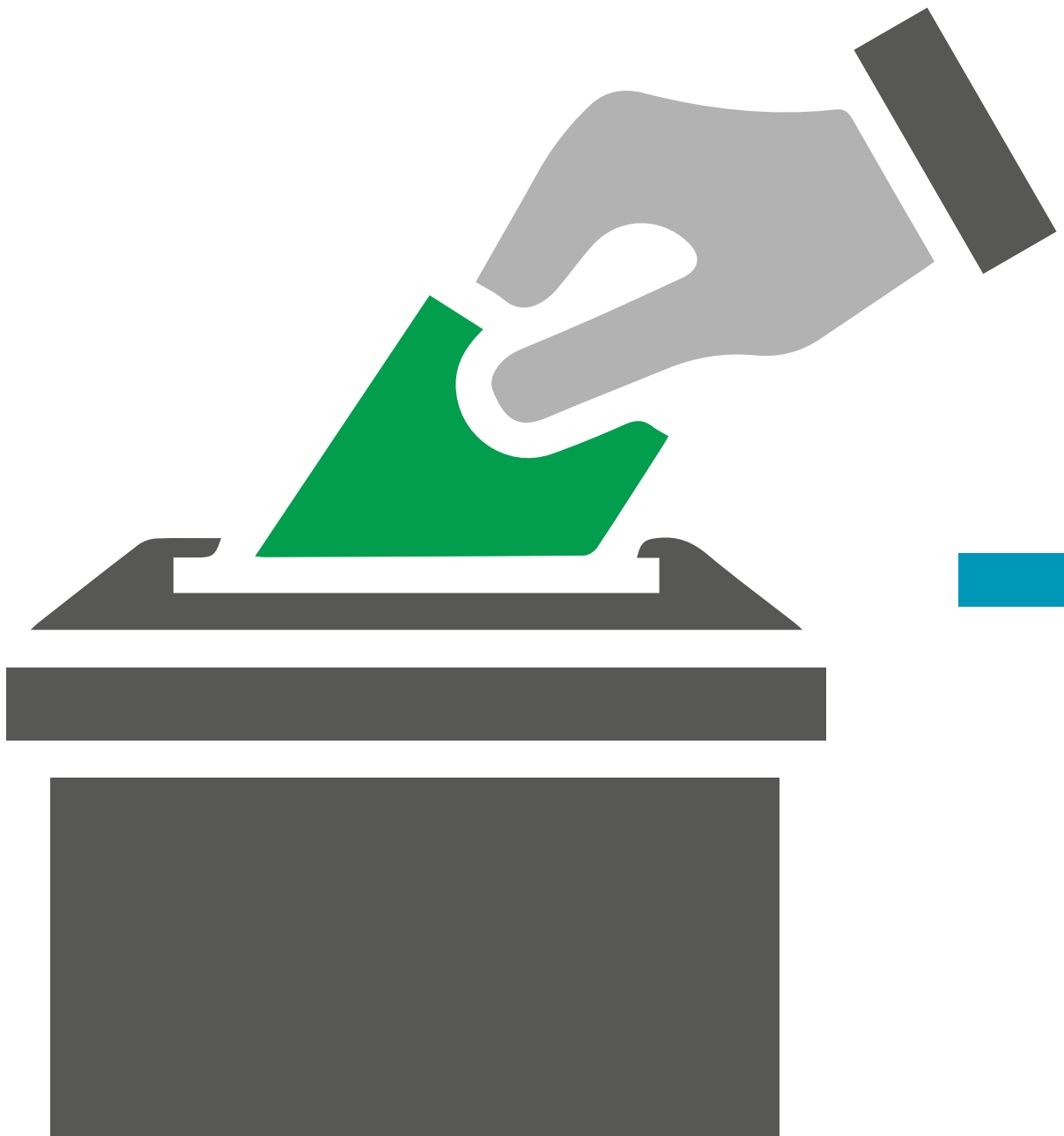


Turned Out 2021

How blind and partially sighted people
are still waiting to vote in secret



Contents

- 3 Summary and recommendations
- 4 RNIB recommendations for UK Government and local electoral services
- 5 Methodology
- 8 An independent and private vote?
- 9 Voting satisfaction
- 13 Information prior to the election
- 14 Polling stations, postal and proxy voting
- 18 Disenfranchisement of blind and partially sighted people
- 21 Conclusion
- 22 Devolved Nations Elections



“My ability to vote in a democratic society is very important to me. Each time we go to vote, I feel less independent.”

Summary and recommendations

The right to vote independently, and in secret, is a cornerstone of our democracy. Yet nearly 150 years after the Ballot Act – which guaranteed the right to vote in secret – blind and partially sighted people still face unacceptable barriers to exercising their democratic right to vote.

RNIB has campaigned on this issue for many years, calling on the UK Government to create an accessible voting system and guarantee blind and partially sighted voters can access information about elections and candidates independently.

When voting, blind and partially sighted people, without any assistance, should be able to:

- review the candidates on the ballot paper.
- reliably find, and mark, their chosen candidate on the official ballot paper.
- be in sole control of the secrecy of their vote.

Around 350,000 registered blind or partially sighted people live in the UK; an estimated two million people live with sight loss that affects their daily lives.

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.

Turned Out 2021 headlines

- 10 out of the 11 people (91 per cent) who used the audio device in the Norfolk trial reported that they were either very satisfied or quite satisfied with their overall voting experience this year, compared with 39 per cent of blind and partially sighted voters overall.
- Only one in five (19 per cent) blind voters and less than half (46 per cent) of partially sighted voters said they could vote independently and in secret under the current voting system.
- Less than a third (30 per cent) of blind voters were satisfied with their experience of voting.
- More than half (53 per cent) of blind people reported being unable to read any information regarding the election sent to them by local councils, including polling cards.
- Eight out of 10 (81 per cent) think offering blind and partially sighted voters an audio player to assist them to vote is a good idea.
- One in three (29 per cent) blind and partially sighted people who used the tactile voting device (TVD) to help them vote, said it did not fit the ballot paper.
- A third (31 per cent) of blind voters said the support they received at the polling station was poor.
- 40,000 blind and partially sighted people risk being disenfranchised by the proposed imposition of voter ID.

RNIB recommendations for UK Government and local electoral services

1. Roll out the audio player and TVD trialled in Norfolk to enable blind and partially sighted people to vote more independently, and in secret, by elections in 2022.
 2. Publicise better accessible voting options, and the support available within a polling station before polling day and within polling stations on the day so blind and partially sighted people know what support they can expect and request.
 3. Publish the names of candidates, and their order on ballot papers online and in local electoral offices (and in accessible formats), before elections so blind and partially sighted people can find who they want to vote for and where they will be placed on the ballot paper.
 4. Work with RNIB to ensure Presiding Officers and their staff are fully trained on sight loss, different sight conditions, and the support they should offer.
 5. Review and revise the postal voting system to make it accessible for blind and partially sighted people.
 6. Local authorities should update local registers of blind and partially sighted people, collect information on preferred formats, using them to send items like poll cards in formats voters can read.
 7. Imposing a photographic voter ID requirement risks further disenfranchising tens of thousands of blind and partially sighted people.
- If voter ID plans are to go ahead the Government must make sure poll cards are available in people's preferred formats, and accept these, as well as photographic ID, as proof of eligibility to vote at the polling station.

Methodology

We had 626 responses from blind and partially sighted people, the highest number we have had for any of our Turned Out surveys. Continuing restrictions and social distancing measures meant there were more barriers than ever to blind and partially sighted people exercising their right to vote independently and in secret.

Due to research timescales, this was a self-selecting online survey advertised through email and social media. It is therefore likely to exclude the experience of those people with sight loss who do not use the internet.

Of those who took part in the survey, 50 per cent are blind and 50 per cent are partially sighted voters, reflective of the blind and partially sighted population in the UK.

This survey is more representative of the experiences of younger blind and partially sighted people. While around

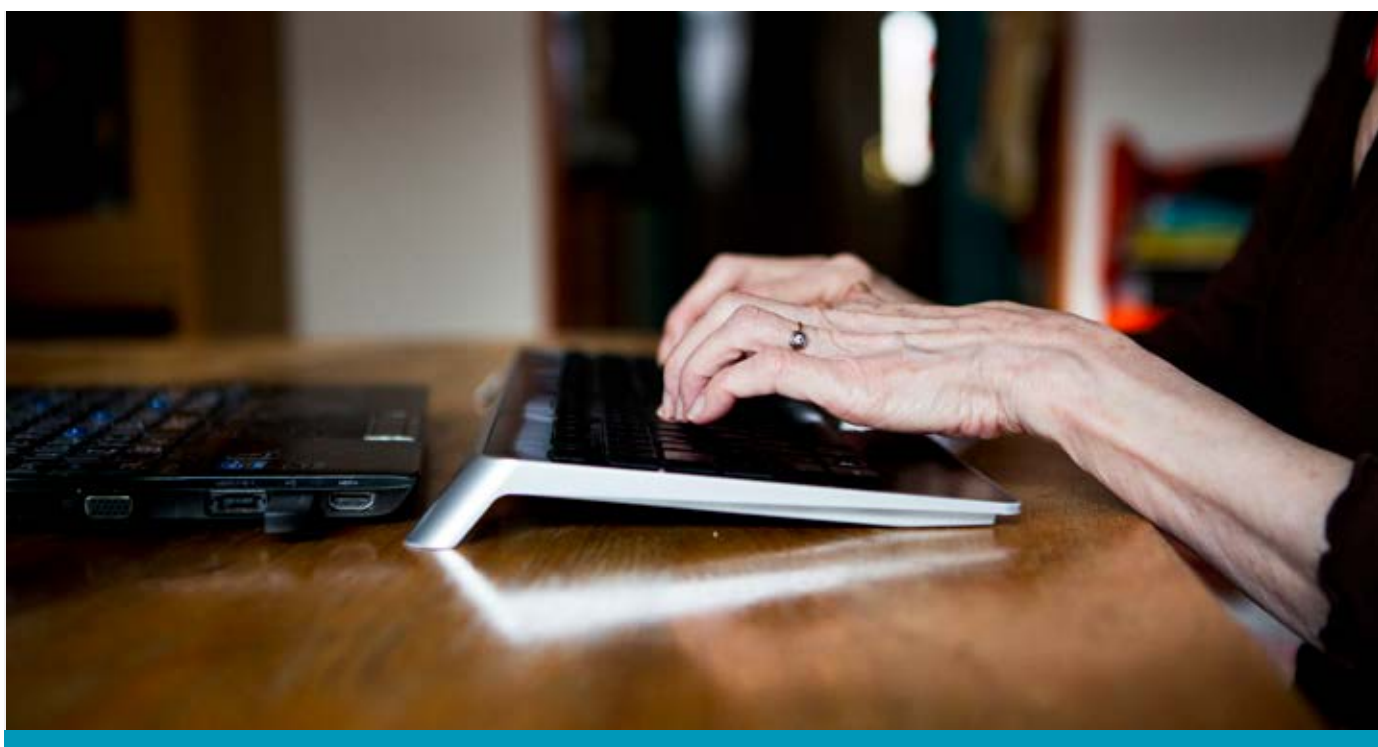
We had

626

responses from blind and partially sighted people to the survey

a quarter of the general population of blind and partially sighted people are working age, 63 per cent of respondents to the survey were aged under 65.

This report also contains information relating to Voter ID, gathered as part of RNIB's regular Tracker Survey into the experiences of blind and partially sighted people. The Tracker survey of more than 400 blind and partially sighted people was conducted in February and March 2021. Findings are representative of the wider population, including by age.



Background to Turned Out 2021

We have been surveying blind and partially sighted people's experiences of voting at each General Election since 2015. Elections were postponed in 2020 due to coronavirus restrictions, ensuring a large number of elections were held in 2021. There were local elections across the countries, Police and Crime Commissioner elections, Welsh Parliament/Senedd Cymru elections in Wales, Scottish Parliamentary elections and London Mayor and London Assembly elections.

Despite it not being a General Election year, we decided to run this Turned Out survey in 2021 so we could compare the experiences of voters under the existing system, with those taking part in the trial of an audio device to improve voting accessibility.

In law, to enable blind and partially sighted people to vote, each polling station must provide:

- a large print version of the ballot paper; and
- a tactile voting device (TVD).

The TVD is a plastic template, which the Presiding Officer can put over the ballot paper to enable blind and partially sighted people to locate the voting boxes and find where to make their mark. However, it does not tell the voter the names or parties of the candidates. Any voter wishing to rely on the TVD alone would be dependent on knowing the order of the candidates as printed on the ballot paper. In practice, this means many people require

assistance, from a family member, friend, or member of polling station staff, to provide this information so the voter can mark the right box.

These provisions used to make ballot papers accessible for blind and partially sighted voters were declared unlawful in May 2019 in a case brought by law firm Leigh Day, on behalf of campaigner Rachael Andrews, with RNIB providing supportive evidence.

While we know online voting would be a popular choice for many, the Cabinet Office has ruled this out as an option for our electoral system in the immediate future, because of security risks to online systems which could theoretically undermine the reliability of the vote. It is also concerned that braille, tactile, or large print ballot papers would be identifiable when placed with other ballots at the count.

In the judgement following 2019's Rachael Andrews' case, Justice Swift said: "a device in the form of the present TVD would [meet its obligations] if, in addition to the flaps and raised/braille numbers on

91%

of blind people and

54%

of partially sighted people had to get another person to help them to vote in the polling station.

the right-hand side, the names of the candidates and/or the names of their political parties were present in braille and/or raised lettering in corresponding position, on the left-hand side of the device."

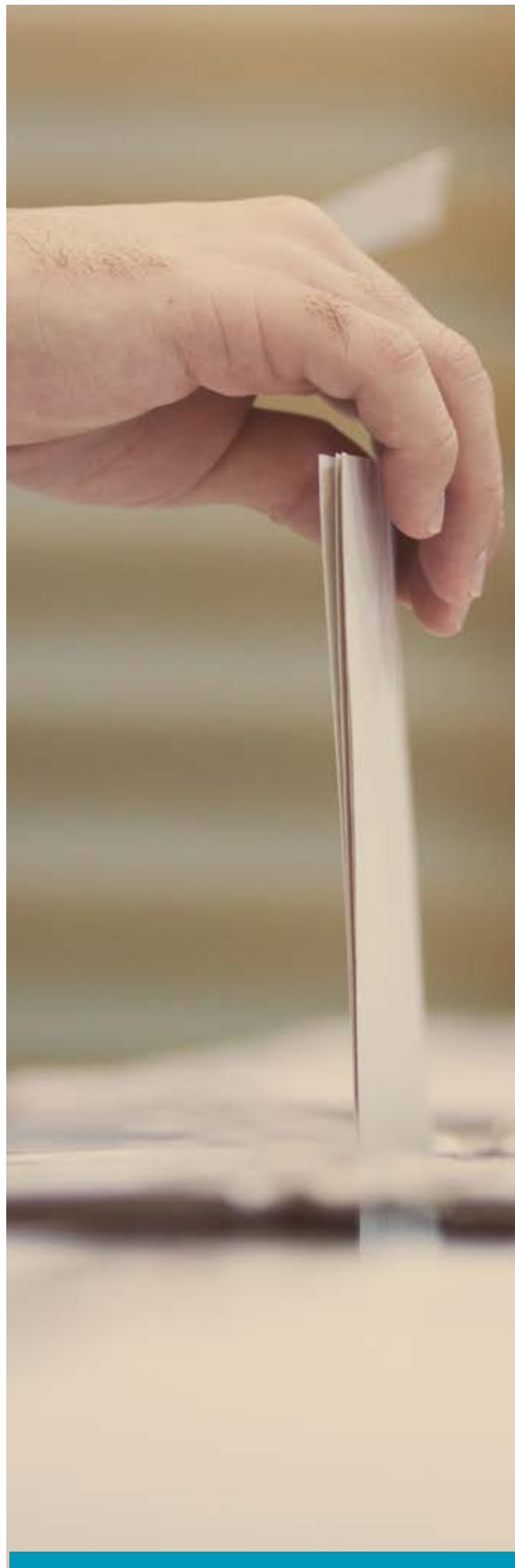
However, based on electoral timelines, we understand from the Cabinet Office that it is impossible for manufacturers to produce individual TVDs for each constituency in the window between candidate lists being finalised and the polls.

The information they would need to contain would also make them unwieldy. Moreover, if the details were embossed in braille, it would exclude the majority of blind and partially sighted people, and those with sight loss who do not read braille.

Meanwhile, in 2020, amendments to the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill that RNIB Scotland lobbied for passed with support from all the parties represented in the Scottish Parliament. As a result, there will now be pilots run by the Scottish Government to develop an alternative method of voting which is accessible to blind or partially sighted people.

RNIB Scotland is currently working with the Scottish Government on their early stage development of a home-based online voting method which would produce a QR code to return to electoral authorities.

The 2020 Act also requires the Electoral Commission in Scotland to publish reports on the accessibility of elections in Scotland, which is in its early stages and will be reviewed as to its effectiveness.



An independent and private vote?

Only one in five (19 per cent) blind voters and less than half (46 per cent) of partially sighted voters who voted in the May 2021 elections said they could vote independently and in secret under the current voting system.

At the polling station, nine out of ten (91 per cent) blind people and five out of ten (54 per cent) partially sighted people had to get another person to help them to vote.

As revealed in Turned Out 2019 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.

- "I cannot cast the vote independently and in secret. This is frustrating as I don't want to share my political views with other people.
- "I usually have my partner with me to help which makes things easier but today I was alone which made me realise just how dependent I am on others. Very negative from start to finish."

Postal voting also needs reform, with three quarters (74 per cent) of blind and half (50 per cent) of partially sighted postal voters having to seek assistance from another person.

- "My daughter had to point out the candidates and she had to guide me to where to put the cross, so I had no privacy in my vote."
- "As like most people we had more than one vote to do and as it was a postal vote it made a lot extra work for my PA to have to fold all the relevant choices into the correct envelopes – this could have been made much more simple."

Voting is a fundamental democratic right. It is essential changes are made to ensure that blind and partially sighted voters can vote independently, and in secret, however they choose to vote.

Voting satisfaction

Overall, only two fifths (39 per cent) of blind and partially sighted people are satisfied with their experience of voting while the same proportion (40 per cent) are dissatisfied with their experience of voting. The experience is judged to be less satisfactory by blind voters, of whom just 30 per cent are satisfied while 44 per cent are dissatisfied. Meanwhile 47 per cent of partially sighted voters are satisfied with their experience of voting compared with 35 per cent who are dissatisfied.

- "My ability to vote in a democratic society, is very important to me. Each time we go to vote, I feel less independent."
- "I am really disappointed with not being able to vote on my own when a sighted peer gets the option to do so without any problems, assistance, worry and able to do so in private."
- "I am able to read with my magnifier therefore I can vote independently."



Making voting accessible to blind and partially sighted people will require wholesale changes to the system

Making voting accessible to blind and partially sighted people will require wholesale changes to the system: in materials sent before the election, staff training, and adaptations available in the polling station, as well as changes to make postal voting accessible.

RNIB's User Experience team – which provides consultancy on accessible products – ran studies on the future of voting with the Cabinet Office in January 2020 to find a way to enable blind and partially sighted people to independently match the relevant hole in the TVD with the right candidate.

They tested the concept of using an audio device with headphones so blind and partially sighted people could read the names and details of the candidates. Used alongside the TVD, this would ensure no need for another person to be present while the list of candidates is reviewed and the vote cast. The audio players have raised, tactile buttons and are easy to use independently. Information about the candidates would be recorded onto USB sticks by Presiding Officers before the election. Plugged into the players, these would be taken into the voting booth by blind and partially sighted people.

Testers reported:

- "Very good idea and quite easy. Easier to vote for one. Would feel confident using this. Would prefer voting with the audio device, have more privacy."
- "That was good. Prefer to use the audio device and use it independently rather than postal vote."
- "It is good, better than having somebody read this out. More independent. What would put me off is that it is an extra thing you have to have. The biggest problem is that in my local polling station I feel they would not do it discreetly and that is important. So, prefer my partner to help me. The actual process [of the audio device and TVD] is fine as I can vote independently and privately."

RNIB called on the UK Government in 2020 to roll out the audio player alongside the TVD in time for the elections in May 2021.

However, in November 2020, the Cabinet Office advised that this was no longer possible due to practical difficulties in procuring the audio players in time. Instead, RNIB agreed to support with the delivery of a trial to ensure the system works well for blind and partially sighted people.

The Norfolk Trial

RNIB worked with Broadland and South Norfolk Councils and the Cabinet Office to deliver an accessible voting trial in which voters used an audio player and headphones, alongside the TVD, to vote more independently and in secret during the May 2021 Elections. The audio player and TVD were used in nine polling stations across three electoral districts. Blind and partially sighted people were made aware of the trial through social media, local talking newspapers, and local press and television.

Of the 11 blind and partially sighted people who took part in the trial and completed RNIB's online survey, five were severely sight impaired, six were partially sighted. Overall, reactions to the proposed solution were very positive. Ten participants said the audio player was very helpful, while the other participant said it was quite helpful. When asked if they would use the audio device again, all the participants said that they would.

Ten out of the 11 (91 per cent) participants in Norfolk voting using the audio player and TVD reported that they were either very satisfied or quite satisfied with their overall voting experience this year compared with only 39 per cent of blind and partially sighted respondents across the whole country.

Similarly, ten out of the 11 (91 per cent) participants in the Norfolk trial reported that their voting experience was better than previous years. This is significant when compared with the 15 per cent of blind and partially sighted respondents who, in general, said their voting experience had improved this year. When asked to share their experience of using the audio device participants explained:

- "The speaker and the plastic cover worked well. With my limited sight. I think I know who I voted for. I felt much more confident than last time (although my sight continues to get worse)."
- "The same Kings player I have from Calibre and I used it with the TVD worked OK. Yes, it was much easier."
- "Yes, much better than before. I could hear the candidates through the headphones and used my finger to find the right circle."
- "Much better for me. I listened to the politicians' names on the player and counted down the numbers."
- "Much easier. The sonic talking news player was great."

Ten out of 11

participants in the Norfolk trial reported that their voting experience was better than previous years

In follow up interviews, three participants explained they liked the audio device and found it easy to use. They said it added to the feeling of privacy and independence as the person could be left alone to listen to the candidates as many times as they wanted, without having to rely on electoral staff. When headphones were used, they felt this was quite private without intruding on other people and without drawing attention to themselves by having the staff member read out the candidates, sometimes multiple times.

The interviews highlighted some areas for improvement, for example technicalities relating to the audio. It is important when the audio recording is made that the speech is not too fast.

One person commented that they had to listen to it several times to absorb the information. It is essential that the audio list of candidates is numbered so that the numbers line up with the numbers on the TVD.

Others reported they would have appreciated a private area to sit and take their time with the device, and it was emphasised how important headphones are to ensuring choices are private:

- "It would be useful to be able to sit in a separate area and listen to the audio."
- "When using headphones, it was quite private but without you would be drawing a lot of attention to yourself and this would add to the stress."

Blind and partially sighted voters taking part in the trial also highlighted that, while voting independently using the audio player and TVD, there is still anxiety relating to not being able to be sure whether the pen has marked the paper and whether the mark is put in the correct location.

As a result, some still felt that they had to ask polling station staff to check that they voted correctly as they were not confident in using the TVD, this means that the vote is not private. One voter suggested a stamp with a cross might give them more confidence in the process.

Our survey found overall eight out of ten (81 per cent) blind and partially sighted voters in the UK thought being offered an audio player to assist them to vote in the polling station is a good idea.

RNIB is confident the proposed accessible voting solution will enable more people to vote independently, but it is not a panacea because of these remaining difficulties.

Along with changes that need to be made to better train staff, and ensure consistency of experience, many blind and partially sighted people continue to tell us they would prefer telephone or online voting.

In addition, clear communication on what accessible methods are available for people to use at the polling station is key. This way people can prepare themselves before coming in to vote and they know to ask for the assistance they need. It also helps if the list of candidates is easily and accessibly available to review prior to voting so it is clear what to expect on the day.

Information prior to the election

Blind and partially sighted people who responded to our survey reported not being able to access information sent to them prior to the election, both from local councils and political parties.

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.

Political parties need to prioritise this issue to ensure they are reaching all their potential voters and giving citizens access to the information they need to inform their choice. Failure to provide this information in an accessible format is likely to be a breach of the Equality Act.

- "I couldn't read any of the leaflets from any of the candidates."
- "Information from campaigners and councils should be made available on a centralised website for easier access/reading."

Just 12 per cent of blind people and 32 per cent of partially sighted people said they were able to read all of the information sent to them by their local council, including poll cards.

Just 12%

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

53 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, which is the same as in 2019.

Local electoral services should be sending information about an election in accessible formats. Local authorities hold registers of blind and partially sighted people and, in England, Care Act guidance has been amended to make it clear that local authority services, including electoral services, could use these registers to make sure they are sending information in accessible formats to blind and partially sighted people.

- "I didn't receive any of this information in an accessible format. I learned at a later date I could request this, but it was then too late."
- "All material I received was provided in standard print which is not good for me because I don't have any sight. Braille or other alternatives would have been better."

Local authorities should update local registers of blind and partially sighted people, collect information on preferred formats, and use them to send items like poll cards in formats that voters can read.

Polling stations, postal and proxy voting

At the polling station

Our survey found 54 per cent of blind and partially sighted people who were able to vote did so at a polling station. These voters reported experiences which suggest inconsistencies in staff training and levels of knowledge in how to support blind and partially sighted voters. Only two out of five (40 per cent) blind voters said that the support they received at the polling station was good, while a third (31 per cent) said the support they received was poor.

Coronavirus restrictions meant the 2021 Elections were particularly challenging for councils and polling station staff. New policies and procedures had to be put in place to ensure a safe and secure environment for staff and voters, and local authorities reported difficulty in recruiting the required number of polling station staff.

These challenges meant blind and partially sighted people experienced additional difficulty getting the support they needed at polling stations.



Voting experiences were mixed with few positive reports:

- "The staff were very clearly trying their best, but, because I had problems using the tactile device, my dad who was helping me vote had to fill out a form stating that he was helping me. This has never happened before, and I've spoken to other people who did not have this experience. I think there needs to be some consistency in the system."
- "At no time did staff say they would offer assistance if required. Neither were there any signs explaining if you required assistance to ask a member of staff."
- "Very supportive, efficient and helpful."
- "They asked if I was okay, but the help was limited due to social distancing."
- "I explained I can't see well but no assistance was offered, just a prompting where to fetch the ballot paper from. I stood as my name was crossed off the voting list but did not see and was not told that another woman further down the table was holding my papers out to me."

I went to the voting booth and was obviously struggling but no assistance was offered. Then I had to ask where the ballot box was. The staff member (who I told earlier about my sight) just waved his arm saying: "over there".

Then I wasn't sure where the exit was and no one told me, by which point I felt humiliated and reluctant

to ask for help again. Not a positive experience at all, one which I doubt I will repeat."

- "The staff were very patronising. Despite me not needing any assistance, they talked to me like a child (I'm 20) and asked me if I could "cope" with voting."
- "As it stands, it's a totally humiliating experience from start to finish, no assistance offered at any stage with people there just making assumptions that everyone can see. If staff there were trained on responses to people with sight impairment the whole experience could be improved."

It is essential that all polling station staff are aware of their responsibilities under the Equality Act and the Representation of the People Act and know how to support a voter with sight loss. While we suspect staffing difficulties related to coronavirus made this situation worse, we consistently hear reports of poor training affecting experience.

In the Norfolk trial, lack of awareness of sight loss among staff was one of the things highlighted by voters which made using the new audio device more difficult:

- "The officer in the polling station was not familiar with the audio device."
- "The officer in the polling station did not realise that they did not need to supervise the person listening to the audio. This infringed on the person's privacy and once left alone with the audio device it was much easier and less stressful."

All three participants who were able to take part in in-depth interviews with RNIB's User Experience Team felt there was a lack of understanding from polling station officers of the needs of blind and partially sighted people. They said this was apparent when guiding people in the polling station, instructing them to fold the paper (to keep their vote secret), looking over their shoulder and not giving them privacy, and being unable to verbally guide them to put their vote in the ballot box themselves. This, in addition to a potentially stressful journey if the person needs to go to an unfamiliar location, can make the voting process quite difficult.

Norfolk trial participants also raised a lack of knowledge of how to use the TVD and the audio device.

- "There is still a reliance on the officer to fit the TVD correctly and a blind person is not able to check this. During the voting it was a friend that noticed that the TVD was not fitted correctly, and this would have resulted in an incorrect or void vote."
- "The officer in the polling station was not familiar with the TVD and did not know how to use it."
- "The TVD was the incorrect one (European one) and hence did not fit the ballot paper correctly."
- "The backing paper was difficult to remove and therefore the TVD did not stick to the ballot paper and it was difficult to use as it moved around on the ballot paper."

Across the UK, one in three (29 per cent) blind and partially sighted people who used the TVD to help them vote, said it did not fit the ballot paper. This seems to be particularly the case in the Scottish and Welsh Parliamentary elections, where the candidate lists, particularly in regional elections, can be very long.

If the TVD is going to continue to be an important component of voting for blind and partially sighted people in the future, this simply cannot continue. Safeguards will need to be built into the system, with Presiding Officers checking the TVDs sent to each polling station against the local ballot paper.

In advance of the election, RNIB worked with the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators to create training materials for polling station staff. These included a film created with blind and partially sighted people, a handy tips guide on how to support blind and partially sighted people and input into the Handbook for Polling Station Staff.

RNIB Cymru also worked with the Electoral Commission to produce a pocket guide to voting, which provided useful tips and advice for blind and partially sighted voters, so they were aware of their rights, and what to expect, when voting. The introduction of new measures to support blind and partially sighted people to vote is a prime opportunity to retrain polling station staff in supporting voters with sight loss. RNIB is keen to support in the development of appropriate training materials.

Postal voting

Nearly half (45 per cent) of blind and partially sighted people used a postal vote, with 47 per cent of blind respondents and 44 per cent of partially sighted respondents voting this way. This is substantially higher than in 2019 when 31 per cent of blind respondents and 26 per cent of partially sighted respondents voted by post, likely due to coronavirus restrictions. Voter experience of postal voting was mixed and there is still a lot to do to ensure postal voting is fully accessible to blind and partially sighted people:

- "The idea of a postal vote seemed a great idea, however the reality was not suitable for persons with sight loss. It would be nice if they asked if another format could have been offered."
- "Another person filled in the ballot paper for me. I had not wanted that person to know how I vote."
- "I had to be very careful to place the forms in the right envelopes in order not to spoil the vote."
- "It was difficult and took some time. Initially I left out a ballot paper because it did not indicate how many ballots there were."
- "I could not have managed by myself. I had to vote three times so there was lots of paperwork. I would've just got frustrated and given up without the help of my daughter."
- "Having a postal vote gives me plenty of time to read and cast my vote. There is no pressure and also I don't feel nervous about going to the polling station."

- "Hideous!! It is a complicated process and it should be simpler or have a clear alternative for people with sight loss."
- "The instructions were confusing, and it felt like there was too much information to read and it also seemed contradictory. My sighted husband and I managed to work it out, but it wasn't easy."

As in 2019, we are calling on the Government to review and revise the postal voting system to make it accessible for blind and partially sighted people.

Proxy voting

A small proportion – less than one per cent – of respondents to our survey chose to use a proxy vote. All respondents, who explained why they chose a proxy vote, said it was because they were not confident in the provisions made to help them vote in a polling station.

Disenfranchisement of blind and partially sighted people

Disappointingly, 18 respondents to our survey reported attempting to vote but being unable to cast their ballot. Of the 18 people, ten were registered blind. People opted out because of a lack of confidence in the system, or they were faced with inaccessible materials so didn't know how or where to vote:

- "I completed the online form [for a postal vote] but was sent a paper to confirm my signature which I couldn't see and couldn't do... I cried because I couldn't vote. People died to give me the right to vote and this is the first time I've not been able to vote. I am deeply distressed by this."
- "I have to get assistance from my dad, or family member, to fill in the voting ballots so I have to tell him who I want to vote for and for which party I want to vote for. The information is not in an accessible format for me to vote independently."
- "I never received anything, so I don't know as this would've been my first election."
- "Because it needed to be in large print at all times, I have previously voted and it's still the same issue."
- "This year I was expecting postal voting but there was no ballot paper."
- "I had no one to fill in the ballot paper for me and I didn't know what I'd find when I got there with regard to social distancing etc."

A further 25 voters told us they did not attempt to vote; 15 were blind and ten were partially sighted. Six respondents said they thought they would not be able to read the ballot paper, nine said they would be unable to vote in secret – and they didn't want to share their vote with someone else – and two said they did not know there was an election.

It is essential that adaptations available to blind and partially sighted people to enable them to vote are widely publicised ahead of polling day, and clearly explained at the polling station. Without this, blind and partially sighted voters are either being excluded from, or opting out of, the democratic system because of the barriers they face casting a vote.

It is unacceptable that blind and partially sighted people are left feeling disenfranchised from the democratic system because it is not accessible.

Voter ID

The Government proposes the introduction of an ID requirement for voting, which will be included in the Elections Bill. 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 disproportionately less likely to hold a passport or driving licence.

The sanctity of the voting process is extremely important, but we do not believe the imposition of a voter ID requirement is a proportionate response to the potential for fraud, bearing in mind the number of people it will disenfranchise.

We estimate blind and partially sighted people are twice as likely not to have photographic ID compared to the population generally. This disparity means blind and partially sighted voters are at much greater risk of disenfranchisement by this policy than the general population. RNIB's Tracker Survey suggests 13 per cent of blind and partially sighted people have no acceptable photographic ID, meaning it's possible this new requirement could exclude 40,000 blind and partially sighted people from the electoral process. This is on top of the existing barriers faced by blind and partially sighted people.

Pilots for voter ID were held in 2018 and 2019. The Government said:

“There is no indication that any consistent demographic was adversely affected by the use of voter ID.”

However demographic information on those turned away from polling stations was not recorded as part of the pilot.

We know at least one blind man was turned away from the polling station and unable to cast his vote because the new requirement had not been communicated in an accessible way, and although he had his polling card with him, the pilot area was not able to accept this as proof of his right to vote.

It is unclear why the Government has chosen to introduce a photographic ID above other forms of ID or proof of address. The Electoral Commission's evaluation of the voter ID trials in England found twice as many people were not issued a ballot paper in (0.4 per cent of voters) for the photo and mixed ID pilot models, compared with the poll card model (0.2 per cent of voters).

Proposed voter ID could disenfranchise:

40,000

Blind and partially sighted people

Fewer voters would likely be disenfranchised if people were able to bring their poll cards rather than having to get photo ID. We therefore recommend that if a requirement to show ID is introduced it allows people to bring their poll cards as proof of ID. Of course, this would need to be implemented alongside policies recommended above to make poll cards available in individuals' preferred formats.

If a photographic ID requirement is introduced, the application process for any locally issued voter ID must be fully accessible, and there must be ways for people who are digitally excluded to apply.

During the pandemic RNIB has had to support the Government repeatedly to retrofit policy to make it accessible to blind and partially sighted people. For example, we continue to support the Government to make home coronavirus testing accessible. It is essential that the needs of disabled people are built into the roll out of this policy from the beginning.

Assuming the voter ID requirement goes ahead we will be calling on the Government to:

- Ensure communications around the voter ID requirement are accessible to blind and partially sighted voters and communications are sent in voters preferred formats. Local authorities could use registers of blind and partially sighted people to do this.
- Ensure digitally excluded voters are informed and given the opportunity to register for photographic ID by carrying out a large-scale outreach programme, potentially similar to the door-knocking carried out for the census or the digital switchover help scheme. While this would be an extensive logistical undertaking it would be necessary to ensure that blind and partially sighted voters are not disenfranchised.
- Ensure any locally issued voter ID application process can be accessed in a variety of different ways – for example online, a paper application, or in person – and applications are available in a variety of different formats such as braille, large print and audio. Any web pages used would need to be fully compatible with screenreading software. Blind and partially sighted people have reported that current online application processes for ID, such as passports, are very difficult to navigate.
- It would also be helpful if the voter IDs themselves had a tactile marking that distinguished them from other cards the voter may carry.

Conclusion

With the Norfolk trial and user testing, we have made some progress towards making voting more accessible for blind and partially sighted people.

The experience of blind and partially sighted people in the trials has been positive, and in the absence of telephone or online voting, it is likely the audio player used alongside the TVD is the best next step forward to deliver more accessible voting for blind and partially sighted people.

Meanwhile, much more needs to be done to improve training in the polling station, the accessibility of postal voting, and to make sure people get information about the election in their preferred formats.

There has been a long wait for accessible voting since current provisions were declared unlawful in May 2019 and the audio player should be rolled out in time for the elections in 2022. Even then, it is unfortunate that this will mean a solution hasn't been implemented until three years after the legal judgement.

At the same time, while we work collaboratively with the UK Governments to improve the accessibility of voting, the prospect of voter ID risks disenfranchising tens of thousands of blind and partially sighted people. We are concerned that if implemented as planned, the Elections Bill will give to blind and partially sighted people with one hand while taking away with another.

Blind and partially sighted people have the same right as everyone else to vote independently and in secret.

Nearly 150 years after the introduction of the right to vote in secret, it is shameful that so many are disenfranchised, have to tell another person their vote, or struggle to get the information they need. An accessible voting system is vital for a healthy democracy.

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 which contains separate measures relating to electoral administration in Scotland.

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.

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 years olds, and The Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020 delivered further reforms to electoral and operational arrangements.





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