

Every Vote Counts

– Getting voices heard

A report exploring how people with learning disabilities can become better engaged in the democratic process.



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Foreword

The past decade has seen politicians of every persuasion, across the world, concerned at low turn-outs at elections and apparent increasing apathy and disinterest on the part of potential voters. As we move towards a general election in 2010, there is an increasing awareness that this is an election where every vote will certainly count!



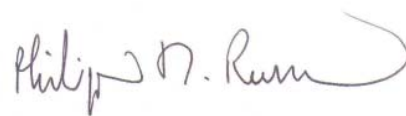
But we know that all too often, people with learning disabilities can be lost and forgotten in the midst of busy election campaigns. While we have made great progress in valuing people with learning disabilities as citizens, with rights and the ability to contribute to the lives of their local communities and the nation as a whole, the door to full democratic rights is still only half open. This does not only apply to general elections, but also to local elections and engagement with representatives generally.

If we really mean what we say around self advocacy and citizenship in a democratic society, then we have to ensure that people with learning disabilities are no longer effectively disenfranchised. My own son Simon assiduously watches the news and he

understands and has views on not only the key issues of the day but also on the election process itself. But far too many people with a learning disability currently lack that opportunity and the support they need to exercise their rights as citizens and to have their views taken seriously.

I believe that the Every Vote Counts campaign has the potential to achieve the enfranchisement and the respect and value due to people with learning disabilities as full 21st century citizens. The campaign meets a real need in informing, enabling and encouraging people with learning disabilities to become active citizens. In fact, in our rapidly changing society, I would see it as being relevant to a much wider group than just people with learning disabilities, to whom it is directed, for example people who don't speak English as a first language.

I hope this campaign gets a real push as we are moving towards a general election. How wonderful it would be to see people with learning disabilities valued as equal citizens and really speaking up, joining in the debates and of course casting their votes.



Dame Philippa Russell, DBE, is the Chair of the Standing Commission on Carers. She has a son with a learning disability and is a lifelong disability rights campaigner.

Introduction

“Even people without learning disabilities find it hard to understand politics. They [politicians] just speak jargon and don’t get to the point. When they make political broadcasts they don’t use clear language that we can understand. They don’t involve us. If people with disabilities all vote, we will be heard. The more we get our voices heard, the more people will respect us.”

Lucy, who has a learning disability.

“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 see now through the Every Vote Counts project why it could be important.” **Mark, who has physical and learning disabilities.**

Most people with learning disabilities have the same right to vote as everyone else, yet only a small portion of the one million or so adults with learning disabilities in England used their vote at the 2005 general election. Sometimes this was due to low awareness of their democratic rights, and sometimes it was because they found the democratic process itself too complex and inaccessible.

That’s why, back in 2007, the disability charity United Response started work on Every Vote Counts, a three year project funded by the Electoral Commission. Its aims were straightforward: to help politicians make their work more accessible to people with learning disabilities across England, and to support people with learning disabilities to become better engaged in the democratic process.

Throughout the project, we have sought feedback from people with learning disabilities, the organisations working with them, politicians and public officials, which we have used to develop a series of resources to help meet these aims.

The following report looks back over the project. It explores the barriers people with

learning disabilities face when dealing with the democratic process, through real life stories. It also includes invaluable advice for all those working in politics, helping them to make the information they provide to voters clearer and easier to understand.

It ends with a call to action – to politicians, people with learning disabilities, their friends and families, and the organisations who work with them – to work together to help people with learning disabilities ensure their voices are heard, in 2010 and beyond.

While 80% of people with learning disabilities are registered to vote, only 16% of those registered voted in the 2005 General Election, compared with a national turnout of 61%.

Research carried out among people supported by United Response, as part of the Every Vote Counts project.

Background

Although people with learning disabilities have the same democratic right to vote as everyone else, there is much evidence to suggest that they are effectively among the most disenfranchised in society.

The Government stated its commitment to involving more people with learning disabilities in the electoral process in its 2001 strategy for learning disability – Valuing People - but research carried out among adults with learning disabilities in England by the Office of National Statistics and the NHS in 2003-4¹ showed that only 31% of respondents voted in the 2001 general election against a national turnout of 59%.

Within United Response, anecdotal evidence gathered from support staff highlighted the low level of participation from the people with learning disabilities that we support at the last general election in 2005. Concerns raised by support workers within the organisation about the accessibility of the voting system were echoed in findings from the Electoral Commission², which concluded that most political party leaflets, manifestos and websites used in the 2005 general election were inaccessible for people with learning disabilities.

These findings led us to carry out an audit of the resources available for people with learning disabilities who wanted to find out more about engaging in the democratic process.

We found that some easy to understand publications had been produced to help people understand the voting process on election day itself, such as the Electoral Commission's easy guide to voting, the Disability Rights Commission's 'Right to Vote' and Wandsworth Council's 'Voting at the Polling Station', which had been produced in partnership with the Makaton Vocabulary Development Group. However, we felt that none of the resources available fully addressed broader democratic issues, such as the significance of voting, how politics affects people's lives and ways in which people could influence political decisions other than through elections – information which we felt needed to be made available to people with learning disabilities if they were to participate in a meaningful and equal way.

Through our own experience of supporting people with learning disabilities and producing accessible communication tools, we were also aware of the differing communication needs from one person to another. Just over a third of people supported by United Response have a physical disability alongside their learning disability. A further third have hearing or visual impairments and almost half do not communicate verbally. Some people are able to understand written English, whilst others prefer easy read text with pictures. We were also aware of the differing levels of person to person support that people needed to understand information.

¹ Health and Social Care Information Centre (Emerson et al), *Adults with Learning Difficulties in England 2003/4 (2005)*

² Electoral Commission, *Election 2005: engaging the public in Great Britain, (2005)*

However, we knew that producing accessible information targeted at people with a learning disability could only be part of the solution. As the needs and rights of people with a learning disability are so often overlooked or misunderstood, we also understood the importance of working with political stakeholders to raise awareness of the issue and to assist them in making democracy relevant and accessible to adults with learning disabilities.

We approached the Electoral Commission with our plan for Every Vote Counts - a three year project to encourage greater democratic participation among adults with learning disabilities in England and to offer them more of a say in the political decisions that affect their lives. The Electoral Commission had recently launched a programme to encourage greater participation among disabled people and agreed to fund the project.

Every Vote Counts – our research

We wanted to find out the true extent to which people with learning disabilities were engaged with politics and the electoral process.

To do this, we carried out a survey of the people supported by United Response and the people that support them. The survey asked for information on the number of people currently registered to vote at each United Response service, and also for information on whether or not people were using their vote. In services where people were not registered or using their vote, respondents were asked to suggest reasons.

Support workers were also asked about their experiences of supporting people to vote and participate in the democratic process - what they had tried, what had and hadn't worked, what they had learnt. They were asked what they hoped to achieve in the future regarding democratic rights, and what help they might need to achieve this. All information was supplied anonymously and respondents were asked not to give information on individuals or on how people chose to vote.

Responses from the survey provided feedback on the experiences of 227 people with learning disabilities and 252 staff who support them.

What we found:

■ **There may be fewer people with learning disabilities participating in the democratic process than previously thought.** Our responses showed that while 80% of people with learning disabilities are registered to vote, only 16% of those registered in the 2005 general election and 20% in their last local elections. These figures are lower than those cited in research published by the Office of National Statistics and the NHS (which related to the 2001 general election).

■ **There are many barriers preventing people with learning disabilities from participating.** The survey results showed that a lack of understanding about the purpose of voting, the democratic process and the candidates, prevented many people from actively taking part.

“The service user found the voting system and filling in cards complicated and confusing. Concerns are that although the service user wanted to vote and did, they, didn't really have enough political knowledge to make a really informed choice.”

“They didn’t understand what elections were. They weren’t interested.”

■ **Support staff said that the complexity of the system often made it difficult for people, even with mild learning disabilities, to make an informed choice and therefore use their vote meaningfully.**

“The people we support are unable at present to understand the voting process, party ideology or reason for voting.”

■ **Others said that a lack of easy to understand information made it difficult for them to explain the differences between candidates in a clear and unbiased way to the people they support.**

“To ensure objectivity, but also privacy, I asked someone else to listen to everything I said from outside the room... I also asked the questions more than once and in a different order, to check that the person being supported wasn’t just indicating yes to the first one. Total objectivity is very important, but it is difficult to briefly explain the differences between the parties, especially as not all parties make it easy to access their manifestos.”

■ **Others commented that the layout of the ballot paper and the physical voting environment acted as a barrier to people voting.**

“Polling stations are not welcoming places. The paperwork excludes people with learning disabilities from taking part. There is no accessible information.”

■ **Many support workers said that they would like to do more to support people to become involved in the democratic process and had tried a variety of creative methods to make it easier for people to engage.** These included postal voting, creating accessible information to explain differences between candidates, inviting candidates to meet and greet sessions, trying to relate politics to people’s everyday lives and offering people support to get to the polling station. Many were concerned that without this support people with more complex needs would not have a democratic ‘voice’.

■ **Many support workers were concerned about bias and overly influencing, albeit unintentionally, a person’s decision.** When asked how this could be overcome, support workers highlighted the need for training and resources to be developed on how to support people to take part in the democratic process in an unbiased way. Role play, short films, meet and greet sessions with candidates and practice elections were all suggested as ways that would make it easier for people with learning disabilities to become better informed and for support workers to provide information in a neutral way.

“We have learned that it is difficult to generate interest and also present information in an unbiased manner.”

“It is very difficult to not, however unintentionally, put one’s own personal angle on it.”

“More aids and assistance are required to support people with learning disabilities in this area.”

“We would like to receive guidance on how to support people fairly and democratically.”

■ **Support workers also felt there to be a lack of understanding among candidates, politicians and public officials about the needs of people with learning disabilities which could be addressed through awareness training.**

“There needs to be preparation work leading up to each election.”

“We need to get candidates to speak to people with learning disabilities.”

“There needs to be training for candidates.”

■ **They also highlighted the need for information about the democratic process, as well as manifestos and other information relating to party policies and candidates, to be available in a more accessible format.**

“There needs to be clear information [from political parties] about what their policies would mean for the tenants.”

■ **Many also felt that there was a need for easy to understand information to be created to help people with learning disabilities better understand how political decisions and policies affect their everyday lives, which in turn would generate more interest in the democratic process generally.**

"People should have choice as they do in every other area of their lives."

Ruth is a United Response team leader. She told us how her team had supported six people with learning disabilities to vote in their local elections.

"I think voting is something that can often be overlooked when it comes to supporting people. But we felt that it was a basic right and that people should have the choice as they do in every other area of their lives.

"All six people had specific communication needs and we were aware that at that time they didn't have a full understanding of the democratic process.

"One of the things we did was to write to each of the local candidates and invite them to the house to meet their potential voters.

"Unfortunately, none of the candidates were able to make it along in person, but two of the parties did send a representative. This gave us the opportunity to explain the importance of visuals as a communication tool.

"We use a lot of photos and images in our work, as this is how the people we support prefer to communicate. Used correctly, images can help with recognition. With this in mind, we were concerned that the people living at the house might find it confusing if they were visited by the representative rather than the candidate and so we suggested that they brought along a photo of the candidate with them.

"Most parties do include a photo on their literature. But the photos are often in black and white or tinted, both of which make it difficult for someone with autism to link the image with the real person.

"The representatives seemed surprised when we explained this to them. I don't think they'd ever thought about it in this way before. But they were interested and one did bring along a new photo of his candidate for us to use, which worked well."

"Having more information which is accessible would make a huge difference."

People's experiences of voting and the democratic process

Following the survey, we conducted a series of workshops and interviews with some of the people we support - some who had voted before and some who hadn't - to ask them about their views on politics and taking part in the democratic process. We also asked them to tell us about the issues that are important to them. Here is what they told us.

"Sometimes people with learning disabilities aren't listened to."

Jason is a young man with learning disabilities who lives with his family. He works part time in a shop and goes to college. He visits a local community skills centre two to three days a week.

Jason has voted in one general election in the past, and liked being able to "cross the box", but he did find some of the process "a bit difficult". One of the reasons he'd voted was because he'd heard about the party he'd voted for and wanted to be involved, but he hadn't read much information about the party, and hadn't heard of any other parties. He has never voted in local elections.

He says that "sometimes people with learning disabilities aren't listened to", and would be interested in getting his voice heard democratically in the future. He would prefer information to be presented in a more straightforward way, and using visual cues. Politicians should "use TV more" to communicate.

"If people with disabilities all vote, we will be heard."

Lucy, 32, has voted before and thinks it's important for people with learning disabilities to engage with the political process. She told us:

"Politics affects us in the newspapers. Politics affects us on public transport. Politics affects us through everyday life."

"It is important for making decisions. When politicians sit round the table they have to make the best decision for us."

However, Lucy is concerned that some people with learning disabilities may be finding it difficult to register their opinion.

"Even people without disabilities find it hard to understand politics. They [politicians] just speak jargon and don't get to the point. When they make political broadcasts they don't use clear language that we can understand. They don't involve us."

"If people with disabilities all vote, we will be heard. The more we get our voices heard the more people will respect us."

"I love being able to live my own life, it really matters to me."

Abby, 42, lives in supported accommodation in her own flat. She has limited mobility and uses a wheelchair or walker to get around. Her main leisure activities are going to a drop-in centre, or going to the cinema, "if I can afford it".

She has received election literature, but says it was hard to understand, as there were only a few pictures and Abby can't read.

She did vote once before, and she thinks "it's sad that people with learning disabilities don't vote. It's not fair if people with disabilities can't have their say."

Abby's main political concerns are about transport and independence. At the moment she has to use minicabs to get around, because the buses don't use ramps and the drivers aren't helpful. She would vote for any party who could sort this out. She also used to have a lot less freedom in her life:

"I love being able to live my own life, it really matters to me". She would vote for parties that encouraged more independence for people with disabilities.

"Politics is about choices. You need to tell politicians what you want, or you won't get heard."

Ismael, is 31, has moderate learning disabilities, and lives in his own flat in West London, with support. He is extremely active: he plays football every Sunday, and enjoys going to see Arsenal play live, when he can afford it. He also likes parties, visiting friends and music. He gets around easily on public transport with his Freedom card.

Ismael has voted and is very passionate on the topic. He thinks all parties need to do a lot more work to make things accessible "for disabled people and old people. We need more lifts in stations and more space for wheelchairs on buses. And everything needs to be safer. Everyone has the right to a life and to get out."

Ismael believes that one of the reasons lots of people don't vote is because "none of them stop the wars, stop our armies going off to get killed." He says that, as someone who was born in Eritrea, he knows what war is like.

Another problem with voting is that there is "too much jargon", and that the process is difficult. This is a shame because "politics is about choices. You need to tell politicians what you want, or you won't get heard."

Haresh is a young man with hearing impairments and learning disabilities. He is very sociable and enjoys going to his favourite pub, playing football, running and using the internet.

He does know a bit about politics, he has received voting cards and has discussed it with others, but he has never voted. When asked why, he says that it's partly because he didn't think it was relevant to him and partly because he found election materials really difficult to understand.

However, a wider discussion shows that Haresh is concerned by a number of issues, which could be affected by local politics. He is very keen to go to a new bowling alley, but it is too far away, and there is no direct bus. He would therefore like better public transport in the local area. He has had difficulties in the past with local transport, particularly getting lost, which is why he is currently doing public transport training with United Response.

When asked whether he would be interested in voting for people who might have plans to increase or decrease the amount of public transport in his area, or to increase or decrease the amount of support he receives, he said that this would be of great interest to him if it was explained in a way that he could understand. His favourite method of communication from politicians or parties would be the television, closely followed by the internet. Printed material came a distant third.

“Voting is important. It should be their decision, their choice.”

Dawn is a young woman with learning disabilities from West Sussex. Dawn thinks it's important for people with learning disabilities to exercise their rights.

Asked whether people with learning disabilities should vote, she said: “Yes. They

have rights. You can't stop them. It is their decision and their right.” Dawn thought more people would vote if someone showed them how to do it.

“It's probably because they have never done voting before and don't know what it is. They basically need someone to show them how to do it and why they need to do it. Voting is important. It should be their decision, their choice.”

Breaking down the barriers

Our research clearly shows that many people with learning disabilities do have views on political issues and would like to vote and become more engaged in the democratic process, but a lack of accessible, easy to understand information on how politics affects their lives and how to engage with the democratic process is a barrier preventing people from getting involved.

The people we support and their support staff told us that they wanted information presented in a clear, unbiased way using accessible communication tools such as easy to understand words, pictures, sound recordings and video files – communication tools which people with learning disabilities

find easier to understand and which they use in other areas of their lives.

Based on these findings and with people with learning disabilities acting as consultants, we created the Every Vote Counts pack – an easy to use CD ROM and booklet covering everything from how politics works, to how it affects people's lives, to how to get involved and register your opinion.

The pack was launched in January 2009 and distributed to learning disability organisations, advocacy groups and individuals with learning disabilities around the country.

Four months later we also launched the Every Vote Counts website (www.everyvotecounts.org.uk), which includes a web version of the pack, as well as further stories and video clips to help people with learning disabilities understand more about how politics affects their lives.

Milan's story

Milan is one of the people who helped us develop the Every Vote Counts pack and website. Milan is interested in politics, but was unsure about how it affects him on a daily basis. We asked him to choose one area of his life. He chose his hobbies. We then worked with him to help him document, through pictures and words, how politics affects this area of his life.

Milan enjoys bird watching and visiting different places of interest, but needs support to take part in these things. He uses Direct Payments to pay for someone to support him to do these things. Through his research Milan discovered that political decisions determine the support he receives and that politicians decided that people should be able to receive Direct Payments if they wanted them.

Milan is a regular visitor to the Wetlands Centre, where he enjoys birdwatching. He noticed that there are often a lot of volunteers at the centre and decided to find out about how he could become involved.

To his surprise, Milan found out that political decisions also affect volunteering. He did some training, but was told that he couldn't start work as an official volunteer until his Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check had been completed. Milan found out that CRB checks were introduced by politicians to keep vulnerable adults and children safe.

Milan is now a volunteer and through his work at the Wetlands Centre has found out about the environment. He decided that he wanted to recycle as much as possible and so went to a local recycling centre to find out more. He found out that local politicians make decisions about where recycling centres are located and what can be recycled there.

Milan was surprised by how much of his daily life is affected by politics. His story is now included in the Every Vote Counts pack and on the website to help others gain a better understanding of how politics affects them.

Capacity to vote

Through the Every Vote Counts pack and on the website, we also sought to address the key practice issues facing support workers when assisting someone to engage in the democratic process. We were aware from our research that assessing mental capacity to vote was an issue of particular concern to support workers.

Whilst it is true that not everyone with a learning disability has the capacity to vote, we were concerned that too many people were being denied their right to do so either because false assumptions were being made about their ability to vote, or because there was uncertainty over how to assess capacity in this area and whose role it is to do so.

The Mental Capacity Act (2005) has a code of practice which provides guidance on how to assess someone's capacity to consent and make decisions. The act covers all types of decision making, including voting.

The Code of Practice that accompanies the act states that a person must always be assumed to have capacity unless it is established that he lacks capacity and that a person is not to be treated as unable to make a decision unless all steps to help the person do so have been taken. This means that just because someone may need unbiased help to make a decision or to communicate their decision it does not necessarily mean that they cannot make that decision. It also means that people must be given all the support they need to make a decision and this includes having access to information which is presented in a way which is meaningful to them.

The Code of Practice also states that in order to assess someone's capacity the assessor must have the skills and ability to

communicate effectively with the person being assessed and, if necessary, should get professional help to communicate with the person. This means that decisions can no longer be made based purely on the way someone looks.

In the context of voting, having capacity means that someone has enough understanding to be able to choose between candidates and to understand that they are choosing a political representative. Beyond this, the individual can make their choice by whatever criteria they like. It is not up to anyone else to judge if reasons for choosing someone are valid or not.

Here are some examples from the Every Vote Counts pack and website:

What is politics?

Politics is the name for the way groups of people make decisions about running the country. The people who help make these decisions are called **politicians**.

You can have a say in how the country is run by voting for **politicians** in an **election**, and by telling **politicians** about things that are important to you. Click on the pictures or words below to find out more.

<input type="checkbox"/> How politics affects you	<input type="checkbox"/> How politics works	<input type="checkbox"/> How to get involved
		

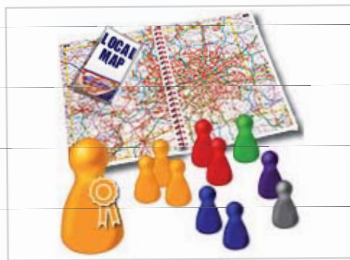
How politics works



★ Members of Parliament (MPs)



An **MP** is an ordinary person who has decided that they want to become a **politician** and help to run the country by working in **Parliament**.



Their job is to **represent** the people who live in a certain area (called a **constituency**). They have a say on their behalf in how the country is run.



Most people can decide to try and become an **MP** if they want to. They can join a **political party** or decide to be an **independent politician**.

How to get involved



There are lots of ways that you can get involved in **politics** and have a say in how the country is run. Everyone can get involved. Click on the pictures or words below to find out more.

<input type="checkbox"/> Voting 	<input type="checkbox"/> Your politicians 	<input type="checkbox"/> Political parties
<input type="checkbox"/> Elections 	<input type="checkbox"/> Campaigning 	<input type="checkbox"/> Getting started



Local election

A local **election** is when you can **vote** for your local **politicians**, called **councillors**.

They make decisions about your local area and local services. In London you also have a **mayor** and **Members of the London Assembly**.



General election

A general **election** is when you can **vote** for who you want to become your **Member of Parliament (MP)**. **MPs** work in parliament and make decisions that can affect the whole country.



European election

A European **election** is when you can **vote** for who you want to become your **Member of the European Parliament (MEP)**. They work in the **European Union**.

Every Vote Counts – the feedback

In order to assess whether Every Vote Counts was meeting the needs of people with learning disabilities, we asked those who had used the pack and website to provide us with feedback. We specifically asked people to tell us about their experiences of engaging with the project – what they liked about it, what they didn't and whether it had affected their knowledge of politics. This is what they told us:

"I'd never really thought about contacting my MP about something like this until now."

1. Mark, aged 20, has physical and learning disabilities. Due to his age, Mark hasn't voted in a general 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 see now through the Every Vote Counts pack why it could be important.

"I use Direct Payments to buy my support and they work really well for me. I was surprised to find out that things like Direct Payments are decided by politicians. I hadn't thought about it before."

Being a wheelchair user, physical access is another issue which is important to Mark in his everyday life. He said:

"There are laws to say that buildings have to be accessible for wheelchairs, but older buildings are still exempt. I find it hard to understand why this is as it makes it difficult for me to get about. I'd never really thought about contacting my MP about something like this until now."

"I understood it all!"

2. Neil is a volunteer with Mencap. He recently attended a workshop on Every Vote Counts.

Asked what he liked best about the project he said "the accessible information." He added "I understood it all!" Asked what were the most important parts of the project for him, Neil said "The voting and how you can vote."

"I thought we could do with a crash course in politics so the CD ROM will be very useful indeed."

3. Carol works with people with learning disabilities in East Sussex. She told us:

"The pack is fabulous. I am using it at one of our self advocacy groups. We had written to our MP about attending the parliamentary

debate on 5th March on human rights for people with a learning disability and he wrote back and said he'd like to meet the group. I thought we could do with a crash course in politics so the CD ROM will be very useful indeed and it will come in handy for our workshops. It is so good to have access to such a good resource."

"Some people had an interest in politics before they started coming here, but lots of them didn't see it as relevant to them. Having the Every Vote Counts packs around has been a useful way of introducing them to the topic and seeing if it is of interest to them."

4. Maggie, who manages the Perfect Start centre in London, which offers various training courses and activities for local people with learning disabilities, says of the pack:

"It's been a useful resource for us. We get a lot of very different people coming to Perfect Start, with quite a range of abilities. Some of them had an interest in politics before they started coming here, but lots of them didn't see it as relevant to them. Having the Every Vote Counts packs around has been a useful way of introducing them to the topic and seeing if it is of interest to them. People communicate in different ways, but most enjoy using computers, so the CD ROMs were just right for them."

"One of my concerns is not talking about politics in a biased way. We do our best not to discriminate in any way, whether on the basis of gender or race or religion, and try to do the same with people's political views. If any legal political party wanted to come

in to speak to the people we support, even one of the extreme right wing ones who I might not personally agree with, we'd treat them the same as any other party. I think the guide can help us be unbiased because it presents information in a neutral way.

"The time the guides were most useful was during the recent local elections. Because it was in the media and on TV a lot of the people who come here were suddenly very interested, and the guides helped them to understand what was happening during that election and what they could do to be involved. We'll definitely be using the pack in the run up to the general election."

"I find the information easier to understand than the things that politicians send."

5. Linda, 60, lives in West London, with her sister.

She has always been interested in politics but her late mother told her that "it wasn't for her" and so she has never voted as she didn't think she would be allowed to.

Linda has used the Every Vote Counts guide and CD ROM, with some support. "It's very good and there's a lot of information," she said. "I think the pictures are really useful, and I find the information easier to

understand than the things that politicians send." The guide helped Linda realise "I can use my voice. I have a right to speak out."

"...it helps people who don't read very well."

6. Zac, 49, lives in supported accommodation in London, in his own flat.

When he sees politicians on TV or in the newspapers he says "they don't talk properly. Sometimes I don't understand them." He has also received campaign literature: some was useful "because it was easy to understand and used pictures", while others were very difficult. He says that all politicians should try to make things easier to understand.

Zac was very enthusiastic about the Every Vote Counts CD ROM and called it "classy". He learnt new things, like the fact that you can visit your MP or speak to local councillors. He also thought the audio feature was excellent, "because it helps people who don't read very well." He suggested a video that showed someone actually going out to vote would help even more people. "More people need to vote, it's important," Zac said, after using the resource.

Terri works for Surrey County Council. She told us:

"We wish to use the packs in our various sites to promote people's understanding of voting, government etc and to promote their independence, choice and control by affording them the opportunity to make an informed choice of who they vote for and why they are voting."

Alex, aged 28, has learning disabilities and lives in Surrey. He said:

"I like the fact there is lots of information, and lots of writing to go with the pictures. The listen button is really good and so is the layout."

“It was really interesting and I liked hearing people’s stories.”

Samantha, aged 21, has learning disabilities. She lives with her parents in Greater Manchester. She travels independently and has a very active social life.

Samantha’s feelings towards politics are mixed. Through her mum, Samantha had a very positive experience of engaging with her MP. “My mum went to see a MP to get me some support because at the time I couldn’t get any. The MP helped me and I got the support I needed. I would like to say thank you to the MP for that.”

Although Samantha has voted, it wasn’t an easy experience for her.

“I voted once, but I found it confusing. I’d decided who to vote for from the information my parents had, but when I got there it was a long list and there were so many people on it that I was confused.”

Samantha enjoyed using the Every Vote Counts website. She said: “I really like the fact that you can listen to the website as well as see it. It was really interesting and I liked hearing people’s stories.”

The website helped Samantha to think about the political issues which affect her life. She said:

“My brother is a soldier so I’m worried about the war in Iraq. I’m worried that he will be killed. I also worry about my benefits. It’s a struggle living on benefits. There’s not a lot of money left at the end and that makes me scared sometimes.”

Samantha is also concerned about issues affecting other people.

“I’ve heard about the people who have had their homes flooded. I think the Government should help people like that. It’s not fair that they don’t get any help. I also think transport should be made cheaper for other people too.”

Making Democracy Accessible

In the summer of 2009, we moved on to the second part of the Every Vote Counts project. Entitled Making Democracy Accessible, the aim of this part of the project was to work with politicians, political parties and public officials to help them gain a better understanding of the needs of people with learning disabilities and

to assist them to make their own information easier to understand, which is particularly important with a general election approaching.

We produced a second CD ROM and guide, this time aimed specifically at political stakeholders. The guide includes a five point action plan on how to make public and political information such as manifestos, websites, leaflets and letters more accessible; as well as background information on how to engage with learning disabled constituents; information on the duties and responsibilities of political stakeholders to

make information accessible to disabled people and directions to organisations which can help to make information easier to understand.

5 Point Guide to Accessible Communication

■ Making your information accessible. With examples throughout, the accessible information part of the guide takes you through the various steps of making your information easier to understand for people with learning disabilities. It asks you to consider the layout and style of your documents. It suggests ways of using pictures and photos to explain complex text, as well as ways of making the text simpler and easier to read. It also highlights alternative ways of presenting written information, such as through audio and video. Finally it looks at how websites can be used to make information more accessible.

■ Involve people. The most effective way to ensure that your information is accessible is to consult people with learning disabilities. This part of the guide suggests ways in which you can do this and organisations which can help.

■ Raise awareness. If you employ other people then it is your responsibility to make sure that they are all aware of the importance of accessibility. This part of the guide shows you how you and your staff can become more disability aware.

■ See what others are doing. You don't need to reinvent the wheel to make your own information accessible. Many organisations already have experience of making information easier to understand for people with learning disabilities and are willing to share their knowledge. This part of the guide highlights how you can benefit from information that already exists.

■ Get started. If you produce a lot of information, then knowing where to start in terms of making it accessible, may seem overwhelming. This part of the guide highlights the importance of making small changes now that can feed into a longer term plan.

In November 2009, we sent the packs out to all MPs, MEPs, councils, election teams and political parties in England.

Here are some tips and examples from the guide.

Layout and style

Layout is important.

If a page looks too cluttered people won't know where to start. Or they might not start at all.

- Try to make a page look inviting and clear.
- Talk to the reader – use 'you'.
- Make layout spacious and uncluttered.
- Keep pictures and photos to the left. text to the right.

✓ Example



Keep the text on the right and close to the image on the left.

✓ Example



A political party is a group of people who join together because they have similar ideas about things.



Most political parties publish information to tell people about their ideas. These ideas are called policies. This information is called a manifesto.

abc Words

Think first and foremost about exactly what it is you want to tell people. Most information can be given in simple and straightforward ways

Here are some things to bear in mind.

- Use clear, easy words. Simple, short sentences are best.
- If you have long sentences, you can **pull words out** to make things clearer for people.
- Avoid big words, jargon or abbreviations.
- If you need to use unfamiliar words, explain them afterwards.
- AVOID USING ALL CAPITALS which are harder to read.
- If you need to emphasise a word, use **bold** or make it larger, without overdoing it.
- Good fonts to use are sans serif or Helvetica based fonts such as Arial.
- Do not use fancy fonts as they can be hard to read.
- Whatever you write will be worthless if it's too small! Make sure you print at least font size 12 and if possible much larger. Most people with learning disabilities would prefer a font size of 14 -16 pts. Do what you can given the size of your publication.
- Do not use *italics* or underline lots of words as this can confuse people.
- Use left alignment - justified text is too hard to read.
- Try and keep to one idea per sentence.

✓ Example

The council is responsible for making decisions about things that affect their local area.

Using Audio

Some people who are visually impaired like to receive information only in audio. Other people might like to have information in audio format if they cannot read.

You could make information available on tape or CD.

✓ Example

Click on the audio button below to listen to the caption.



Your MP and What You Can Do



Your MP represents you when it comes to making decisions about things that affect the whole country.

You can vote to choose your MP at a general election.

Making Democracy Accessible – the feedback

In order to assess the usefulness of the Making Democracy Accessible guide, we sent out an evaluation form with each one asking political stakeholders for their feedback. We specifically wanted to know how relevant stakeholders had found the guide and how they felt it would affect their communication with people with learning disabilities. Here is some of the feedback that we have received so far.

Diane Abbott MP:

“I believe that it is extremely important to encourage those with accessible needs to vote, as a 16% voter turnout due to a lack of easy to understand information available

to those with learning disabilities is a woeful statistic to behold.”

She said that she found the pack:

“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.”

Gateshead Council:

“I’m always concerned about using the wrong language when discussing issues relating to disability. The pack helped somewhat...the examples of layout have helped as have the useful links.”

The Rt Hon Michael Jack MP:

“As the husband of a special needs teacher you have touched on some very important issues and I can well appreciate why at this time you felt it important to raise this issue...”

Stafford Borough Council Election Team:

Responded to say they had found the pack “clear, easy to read” because of its “plain language.”

Mike Natrass MEP:

“It gives information about some very straightforward actions which a political stakeholder can take to ensure greater franchisement...Keep up the good work.”

Coventry City Council said that they found the tips on info such as layout and formats very practical, but highlighted the need for the pack to be made available online, in the same way as the Every Vote Counts pack so as to make it easier to share it with other colleagues.

The Making Democracy Accessible pack has since been made available online.

Lessons learnt – conclusions

Over the last three years, the Every Vote Counts project has shown us that while the majority of people with learning disabilities are failing to vote:

- ▣ Many people with learning disabilities are interested in politics and how it affects their lives and other people's.
- ▣ Many people feel passionately enough about one or more issue that they would like an opportunity to register their opinion.

▣ Many people have the capacity to weigh up information and to choose who they would like to vote for, if information is presented to them in an accessible way.

It has also shown us that:

▣ Many people with learning disabilities feel disenfranchised because of the use of overly complex language in written material, on websites and in TV and radio broadcasts dealing with political issues and voting.

What we are calling for – 2010 and beyond

We believe that that the 2010 elections provide an ideal opportunity for people with learning disabilities to play an increased role in the democratic process and have their voices heard.

We are calling for all political stakeholders to recognise the rights of people with learning disabilities to vote, and to do all that they can to encourage more participation. Specifically, we are calling for:

- All political stakeholders to work with the learning disability sector to bring about a substantial increase in the number of people with learning disabilities voting in 2010, to at least 40%.
- All main political parties to make the information about their policies and their candidates as accessible as possible, with easy read manifestos as a minimum.
- All election information produced by local authorities, political parties and central government to be made available in formats which are accessible to people with learning disabilities.
- All MPs to support the work of United Response's Every Vote Counts campaign and Mencap's Get My Vote campaign by signing our joint Early Day Motion 383 entitled 'People with a Learning Disability and Voting'.

- People with learning disabilities to be fully consulted and involved in making the 2010 election as accessible as possible.

Looking beyond 2010

However, the elections taking place this year are only one part of the democratic process. We believe that the momentum created through the Every Vote Counts campaign must not be lost and that people with learning disabilities must continue to be given opportunities to become better engaged beyond 2010. With this in mind, we are calling for:

- All organisations working with people with learning disabilities to put in place a strategy for improving the democratic involvement of the people they work with.
- All elected representatives to review how they communicate with constituents, to take into account the needs of people with learning disabilities.
- Political parties and interest groups to review their membership processes and to make it easier for people with learning disabilities to become involved, if they so wish.
- Local authorities to put in place a strategy for communicating more accessibly.
- People with learning disabilities to work together to spread the message that politics affects their lives and that they have the right to participate.

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Appendix

What is a learning disability?

There are around a million adults with a learning disability in England. A learning disability is caused by something affecting the way the brain develops and usually occurs during pregnancy, birth or because of an illness in childhood. It is a lifelong condition and is not the same as a mental illness.

There are many different types of learning disability, most of which affect a person's capacity to learn. Learning disability is also known as learning difficulty, intellectual impairment or intellectual disability.

Often attitudes towards people with a learning disability create barriers and contribute to discrimination and social exclusion. In effect this leads to people being disenfranchised.

Fortunately there is now legislation in place to address this and attitudes are beginning to change. But, much more needs to be done to break down these barriers through good inclusive practice.

People with a learning disability have much to offer and have the same rights as everyone else to be heard, have a say, get involved and make their contribution as equal citizens.

As well as around a million adults with a learning disability there are estimated to be as many as 1 in 5 people with low literacy levels in England. This means that a highly significant amount of people rely on others to ensure they can access important information and activities.

When it comes specifically to engaging in the democratic process, people with a learning disability often:

- Have limited choice and control in their lives.
- Are excluded from many activities that others take for granted.
- Need someone else to help them interpret and understand any written information. This could include any letters, leaflets, flyers, or surveys posted through their doors.

■ Need support to fill in any forms, or other requests for information. This could be registering to vote, or filling in a ballot paper.

■ Need support to access and find out about information that is of interest to them. This could be finding out what a political party thinks about a key issue, or what different candidates in an election are saying.

■ Need support to understand the democratic process and to engage in it. This could be contacting their political representatives about something that is important to them.

A note on case studies

Many of the case studies in this report have been provided by people with learning disabilities. Some names have been changed at their request.

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