



Disability Wales Response to Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Bill

About Disability Wales

Disability Wales (DW) is the national association of Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) striving to achieve rights and equality of disabled people in Wales.

DW promotes the adoption and implementation of the Social Model of Disability, which identifies that it is environmental, organisational, and attitudinal barriers that disable people and prevent their full participation in society, not their medical conditions or impairments.

Key Findings

- General support from individual members for voter registration without application, but test periods should include data on the number of disabled people voting.
- Financial support for disabled candidates is extremely important and previous financial support available has allowed more disabled people to stand as candidates.
- Financial support should be extended, particularly to those with caring responsibilities.
- Other resources, such as mentorship schemes and network groups, are also important for supporting disabled candidates.
- An online Welsh Elections Information Platform could be positive, should appropriate steps be taken to ensure access and that those who are digitally excluded can find the same information.

Introduction

Access to elected office and our political institutions is a vital right for disabled people. The ability to engage in these political systems forms a core part of our Article 29 rights under the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Disabled People,¹ yet we still do not have data on the

¹ United Nations Convention of the Rights of Disabled People, "Article 29 – Participation in Political and Public Life", <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-29-participation-in-political-and-public-life.html>

number of disabled Members of the Senedd and Town or Community Councillors.

This response is based on a survey with 28 respondents, alongside feedback from both the Access to Elected Office scheme and Equal Power Equal Voice mentorship project. Of the survey, all respondents identified as disabled, and almost all were regular voters. 25 respondents had voted in the 2021 Senedd elections and 24 respondents had voted in the 2022 Welsh Local Government elections.

Voter Registration without application

We asked our survey respondents if they agreed with the implementation of voter registration without application, 24 of the respondents said that they agreed with it, 3 respondents disagreed, and 1 had no opinion. This agreement was caveated by one respondent, who told us that they would only agree subject to ensuring the checks and balances were in place to ensure all who are registered are eligible to vote. We also asked if this would make them more likely to vote. Of the 28 respondents, 18 reported that they would be more likely to vote, 7 said that they would not be more likely to vote, and 3 respondents were not sure. When asked for comment, one disabled person who responded “Yes” wrote that they would be more likely as currently registering to vote can be difficult due to their vision impairment.

We are pleased to see that there is a proposal for pilots of this policy and do believe that it can help some disabled people who have difficulty with the paperwork that comes with registering, to be able to vote. However, we would firmly encourage that information is taken about how the implementation of this impacts disabled people and how many disabled people are voting. We would also like to stress, that although this could potentially eliminate one barrier to electoral participation, there are still numerous barriers in place which could prevent a disabled person being able to enjoy their right to vote.

Financial Support

Disability Wales is pleased to see a duty placed on members to source financial support for disabled candidates. Amongst our respondents, there was wide support for financial assistance schemes for disabled people, 26 out of the 28 respondents agreed with this proposal, one

person cited a scheme similar to Access to Work would be useful. “Finances are almost always the largest barrier to our standing for an elected office!”² Financial barriers were cited throughout the survey as being a key reason that some disabled people cannot access elected office, we support any measure that will help eliminate this.

Disability Wales administrated the Access to Elected Office Fund on behalf of the Welsh Government. The fund “The Access to Elected Office Fund Wales exists to assist disabled people who want to stand for elected office with the additional impairment related costs that are a barrier to their participation in politics.”³ It was launched on the 15th February 2021 and ran during the 2021 Senedd elections and 2022 Welsh Local Government elections. During the 2021 Senedd Elections, the fund struggled to ensure that it would reach enough potential candidates due to the limited time, current known candidates were reached out to, one candidate told us that there was no need as their local authority had already put provisions in place. The 2021 Fund received 3 applications and supported 2 candidates, neither of whom were successful. There was positive feedback from these candidates, one saying that “the availability of the fund played a significant role in their decision to stand”. The 2022 Welsh Local Government elections had more applications, 18 disabled people applied, and 17 awards were granted. Feedback from applications showed that over 90% were either very satisfied or satisfied with the scheme. One applicant told us that “I will love to stand for Councillor again with faith that this fund would be readily available again thanks for all the help.” From the 2022 elections, 6 of 8 candidates were successfully elected to Community Council positions, no candidates were successful in Principle Council elections. Due to time constraints, the scheme did not specifically target disabled people from other protected characteristics, but over half the applicants were women and a small number of applicants were non-binary, applicants most commonly identified as White British/ Welsh/ English, but 17% identified as White and Asian, 8% as other mixed and 33% as any other ethnic group. Although we are working with a small sample size, we are encouraged by these numbers as they go against the usual trend of Council candidates being normally white, non-disabled men.

²Individual Disability Wales Member

³ Disability Wales, “Access to Elected Office Fund Wales”, <https://www.disabilitywales.org/projects/access-to-elected-office-fund-wales/>

The successes of the Access to Elected Office Fund demonstrate the real need for these schemes in Wales and for the expansion of the scheme.⁴

Disability Wales is also fully supportive of proposals to expand these financial support schemes to other groups. In particular, we are concerned that there aren't proposals for financial support for to cover the costs of providing care and support to others. The provision of this care is often heavily gendered and can be a significant expense. We believe that it would be important to look over the possibility of expanding this scheme to cover this. Most respondents were in favour of the financial support being extended, 15 of the 28 respondents supported this. When asked if both proposals would increase the number of disabled people accessing elected office, 24 respondents said that it would, no respondents said that it wouldn't help increase the number of disabled people accessing the opportunity to run for elected office.

Disability Wales also is a partner organisation of the Equal Power Equal Voice (EPEV) project. "Equal Power Equal Voice is a cross equalities partnership mentoring programme that aims to increase diversity of representation in public and political life in Wales,"⁵ we have seen success in the project encouraging disabled people to stand for office and widen their knowledge. In a testimonial, one Disability Wales mentee stated that "Standing for public office has been a long-term ambition of mine, which is also an honour and a privilege. Being part of the Equal Power Equal Voice programme has given me the platform I needed to take my interests and ambitions to the next level."⁶ We have seen that alongside the financial support, it is vital to ensure that disabled people, or anyone from a group that is underrepresented politically, have a support network in place, for example, another mentee wrote that "through EPEV I've gained contacts and become part of networks. I now feel empowered to reach out to people."⁷ We are pleased to see these duties being placed, but we would recommend that

⁴ Disability Wales and Access to Elected Office Fund, "Review of the Access to Elected Office Fund Wales Pilot Scheme", 31st January 2023.

⁵ Equal Power Equal Voice, "About EPEV", <https://epev.cymru/application-process/>

⁶ Equal Power Equal Voice, "Paul", <https://epev.cymru/testimonials/paull-allchurch/>

⁷ Equal Power Equal Voice, "Shahd", <https://epev.cymru/testimonials/shahd/>

these are not entirely financial, there options for support must be in place.

Online Elections Information

We asked respondents about the proposal for the online Welsh Elections Information Platform, the response was generally positive, 22 of the 28 respondents agreed with the proposal and 24 respondents thought that it would improve knowledge of Welsh elections. We further asked if they thought this platform would make them more likely to vote, of the 28 respondents 20 thought that it would make them more likely to vote. There was some concern with how the platform would be designed, it was made clear that all information on this platform would need to be accessible, screen readable, with multiple language options including BSL video. Should this platform be built, it should be done so either co-productively or in close consultation with disabled people to ensure that it would be accessible.⁸ We also need to see a plan to

⁸ “Creating a Welsh Elections Information Platform that is fully accessible for disabled people is crucial to ensure inclusivity in the electoral process. Here are some measures the Welsh Government should consider to make the platform accessible: Consultation with Disabled Communities: Engage with disabled individuals and advocacy groups throughout the development process to gather input and feedback on the platform's accessibility features. This ensures that the platform meets the specific needs and preferences of the disabled community. Accessibility Standards Compliance: Ensure that the platform complies with international and national accessibility standards, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1. This includes providing accessible features for navigation, content presentation, and interaction. Alternative Formats: Provide election information in multiple formats, including plain text, large print, audio, and electronic formats compatible with screen readers. Ensure that downloadable documents are accessible and that multimedia content has captions and audio descriptions. User-Friendly Design: Design the platform with a user-friendly and intuitive interface. Ensure that it is easily navigable using keyboard commands and that focus indicators are visible for users who rely on keyboard navigation. Text-to-Speech and Speech-to-Text Support: Implement text-to-speech and speech-to-text functionality to accommodate individuals with visual or hearing impairments. This allows users to listen to or read content based on their preferences. High Contrast and Adjustable Fonts: Provide options for users to adjust text size, font styles, and background colors to enhance readability for those with visual impairments or cognitive disabilities. Accessible Forms: Ensure that online forms, such as voter registration forms or feedback forms, are designed with proper labels, error messages, and accessible input fields to facilitate completion by individuals with disabilities. Keyboard Shortcuts: Include keyboard shortcuts for important functions and actions on the platform, making it easier for users who cannot use a mouse or touch screen. Video Accessibility: If the platform includes videos, ensure that they have accurate captions and transcripts. Provide sign language interpretation for important video content. Interactive Maps: If the platform includes maps for electoral district boundaries or polling locations, make sure that the maps are navigable by screen readers and provide text-based information alongside the visual representation. Testing and User Feedback: Conduct regular accessibility testing with disabled users to identify and address any issues. Actively seek feedback from disabled individuals to make continuous improvements. Training for Staff: Ensure that staff responsible for maintaining and updating the platform receive training on accessibility best practices to ensure ongoing compliance. Technical Support: Offer technical support and assistance channels that are accessible and responsive to users with disabilities, including providing support through text-based communication for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Public Awareness

ensure that, even with the availability of this service, that the same information would still be available offline, this is important for those who are digitally excluded.

Other Barriers

We identified three key additional barriers to accessing Welsh political institutions in Wales. Firstly, discrimination from the public, the built environment and accessibility of elections, and internal culture within political parties.

We were repeatedly told by respondents to our survey that they are concerned about discrimination during the election and if elected. One respondent has experienced discrimination from political parties and voters “Discrimination from members of the same or other parties and discrimination from voters as I experienced.”⁹ For our members, this discrimination manifests both in attitudes on the street and the respect given to them as a disabled candidate or elected representative.

The built environment was also highlighted as an issue both as a candidate and a voter. As a candidate, the issue of pavement parking, door knocking/ leafletting and having to take meeting in inaccessible buildings was repeatedly highlighted as barriers. “Inaccessible Physical Environment: Many public buildings, including government offices and campaign headquarters, may lack adequate accessibility features like ramps, elevators, or accessible restrooms. This can make it difficult for disabled individuals to access these spaces.”¹⁰ For voters, there has been significant previous attention to the difficulties of disabled people who are blind or have a vision impairment being able to enjoy their right to a secret ballot due to needing support while voting.¹¹ Considering the attention that has already been given to this issue we are extremely concerned that it has not been specifically addressed within the Bill as it

Campaigns: Launch public awareness campaigns to inform disabled individuals about the availability and accessibility of the Welsh Elections Information Platform, promoting its use and benefits. Accessibility Statement: Publish a clear accessibility statement on the platform, detailing its commitment to accessibility, the standards followed, and contact information for accessibility-related inquiries and issues. By incorporating these measures, the Welsh Government can create an inclusive and accessible Elections Information Platform that empowers all citizens, including those with disabilities, to engage in the electoral process and make informed decisions during elections.”, Disability Wales Member

⁹ Individual Disability Wales Member

¹⁰ Individual Disability Wales member

¹¹ RNIB, “Turned Out 2022”, 13th July 2021,

https://media.rnib.org.uk/documents/RNIB_Turned_Out_2022_APDF.pdf

stands. Although the Bill has the potential to make positive action, we are concerned that it is not going far enough to support disabled people looking to engage.

Internal culture within political parties was frequently mentioned by respondents. “Political parties may not actively recruit or support disabled individuals as candidates. They may lack inclusive policies and practices that would encourage disabled individuals to become involved in party leadership and decision-making.”¹² This is a large concern for us, as even with the financial or support needs met, should the candidate selection procedure be inaccessible, it can prevent disabled candidates from being able to stand for election. We heard reports of complicated procedure with limited options for reasonable adjustments and that the internal culture within parties can be difficult for some disabled people to navigate.

Conclusion

We believe that this Bill contains many positive measures for diversifying Welsh political institutions. We are pleased to see specific support for disabled candidates and although a new scheme the Access to Elected Office Fund has had encouraging results, but we believe that it is important that this is expanded upon and that new measures for increasing political engagement are accessible to disabled people. Although we have limited data on the number of disabled MS’ and Councillors in Wales, we do know that under the current status quo there are many barriers to engagement. Should they be properly implemented, there are many proposals within this Bill, however, we are concerned that there are still significant barriers to engagement that have not been addressed.

¹² Individual Disability Wales Member