

FOREWORDS

Areeq Chowdhury

In undertaking this research, it has become clear to me that the problems facing disabled and vision impaired voters when accessing elections is far greater than I imagined. It should be a source of embarrassment for successive Governments that such basic problems persist in 2017.

This report looks specifically at how the use of digital technology can enhance accessibility, however, there are some very simple short-term fixes which should be implemented, too. Some of these are outlined in this report, such as highlighting accessibility helplines at the beginning of a document or webpage, rather than at the end.

For the UK to be a truly inclusive democracy, the next Government must address the problems outlined in this report and recognise that digital democracy has a critical role to play in enabling accessible elections. It is a human right for citizens to be able to cast a secret and independent vote, however it is highly questionable whether voters with vision impairments and other disabilities have access to that right.

Online voting has a crucial role to play in ensuring that everyone can play a full role in democratic participation. We should look towards the progress that has been made in countries such as Australia and Estonia, where voters with disabilities are able to vote independently in the comfort of their homes. There can be no excuse for delay, and I would strongly urge all parties looking to govern the UK to adopt the recommendations set out in this report.

A democracy that works for everyone is one where no voter is left off the electoral register, where all voters are sufficiently informed about the election, and where all voters have the ability to vote independently.

Areeq Chowdhury

Chief Executive of WebRoots Democracy

Baroness Sal Brinton

Democracy must be accessible to all voters. Technology has played a crucial role in reducing barriers which hinder the lives of those with vision impairments and other disabilities. I am therefore pleased to welcome this report by WebRoots Democracy assessing how the internet can help include voters of all abilities into our electoral process.

It is vital that we approach our democracy as we approach our devices. They should both be accessible, user-friendly, and kept up-to-date with the times in which we live. Solutions of the past aren't always suitable for the present, so it is right that we constantly look at how technology can improve the system and this report does just that.

As a full-time wheelchair user myself, I know first-hand how our democratic infrastructure is unfit for those of us with disabilities. Our Parliament in Westminster is not nearly accessible enough and the experiences outlined in this report demonstrate how our political process isn't either.

A cornerstone of our electoral system is that voters should be able to vote independently and in secret. This simply is not the case for many voters with vision impairments and other disabilities. It is not right that hundreds of thousands of voters are being made to depend on others to cast their ballot on their behalf, or risk accidentally spoiling their vote. It is clear that the technology exists to enable independent and secret votes for all.

As set out in this report, countries such as Australia have successfully implemented online voting for vision impaired and disabled voters. It is time for us to look at here in Britain, too.

Baroness Sal Brinton

President of the Liberal Democrats

Nicky Gavron AM

As a politician who recently has become visually impaired, I know all too well how inaccessible our society is for those of us with a disability. It is an aspiration that institutions in the private sector enable accessibility for all, but it is an expectation that institutions in our public sector are accessible, and this includes the administration of elections.

Therefore, I wholeheartedly welcome this important report by WebRoots Democracy exploring how we can enable full inclusion into our democratic process for voters with vision impairments and disabilities.

Any one of us can obtain a disability at any point in our lives, so it is critical that we speak up and speak out about deficiencies in our democracy that make it difficult for us to participate. The rise in digital technology has brought wonders for people with vision impairments and disabilities. It has broken down barriers to everyday tasks and enabled greater independence. For me personally, voice recognition technology has been an incredible help following the rapid decline in my eyesight.

It is only right that we now look at how best we can harness digital technology to break down barriers in our democracy. It is frankly unacceptable that we have a situation in which hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of vision impaired and disabled voters in the UK are unable to vote independently and in secret, when in other countries they are able to do so. We should look towards advancements made by our friends in Australia and Estonia in which they have adopted online voting to enable democratic accessibility for all.

The expectation for our elections to be accessible is not currently being met, however if we implement the recommendations set out in this report, they can help set us on our way.

Nicky Gavron AM

Labour London Assembly Member
Deputy Mayor of London 2004-2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose and background of this report

A functioning democracy is one that is accessible to all. Voting in elections, the action we are all asked to undertake, is the foundation of our democratic society. In an age where technology has enabled many people to continue playing a full role in society despite disabilities, it is questionable that we should continue indefinitely with an analogue process of democratic participation.

In producing this report, we have worked with disability charities and campaigners from across the board, as well as election providers, and the Electoral Commission, exploring how technology can ensure more inclusive elections. Throughout this report, we build upon the discussions held during a policy roundtable we hosted at City Hall, London, as well as existing research, new data, and information kindly provided to us by disability charities.

This report explores barriers not just in the physical act of voting, but in joining the electoral register and accessing information about elections, candidates, and party policies. It also sets out a number of recommendations that we will be calling on decision-makers to adopt in the run up to this snap General Election, and beyond.

WebRoots Democracy

WebRoots Democracy (also known as the Institute for Digital Democracy) is a youth-led think tank focused on the intersection of technology and democratic participation. Its aim is to modernise, enhance, and future-proof democracy in the United Kingdom.

With the advice of industry experts and academics, and the support of an all-party group of MPs, WebRoots Democracy intends to deliver evidence-based tech policy to sustain the future of British democratic participation.

WebRoots Democracy is an independent, non-partisan organisation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Government should initiate **pilots of online voting** as a matter of priority in the new Parliament, with a view to an online voting option being in place for the next UK General Election.
2. Consideration should be given towards **joining up existing disability registers**, such as CVIs, with the electoral register.
3. It should be made law for **all major political parties to produce manifestos in alternate, accessible, formats** prior to the opening of the postal vote window.
4. Consideration should be given towards **recording information preferences on the electoral register** and passing this information on to party campaigners.
5. The Electoral Commission should **develop an official, independent, and accessible voter advice application** ahead of the next UK General Election.
6. Key election information shared on social media by public bodies should **not solely contain the information in an image format**.
7. The Equality and Human Rights Commission should **explore whether or not the existing voting system is in breach of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**.

KEY FINDINGS

It is clear that accessibility for vision impaired and disabled people, whether it be in the administration of elections, or elsewhere, is seen only as an ‘after-thought’ by decision-makers and is seen through the prism of compliance rather than inclusion. Many of the required changes to the system should have been implemented long ago. For example, frustration was reported to us regarding the fact that information about assistance is often placed at the end instead of the beginning of important documents.

Simple changes can make a huge difference to people’s experience with elections, and should be implemented immediately. It is the case that there are polling cards produced which ask the voter to call a helpline if they require assistance, with the helpline number printed only on the opposite side.

The move towards online and individual electoral registration seems to have improved accessibility to registration for disabled and vision impaired voters. In particular, it has reduced the risk of deliberate non-registration by carers or other individuals. However, there is clear room for improvement and consideration should be given towards ensuring disabled students in particular have not been left off the register as a result of the changes.

Access to information in elections also appears to be problematic. The publication of manifestos in accessible formats is slow and in the cases of the Conservative Party and the Scottish National Party, has taken place days after the postal vote window has opened for the 2017 UK General Election.

With regards to the physical act of voting, there is a clear feeling that voters with disabilities and vision impairments are being prevented from their right to vote secretly and independently in the existing system. There is a strong appetite amongst disability organisations and campaigners for an accessible, remote, online voting option to be introduced for future elections.

VOTER REGISTRATION

It is clear that the move towards online and individual electoral registration has increased accessibility to registration for many voters with disabilities. The previous method of household, paper, registration was said to have left many disabled people unregistered to vote. In addition, according to Scope's 2010 report, *Polls Apart*, there were anecdotal reports of household registration being used as a way of stealing disabled people's votes.

The move towards individual voter registration has reduced the risk of deliberate non-registration, and the online platform has improved accessibility for those who are vision impaired or find it difficult to leave their home to obtain postal registration forms. Whilst the figures are not broken down by disability, data on the Government's website show that the vast majority of voter registration applications made since the 2017 election was called have been completed online. On the deadline day to register, 622,000 applications were made, 99% of which were completed online.

As part of our roundtable discussion, it was clear however, that accessibility for disabled and vision impaired voters was seen only as an "after-thought" for the Government and wider society. For example, an irritation that was raised was that contact details for alternate formats were not placed at the top of a letter or webpage.

Clive Lever from the British Computer Association of the Blind pointed out that it can take on average 15 times longer for someone with vision impairments to read a webpage than someone with full sight. It is therefore even more critical that information for alternate formats are placed at the beginning of the webpage.

In addition, some have argued that the move towards individual electoral registration discriminates against people with learning disabilities, mental health difficulties or dementia.

In an article for the Guardian, Lucy Series from Exeter University, argued that people with cognitive disabilities may struggle to complete the declaration of truth that their name, date of birth, address, nationality, and national insurance number are correct.

A Lancaster University study on the participation of adults with intellectual disabilities in the 2015 General Election found that just 23.9% of their sample had registered to vote and that only 8.7% turned out to vote. They also found that the voter's mental capacity was "framed as justification for the behaviours of people working in settings to prevent adults with intellectual disabilities exercising their rights."

In our roundtable, Eleanor Lisney from Crip the Vote UK, highlighted to us that voter registration is particularly problematic for disabled students who may have left home and be unaware that they are required to re-register in their new constituency if they wish to vote at their university's location. She argued that young disabled people are particularly at risk of being missing from the electoral register.

On the Government's 'Register to Vote' website, there are no contact details provided anywhere on the page for users who may require assistance. In order to obtain this information, the user must click on the 'help' button at the very bottom of the webpage, and then click on 'accessibility', before scrolling down to 'Contact GOV.UK' and completing a web form. No telephone helpline appears to be provided.

There is clearly a desire for a more automated method of voter registration which doesn't leave voters behind. Ideas raised included allowing voter registration as part of other public services such as registering with a GP, and to join up the electoral register with disability registers. There is also a case to be made for there being a concerted effort, and distinct drive, by the Government and other bodies to ensure that people with disabilities and vision impairments are registered to vote.

Whilst online voter registration has played a significant role in making the process more accessible for many people with disabilities, it is clear that there is progress to be made in the design. If it isn't being done already, it would be a sensible idea to test the user experience of the online voter registration platform with a range of disabled and vision impaired voters. Clive Lever from the British Computer Association of the Blind told us his advice to "young website designers" is to ask themselves: "could my nan do this?"

BARRIERS IN ELECTIONS

Disabled voters face a number of barriers to accessing information about elections, political parties, and local candidates. This can include everything from leaflets that come through the letter box about local candidates, information on election deadlines and polling station locations, as well as details about party policies outlined in election manifestos. These all need to be accessible in order for people with vision impairments and disabilities to make informed choices.

At the time of writing (30/05/2017), the alternate manifesto formats provided by each of the main political parties is as follows:

Conservatives: Braille, Large Print, and Audio versions.

Labour: British Sign Language, Braille, Large Print, Easy Read, and Audio versions.

Liberal Democrats: British Sign Language, Braille, Easy Read, and Audio versions.

Greens: British Sign Language, Braille, Easy Read, and Audio versions.

UKIP: No information on alternate formats.

Scottish National Party: “Accessible versions of our manifesto will be available shortly.”

With postal votes having already been sent out, it is problematic for parties to have not published accessible manifestos as the window for postal voting (a method used by many disabled voters) shortens with each day of delay. During our roundtable discussion, it was described to us as “inexcusable” to not have accessible formats ready by the date of polling, and it was pointed out that despite the nature of the General Election being called at short notice, other parties had managed to produce alternate formats in time.

According to the British Deaf Association, the Conservative Party have refused to publish their manifesto with a British Sign Language translation. The BDA argue that this is “denying deaf people who use sign language the right to be informed and to have full access to information” on the Conservative Party policies. They describe this as a “clear breach” of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

The internet has quite clearly played an important role in increasing access to information on party policies. The political parties which have published accessible formats have been able to do so easily online at a lower cost compared to publishing hard copies. Video BSL translations have been published by some on their manifesto page, as well as audio recordings of manifestos. Ideally, publishing accessible formats online should be made a requirement for all major political parties.

In our roundtable, Marie Chadwick, of the Royal National Institute for Blind People, drew attention to the EU referendum pamphlet sent out last year by the Government encouraging a vote to Remain. The pamphlet was produced in standard/small print on glossy paper. In addition, no information was available anywhere in the pamphlet about accessing alternate formats. She told us that the RNIB ended up receiving calls from users and resorted to referring individual cases to the Cabinet Office.

This was concerning to hear, and it quite clearly goes against best practice advice published by the Office for Disability Issues on accessible communication formats. Published in 2014, the guidance is written “for government communicators” and outlines that “to reach all your audience, you need to make effective use of accessible communication formats.” It also states to “make sure any accessible formats you produce are available at the same time as the standard print.”

Luke Ashby from Electoral Reform Services asked participants in our roundtable whether online voter advice applications present potential for an accessible method of obtaining information about parties and policies, however Rebecca Bunce from Access the Vote commented that “half of them” do not work with screen readers and many have pop-ups with tiny crosses. There was a consensus however that producing accessible information online is beneficial for voters with disabilities and vision impairments, but only if they have universal accessibility with different devices.

There has been a growth in the number of voter advice applications or websites produced in recent years which aim to provide unbiased information on political parties to help users make more informed choices. These often take the form of quizzes or surveys, or in some cases, games. We are unaware, as yet, of any which are particularly catered to voters with vision impairments and disabilities. It would be interesting, for example, to see a voter advice application that works based on voice recognition. In previous reports we have published, we have called upon the Electoral Commission to produce their own, official voter advice application.

Due to many disabled voters being bedbound or chairbound, it was noted in our roundtable that they are unlikely to use laptops and computers but mobiles and tablets instead. Nigel Lewis from AbilityNet told us that every online service should be designed to respond to whatever device is being used and that there needs to be a “step change” amongst website developers away from “bad inclusive service design”. He said it was unnecessary to have separate websites for people with disabilities.

Similar frustrations about accessibility were raised regarding candidate leaflets, which are often distributed with no alternate formats available. These leaflets inform voters of who their local candidate is, what they believe in, and what they aim to do for local people. However, for many people with disabilities, these leaflets can be entirely inaccessible. On this point, Tom Hawthorn from the Electoral Commission raised an idea of recording information preferences in the electoral register, and making this available to campaigners.

Participants responded positively to this idea as this would reduce the likelihood of this being a repeat problem, however Rebecca Bunce qualified support with a warning that the data should be used for this purpose only and not for targeted advertising. Rosanna Singler from Leonard Cheshire Disability added that not everyone is open about their disabilities and may be unwilling to share this information or for this information to be shared with political parties.

With regards to information about the election itself, Access the Vote highlighted to us how, increasingly, Government bodies and the Electoral Commission are tweeting or sharing images on social media with instructions in the image rather than in the tweet or status. This can lead to difficulties for voters using screen readers as they may not pick up important information and deadlines related to the election. This is another important area which should be given consideration by the Electoral Commission and Government institutions.

BARRIERS IN VOTING

Vision impaired voters

In 2015, the Royal London Society for the Blind, estimated that more than 1.3 million vision impaired voters were 'prevented from voting in secret' due to inaccessible voting and registration methods. In an article for the Huffington Post following the 2015 General Election, Chief Executive of the RLSB, Tom Pey, said that online voting should be introduced by 2020 to 'remove barriers for blind people to exercise their right to a secret ballot.' Pey was excluded from voting in the 2015 General Election despite registering to vote online, as he was unable to read the subsequent letter he received asking him to enter more information because he is registered blind.

A survey carried out by the Royal National Institute for Blind People in 2014, found that 69% of respondents were unable to vote in secret and independent of assistance. Some voters with vision impairments depend on others to cast their vote for them in fear of accidentally spoiling their ballot. The RNIB described the existing system as a 'mockery of anti-fraud processes' due to many having to tell another person who they want to vote for without any way of checking that their wishes are being met.

Their research found that those who did not vote were not simply abstaining due to lack of interest. Of those that did not vote, over half said they would have voted if it was easier for them to do so. Nearly half said they didn't vote because they couldn't get to the polling station easily. Some of their respondents reported that staff at the polling station did not know how to use the tactile and large print templates, or had the wrong templates available.

82% said they want new, accessible, ways of voting to be introduced, and 45% said they think the current voting system is 'not fit for purpose'.

Ruksana Khanum, from the Royal Society for Blind Children, told us that not all people with vision impairments are satisfied with having to rely on assistance to vote, and that she has a right to vote independently and in secret.

Writing in a blog for WebRoots Democracy, Agatka Cienciala, a young person with a vision impairment said:

"The truth is that blind and partially sighted people, together with other disabled people, are the biggest group in our society still not to have the possibility of voting, using the secret ballot."

Voters with other disabilities

For many voters with disabilities, physical access to polling stations can be difficult. This can be due to barriers such as steps at the entrance, heavy closed doors, and narrow corridors.

The level of inaccessibility can be much worse when polling stations are located in obscure venues such as portable cabins, caravans, or in fields. In addition, in some cases, disabled people find that they cannot park near the polling station, can be disorientated by too bright/not bright enough lighting, and find that the voting booths themselves are too high or too low.

Mencap, a charity which supports 1.4 million people with learning disabilities, provided information to us from a survey they conducted prior to the 2015 General Election which showed that 17% said they had been turned away from a polling station because they had a learning disability. They note that voters cannot be turned away from polling stations on account of a “lack of capacity” and that only a court can decide whether someone lacks capacity.

In Scope’s 2010 report, one parent detailed their experience at the polling station as follows:

“I took my son who has learning disabilities to vote. I was disgusted to hear one of three people at the polling station say ‘that’s another spoilt paper’ and the other two agree. In future we will go for postal voting so that we don’t have to put up with these sort of comments.”

Unlike in Northern Ireland, voters in the rest of the UK are restricted to voting only at the polling station designated on their polling card. This may act as a significant restriction for disabled voters as it may force them towards inaccessible venues, with no alternative.

For voters who are housebound due to their disability, postal voting also presents a number of similar barriers. With the option of postal voting, this group of disabled voters may have to depend on another individual to essentially submit their vote on their behalf and trust that they have done so. The same principle of dependence and trust is true for the proxy method of voting, too.

Research by Leonard Cheshire Disability following the 2015 General Election found that 24% of disabled people found it difficult to vote in person at polling stations. The problems their research highlighted included:

- No level access or disabled parking spaces available at some polling stations
- Inaccessible voting booths and ballot boxes
- Polling station staff lacking training to help.

One of the respondents to their survey recounted their experience as follows:

“There was a step up into the venue. My wheelchair could not be tipped back far enough to get over the step. The staff did offer to come and help lift me over – which although was kind it wouldn’t have been helpful or dignified at all, plus I was fearful of being dropped.”

Another said:

“The booth shelf was too high so I had to complete the ballot papers on my lap for all to see. There was no privacy.”

THE EXISTING SYSTEM

Currently, voters with vision impairments are assisted in elections with the following means, as set out by the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

Large print ballot form

Voters with vision impairments can request a large print copy of the ballot paper to take into the polling booth with them, which they can then use as a reference. The voter then uses the large print copy to read all of the information on the ballot paper, but must still cast their vote on the standard size print ballot paper.

Tactile voting device

If the voter has difficulty completing the ballot paper, they are able to request a tactile voting device at the polling station to help them mark their vote in the correct place. This device has a sticky backing, which attaches at the top of the ballot paper. It has numbered lift up flaps written in braille, directly over the boxes where you mark your vote.

The voter will need to use the large print ballot form, or ask someone (a companion or polling station staff) to read out the list of candidates to them. The voter then needs to remember the number of the candidate they wish to vote for, lift the flap with the same number, and mark an X in the box.

Finally, the voter detaches the tactile device and folds their ballot paper in half before posting it in the ballot box.

Help at the polling station

If the voter has difficulty with both the large print ballot form and the tactile voting device, they can request someone to help them at the polling station. That person can help guide the voter between the entrance, desk, polling booth, and ballot box. They can also cast the vote on their behalf.

The person aiding the voter could be a companion or polling station staff. Any companion must be a member of the voter's immediate family over 18 years old, or a 'qualified elector' – which is someone who is legally able to vote in a UK election.

Vote by proxy

Any voter who is unable to get to a polling station to vote can appoint someone they trust to go to the polling station to vote on their behalf. This is called voting by proxy. Unlike postal voting, a reason must be provided for a proxy vote. Voters can cite their vision impairment as a sufficient reason for a proxy vote.

The vision impaired voter needs to register to vote by proxy at least six working days before the election by completing an application form and sending it back to their local electoral registration office. Unless the voter is registered as blind, they will need someone to support their application such as a GP or a social worker.

Postal voting

All voters can apply to vote by post rather than going to a polling station. If the voter has registered to vote by post, they will be sent the ballot paper in the post. A vision impaired voter can then cast their vote in their home using their own magnifiers or equipment, rather than going to the polling station.

The voter can also request assistance at home, including a tactile voting device, a large print ballot form for reference, and help with mailing their completed ballot form.

In addition to the postal, proxy, and help at the polling station methods of voting outlined here, guidelines from the Electoral Commission states:

“Any voter with a disability is entitled to assistance to gain access to the polling station. Returning Officers must consider accessibility requirements when planning for elections and polling stations are selected in consultation with local disability groups. If a voter can’t enter the polling station because of a physical disability, the Presiding Officer may take the ballot paper to the elector.”

ONLINE VOTING

Voters with vision impairments could significantly benefit from the introduction of an online voting option, due to the potential it has for enabling these voters to cast an independent and secret ballot for the first ever time. With the use of an online voting platform that works with screenreaders, a voter would be able to use their own equipment, in the comfort of their home, to cast a vote in an election in secret and without having to rely on others to do so on their behalf.

In addition, the rise of digital alternatives to paper-based methods, has improved accessibility for people with vision impairments in other areas of their lives. It is no longer the case that people with vision impairments rely on languages such as braille. In fact, figures reported by the RNIB to the BBC in 2012, showed that fewer than 1% of the two million vision impaired people in the UK use braille.

For these reasons, in 2013, the Royal Society for Blind Children's Youth Forum launched a campaign entitled 'Votes Without Limits' in which they called for accessible online voting to be introduced in time for the 2020 General Election. They argued that this would "make voting easier for blind and partially-sighted people."

The potential breach of law in which the existing system blocks vision impaired voters from casting secret ballots was described as a 'civil rights issue' in the USA, when in 2013, a US Federal Judge ordered Maryland to allow blind and disabled voters to fill out absentee ballots online.

As part of our roundtable discussions, we heard about the experience in New South Wales where online voting was introduced after the issue of inaccessibility was taken to court. Scytl, who develop the online voting technology there, stated that the system had universal design, supports nine types of screen reader, and doesn't require any add-ons. In Australia, online voting was introduced for vision impaired voters initially, but later expanded to expatriate voters.

In research undertaken by the BBC in 2015, they interviewed Liz Ball, who is deafblind and communicates through tactile fingerspelling. She called the existing system 'antiquated' and said:

"It still doesn't take account of technology or the shift in societal attitudes to disability. It's about time that as a country we got our act together to make sure that everybody can vote without being disappointed or frustrated by that process."

She said that online voting 'would not just make it easier for people with blindness, but those with other disabilities would benefit, too.'

Scope called for the introduction of an online voting option in 2010 after 35% of participants they interviewed for their Polls Apart study said they would prefer to vote online. In the report, Scope said:

“For some groups of voters, both polling station and postal voting continued to be fundamentally inaccessible. Visually impaired voters and those with complex physical impairments still had to rely on others to physically mark their ballot paper on their behalf, denying them their right to a secret ballot.

New technologies are now being used by disabled people to improve accessibility in every part of their lives, and the potential of it to revolutionise voting remains considerable.”

The option to vote online has the potential to bring down physical access barriers for voters who are wheelchair users, have learning disabilities, or motor limitations. It could also enable many to cast secret, independent ballots for the first ever time.

It has already been implemented as an option in elections around the world in countries such as Australia, Estonia, and Switzerland. We have outlined in previous reports methods of mitigating security risks associated with online voting. There was a consensus at our roundtable that this would be a good development to have in the UK, but this was qualified with the need to ensure that the user experience for voters with vision impairments and disabilities is considered at the beginning of the design and not as an after-thought.

Sam Campbell from the New South Wales iVote project told WebRoots Democracy that 97% of users reported being satisfied with the experience, and that 1 in 10 users said without online voting they would not have voted at all. The system there is a standard website, not a separate application, and works on mobile and tablet. It was noted that remote online voting is of more value to disabled and vision impaired voters than electronic voting machines that are based within polling stations. A remote platform enables the voter to use their own equipment at their own comfort.

Scytl also informed us about the implementation of online voting in Barcelona City Council elections in 2016. As part of this, the Municipal Institute of Persons with Disabilities implemented online voting as an additional channel allowing citizens with disabilities and vision impairments to vote remotely from the device of their choice. 47% of these voters chose to vote online instead of the traditional paper and postal channels.

Electoral Reform Services which have provided online voting platforms for various political parties including the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats, informed us that their online voting platform is compatible with screenreaders and meets accessibility standards. In the 2015 Labour leadership contest, 344,000 people (81%) cast their vote online instead of by paper.

Nicky Gavron, a London Assembly Member who recently became vision impaired, explained to the roundtable how she depends a lot on iPhone’s Siri application, and suggested that once we have online voting, whether Siri could be used to cast a vote. She described herself as someone who does not have a good grasp of technology but finds Siri very useful for help with her day to day tasks.

A study conducted for this report by the RSBC with 16 vision impaired participants, found that a third did not feel very confident about being able to vote independently and secretly and more than two-thirds want to be able to vote online. One participant described the lack of accessible documentation as “appalling” and another wanted information to be online so that they could access it with their screenreader. Another described their voting experience as “very difficult” and that “the only way I vote is because I ask a family member who I trust to do the postal vote for me.”

Writing for our website in October 2014, Victoria Richards, trustee of the disability charity Enrych Black Country, said online voting could ‘open up our democratic arena to more people; answering the cry of the disabled people that demand “nothing about us without us”’.

INTERNATIONAL AND EU LAW ON VOTER ACCESSIBILITY

In the Human Rights Act 1998, Protocol 1, Article 3: 'Right to free elections' reads as follows:

"The High Contracting Parties undertake to hold free elections at reasonable intervals by secret ballot, under conditions which will ensure the free expression of the opinion of the people in the choice of the legislature."

According to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, this right is 'absolute' and 'must never be restricted in any way.'

Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that parties shall guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and "the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others". It goes on to state that parties to the Convention should:

"Ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote...by ensuring that voting procedures, facilities, and materials are appropriate, accessible, and easy to understand and use."

It continues to state that parties to the Convention should undertake to:

"Protecting the right of persons with disabilities to vote by secret ballot in elections and public referendums without intimidation...facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate."

The failure to provide an accessible, secret method of voting for those with vision impairments and other disabilities could therefore be a breach of the Human Rights Act and international law. This was similarly argued in Australia, when in 2011, Vision Australia argued that the Government 'has an obligation to enact the necessary legislation and provide sufficient resources to facilitate the development and continuation of equitable voting practices.'

One of the methods they said would enable their service-users 'to cast an independent, secret ballot' was the introduction of an online voting option 'in which votes are cast using an accessible website.'

The recently published 2017 – 2023 Disability Strategy published by the Council of Europe also outlines some relevant points on this subject. Under its section on accessibility, the document states:

"It is important that all persons benefit from technological advancements and that no-one is left behind, including persons with multiple disabilities and complex needs."

Information and communication tend to be largely inaccessible for many persons with disabilities and therefore attention needs to be paid to appropriate and alternative communication modes. This includes the need for accessible political campaigns to promote full participation in public and political life.”

In light of this, and the expression by voters with disabilities and vision impairments that their rights are being “denied”, we strongly recommend that the Equality and Human Rights Commission explore whether the existing voting system is in breach of international and UK laws and obligations.

CONCLUSION

Next steps

This report is very much a first step towards our work in pushing for policy changes to enable an inclusive, accessible, democracy.

The next steps will be to continue the push for cross-party support for election modernisation, of which much progress has been made. The focus, however, will be on making requests from the new Government to introduce this reform over the course of the next Parliament. We will also press relevant bodies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and the Electoral Commission, to investigate whether the rights of disabled and vision impaired voters are being denied by the state.

Get involved

If you agree that it's time for the UK to modernise elections and you would like to find out more about the campaign for online voting, there are a number of ways to do so.

- Like us on Facebook at facebook.com/WebRootsUK.
- Follow us on Twitter at twitter.com/WebRootsUK.
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Our roundtable attendees are as follows: Areeq Chowdhury (WebRoots Democracy); Khadija Said (WebRoots Democracy); Ben Pearson (WebRoots Democracy); Nicky Gavron AM (London Assembly); Nigel Lewis (AbilityNet); Rebecca Bunce (Access the Vote); Clive Lever (British Computer Association of the Blind); Eleanor Lisney (Crip the Vote UK); Tom Hawthorn (Electoral Commission); Luke Ashby (Electoral Reform Services); Rosanna Singler (Leonard Cheshire Disability); Katherine Payne (Royal Society for Blind Children); Ruksana Khanum (Royal Society for Blind Children); Marie Chadwick (Royal National Institute for Blind People); Ben Fagg (Scytl); Klaus Thalman (Scytl). The roundtable was observed by Shelley Hopkinson (Equality and Human Rights Commission).

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