

Written evidence from The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)¹ (TEB 41)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The Elections Bill inquiry

About Sight Loss in the UK

Every day 250 people start to lose their sight	At least half of all sight loss is avoidable	More than two million people have sight loss	350,000 registered blind or partially sighted	Age-related macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in adults.
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Summary

- 4 out of 5 blind and partially sighted voters are unable to vote both independently and in secret.
- We are extremely concerned that the proposed changes in section 8 of the Elections Bill reduce the legal protections to support blind and partially sighted voters and we would like to see a reversal of this change.
- In its current form, the introduction of voter ID could disenfranchise 40,000 blind and partially sighted voters.
- All communications related to the introduction of voter ID need to be in accessible formats for blind and partially sighted people.

Diminished legal protection for blind and partially sighted voters

While we welcome the Elections Bill's stated ambition to make voting more accessible for disabled people, the wording in the proposed legislation will reduce protections for blind and partially sighted people.

Since 2015 we have been surveying the experiences of blind and partially sighted voters. One of the key themes we've seen throughout our research is the frustration that blind and partially sighted people experience when they are unable to vote independently and in secret. We believe that an independent vote is one where a blind or partially sighted person can, without any assistance:

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

¹ The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is the UK's leading sight loss charity and the largest community of blind and partially sighted people. We provide a wealth of services including practical and emotional support through our RNIB Connect community and our Sight Loss Advice Service, guide business and public services on accessibility, campaign for change, and have a library of over 60,000 accessible reading materials, including daily newspapers. Every day 250 people begin to lose their sight. We want society, communities and individuals to see differently about sight loss. Since 2015 RNIB has asked blind and partially sighted people to share their experiences voting and our findings have consistently highlighted several barriers that prevent blind and partially sighted people voting independently and in secret.

Despite it being nearly 150 years since the Ballot Act – which guaranteed the right to vote in secret - our research has consistently found blind and partially sighted people are unable to exercise this right. Figures from UK elections in May 2021 found that 4 in 5 blind people felt they were unable to vote both independently and in secret.

Our survey respondents over the years have given many examples of the frustration and humiliation of not being able to vote independently and the impact this has:

- “The lady had to read out the candidates to me and point out the one I wanted to vote for. It was slightly humiliating... Don’t get me wrong – the ladies were lovely and kind but it wasn’t secret or independent.”
- “The voting booth was right beside the queue for the check in desk; it wasn’t closed off and I had to verbalise my choice to my partner. When telling her which candidate I wanted, a person, waiting in the queue beside the booth, audibly sighed. I don’t feel I get privacy in my vote.”
- “My helper disagrees with my vote and I have no way to be sure she voted as I wished...”
- “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.”

For our full research on the experiences of voting of blind and partially sighted people, please see our ‘Turned Out Reports’ which are available on the RNIB website at www.rnib.org.uk/voting.

In section 8 of the Elections Bill, ‘Assistance with voting for persons with disabilities’, sub paragraph 3(b) of the Representation of the People Act is replaced. We’ve outlined the proposed changes below:

Current wording:

"(3A) The returning officer shall also provide each pollingstation with-

...

(b) a device of such description as may be prescribed for enabling voters who are blind or partially-sighted to vote without any need for assistance from the presiding officer or any companion.”

Proposed wording:

“(b) such equipment as it is reasonable to provide for the purposes of enabling, or making it easier for, relevant persons to vote in the manner directed by rule 37.”

The proposed changes significantly downgrade the legal protection for blind and partially sighted people and in our view the revised wording offers no more protection for disabled voters than already exists under the Equality Act. Reasonable adjustments must already be made.

Under the current legislation, polling stations are required to provide blind and partially sighted people equipment that enables them to vote without assistance, but under the

proposed legislation they are required to provide equipment that is considered ‘reasonable’ to make voting easier. The wording to provide “such equipment as it is reasonable” introduces ambiguity as it is up to the individual returning officer to determine what they consider to be ‘reasonable’.

To fulfil the ambition of the Bill and make voting more accessible, we believe it should maintain the existing wording to uphold the legal protection in support of blind and partially sighted people’s democratic right to vote independently. If further measures are to be made to support a wider group of disabled voters we would support this and this could be made in an additional clause.

Even with the current legal protection for blind and partially sighted people, 4 in 5 blind voters are unable to vote both independently and in secret. In 2019, a Judicial Review found the Government’s current provisions to support blind and partially sighted voters unlawful, with the judge describing existing provisions as “a parody of the electoral process” because of the inability for voters to review and mark the ballot paper independently using equipment provided.

However, recent trials carried out with the Cabinet Office have shown alternative devices or equipment could be provided to meet this requirement. RNIB have been working with the Cabinet Office on providing an audio player to read out the names on the ballot paper, used in conjunction with the current tactile voting device: a clear template which fits over the ballot paper and enables a blind or partially sighted voter to find the appropriate box. We are extremely concerned that the adoption of more general language in the Elections Bill could cause the voting experience of blind and partially sighted people to deteriorate even further.

It is crucial that the wording ensuring blind and partially sighted voters must be able to vote without any need for assistance be maintained in law.

Introduction of voter ID

We are also concerned about the requirement in the Elections Bill for voters to present photo ID at polling stations. We believe this will disproportionately disenfranchise blind and partially sighted people, particularly older blind and partially sighted people.

Our research shows that blind and partially sighted people are around twice as likely to not have photographic ID than the general public. Some 13% of blind and partially sighted people said they had no photographic ID at all, including travel passes. This disparity could result in as many as 40,000 blind and partially sighted people being left unable to vote as they do not have the right form of ID. We suspect this could also disenfranchise a much larger number of older voters who are also more likely to be digitally excluded and less likely to have photographic ID.

While we welcome the commitment to provide free voter ID cards for all those who require it, we doubt this will be sufficient to avoid disenfranchising blind and partially sighted voters. Historically communications related to elections have been inaccessible for blind and partially sighted people. There would need to be wholesale reforms in the way local authorities communicate with blind and partially sighted voters in order to ensure everyone was aware of the new requirement and able to act on it. We know of at least one blind man

who was turned away from the voter ID trials in Derby and unable to vote – despite having his poll card – because he was unaware of the new requirement.

Instead of introducing photographic ID for voters we would like to see the Government spend this money on making voting more accessible and if a voter ID requirement must be introduced we would recommend the use poll cards as proof of ID. The Electoral Commission’s evaluation of the voter ID trials in England found half as many people were not issued a ballot paper in the poll card model (0.2 per cent of voters) as for the photo and mixed ID pilot models (0.4 per cent of voters). Adopting this model would reduce the impact on blind and partially sighted people and would meet the Government’s objective to increase confidence in the integrity of the vote.

If the Government does decide to go ahead with the introduction of voter ID then we urge them to engage with blind and partially sighted people in the design of the application process for voter IDs. It’s vital that the application system and associated communications be accessible for all. To do so would require a door-to-door contact with voters to raise awareness of the new voting requirements and support people to apply for locally-issued voter ID. This could be modelled along the lines of door knocking activity around the census, or the program for the digital switchover.

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