with many disability campaigners, and we would identify with them opportunities to speak to the planning group. It also comes from within the planning group. So, there is a variety of ways. As the committee has given its report to the planning group,

there is a constant review of accessibility issues. So, that is how it comes about.

[138] The Electoral Commission has different fora for meeting various groups. For example, we have the political parties panel, where the four main political parties in Wales meet us, and at which we discuss with them the accessibility of their campaign materials for voters. RNIB and RNID came to the last meeting of the panel in January and gave a presentation. They came with examples of the parties' campaign materials and gave them their view on how to make them more accessible and outlined the services and assistance that they could give to political parties. So, we are trying to address this not only in respect of the voter's experience but from the parties' angle as well.

[139] **Ann Jones:** Does anyone else have anything to add? I see that you do not. Thank you ever so much, Kay, for that. We will no doubt be returning to this and you will no doubt return to tell us, we hope, that all our polling stations are accessible. Thank you for coming today.

10.28 a.m.

**Hygyrchedd Gorsafodd Pleidleisio yng Nghymru—Y Diweddraf—Tystiolaeth
gan Gymdeithas y Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol
Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales—Update on Progress: Evidence from
the Association of Electoral Administrators**

[140] **Ann Jones:** We move to our last set of witnesses—'witnesses' sounds terrible, we shall call them 'friends who are coming to give us evidence', I think—namely Philip Johnson, who is the chair of the Association of Electoral Administrators, and Bob Screen, the acting secretary. I think that Bob has been here before, so he is well known.

[141] Could we swap the name plates? We know who you are, but those watching the broadcast may not. I thank you for coming today, and I realise that your work is getting to the point at which you would like someone to make an announcement. At least you know when the Assembly's elections are, so you can plan for those. I will let Janet ask her set of questions first, as she has another meeting to go to shortly.

[142] **Janet Ryder:** We have heard a lot today about the need for training. We have heard about what training should be given. You have previously identified the potential of polling staff instructors to drive up the standard. That has to be linked to training. We have heard from the Electoral Commission about the training packs and the material that is available. What impact has that training had on the accessibility of polling stations?

10.30 a.m.

[143] **Mr Screen:** Philip is going to indulge me in allowing me to take some sort of lead on that one as I am the outgoing chair of AEA Wales and Philip is the incoming chair. First, I apologise that we have not given you a report; we have not discussed anything because, as you say, there are things going on at the moment. On training, I recall that we brought a set of minimum standards to the last committee meeting that we attended. I am pleased to say that those minimum standards are being met throughout Wales. One of those standards relates to training. We asked all of our colleagues to employ polling station inspectors, who will be trained more in disability issues, rather than train the 400 staff we have to employ for election day. Philip is going through a training session at the moment with all of his staff.

[144] It is difficult to try to deal with those issues in an hour or an hour and a half; therefore, we have looked to our polling station inspectors, many of whom will have DDA

involvement in the councils. They visit the stations and are able to get up and look at obvious things, such as why signs are not in the right place and why the polling booth is not in a certain place. Even though we outline these issues in the training, with the best will in the world, when people set up a polling station, they do not always consider them.

[145] It is fair to say that, at the last meeting, we said that a huge amount had been done on physical accessibility but that there was still a long way to go on that one. However, for the last European elections, we concentrated on training and looking at our polling station inspectors; all of our briefing sessions included that DDA awareness training. We told people to be aware of all of those things.

[146] **Janet Ryder:** Does every council employ those polling station inspectors now or has every council now got a fully trained—

[147] **Mr Screen:** It is more the norm than the exception and that is the case with most of the 22 authorities.

[148] **Mr Johnson:** It is not a legal requirement, but in the Ministry of Justice's funding, there is provision for, I believe, up to one inspector for every 10 polling stations.

[149] **Janet Ryder:** So you will be able to let us know what the coverage is across Wales for the forthcoming elections because, although we do not know the exact date, the timescale is narrowing all the time. Are you sure that that will drive up the standards?

[150] **Mr Johnson:** We did some research a few months ago and I was quite pleased because we asked questions on whether disability and access arrangements were brought up in training sessions and more than half of the authorities in Wales responded. They all confirmed that they had, to some degree, raised disability training and access awareness. All of those things were raised at training sessions for last year's European elections.

[151] **Janet Ryder:** So, are you telling us that not every council has run the disability access training courses that you are referring to?

[152] **Mr Johnson:** Not everyone had responded, but of those who did, they had all, to some degree, carried out—

[153] **Janet Ryder:** We would be interested to know which councils have not responded because this is an important aspect.

[154] **Mr Screen:** It would be fair to say that we concentrated on the European elections because it was the easiest of all elections that we dealt with and certainly the last Assembly election was quite horrendous because of the weight of legislation that came in—new legislation that England will now be experiencing for the first time. We have learnt our lessons from that. At the European elections, we felt that we had more time to devote to DDA issues. Certainly, through our meetings and those that we had with the Electoral Commission, a driver from us was the need to push on DDA awareness.

[155] We invited people from Mencap, RNIB and RNID to those meetings. We are engaging with all of these groups, so it is fair to say that there has been a huge—

[156] **Janet Ryder:** I can accept that there has been a huge rise in your awareness of the need for training, but what we want to know is how much of it is now being delivered. If there is a gap between that awareness and the delivery of that training on the ground, we need to know what that gap is. You are saying that you concentrated on the European elections, and I would very much welcome, if possible, a paper to the committee from you, showing us which

councils rolled out that training, which training from the Electoral Commission they rolled out and which councils still have some work to do on that, if that is possible.

[157] **Ms Screen:** Yes.

[158] **Janet Ryder:** You have expressed concerns about the aspects of Scope Cymru's Polls Apart methodology in the past and indicated to the committee that you would be pleased to work with Scope Cymru to develop that survey. Have you undertaken any work with Scope Cymru? You have mentioned a number of groups that you are working with. Have you worked with Scope on improving the polling stations?

[159] **Mr Screen:** We have made the offer to Scope Cymru and to various groups and asked them to please engage with us, as we are trying to engage with them. However, we have not had a formal approach from Scope Cymru. We do our own monitoring as part of our minimum standards. The minimum standard was that we would look at our polling stations on an ongoing basis—not once a year, but throughout the year. However, we have not had that direct contact with Scope Cymru. It is unfortunate that 90 per cent of Scope Cymru's report—and I accept that its report is better than no report—is based on old information, which it felt was a little flawed. At the last meeting, we asked Scope Cymru to please work with us, because we want to work with it.

[160] I think that I commented at the last meeting that no one organisation has the monopoly on equality issues. We are in this together. We are trying to engage. We each have a part to play. It would be nice if Scope Cymru came to us and said, 'We want to do this, what do you think?' We could then feed information to Scope Cymru and exchange ideas. However, we have not had any direct engagement from Scope Cymru.

[161] **Ann Jones:** Scope Cymru has been in this morning. It produced a paper that talks about the 2007 survey, which was the last survey that it did, because it reports only on Assembly elections and general elections, so there will be a report after the general election this year. It said that it found that 70 per cent of the polling stations surveyed did not meet the five simple access tests. That was about how people registered to vote—which is not a polling-day issue—physical access ramps, accessible information and modes of voting. That was in 2007, which was the latest year on which it reported. We acknowledge that there has been some improvement, but there is still a long way to go. We will note that perhaps Scope Cymru should get in touch with you. The message from Scope Cymru this morning was quite clear: there is still time to put arrangements in place before the next general election to ensure that disabled voters feel that they are a part of the process. So, we will write to Scope Cymru to suggest that it contacts you with some urgency. I do not know whether its representatives are still in the building, but if they are listening to this in another room, perhaps they will take that action. However, we will double up on that.

[162] Eleanor, do you want to ask your set of questions?

[163] **Eleanor Burnham:** Absolutely.

[164] Pa gamau sydd wedi cael eu cymryd gan Gymdeithas y Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol, neu unrhyw aelod ohono, i annog awdurdodau lleol i roi cyfle i staff anabl a staff sy'n arbenigo mewn cydraddoldeb anabledd i gynnig cyngor ac awgrymiadau yn ystod y broses o gynllunio etholiadau? Yr ydych wedi crybwyll y pwynt yn barod a bu ichi grybwyll nad oeddech wedi cael What steps have been taken by the Association of Electoral Administrators, or any of its members, to encourage local authorities to provide opportunities for disabled staff and staff who specialise in disability equality to offer advice and suggestions during the process of election planning? You have touched on this point already, and mentioned that you had not had

trafodaethau gyda Scope Cymru. Mae hynny yn resynus ofnadwy. Mae hi'n syndod mawr imi nad ydych wedi siarad â chorff sydd mor hanfodol bwysig i ddatblygu gwell gyfleusterau.

any discussions with Scope Cymru. That is a matter of great regret. It is a great surprise to me that you have not spoken to an organisation that is so vital to the development of better facilities.

[165] **Mr Johnson:** Obviously, I am concerned that we need to have this dialogue with Scope Cymru, but, coming back to the research that we have done, it appears that up to 95 per cent of polling stations are now accessible and you can tick those boxes on the five questions of accessibility.

[166] **Eleanor Burnham:** Forgive me, but it was not just about accessibility to the polling station. It is about something quite basic when you get inside. The lady who gave evidence is in a wheelchair and made the point that she was stuffed into a corner because none of the polling booths were capable of coping with her and her wheelchair. Surely, that is a basic need, not to mention the other sensory issues that we are engaged with.

[167] **Mr Screen:** Once again, at our last meeting, we gave our minimum standards. It would be great to exceed those standards, but the minimum standard would be that every polling station in Wales should have a low-level polling booth.

[168] **Ann Jones:** You showed us an example.

[169] **Mr Screen:** Yes, I brought an example with me. Hand on heart, I would say that 95 per cent to 96 per cent of polling stations now have those. There were problems with grants from the Ministry of Justice, but I know that grants were going in. I would say that 95 per cent of all polling stations in Wales—around 3,000—have low-level polling booths. On the remaining 5 per cent or so—I cannot give you an exact proportion—the reason for that would probably be because they are portakabins in remote areas, where there is no other polling station. That would knock our percentages down, but every polling station that is physically able to accommodate one now has a low-level polling booth. That was our minimum standard.

10.40 a.m.

[170] **Eleanor Burnham:** Chair, I would ask that we get an analysis at this stage. We are grateful to the witnesses for coming here, but, as we heard earlier, when Joyce was here, Pembrokeshire has done extremely well on this, so it is important for this committee, so that we can make some progress, to have an analysis of who is doing what. Also, I would personally like—with your permission, Chair—to have a copy of the witnesses' criteria. You talk about minimum standards. Perhaps they need to be raised. Why can we not go beyond minimum standards, anyway? As I said earlier, I feel passionate about this, as do we all. As the Chair said earlier, people vote for *The X Factor* because they can just press a button to vote, and we have a democracy that is failing if fewer and fewer people come out to vote. That is why we are reviewing this.

[171] **Mr Johnson:** That is an extremely good point. Unfortunately, it is one that we cannot give an answer to. There is now a duty on returning officers and electoral registration officers to encourage registration, which is, after all, the first barrier to voting, and on returning officers in particular to promote elections. We could realistically get 100 per cent successful polling stations, but they would not be the first choice of the vast majority of able-bodied voters, who might stay at home. There is a balancing act here, and it is difficult at times. I use 10 portakabins in Newport, for example, and it is questionable, depending on the type of disability involved, how accessible they are. However, in the one case that comes to mind, on the Old Barn estate—Mr Asghar will know it—there is nowhere else for that polling station.

The only other option would be to relocate it about three miles away. That is the reality that we have to deal with on the ground.

[172] **Eleanor Burnham:** I am not an expert on the specifics, but surely there are many community centres that have now been completely disability-proofed.

[173] **Ann Jones:** They are not always in the right areas for the wards. That is the problem.

[174] **Mr Screen:** That is the issue, Chair. They have to be located in a polling district. We can move polling districts to an extent—

[175] **Eleanor Burnham:** I suggest, then, that we should be doing some specific work on who is disabled and who is likely to need to come to a polling station. There is plenty of time to do that, even if elections happen every year. There is plenty of time to find out, through a questionnaire, about physical disabilities and who will want to go where. If people cannot go to one polling station, then we need to ensure that they can go to another.

[176] **Mr Johnson:** Again, legal provisions prevent that, I am afraid. It would be an ideal scenario.

[177] **Mr Screen:** I put my hand to my head as well, but the reality is—

[178] **Ann Jones:** I have to say that I have some sympathy for Eleanor on this matter. Where you have a town that is divided into six wards, it causes utter confusion for people. If you had six polling stations, but a common register, anyone in Rhyl—I use the example of Rhyl, as it is my home town—could vote wherever they happened to be. If you were shopping and a polling station was nearby, you would vote there. There must be a way, with all the technology that we have now, to be able to cross me off the list, having said, ‘Well, Ann Jones should vote here, but she’s actually gone shopping and voted there’. There must be a way of crossing people off the list with all the technology available. So, I have some sympathy for Eleanor’s idea, but I can also see the logistical nightmare that you have. I am not advocating that it should come into use for the next elections.

[179] **Eleanor Burnham:** I am a simple soul. I just want to get people out to vote.

[180] **Mr Screen:** Exactly. That is our wish and desire. Having had the privilege of being the chair of AEA Wales for the past four years, I am about to retire, so this will be my last election and appearance before you, and I can assure you that, of our 18 members out of 22 authorities, not one does not say, ‘We’re doing all this work and we can’t get 40 per cent of those who are registered to vote’. Every single vote counts. There is a huge desire among people like us to make this work and to work with groups. We are not putting up any barriers. What we say is that we would like these groups to come to us, because that is far easier than for us to seek out individuals who are partially sighted and so on. We have offered to go to groups’ meetings to give them training to inform them about what they can do. It has to be a two-way process.

[181] **Eleanor Burnham:** You mentioned specific areas to which you take mobile units. Is the reason why you have to have these mobile units, which are then physically inaccessible for some people, a matter of timing? Do we need to change the times or even the days when we vote?

[182] **Mr Screen:** I will jump in here, if you will excuse me, Phil, as I do tend to go on. I feel passionately about the whole service.

[183] **Ann Jones:** We know, and we are grateful to you, because you have appeared before

the former local government committee on several occasions to discuss these issues.

[184] **Eleanor Burnham:** I am just trying to get to the bottom of what the barriers are.

[185] **Mr Screen:** I am trying to convey an understanding of the practicalities, and the difference between what we want to do and what we can do. You have raised two issues, one of which was about the timing. For the next election, Mr Brown could go to the Queen some time today, although I do not think that he will, and we could be running an election within 17 working days. That is an absolute nightmare. We cannot do various things. We can do lots of things, and put plans in place for this and that, but if he were to go to the Queen this afternoon and we got a call saying that the election was to be held on 25 March, we would have to work to an extremely tight timetable. We have looked at our polling stations, and they are in hand. We have changed them and improved them. With regard to such things as polling cards, where we have to give out information, in all honesty, I do not know whether I would be able to meet our legal requirements in some cases, in printing 130,000 poll cards to get out and inform people in the timescale allowed. Parliamentary elections are an absolute nightmare—

[186] **Eleanor Burnham:** That is why a timed election is needed, without all this nonsense.

[187] **Mr Screen:** Please.

[188] **Ann Jones:** I am sure that Gordon Brown is listening to your plea, Bob.

[189] **Mr Screen:** The other point that you mentioned was linked to timing. The polling district is an issue. I have some remote locations and I have six portakabins: one in Fernlea, Risca, and one in the car park of the Fisherman's Rest—I cannot go into the restaurant. It serves about 500—

[190] **Eleanor Burnham:** Can they not go into the Fisherman's Rest?

[191] **Mr Screen:** Not without the Fisherman's Rest charging me about £500.

[192] **Eleanor Burnham:** They could have a pint while they were at it. [*Laughter.*] Sorry.

[193] **Ann Jones:** The law does not allow you to vote in a licensed area.

[194] **Mr Screen:** I could say, 'I am not going to have a portakabin in that car park. I will move to the next polling district'. The reality on the map—

[195] **Eleanor Burnham:** Are there not any portakabins without steps up to them? Can you not get any that are level with the ground?

[196] **Mr Screen:** We do that as far as possible. Blaenau Gwent, for instance, will spend in the region of £2,000 to make a portakabin completely accessible.

[197] **Ann Jones:** I would like to ask you about something that Kay from the Electoral Commission said—she was here just before you. She said that, while it offers training, some presiding officers and some polling clerks have been in post since Adam was a lad. They have always done it their way and have decided, because they have always done it that way, that that is the way that it should be done. How do you overcome that? They are your members, so how do you overcome that? Things have changed. We no longer have polling booths pushed into a corner where there is no light; they should now be located in places where people can see. How do deal with the fact that you have presiding officers and polling clerks who have always done things a certain way, and whose attitude is, 'It is election day, and so the polling booth will be in the corner, where people can trip over, because someone has tripped over

every time there is a vote, and it is not election day unless someone trips over'? I am a Luddite; I do not get on with technology, but how do you get those people to move into the twenty-first century?

[198] **Mr Johnson:** Bob has just whispered to me that we should sack them. [*Laughter.*]

[199] **Ann Jones:** You would be sacking a heck of a lot in my patch.

[200] **Mr Johnson:** I have been tempted, I must confess. Training has been given to POs and PCs over the last few years. For example, last year, when they arrived at the training session, there was a dummy polling station set up with 20 glaring errors, most of which related to access: a box was left on the stairs, the lift was marked 'Out of order' and so on. They were scored on how well they did. So, we made an assessment straightaway, and we knew where there might be a problem. Those sorts of methods are now being used in most authorities, to try to get a feel for this. We know that Mr Jones, say, has done it for the past 40 years, but how well has he done it for those 40 years? We are now coming around to this and quite a few of the older hands are now taking part in training and starting to think, dare I say it, that perhaps it is a job for younger person.

[201] **Eleanor Burnham:** They are very well paid for doing this, particularly the presiding officers. I had not realised until recently how well paid they are. So, they should be on the ball, because this is an important democratic issue.

10.50 a.m.

[202] **Mr Screen:** Absolutely. We strenuously emphasise that in our training. It is one of the biggest things on our list, and we really go to town on it. We ask obvious things like, 'Why put the polling booth over there in the corner when you are sat under the light?' I give polling station inspectors a report and they will go back and say, 'Move that, as I want it placed over there'. Polling inspectors have a vital role to play, because those who have not listened in the briefing can be chased up by them.

[203] **Eleanor Burnham:** You have answered quite a lot of my other questions.

[204] Yn eich papur i'r pwyllgor ym mis Hydref 2007, yr oeddech yn dadlau bod angen apwyntio a hyfforddi mwy o staff etholiadol parhaol. Yr ydych newydd ddweud cyn lleied o amser sydd gennych cyn yr etholiad cyffredinol. A ydy hynny wedi digwydd? In your paper to the committee in October 2007, you argued that there was a need to appoint and train more electoral staff on a permanent basis. You have just said how little time you have before the general election. Has that happened?

[205] **Mr Screen:** Three senior officers will be retiring this year, including me. I am concerned that succession planning is not being put in place in some areas. I am disappointed that, in some quarters, the value of what my staff do is not understood. I have two young girls as trainees and, to be quite frank, if they were to go, the election would fall, for whatever reason, whether for equality reasons or legal issues. In the present climate, I certainly will not be able to keep one and I may have to lose the other. In the present economic climate, with 300 or 500 jobs going, electoral services will not be exempt from those cuts. That is a shame. There is a black hole and a crisis, and I have said this for the past three or four years of my chairmanship of the Association of Electoral Administrators. The Electoral Commission and we need to work together, and I do not think that local authorities, with returning officers, are necessarily the right bodies to be running elections in this day and age.

[206] **Eleanor Burnham:** Who would you suggest is?

[207] **Mr Screen:** We could move to the model used in New Zealand and Australia, where national elections are run the by the commission and local elections, possibly the local authority. There has to be local authority input, but I am concerned about the balance. We are working in a climate of conflict. If we go to an accessible school, we have to look at whether the school should close, and we have all those problems and issues. In my view, a school is an ideal polling station, and it would also get the children asking why the school is closed or what is going on. However, if you tell that to a school in an area that has many single mums, you would be told—

[208] **Eleanor Burnham:** That is on the timing again, which is not within our remit.

[209] **Mr Screen:** It is the conflict that we are working to. We have to juggle.

[210] **Ann Jones:** It is the conflict, you are right, Bob. It has been expressed many times that there should be permanent election staff. It is silly nonsense about you working only one day in four, but there are still people who think that. I am on your side on this. I think that there should be permanent electoral registration staff. This business of always having to draft people in means that you draft in people such as Mr Jones who has done it for 40 years. They come out of the closet once every four years and think that they know it all. All your good work on training is then lost because you have to rely on the Mr Joneses. You are right that it should be purely the permanent staff in an electoral registration department who run elections. There is enough work to do ensuring that everyone is on the register, that everyone on it understands the voting process, and that, when an election is called, people can exercise their democratic right. There is a load of work involved in that. Local authorities tend to pull election staff in and out. Now, because there is uncertainty about the general election, I suppose that people are being geared up for it and then dropped off again. You cannot keep playing the grand old Duke of York on elections. I feel strongly about that.

[211] **Mr Screen:** We have discussed that long and hard, and you have agreed, Chair. I value your support on that, and thank you for it, but electoral services have long been seen as the cinderella service. It happens only once every so often.

[212] **Eleanor Burnham:** Now that we are having elections every year, anyway—

[213] **Mr Screen:** Yes, there are elections every year. There is continuous registration with small teams of staff—

[214] **Ann Jones:** They are dedicated staff.

[215] **Mr Screen:** Yes, but they are not valued. I am loath to say this, but I will say it anyway, as I am coming to the end of my career. [*Laughter.*] In a job evaluation exercise, one exercise is to do with staff dealing with and managing data, but that is ‘of a low value to the authority’. It is the most fundamental thing that we do, and yet my staff have now been downgraded because the system will not recognise what they do. The computer says ‘no’. I feel quite happy saying that, even though I have issues with my returning officer and chief executive, who just says, ‘Well, what can I do about it?’ The service needs to be valued, because people in the authority do not understand the system. Excuse me for saying that, but I feel passionately about this.

[216] **Ann Jones:** You are right.

[217] **Mr Screen:** This will be my last election. Can I say with certainty that there will be 100 per cent access to polling stations at the next Assembly election? No, I cannot, obviously. However, can I say with certainty that we will do our best to improve access? Absolutely.

Someone commented earlier that trying is the first step to failure, but I totally disagree; trying is the first step to success. We have our aspirations and aims, and we have done a marvellous job, but we have a very long way to go. In the real world, we have all these problems and issues that we have to deal with.

[218] **Mohammad Asghar:** This is an interesting debate, and I must admit that I am enjoying your contribution the most. Your statement that no one organisation has a monopoly on equality really hit me. That is a wonderful statement, and we need to listen to organisations such as yours. Sharing information would improve the experience for all organisations, especially given the pressure under which you work.

[219] My question relates to the 2011 Assembly elections. You said in your last evidence session with the committee in 2007 that the Assembly elections of that year were one of the most difficult that you had experienced. Are you confident that those difficulties will not be repeated in 2011?

[220] **Mr Johnson:** Fortunately for him, Bob will not be in post by then. We were very much guinea pigs at the last Assembly elections. The new postal voting legislation was taking effect, and we had to verify the postal voters' security statement against our database. We had new software, new laws and new technology, but we pulled it off, thankfully. You may be aware from press articles that England faces doing that for the first time this year and wants to move the counts to the following day. I respect the freedom of the returning officer to choose, as that is his right, at the moment. However, we pulled it off last time, and I am very confident that the 2011 elections will run smoothly.

[221] **Ann Jones:** I say that we should keep the polling-day count. The count for the first Assembly elections in 1999 was moved to the following day, and it was a nightmare. Although it is a long day if the count is held on the same day as the vote, it was even longer when it was held on the following day. I could not go to bed that night because I was number-crunching. I turned up at the count the next morning looking as though I had not been to bed at all. A same-day count is the tradition, but perhaps we should look at the other options if they make for an easier process.

[222] Thank you both for your evidence today. Bob, you are pushing at an open door, because I feel strongly about the issues that you raised about your work and about electoral staff, and I know that the committee does, too. That is why we have returned to this issue. We published our report, but we wanted to return to it to ensure that people did not think that it was merely meant to prop up the piano. We are determined that everybody will play their part in democracy—if they want to do so. That is the issue, and we have to make it right for them to do so. I know that you are both in for a very busy time shortly, but I have no doubt that you will carry it off with the humour that can sometimes get lost in elections. Thank you both for coming today.

[223] I remind the committee that the next meeting is on 16 March, when we will be discussing equal pay with the Welsh Local Government Association, Unison, and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, SOLACE. Returning to the issue in hand, should we bring the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government, Carl Sargeant, in on it? I initially thought that we should write to him, but so many issues have been raised that it may be better for us to invite him to a meeting to see whether we can make some changes to what will happen during the general election. Should we fetch him in? I see that you are in agreement. Thank you. I declare that the meeting is now closed.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 11 a.m.
The meeting ended at 11 a.m.*

