

# Turned Out 2017



Why the UK voting system must change so blind and partially sighted voters can be in sole control of their right to a secret ballot.



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There are around 350,000 people registered blind or partially sighted in the UK.

All voters have a right to vote independently and in secret, but breakdowns in the current voting system are failing to guarantee this right, according to many blind and partially sighted voters.

The Representation of the People Act 1983 states that each polling station must have:

- a large version of the ballot paper for voters who are partially sighted and
- a device for enabling voters who are blind or partially sighted to vote without any need for assistance from the presiding officer or any companion

In our report **Turned Out 2016** we called on the Government to ensure the next General Election was the most accessible ever. RNIB surveys have persistently highlighted the same breakdowns year-on-year.

# Over 400

blind and partially sighted voters responded to our 2017 survey covering the General Election on 8 June.

**Only 1 in 4** blind or partially sighted people said the current system let them vote independently and in secret.

## So was the General Election 2017 the most accessible ever?

No, blind and partially sighted people reported the same problems and breakdowns as they faced with all previous elections over recent years:

- Only 1 in 4 said the current system let them vote independently and in secret
- 8 in 10 who voted at the polling station and used the tactile template said they voted with a companion or member of staff
- Half said they wanted to be able to vote online and / or by phone as an alternative to the current system.



“I found the polling station staff at this election did not know how to use the tactile template or had forgotten their training. I had to ask for the tactile template because it wasn’t offered to me.

“They did assist me to fit the template to the ballot paper, but as I tried to mark my choice they said the template wasn’t in the right place, so they had to have another go. The staff member also commented on the box I was aiming to mark, so I knew they had seen my vote.

“I had a better experience than this at the previous election but accessibility should be totally reliable, not hit and miss like this.”

Wayne Chapman

**Blind and partially sighted respondents were asked if they felt the current voting system allowed them to vote without assistance and in secret:**

- 45 per cent said ‘No’
- 29 per cent said ‘Partially’
- 54 per cent of blind and partially sighted respondents felt new accessible ways to vote are needed like telephone, electronic and online voting.
- Only 4 per cent felt no changes are needed to the current system.

**Voters said:**

“Although the tactile guide was available the staff did not know how to use it and attached it wrongly to my ballot paper. I had to inform them how it should be attached and used. They were friendly and keen to help but their positive attitude did not assist me to vote. The tactile guide itself is not ideal in many ways it doesn’t tell you where the boundaries of the box are, no way to know if your pen worked or your mark is within the box etc.” **Adrian**

“I was given the tactile overlay and taken by the presiding officer to the booth. She then went through the numbers associated with the candidates and read them out to me. When I chose who I wanted to vote for, I could clearly tell that she was looking at where I was putting my mark because as I lifted the flap she said okay put an X there and I could also gauge by her direction of breathing that she was looking over my shoulder” **Mohammed**

“I spoiled my first ballot paper when trying to use the tactile template as I could not line up candidate braille information with the cross entry position. The template did allow me to count down through the



candidate list to the one I wished to vote for. The station staff read out the ballot list for me. The template has no horizontal or vertical guide lines to align the candidate entry with the box where the cross must be entered. I had to get the member of staff to check my ballot paper to confirm the position of my cross. Why cannot the template include a cut out box against each candidate?" **Arthur**

"I still needed assistance in ticking the boxes and having the list [of candidates] read out to me, so I didn't really see the point in the tactile template." **Joy**

"The current voting arrangements for blind people are unacceptable. My vote is not verifiable. As a blind voter, I cannot be entirely confident that my cross is inside the preferred box. I have to ask for help reading the list of candidates and positioning the template correctly, this is extremely disempowering." **Dave**

"I found the large print template useless because when it came to ticking the box on the small print voting slip, I couldn't read it! Totally useless! There was no template for the small print voting form, so a member of staff had to fill it in on my behalf. I felt embarrassed, as I wanted a secret, private vote, like everyone else and anyway, how would I know if he ticked the right box for me? I still don't know if my vote went to the party I wanted it to go to!" **Heidi**

"I love the experience of voting. However, I was so disappointed that in 2017 I cannot cast my vote secretly and independently. I don't know if the member of staff placed the cross in the correct box or even if she placed my vote in the ballot box. I didn't like having to tell a stranger who I was voting for. It was one of those times when my blindness overwhelmed me and left me feeling sad and frustrated." **Claire**

## On behalf of every blind and partially sighted voter in the UK we are calling for three main changes to the voting system.

### Before the next General election and tested by voters at the upcoming council elections on 3 May 2018:

1. Replace the current Tactile Voting Device (TVD) with a new accessible voting system that guarantees blind and partially sighted voters can without any assistance:
  - review the candidates on the ballot paper themselves
  - reliably find and mark their chosen candidate on the official ballot paper
  - be in sole control of the secrecy of their vote.
2. Guarantee all blind and partially sighted voters can get their legal right to vote without any assistance and in secret by:
  - eradicating the breakdowns in the current system
  - empowering blind and partially sighted people to vote on the same terms as everyone else
  - changing the culture of accessible voting from routinely intervening to assist a blind and partially sighted voter to not having to assist.

### By the 2022 General Election:

3. Provide an online and / or telephone option for blind and partially sighted people to cast their vote independently and in secret if they aren't able to vote at their polling station.

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