

PRESS RELEASE

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Making disabled people's votes count – groundbreaking campaign

- **As few as 16% of people with learning disabilities are exercising their right to vote, leaving hundreds of thousands marginalised and disenfranchised**
- **At least half a million people with learning disabilities in England who have capacity to vote are not voting, more than half of all people with learning disabilities**
- **Jargon in election materials and complexity of system are major barriers, along with low awareness of their legal right to vote**
- **On 20th January the national disability charity, United Response, launches a campaign urging political parties to work with people with learning disabilities and make 2010 the most inclusive election in UK history**

With the 2010 general election expected to be one of the most pivotal of recent times, United Response is launching a campaign urging all political parties to engage with the half a million people with learning disabilities who are eligible to vote but do not. This is particularly important with low turnout a major concern.

A report carried out by United Response shows that as few as 16% of people with learning disabilities who were registered to vote actually did so in the last election, compared with a national turnout of 61%. It also explored why so many people with learning disabilities feel excluded from the democratic process: key barriers were a lack of easy-to-understand information about candidates and policies, the complexity of the voting process and low awareness of the right of people with learning disabilities to vote.

The report is the culmination of a 3 year project funded by the Electoral Commission. As well as real life case studies of people's democratic experiences, it includes a series of recommendations. Most significantly, it calls for voter turnout among people with learning disabilities to increase to at least 40% and for all main political parties to provide manifestos which are in a format that is easy to understand for people with learning disabilities.

On **20th January**, United Response will launch the report at an event for MPs, political parties and local authorities at the **House of Commons**. The report examines the voting experiences of people with learning disabilities through research and case studies. The event will showcase a series of resources and a website (www.everyvotecounts.org.uk) designed to make the political process easier to understand for people with learning disabilities, and to assist MPs and candidates in meeting their obligation to communicate clearly with citizens who have disabilities.

Su Sayer OBE, United Response founder and chief executive, says "People with learning disabilities are affected by decisions made at a national and local level in the same way as everyone else. Yet information about the democratic process is often presented in a way which is confusing and full of jargon.... As a result, many people who would like to vote currently find themselves excluded"

Mark, aged 20, from Greater Manchester, has physical and learning disabilities. He says: "People with learning disabilities should get a chance to vote because everyone else gets to. Everyone should have a say in how the country is run. People should definitely vote if they want things to change."

Due to his age, he hasn't voted in an election before and hadn't given voting in 2010 much thought until he went to a presentation on Every Vote Counts and began to see how politics affects him: "I was too young to vote at the last general election and voting is not something that has really taken my interest before, but I can now see through Every Vote Counts why it is important."

Diane Abbot, MP, said: "I believe that it is extremely important to encourage those with learning disabilities to vote, as a 16% voter turnout due to a lack of easy to understand information is a woeful statistic to behold." She described the Making Democracy Accessible Pack as: "Concise and very informative...covers a wide range of policy...Aspects such as using pictures relevant to the text and even the format of the text are valuable pieces of advice."

Ends

For more information, interviews, photography, case studies or to request a copy of the report, please contact Jaime Gill (07969128908) or Sarah Bartlett (07980915749) or email jaime.gill@unitedresponse.org.uk or sarah.bartlett@unitedresponse.org.uk

Notes to editors:

United Response is a top 100 charity operating in England and Wales, providing a range of support and services for more than 1,500 people with learning disabilities, mental health needs or physical disabilities. We employ over 2,000 people across the organisation and have won many awards for our pioneering work since being founded in 1973.

Our mission is to enable people with learning disabilities, mental health needs and physical disabilities to take control of their lives.

Our vision is a society where disabled people are equal participants and have access to the same rights and opportunities as everyone else.

The services we provide depend on each person we work with. We can provide 24-hour support for people with profound physical needs, or just a few hours for those who need less support to live their lives. We can job coach someone into meaningful paid employment. We can provide outreach support for someone with a mental health need or help people who find it difficult to communicate by making information more accessible. The key to our success is that we work with each person to do the things they want to do, supporting them to communicate what they want and tell us how we are doing.

In support of our vision, we also campaign to improve the lives of people with disabilities in society. This may mean lobbying decision makers such as MPs to ensure that people's voices are heard or it might mean working directly with disabled people so that they can be more directly engaged in the democratic process. We also work with employers to ensure that more people with learning disabilities, mental health needs and physical disabilities get a fair opportunity to work.

To find out more please visit www.unitedresponse.org.uk