

Study Highlights Disabled Voters' Needs

Working For Election Accessibility in the UK

The Spastics Society (now SCOPE), a group in the United Kingdom for people with Cerebral Palsy, undertook a study of the 1992 General Elections in their country and published the results of the study in *Polls Apart: Disabled People and the 1992 General Election*. The following are excerpts from that study.

"Taking part in an election is one of the most fundamental expressions of citizenship within a democracy. The act of voting is one of the most potent expressions of the right to self-determination and freedom to choose that an individual has. Yet in a country that prides itself on its democratic system we found that many disabled persons are excluded from the democratic process and, by omission, are denied their right to vote.... If, as a society, we cannot guarantee that disabled people are able to participate in the fundamental institutions of democracy nor can we guarantee their right to vote, then disabled people will be

correct in feeling that they are still, as one of our interviewees claimed, "third class citizens." Our study, the most comprehensive undertaken on this issue, looked at how disabled people fared in the whole electoral process. We examined how accessible the polling stations were on election day; which issues are particularly important to disabled people and the manner in which the political parties handled these issues." —p.1

"Just before the confirmation of the General Election date as 9 April we asked for volunteers to help us monitor the

accessibility of polling stations for the 1992 General Election. We asked our surveyors to monitor at least half the polling stations in their constituency to interview two disabled people, to collect the electioneering leaflets and to save local newspapers cuttings which related to disability issues. All the people involved in surveying the accessibility of polling stations were either disabled people, carers, or had worked with disabled people. We supplied our surveyors with a simple monitoring form which required them to tick the appropriate box covering 5 areas where access could be a problem: pathway; steps; ramps; doorways; and the interior of the

THE SPASTICS SOCIETY'S STUDY OF THE 1992 GENERAL ELECTION

ACCESSIBILITY OF A POLLING STATION

When checking a polling station assume that the voter is unaccompanied and either a wheelchair user or with severe walking difficulties.

CONSTITUENCY /

FULL NAME OF POLLING STATION
.....

ADDRESS...

FUNCTION OF BUILDING (eg. school)

Below is a description of types of access problems, please mark in the boxes which applies. If you are not sure, please describe.

	yes	no
<p>■ APPROACH TO POLLING STATION:</p> <p>Level pavement to door <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Damaged or uneven pavement/path <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Obstructions on path/pavement <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>High kerb <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Permanent ramp too steep? <input type="checkbox"/> easy to use? <input type="checkbox"/></p>	✓	✗
<p>■ ENTERING THE POLLING STATION:</p> <p>Slight step/small step at entrance <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>2 - 3 steps at entrance <input type="checkbox"/></p>		

4 or more steps	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 or more flights/series of steps	<input type="checkbox"/>
propped open doors	<input type="checkbox"/>
Double doors hard to open <input type="checkbox"/> easy to open <input type="checkbox"/>	
Narrow door hard to open <input type="checkbox"/> easy to open <input type="checkbox"/>	
■ INSIDE THE POLLING STATION:	
Steps inside building	<input type="checkbox"/>
Narrow corridor	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dark interior/inadequate lighting	<input type="checkbox"/>
Slippery floor	<input type="checkbox"/>
■ ANY ADJUSTMENTS TO IMPROVE ACCESS?	
Special arrangements (please describe)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Offer of help from presiding Officer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Temporary ramp	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any additional information? ✓	
Any other access problems? ✓	

Survey designed by The Spastics Society

polling station. We asked the surveyors to consider the potential problems for an independent disabled person using a wheelchair, or someone with severe walking difficulties, i.e. could a disabled person with mobility difficulties get in unaided? We had not anticipated the scale of the task we had set. To cover an average constituency of 32.5 polling stations took all day. Some groups divided up the task amongst themselves, other people did them all on their own." — p.5

"The problems of the postal vote were reflected in our interviews with disabled people. They felt very strongly that it was important to vote in person and that elections were a chance to participate in an important public activity. They wanted to cast their vote at the polling station and experience the excitement and sense of commitment this involved. A real act of being a full citizen. As one of our interviewees, Susan Davies, explained 'I want to be part of the election world.' Or like Leonard Faulkes, who although he only has one leg, preferred to walk the mile and a half to his polling station rather than use a postal vote. Nearly all our interviewees showed a marked hostility to postal voting because they distrusted the impersonal aspects of the system. Most importantly it represented yet another way in which they could be excluded from the mainstream of political life." — p.3

"The Postal Vote system is set up to allow people who cannot get to the polling station on election day for a variety of reasons, to cast their vote. The system can be of great use to people whose disabilities severely restrict their mobility allowing them the opportunity to exercise their democratic rights by post if it is impossible for them to get to the polling station in person. Most people with disabilities value their independence, certainly to the extent of going to the polling station with the rest of the public. Other than expediency there is no reason why the majority of disabled people should be forced to use postal votes because they cannot gain access to what are, in almost every case, public buildings." — p.17

From Jane Enticott, Pauline Graham, and Brian Lamb, *Polls Apart: Disabled People and the 1992 General Election*, London: Campaigns and Parliamentary Affairs Department of The Spastics Society (12 Park Crescent, London W1N 4EQ, United Kingdom), 1992, ISBN 0-946-828-288. ☑

The Disability Manifesto

A number of British groups have drafted and circulated *The Disability Manifesto*, which includes a section on "Access to the Political Process." The recommendations included in that document are:

1. All buildings used as polling stations should be fully accessible to disabled people... Disabled people should be consulted on the design and siting of ramps and other access features. The provision of Braille and large print ballot papers would enable blind and partially sighted people to exercise their right to vote.
2. People should be informed of their right to assistance in voting at polling stations.
3. People living in long stay hospitals must have the right to use the hospital address and must have equal access to the voting process.
4. The postal and proxy voting procedures should be overhauled to include voter registration campaigns for disabled people, the simplifying of forms and removal of the requirement to have forms signed by a GP [Ed.: General Practice physician]
5. Party manifestos and other election material should be produced in accessible formats e.g. Braille, tape and large print for visually impaired people and in Sign Language on video for deaf people and on tape for people with learning disabilities. All party political broadcasts should be subtitled and there should be Sign Language interpretation on at least one channel of each broadcast. Public meetings should be held in accessible venues, which should also have induction loops for people with hearing aids and communication support (e.g. Sign Language interpreters) for deaf people. Materials should be available in the first language of the individual voter.
6. MPs should hold surgeries [Ed.: meetings or candidate forums] in accessible venues and have text phones so that deaf people can contact them by phone. If a deaf or deafblind person wants to meet their MP, then the MP should be required to pay for communication support. "