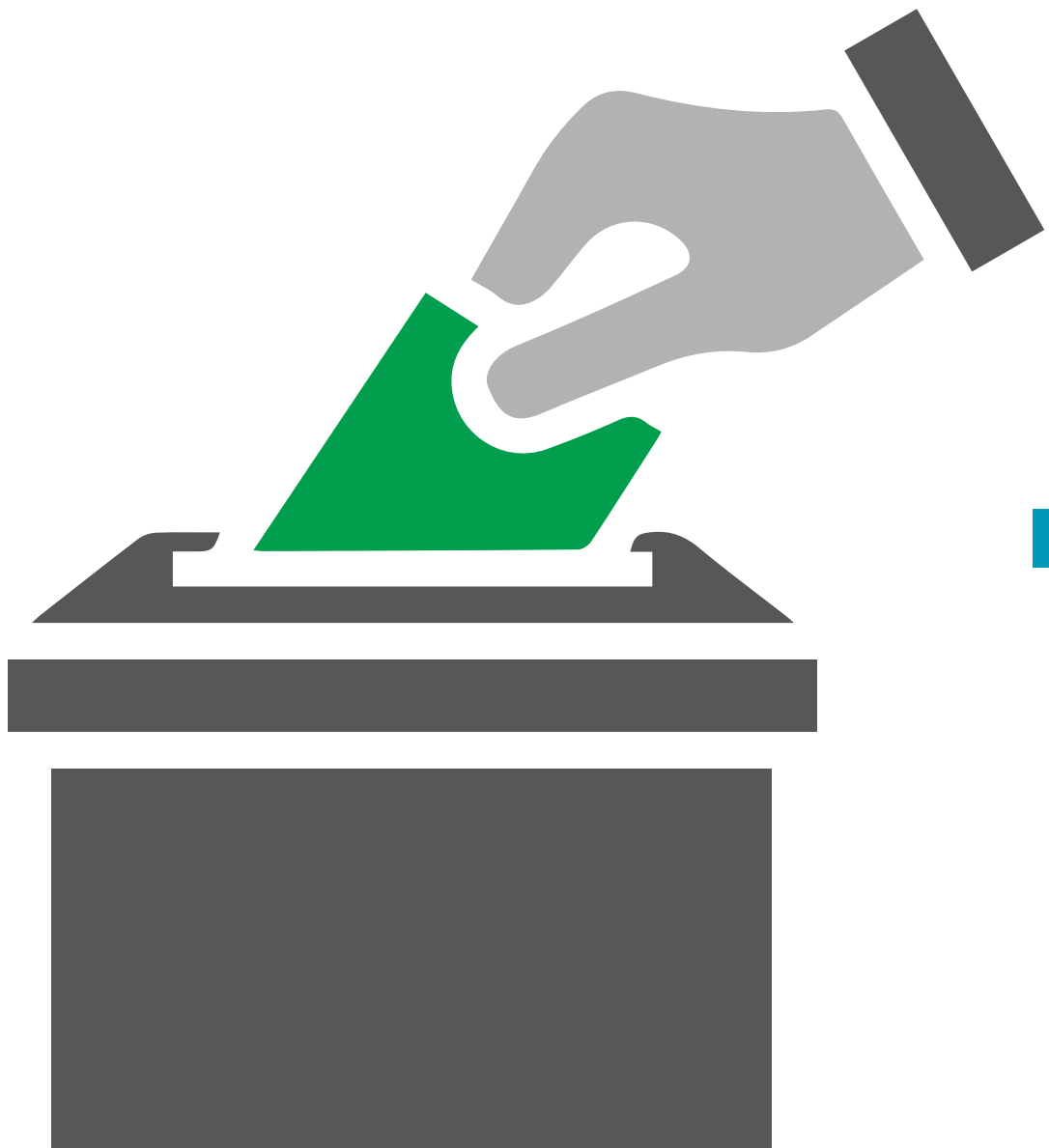


**R N I B**

See differently

# Turned Out 2022

**RNIB's report on the voting experience  
for people with sight loss**



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## Summary

The practical act of voting – making a cross in a specific location on a piece of paper – is fundamentally a visual exercise. As such, the majority of the 350,000 blind and partially sighted people in the UK face unacceptable barriers to voting independently and in secret.

While voting continues to be a visual act, the UK Government has a responsibility to ensure there are alternative ways to participate for those who find the current system inaccessible. RNIB has campaigned on this issue for many years; we call for an equitable voting experience for blind and partially sighted people.

Sight loss is a spectrum, and every eye condition affects someone’s sight differently. The majority (93 per cent) of people who are registered blind or partially sighted have some usable sight.

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# 93%

of people who are registered blind or partially sighted have some usable sight

# RNIB recommendations for the UK

## Government and local electoral services

### For implementing Voter ID the Government must:

1. Send communications concerning the new voter ID requirements in blind and partially sighted people's preferred formats, to ensure as many people with sight loss as possible are informed about the new requirements.
2. Develop and implement a clear and comprehensive plan to ensure digitally excluded voters are told about this new requirement and are given the opportunity to register for photographic ID.
3. Deliver on its commitment to ensure the application process for the voter certificate is as accessible as possible.

### For maximising accessibility of voting the Government must:

1. Monitor and review the accessibility of elections and publish a full Equality Impact Assessment of changes brought in by the Elections Act following the next election.
2. Continue to proactively identify accessible voting solutions and roll these solutions out to blind and partially sighted people across the UK.
3. Review and revise the postal voting system to make it accessible for blind and partially sighted people.

### The Electoral Commission should:

1. Revise its guidance to accurately outline the barriers faced by blind and partially sighted people as well as the solutions that overcome these barriers.
2. Inform Returning Officers through guidance what accessible voting devices can facilitate an independent and secret vote for blind and partially sighted people.
3. Extend the voting accessibility guidance for Returning Officers to support postal voting, so there is a clear framework on how local electoral services can support all disabled voters however they vote.

### Local Authorities should:

1. Where necessary, update local registers of blind and partially sighted people, collect information on their preferred formats, and use that to send items like poll cards in formats voters can read.
2. Implement effective guidance and training to ensure that polling staff:
  - Understand the barriers that prevent blind and partially sighted people from voting independently and in secret at the polling station.
  - Are fully trained on sight loss, have an understanding of different sight conditions, and know what support they should offer.
  - Are aware of the different accessibility aids available and are confident using them to support voters with sight loss.

# Introduction – People with sight loss are still denied a secret vote



Since 2015, RNIB has asked blind and partially sighted people about their voting experiences through a series of surveys. Over that time we've heard the frustration and humiliation blind and partially sighted people face when they cast their vote. It's more than 150 years since the Ballot Act – which guaranteed the right to vote in secret – yet our research has consistently shown that blind and partially sighted people continue to be denied this most basic right.

In 2022, there were local elections in Wales and some parts of England, council elections in Scotland and Assembly elections in Northern Ireland.

These elections came just weeks after significant new legislation was passed by Parliament. The Elections Act introduces two changes to the way we vote that will have a direct impact on blind and partially sighted people. These changes will come into force for relevant polls taking place in 2023.

The first is a requirement for voters to present photographic identification in order to vote at polling stations. The second is the change in legislation addressing how disabled people are supported at the polling station. It's essential these changes do not make voting even more challenging for blind and partially sighted people than it already is.

In this report, we outline how these changes might impact blind and partially sighted people and share our latest findings from the May 2022 Local Elections, considering these findings alongside research we've carried out in previous years.

It is incredibly disappointing that, despite improvements in technology, there has been little progress in voting accessibility in a generation. There is a palpable – and growing – sense of frustration and despair among blind and partially sighted people on this issue.

With the introduction of another barrier to the accessibility of elections in the form of voter ID, the need for change and improvements in the accessibility of elections is more urgent than ever. Otherwise, blind and partially sighted people will continue to be disenfranchised and denied a secret ballot.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matt Stringer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**Matt Stringer,**  
Chief Executive, RNIB

# The Elections Act

## Voter ID requirement

The Elections Act requires voters to bring photo ID to the polling station for UK parliamentary elections, local elections in England and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales. RNIB is concerned that the introduction of voter ID will make the electoral process even less accessible for blind and partially sighted voters, who are less likely to carry the most common forms of ID, such as a passport or a driving licence.

RNIB's tracker survey [1] found that 13 per cent of blind and partially sighted people have no photographic ID at all, including travel passes. This equates to as many as 40,000 blind and partially sighted people who could now be unable to vote as they do not have the right form of ID.

While we raised these concerns during the passage of the Elections Bill, the Government was satisfied that a locally-issued voter identification certificate would ensure voters would not lose out. However, we do not believe this will be sufficient to avoid disenfranchising blind and partially sighted people, who already face a number of barriers when voting.

With each additional barrier, the cumulative effect of the increasingly inaccessible system makes it more difficult for blind and partially sighted people to vote, and the less likely people are to take part in the electoral system. At least one person with sight loss was turned away from the voter ID trials in Derby in 2019, without voting – despite having his poll card – because he had not been sent any

accessible information on the trial and was therefore unaware the voter ID trial was taking place.

We're extremely concerned that this could become commonplace, as historically communications related to elections have not been shared in accessible formats.

### What we're calling for:

To ensure as many blind and partially sighted people as possible are informed about the new requirements, it is critical that communications concerning the new voter ID requirements are sent in blind and partially sighted people's preferred formats. We believe this can be achieved by using the local authority-held sight loss registers. In England, Care Act guidance [2] has been amended to confirm that sight loss registers can be used by local authority services, including electoral services.

There needs to be a clear and comprehensive plan to ensure digitally excluded voters are told about this new requirement and are given the opportunity to register for photographic ID. A large-scale outreach programme is needed, potentially similar to the door-knocking campaign carried out for the census or the digital switchover help scheme. This extensive logistical undertaking is necessary to ensure digitally excluded blind and partially sighted voters are aware of the change and are adequately supported.

In implementing voter ID requirements, the Government must

deliver on its commitment to ensure the application process for the voter certificate is as accessible as possible, with support available for people who are digitally excluded.

This includes, but is not limited to, ensuring:

- Communications around voter ID and the application process are shared in accessible formats.
- A variety of different ways to apply for the voter certificate are available: for example, online, a paper application or in-person.
- Application forms are available in a variety of different formats such as braille, large print and audio.
- The online application form complies with web accessibility guidelines.
- There is a dedicated helpline to support voters who require assistance.
- In person support is available to help blind and partially sighted people fill out the form and take a photograph.
- The voter certificate has a tactile marking, so it can be easily identified. It should be sent with accompanying accessible information so blind and partially sighted people know what it is when it arrives by post.

## Changes to accessibility measures

The Elections Act also changed the legislative requirement for all polling stations to provide a prescribed device to enable an independent vote for blind and partially sighted people. Until now, the Government has prescribed the tactile voting device to fulfil this requirement. A tactile voting device is a plastic template that can be placed over the ballot paper to enable blind and partially sighted people to locate the voting boxes.

Instead of a prescribed device, Returning Officers, who are responsible for overseeing elections in their local areas, are now required to respond to local need and provide each polling station with equipment as they consider “reasonable” to support disabled voters.

The Government stated the intention behind this change was to ensure that elections are accessible for all those eligible to vote and to allow for better solutions to be developed and for a greater variety of support to be provided.

Throughout the progression of the Elections Bill, RNIB challenged this change as we strongly believed it would weaken the legal protections for blind and partially sighted people. This was because the new requirement was vaguer and provided less clarity that blind and partially sighted people would be afforded an independent and secret vote. In our experience, some Returning Officers have always gone above and beyond in supporting blind and partially sighted voters. We remain concerned that removing the requirement for all polling stations to have the prescribed tactile voting device from

the face of the legislation could result in accessibility at the polling station deteriorating even further.

With the help of our Blind Voters Count campaign and the tireless work of Conservative peer Lord Holmes, the Government backed an important amendment to the Elections Bill to address our concerns. This amendment strengthened the legislative wording and added a requirement that support provided to disabled voters in polling stations should enable or make it easier for them to vote independently and secretly.

During the report stage of the Elections Bill, Lord Holmes described his ambition:

**"I set out three pillars that blind and partially sighted people – indeed, all people – should be able to expect when voting: to be able to vote inclusively, independently and in secret... they are the key pillars anyone should be able to rely on when exercising the most essential and fundamental right in our democracy."**

The full wording of the amendment, which is now enshrined in law, states that Returning Officers must provide "such equipment as it is reasonable to provide for the purposes of enabling, or making it easier for, relevant persons to vote independently in the

manner directed by rule 37 (including in relation to voting secretly)." [3]

The amendment also places new responsibilities on the Electoral Commission to:

- To draw up new guidance to support an independent and secret vote at the polling station from 2023.
- To consult relevant organisations in the production of that guidance.
- To hold Returning Officers to account for following that guidance.

We had several reassurances from the Government that the overall changes introduced in the Bill will not result in voting becoming less accessible. During the passage of the Elections Bill, the Government's interpretation of and intention behind the use of both "making it easier" and "enabling", regarding casting an independent and secret vote was clearly outlined.

It was clarified that the inclusion of "making it easier" in the wording does not result in Returning Officers being able to pick whether to "enable" an independent vote or to "make it easier". Nor does it result in a dilution, where a Returning Officer only needs to make it easier to vote independently and in secret.

Then Cabinet Office Minister, Lord True, explained, "If the amendment said only "enable", there would be no duty to assist those who find it difficult; if the amendment said only "make it easier", there would be no duty to assist those who simply find it impossible. The amendment is designed to ensure the widest possible assistance support, greater innovation and accessibility."

While we were pleased that the Government accepted the amendment, real world improvements in the voting experiences of blind and partially sighted people are reliant on clear and robust guidance for Returning Officers.

### **The Electoral Commission's guidance for Returning Officers**

At the time of writing this report, the Electoral Commission published its second draft of accessibility guidance for Returning Officers. RNIB is seriously concerned that it will not facilitate the ambitions of the Elections Act. As it stands, the draft guidance of December 2022 does not, in our view, go far enough to make a meaningful improvement for blind and partially sighted people.

To meet the ambition of the Elections Act, the guidance must reflect the experiences and needs of voters with sight loss, who face a unique set of challenges as voting by paper is a visual exercise. It must set out that background so Returning Officers truly understand what the issues are and can address them sufficiently.

However, in its current form, RNIB is concerned that the guidance fails to sufficiently recognise and acknowledge the fundamental barriers that blind and partially sighted people face at the polling station. While the Electoral Commission cannot be an accessibility expert, it is essential that it takes account of the views, experiences and feedback provided by blind and partially sighted voters.

Similarly, we are concerned that the minimum standard of provision – currently set by the Electoral

Commission – only requires polling stations to provide the tactile voting device and a magnifier (the strength of which is not specified). Provision of an audio solution is only specified as an example of additional provision Returning Officers can offer. As it is up to individual Returning Officers to decide whether it is “reasonable” to provide, it’s not guaranteed that blind and partially sighted people will have access to an audio solution, even if they request one.

As we have set out in our previous reports, in order for blind and partially sighted people to vote in an equitable way, they should be able to:

- Review the candidates on the ballot paper without assistance;
- Reliably find, and mark, their chosen candidate on the official ballot paper without assistance;
- Be in sole control of the secrecy of their vote.

In our view, audio provision – in addition to tactile provision – is essential to meet these criteria, as it is not possible to review the ballot paper, and know the order of the candidates listed, using the tactile voting device alone.

In 2019, a Judicial Review found the Government’s previous provisions, referring to the use of the tactile voting device, unlawful, with the judge describing the provisions as “a parody of the electoral process” because of the inability for voters to review and mark the ballot paper independently. Yet, in the December 2022 draft guidance, a Returning Officer might conclude that the tactile voting device alone would be sufficient to meet the requirements of the Elections Act, even though it



has been found not to facilitate an independent and secret vote.

We believe this potentially leaves Returning Officers at risk of litigation under both the Elections Act and the Equality Act.

### What we're calling for

In RNIB's view, the only way to avoid a postcode lottery of provision is to have both a tactile and audio solution at every polling station, to ensure that blind and partially sighted people are guaranteed an independent and secret vote.

We urge the Electoral Commission to revise its guidance. Critical to the successful implementation of the new accessibility measures, is the need to accurately outline the barriers faced by blind and partially sighted people as well as the solutions that overcome these barriers.

We stand willing and ready to support the Electoral Commission to develop this guidance further, drawing on the wealth of knowledge and expertise we can share based upon the collective experiences of blind and partially sighted people from across the UK.

We also urge the Government to review the impact of the Elections Act and the Electoral Commission's guidance on the accessibility of elections. To improve voting experiences for people with sight loss there needs to be clear accountability. It's critical that the Government publishes a full Equality Impact Assessment of changes brought in by the Elections Act following the next election to identify what's working well and what needs to be improved.

## Experiences at the May 2022 local elections

### Methodology

For this year's local elections, we ran a survey receiving 194 responses from blind and partially sighted people. This is lower than previous years, as local elections didn't take place for the entire UK electorate.

Due to research timescales, this was a self-selecting online survey advertised through email and social media. It was therefore likely to exclude the experience of those people with sight loss who are digitally excluded. Of those who took part in the survey, 60 per cent are blind and 40 per cent are partially sighted people.

This survey has had a higher uptake from the registered blind population: of the total 350,000 people in the UK who are registered blind and partially sighted, half are registered blind and half are registered partially sighted.

Our survey is also more representative of working age blind and partially sighted people. While around a quarter of the general population of blind and partially sighted people are of working age, 57 per cent of respondents to the survey were under 65 years old.

### Findings

#### Poor accessibility of pre-election materials

In line with our previous Turned Out findings, information that is sent out before the election continues to be inaccessible for blind and partially

sighted people. This includes poll cards that are sent by local councils as well as any information that is sent by political parties, for example leaflets about the candidates. It's important that all of these resources are provided in a way that people with sight loss can access as they contain important information.

For example, poll cards let the voter know the time, date and location of the polling station, and information sent from political parties will have candidate information that will help individuals make informed choices about who to vote for.

Only 15 per cent of blind people and 27 per cent of partially sighted people said they were able to read all of the information sent to them by their local council. Just under half (49 per cent) of blind people and 15 per cent of partially sighted people said they couldn't read any of the information the council sent them.

This finding has been largely consistent over the years, meaning that up to half of blind people who have contributed to our surveys have not been able to access election materials in an equitable way to their sighted peers. As our respondents told us:

- "I have asked my local electoral office for accessible information in the past, but I have never been sent any."
- "I have requested many times information et cetera but it always falls on deaf ears to the point where I've given up."

This is particularly concerning as poll cards will include additional information for voters in upcoming elections as a

result of the Elections Act. This could risk blind and partially sighted voters not being informed of the requirement for voter ID. Unless there are significant changes in how local electoral services communicate with blind and partially sighted people, it's likely blind and partially sighted voters will not be able to access essential information they need to be able to vote.

In order to provide equal access to their services, local electoral services should be sending election information in accessible formats. Under the Equality Act, service providers are obliged to provide information in an accessible format as a reasonable adjustment to provide equal access to their services.

Local authorities hold registers of blind and partially sighted people, and in England Care Act guidance [2] has been amended to make it clear that local authority services, including electoral services, can use these registers to make sure they are sending information in blind and partially sighted people's preferred format. This could be, for example, via email or in braille or large print.

While many local authority registers are currently out of date and may

Only

**15%**

of blind people said they were able to read all of the information sent to them by their local council

not hold information about people's preferred formats, maintaining and updating these registers would allow electoral services to engage with blind and partially sighted voters effectively and publicise information about elections while also allowing electoral services – and other local authority services – to anticipate how many blind and partially sighted people they serve. For the purposes of voting, this could help electoral services plan what support they should be providing at the polling station.

### What we're calling for

Ahead of the next set of elections we are calling on all local authorities to:

- Update local registers of blind and partially sighted people;
- Collect information on their preferred formats;
- Use them to send items like poll cards in formats that voters can read.

We are also calling on political parties to prioritise this issue to ensure they are reaching all their potential supporters. In order to make an informed decision, it's critical that blind and partially sighted people have access to the information they need. Failure to provide this information in an accessible format is likely to be a breach of the Equality Act.

### How our respondents cast their vote

For our respondents who were able to vote in the May 2022 elections, 63 per cent voted at the polling station and 37 per cent of blind and partially sighted respondents used a postal vote.

### Voting at the polling station

Feedback from those who voted at the polling station highlighted a number of accessibility issues with the current voting process. While there are some accessibility measures put in place to support blind and partially sighted people to vote in person, they do not go far enough to facilitate an equitable voting experience. Our research suggests there are inconsistencies in the provision of support at polling stations and varying levels of staff training and sight loss awareness.

For the May 2022 elections, all polling stations were required to provide:

- A large print version of the ballot paper.
- A tactile voting device, which is a plastic template that can be placed over the ballot paper to enable blind and partially sighted people to locate the voting boxes.

Blind and partially sighted people were also permitted to bring in their own magnifiers and use their phones to access apps, such as magnifying and text-to-speech apps, as well as using the phone's torch function to improve the lighting in the polling booth.

However, our research indicates that polling station staff are not always aware of the accessibility provisions and in some cases have failed to provide them:

- “[the polling station staff] weren’t aware of the large print ballot template. It took them a long time to find it and they brought me the Braille one by mistake. More training needed.”
- “Staff do not know about the accessibility settings. The staff at my polling station have been doing that role for years and are still surprised and flustered when asked about accessibility options.”
- “The large print version of one of the ballots was being used as a poster, the large print version of the other took 5 minutes to find, not all staff even knew it existed.”
- “There was no large print ballot papers. The magnifier they offered was inadequate.”
- “It took them a while to find the tactile device and figure out how to work it... but I had purposely gone early so if there was a problem it could be sorted out without any embarrassment to the staff or myself. This was done after a number of telephone calls by the staff. Had it been busy I don’t think the same result would’ve occurred.”

Only

**41%**

of blind voters said that the support they received from polling station staff was good

Similarly, our research found that some polling station staff weren’t aware that voters with sight loss are allowed to use their phones as a voting aid. We heard of several instances where individuals were told they were not allowed to use their smartphones:

- “If I had been allowed to use my smartphone app without being told it was disturbing/ distracting other voters then this would have helped.”
- “All election staff should know that some people need help with digital magnifiers/smartphones to help them read... [when] I tried, they weren’t happy and handed me a magnifier that was wasn’t strong enough to be able to read and a visual aid that was baffling to use so ended up having to tell someone my vote.”

**“I was told I wasn’t allowed to use [my] phone app to help me read [the] ballot paper.”**

Our research also highlighted that often polling station staff were unfamiliar with voting aids, such as the tactile voting device, and were therefore unable to provide adequate assistance. This either resulted in blind and partially sighted people not having access to the device or having to educate polling staff on how to use it:

- “No staff knew how to line up the tactile frame so did not want me to use it, not that I would have trusted it if I had insisted.”
- “They were friendly, but unable to attach the tactile voting template to the form, they stuck it to the desk, but then couldn’t keep the form in place properly.”

- "Polling station staff did not know how the tactile frame was to be used. This meant I used my phone to enlarge things but still needed assistance to ensure I was putting my cross in the correct box."
- "The staff were very friendly and were completely open about the fact that they'd never used the tactile voting device before. I had to ask for it, because at first they just handed me the ballot paper. They didn't know how to stick it on so I talked them through it. I don't blame them because ultimately it's not their fault they haven't been trained, it demonstrates a failure higher up."

Overall, only two out of five (41 per cent) of blind voters said that the support they received from polling station staff was good. An example of good practice included one member of staff offering sighted guiding to help someone navigate the polling station:

- "A gentleman at the door gave me his elbow and walk[ed] me through to the various places to pick up the paper register and vote, he waited and then escorted me out. He was extremely helpful."

Others commented that they thought polling station staff were polite and helpful but didn't think they had enough training or had the right resources to support them:

- "I do have to say staff wanted to help and were polite and tried to do their best, however I was left with the impression they had not had any disability training at all."

- "The staff member at my local polling station was very willing to help but because of what was available in order for her to help me, I could not keep my vote confidential."

While we are encouraged to hear of a few positive stories at the polling station, the majority of feedback we received was negative. Blind and partially sighted people have repeatedly told us how frustrated and humiliated they feel at the polling station when they are unable to vote privately.

One person even told us that always having to ask for help and never being sure they voted correctly left them feeling like "less of a citizen". Others told us how humiliating it was when polling station staff caused a scene or patronised them when they tried to vote:

- "This year was the worst experience of voting I have ever had. On arrival at the polling station, I asked for the accessible options. The staff had no information and did not know what to do. A staff member then ran to the entrance door to announce to everyone coming behind me 'there is a problem with this girl's vote. You'll have to wait...' Embarrassed, I just said my partner could help me."
- "I felt humiliated. What was said to me was not done quietly, so anyone in the polling station could hear what was being said. I didn't make my own cross on the ballot paper... The staff were really offended when I said I wanted to vote independently, I nearly got into an argument with them when they insisted that voting is completely accessible to blind people. They made me feel really uncomfortable and watched!"

- “I was made to feel so uncomfortable in the polling station that I ended up rushing my vote and didn’t consider my choices as well as I would have liked. They ruined the whole experience for me and I left feeling really awful about myself, which is so wrong because it had nothing to do with me and everything to do with the system being awful”
- “They didn’t have the TVD [Tactile Voting Device] and when I did vote but with difficulty, I felt really patronised by the staff. It was as if they were saying ‘Bless them, they’ve voted’ as though it was a major achievement.”

All of these examples demonstrate the urgent need for comprehensive accessibility training for polling station staff. It’s essential that all staff have an understanding of the barriers that blind and partially sighted people experience at the polling station and are able to support voters with sight loss appropriately.

That said, casting a vote at the polling station is only part of the challenge for blind and partially sighted voters. The journey to the polling station can also be problematic for people with sight loss, as one respondent described:

- “The polling station I had to attend was at the side of a carpark, with lots of moving cars and no marked footpath to cross the car park to get to the polling station door, which was not the main entrance to the building.”

Local authorities should take steps to produce suitable walking directions for white cane or guide dog users, and ensure assistance is available for individuals who request it.

### What we’re calling for

We’re calling for clearer guidance and training for polling staff to ensure they:

- Understand the barriers that prevent blind and partially sighted people from voting independently and in secret at the polling station.
- Are fully trained on sight loss, have an understanding of different sight conditions, and know what support they should offer.
- Are aware of the different accessibility aids available and are confident using them to support voters with sight loss.

### Postal voting

Voter experiences for postal voting were mixed. Some voters welcomed the ability to vote in the privacy of their own home, particularly if they had a trusted person who could help them. Of all our respondents who used a postal vote, 71 per cent needed assistance from another person, meaning they were unable to have an independent vote.

For those with some residual vision, having a postal vote enabled them to cast their vote in their preferred lighting conditions. It also meant they could use their own vision aids without feeling any time pressure that they might experience at the polling station. Others explained that postal voting is their preference as it is less stressful than voting at the polling station:



- “[Postal voting] is far less stressful than going to the polling station and having [to] get someone to help in public where everyone can hear what is being said.”
- “I need help from my mum to help with my postal vote. It is not ideal as it means although I can make an independent choice it means I cannot do it in secret. It is better than trying to fumble about in a polling station though.”
- “I started using a postal vote years ago after a bad experience at a polling station.”

Although postal voting works for some, it is unacceptable that people are choosing this option because voting in a polling station is stressful or inaccessible.

Meanwhile, our respondents who reported more negative experiences of postal voting referred to the inaccessibility of the process. In particular, they reported having to rely on another person to read out the

instructions, help them cast their vote and ensure that all the documents are returned in the correct envelopes. It’s important to recognise that not everyone has access to support at home and many would prefer to vote independently:

- “My husband helps me to vote which I don’t mind but for people who don’t have this assistance or would prefer to vote independently it would be an issue.”

One participant who chose not to vote told us:

**“Postal votes are totally inaccessible so there was no point. I have no one to help with this at home.”**

For this reason, it’s critical that the accessibility of postal voting is given as much consideration as the accessibility of voting at the polling station. We are aware of some postal voters who have individual arrangements with their local electoral services. For example, one person had someone from their local authority visit their home to assist them in voting, while another had a tactile voting device sent to them. But this support is inconsistent across the country and we are aware of a few instances where individuals have requested support and have not received any:

- “I have asked in the past for large print ballot... This request has not been taken into account as again I received the normal size font ballot.”

- "I wish that the post ballot papers could come in another format for us to use independently – for example electronically in a word document/ braille/ audio. I have heard of a tactile aid but have never used it before because my local council does not provide them"
- "There seems to be no way to get a large print ballot paper or instructions"

### What we're calling for

We continue to call on the Government to review and revise the postal voting system to make it accessible for blind and partially sighted people.

We also recommend that the Electoral Commission extends its voting accessibility guidance for Returning Officers to support postal voting, so there is a clear framework for how local electoral services can support all disabled voters, no matter how they choose to vote.

### Fundamental change is needed to ensure independent and secret voting

In this year's local elections only one in five (22 per cent) blind and partially sighted people reported that they could vote independently and in secret.

Since we started conducting our Turned Out surveys, this figure has remained unchanged. Clearly, the voting system has been inaccessible for blind and partially sighted people long before we started reporting on it. Despite successful trials of audio assistance in voting and provisions provided to enable an independent and secret vote being found unlawful in 2019, the system has remained unchanged for a generation. As one respondent told us:

- "When are we going to fix this? I have spent decades waiting to vote independently. Can we have a solution please, I am embarrassed."

Many others also commented on their frustration and anger that there still isn't a solution in place. Through our Turned Out reports and our Blind Voters Count campaign, blind and partially sighted people have repeatedly voiced the need for a solution so they can vote independently and in secret:

- "Coming up with a simple system whereby disabled and blind people can vote confidently shouldn't be difficult in the 21st century"
- "It could be made easier if we had the audio device to read out what is on the ballot paper. I have got to the point now where I am angry, because the local council didn't want to know"





- “It is shocking that visually impaired people are still basically being discriminated against”
- “We need some technology to help us in the polling station. Surely in 2022 this is available?”

As our previous reports have demonstrated, being able to vote independently and in secret is incredibly important for blind and partially sighted voters. There is a misconception that all voters with sight loss are content with someone voting for them. While it’s true that some blind and partially sighted people are happy for a trusted person to assist them, this is not necessarily their preference, as the examples below indicate:

- “My husband read out the names and told me where to put the cross. I misplaced the cross. He alerted me to my error and the ballot paper had to be returned and replaced by a new one. I felt like a child and was extremely embarrassed. It should have been a private event.”
- “I had to have the candidates read to me by the assistant, it is not nice to lose one’s independence.”
- “My husband tells me which number is my candidate. I would rather do this on my own.”

When we asked our respondents how the process could be improved, many told us that they wanted a solution that would enable them to vote independently:

- “There should be a more accessible ballot paper or audio file for each one so that I don’t require the assistance of another human.”

In line with our past research, blind people again told us this year that they felt less likely to be able to vote independently and in secret (18 per cent) compared with partially sighted people (31 per cent). This disparity in experiences between blind and partially sighted voters suggests that those blind and partially sighted people who are able to vote independently are relying on their usable vision.

### What we’re calling for

The secrecy of the ballot is a fundamental democratic right. For this reason, we continue to call for changes to the accessibility of elections to ensure blind and partially sighted people can vote independently and in secret at every election. It’s evident from our research that blind and partially sighted people are not getting the right adaptations to vote privately.

It’s therefore essential that the Government continues to proactively identify accessible voting solutions and roll these solutions out to blind and partially sighted people across the UK. The Electoral Commission also need to inform Returning Officers through guidance what accessible voting devices can facilitate an independent and secret vote for blind and partially sighted people.

## Only 32 per cent are satisfied with the electoral process

In this year's survey, less than a third (32 per cent) of blind and partially sighted voters reported being satisfied with their voting experience, a decline from last year which saw two in five (39 per cent) finding their voting experience to be satisfactory. Nearly half (47 per cent) reported being unsatisfied with the voting process. Reasons for this low satisfaction rate included:

- Not being able to vote independently
- Having to rely on someone else to vote
- Not being provided accessible voting aids such as the tactile voting device or large print ballot paper
- Staff not knowing how to use voting aids or how to support people with sight loss appropriately.

In comparison, in 2021 we saw satisfaction rates soar to 91 per cent among those who used an audio device in a trial for voters in Norfolk. In this trial, blind and partially sighted voters were offered the opportunity to use an audio player with headphones alongside the tactile voting device. The audio player had a recording of the candidates in the order they appeared on the ballot paper and voters could listen to the names on the ballot paper as many times as they wanted to, without assistance from another person. Blind and partially sighted voters who used the audio device last year were frustrated that it was not available for this election:

- "Last time we had the audio player, this time my wife had to help me. Why have we gone backwards?"

- "The audio player worked fine last year, I was expecting the same but was sorely disappointed. Please can we have it back?"
- "Bring back the audio player like last time. That was the first time I managed to vote on my own."

Similarly, others who heard about the audio device trials in Norfolk were disappointed that this opportunity was not available to them, as it could have helped them to vote independently, while another voiced their confusion about why it was not an option for them:

- "I read on last year's survey about a talking solution, I was hoping to see it but there was nothing. If I can make a cup of tea on my own why can I not vote on my own?"
- "Having read about last year's trial of an audio device I was hoping for that, what happened?"

### What we're calling for

It's crucial that blind and partially sighted people have access to equipment they need to vote independently and in secret. When best practice is identified, it's important it continues. For instance, blind and partially sighted people who had access to an audio solution previously, should continue to have this access in subsequent elections without needing to request it each time.

Similarly, Returning Officers need to identify local need to ensure everyone who needs audio provision has access to it. The Electoral Commission can also play a role in reporting on and sharing best practice.

## How experiences in 2022 compared to previous years

When asked how their experience in 2022 compared to previous years, only 12 per cent of blind and partially sighted respondents said their experience of voting had improved since the last year. While 68 per cent felt it had remained broadly the same, worryingly, 20 per cent said their experience had deteriorated. These results were broadly anticipated as there have not been any significant changes to the voting system in comparison to previous years.

There was, however, one small change introduced this year. This was the Electoral Commission's postcode look-up tool that provides information about upcoming local elections and contact information. A few weeks before the May elections, it could also be used to access the name of the candidates standing for election in a voter's area. While we welcome this addition and were pleased that the Electoral Commission delivered on one of our previous recommendations, it remains unclear if this tool has improved blind and partially sighted people's voting experiences, as there were no observable improvements in blind and partially sighted people's voting experiences and no one in our survey referred to using it. It will be interesting to see if this changes in future elections.

## Disenfranchisement of blind and partially sighted people

Disappointingly, 11 respondents to our survey attempted to vote during the May 2022 elections but were ultimately unable to do so. Of those 11, seven were registered blind. Reasons included:

- Not being provided with voting aids at the polling station
- Difficulties getting to the polling station
- Not receiving a postal vote when requested
- Instructions for postal voting being inaccessible and impossible to follow
- Not being provided with any voting aids or support for postal voting.

Worryingly, one person told us that they decided not to vote after the person assisting them tried to discourage them from voting for their candidate of choice.

- "there was no accessible aids to help me. [The] person assisting me tried to dissuade me of my private personal choice."

This is the reality of a system which in effect requires many voters to share their choice. While the majority of polling station staff are professional and neutral, there will always be those who let their personal feelings show. It is devastating that this voter was disenfranchised in this way.

A further 14 respondents chose not to vote. Of these, nine said it was because they would be unable to vote in secret – and they didn't want to share their vote with someone else. From the comments received in this year's survey there is a growing sense of frustration and despair. After this election, one respondent told us:

- "This experience has put me off voting in the future. what's the point?"

Others have told us how their negative experiences at the polling station have impacted their wellbeing. As one person explained:

- “I missed the postal vote deadline but registered in time to vote. It was a massive effort to find the polling station and [I] got help from members of the public. But when I got to the polling station they said they didn’t have any tactile voting papers or stencils. I didn’t know the proper name for it and despite trying to explain what it was, they did not understand and offered to just do it for me. I didn’t feel comfortable with it and was really stressed and anxious so I left. This is the second election I couldn’t vote in. I don’t know if I’ll bother next time. Too much stress and anxiety.”

We are hearing of more and more instances of blind and partially sighted people becoming disenfranchised and abstaining from voting while it remains inaccessible to them. It is hard for voters to understand why, with improvements in technology, things like banking can be accessible whereas something as important as voting is not. We are concerned that unless there are wholesale changes to the current system, these numbers will continue to grow.

With the introduction of another barrier to the accessibility of elections in the form of voter ID, the need for change and improvements in the accessibility of elections is more urgent than ever.

## **Telephone helpline launch signals landmark for accessible voting in Northern Ireland**

More positive experiences, however, are possible. This year was a landmark year for accessible voting in Northern Ireland where a new telephone helpline was made available for blind and partially sighted people.

For the first time, voters in Northern Ireland could call the new helpline to hear the list of candidates in their area, in the order they appear on the ballot paper. For some blind and partially sighted people, this change made 2022 the first year they were able to report being able to vote independently and in secret.

One voter told RNIB NI:

- “[It] was a wonderful experience today. Able to vote privately and independently. Outside with [a] big smile this time, not tears.”

The Electoral Office in Northern Ireland set up the helpline as an interim measure after consultation with RNIB and Visually Impaired Sector Consultative Forum (VISCF), a consortium of nine organisations who work with blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland.

Some voters who used the helpline indicated that additional features could make it even more accessible. As one person pointed out:

- “The helpline is progress but it would be good to have the option of getting the info repeated. At the moment, it just reads out the list of candidates then ends the call.”

Overall, the introduction of the new Electoral Office Helpline was well received by blind and partially sighted voters. However, there were still mixed experiences reported at the polling stations in Northern Ireland. Most voters welcomed the addition of the helpline, but still highlighted issues around polling staff's knowledge of sight loss and related accessibility issues in relation to casting their vote. There was also a variation across polling stations of what support was available for blind and partially sighted people on the day.

The helpline initiative is a positive step forward, and points to what can be achieved to improve the experiences of blind and partially sighted voters. RNIB and the Northern Ireland Electoral Office share the view that more work is needed to identify long-term solutions that can go even further to improve blind and partially sighted people's voting experiences. Along with VISCF colleagues in Northern Ireland, we will continue to work with the Electoral Office in planning for the Local Government Elections in May 2023.

We urge the UK Government and the Electoral Commission to take note of the progress made in Northern Ireland to inform future practice across the UK.



Picture credit: Simon Jacobs/PA Wire

## The future of accessible voting

For too long, blind and partially sighted people have called for an accessible voting system that enables them to review the ballot paper, mark the ballot paper and verify their mark independently and in secret.

While the Government has so far ruled out a telephone or online voting system for now, we hope lessons can be learnt from other countries, who have successfully implemented a more accessible voting system. For example, Australia has a human assisted telephone voting model, where a blind or partially sighted person can pre-register and on the day of the election they can vote over the phone anonymously and therefore secretly.

In the absence of a telephone or online voting system – which would be the preference for many people with sight loss – there needs to be a piece of equipment that can provide an audio and tactile solution.

We are aware of a device currently under development which could be considered the next generation tactile voting device. The device consists of a single unit that has both audio and tactile functionality. We believe this device may signal hope for blind and partially sighted people, as in theory it meets the criteria of enabling a blind and partially sighted person to review and mark the ballot paper in private.

RNIB is ready to assist the Government with user testing and we hope that this can bring blind and partially sighted people closer to an independent and secret vote in the near future.

## Conclusion

It's evident from our research that blind and partially sighted people's voting experiences will not improve without wholesale changes to the system.

Over the seven years we have been reporting on accessible voting we have seen little improvement, and blind and partially sighted people continue to be denied their democratic right to vote independently and in secret.

The changes to the accessibility measures introduced in the Elections Act could present an opportunity for Returning Officers to make accessible voting a reality for blind and partially sighted people. But this can only happen if Returning Officers understand the barriers blind and



partially sighted people face at the polling station and provide the right support and equipment. However, based on the current accessibility guidance it is very hard to envisage voting experiences improving at the May 2023 elections. The introduction of voter ID is also likely to be a distraction, with Returning Officers focusing on the implementation of voter ID rather than aiming to improve accessibility.

The changes required to improve accessibility at the polling station are not insurmountable. As Lord Holmes said during the passage of the Elections Bill:

- "It will be incumbent upon the Government, the Electoral Commission, the association of Returning Officers and civil society to come together to work to make a positive experience for everybody at the polling booth."

We are determined to improve voting experiences for blind and partially sighted people and will continue to work with all stakeholders to bring about this change.

## Note on devolved nations elections

Following the devolution settlements within the respective nations of the UK, the UK Government is responsible for administering General Elections across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, while responsibility for delivering devolved elections lies with the devolved administrations.

For example, the Scotland Act 2016 devolved legislative responsibility to the Scottish Parliament for running Scotland-wide elections (Scottish Parliament, Local Government; and referenda), while the UK Government maintains responsibility for UK-wide elections in Scotland. This led to the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020 which contains separate measures relating to electoral administration in Scotland. Further electoral legislation is anticipated in Scotland.

In Wales, the Welsh Government has powers under the Government of Wales Act 2006 with respect to the Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament, local elections and referenda. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 reformed local government electoral arrangements including extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds, and The Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020 delivered further reforms to electoral and operational arrangements.



In the 2021 Programme for Government, the Welsh Government committed to “reforming local government elections to reduce the democratic deficit”. They have now launched their Electoral administration and reform White Paper which seeks views on its proposals for electoral reform to modernise the electoral administration in Wales.

In Northern Ireland, the Assembly has no legislative power with respect to elections. UK Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly and Local Government elections are all “excepted matters”. The law governing electoral registration and the conduct of elections is contained in a number of primary and secondary legislation.

## Endnotes

- [1] RNIB regular Tracker survey gathers insight from blind and partially sighted people's experiences on a variety of topics. This tracker survey of more than 400 blind and partially sighted people was conducted in February and March 2021
- [2] "The registers can also be used by the local authority to ensure that information about services is made accessible to that person for example to ask if support could be given to assist them to participate in electoral events." Care and support statutory guidance, section 22.4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-act-statutory-guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance>
- [3] The full wording of the new requirement can be accessed here: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/37/contents/enacted>

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