

The Association of Electoral Administrators



Response to the Government's Open Consultation: Access to elections: Call for Evidence

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) was founded in 1987 and is the professional body representing the interests of electoral administrators in the United Kingdom. It is a non-governmental and non-partisan body and has 1,899 members, the majority of whom are employed by local authorities to provide electoral registration and election services.

The AEA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Government's "Call for Evidence on Access to Elections". The Association also appreciates being part of the Cabinet Office Accessibility Group, working closely with the Electoral Commission and other stakeholders including Mencap, RNIB and Scope.

QUESTIONS

- 1. What capacity you are giving the information? For example as a disabled person, a support worker, or an organisation.**

Organisation – The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA).

SECTIONS ONE AND TWO

The questions in these two sections are not relevant to the AEA, so we have not provided responses.

SECTION THREE – LEVELS OF SUPPORT PROVIDED BY ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATORS TO DISABLED PEOPLE AT ELECTIONS

- 2. To help develop good practice we would welcome details of the support provided to disabled people at elections by local authority Electoral Service Teams.**

Electoral Services teams provide as part of their standard processes the range of support listed in Annex A to the call for evidence. Failure to do so would be contrary to current legislative provisions.

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Some local authorities produce easy to read guides in relation to registering to vote and voting, produce election material in large print or braille and offer one to one support and assistance in completing the registration form and voting at an election.

In many cases, Electoral Services teams work closely with local disability groups in encouraging registration, awareness of elections and their entitlement to vote, and in providing (within current legislative frameworks) effective access to the democratic process.

In terms of support for those electors who have physical disabilities, there is a need to remind school authorities and reinforce the rights of returning officers in the use of schools for polling station purposes. Often, school premises are the only suitable ones within a designated polling place and, equally, they are well equipped for disabled access which has, of course, been provided out of public funds.

3. What support do you provide to disabled people at electoral events?

At the last UK Parliamentary general election, we included the Mencap General Election guides "*An easy read guide to voting*" and "*A supporter guide to voting*", along with the guides produced by Scope, the RNIB and the Electoral Commission, on our website. We specifically raised awareness of them amongst our members, who deliver the elections and polling station staff training, through our daily bulletins.

Any polling station staff training we delivered on behalf of local authorities included awareness of voters with disabilities and the assistance available to them in the polling station.

We are a member of the Cabinet Office Accessibility Group and we recently spoke at the APPG on accessibility at elections, which also gave us the opportunity to listen to the recent experiences of disabled voters.

We will continue to contribute to the Accessibility Group and work closely with the various disability organisations, the Electoral Commission and Cabinet Office in raising awareness in the future.

4. Would more guidance on supporting disabled people to vote be helpful?

Generally, electoral administrators are well aware of the assistance needed for electors with a disability and make the necessary

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provisions as required by law, such as the provision of wheelchair access to polling stations, low-level polling booths, large print ballot papers, the tactile voting device (TVD) and assistance by a companion or presiding officer in completing the ballot paper.

We would expect all polling station staff to be made aware of physical and learning difficulties as part of their polling station training prior to an election, including the additional facilities available to them as outlined above.

The Government's register to vote website at present is not in an easy read format and it is therefore difficult for some people with learning difficulties to register to vote online without support. The Cabinet Office are currently conducting a review of the website and inclusion of easy read formats are being considered as part of the review. This would be welcomed.

However, electoral administrators will continue to be more than happy to assist any applicant by completing a paper application form for anyone who requests assistance.

Some local authorities also produce easy to read documents for registering to vote and voting, which could be made available more widely on a national basis.

However, the general community also needs to be educated on the rights of people being entitled to vote with a learning disability. There appears to be a perception that people with learning difficulties are not entitled to vote, or have to pass a "capacity test" to be able to vote. Family members or carers often discourage people with learning disabilities from registering to vote and voting. Further guidance and support for people with learning difficulties, their carers and families would help reduce this myth so that they can be encouraged to take part in their democratic right and vote.

There may be some instances whereby local authorities also need to refresh and raise awareness amongst their Electoral Services staff and polling station staff in relation to supporting people with learning difficulties and encourage them to register and cast their vote. Whilst for someone with a physical disability it is generally clear that assistance is required, for someone with a learning disability it is not always the case, potentially leading to misunderstandings.

As an organisation, we have already started to raise awareness with our members by circulating the guides provided by the

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Electoral Commission and various disability groups in our daily bulletins prior to the UK Parliamentary election.

However, the legislation relating to the provision for companions to mark the ballot paper needs to be reviewed. For example, there is provision in law for a carer of a person with a disability to mark their ballot paper in the polling station on their behalf. A form is completed which includes a signed declaration by the companion. However, the companion must be eligible to vote in the election that is taking place.

A large number of carers are European nationals and they are not entitled to vote at a UK Parliamentary election, which means they will not be entitled to vote on behalf of the person they care for. This issue becomes more complex in combined polls when the franchise allows European citizens to vote in local elections but not in a UK Parliamentary election, resulting in the carer casting a vote in the local election but not in the UK Parliamentary election.

There is an alternative option in these circumstances whereby the presiding officer can mark the ballot paper on their behalf and complete the necessary paper work. However, a disabled voter may feel uncomfortable with this arrangement, which could increase their anxiety especially having entered the polling station expecting their carer to vote for them on their behalf. Awareness of this criteria needs to be raised amongst the disability groups and caring community.

5. Do you engage with disabled charities and stakeholders in your area to improve the voting experience of disabled people?

As a national professional body, we are a member of the Cabinet Office Accessibility Group, which meets throughout the year.

During the UK Parliamentary election in June, we worked closely with disability groups and promoted their guidance to our members, the majority of whom are employed by local authorities to provide electoral registration and election services.

As outlined previously, this included circulating links in our daily bulletins to all members which included the Mencap General Election guides. We also did the same in relation to guides produced by Scope, RNIB and the Electoral Commission.

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We are also committed to continuing to work with organisations in the future to ensure that people with disabilities take part in the democratic process and have a positive experience.

John Turner
Chief Executive

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