



Accessible Voting Guidance



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EQUALITIES AND WELSH LANGUAGE GUIDANCE ON ACCESSIBLE VOTING

This guidance document has been produced to provide additional information and advice on where Equalities and Welsh Language matters must be considered, to the staff members in Electoral Services and also those working as polling station inspectors, or in polling stations and election counts during the different election periods.

It is issued under the Council's current **Strategic Equality Plan** and **Welsh Language Scheme** and carries their full authority. It should also be considered alongside the Electoral Commission's "Handbook for polling station staff" publication and the checklist for Polling Station Inspectors.

The guidance is split into four sections and one appendix.

- **Section 1 - Introduction**
- **Section 2 - Legal Background**
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- **Appendix A - Model Language Poster for Polling Stations**

The Electoral Commission (the independent body set up by Parliament to foster public confidence and participation in the democratic process in the UK) is clear on how it views the links between accessible voting and the democratic process in the UK.

The Commission believes that equal access to elections is an essential part of a healthy democracy and necessary to ensure high levels of voter participation. Ensuring equal access involves active effort, going beyond the requirements of the law, for a range of diverse communities.

Electoral Commission "Equal Access to Democracy" Report 2003

Section 1 - Introduction

Voting is the most important way an individual can make their voice heard on the issues that affect every aspect of their daily life. It is a central and vital part of how democracy works in the United Kingdom at every level of elected government, from MPs at Westminster and MEPs in the European Parliament, to Assembly Members in the Welsh Government and Councillors in Caerphilly county borough. Decisions are made every day by these elected representatives, ranging from what is happening in local Caerphilly county borough schools and care homes and what leisure or library facilities are available, to national issues like healthcare, pensions and education, and to global issues like defence and the environment.

In many countries around the world, including the UK, people have fought for the right to be allowed to vote. In the UK, women were first allowed to vote on equal terms with men under the Representation of the People Act, on February 6, 1918. But even then, this was only to certain women over 30 and it was not until 1928 that the voting age for women was lowered to 21 in line with men as part of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928. The UK lowered the age for men and women to 18 in the Representation of the People Act 1969 and there is growing support for lowering it further to 16 years of age.

But having the right to vote is not always enough. A strong and fair democracy also relies on people using their votes, but to do this it also has to ensure that as many people as possible can access the system and use the vote that they are entitled to have.

Many people are eligible to vote but may not know where and how to register and vote, or may be discouraged from voting because they have physical or mental issues that prevent them from exercising their voting rights. Other people may need some form of assistance, and some people may not vote because they cannot get to, or gain entry into, sites where elections are held. All these concerns and others, create barriers that keep people from exercising their right to vote.

Section 2 - Legal Background

The Disability Equality Duty 2005 placed a duty on public authorities to encourage participation by disabled people in public life and the Electoral Administration Act 2006 included a duty to conduct regular reviews of polling stations to ensure they are as accessible as possible to disabled people. The Council is required to complete a full review of its 129 polling places every four years.

Under the Equality Act 2010, the Council is legally obliged to make any adjustment that it is reasonable to make, in terms of its own procedures and premises. The Council also has to do what is reasonable to provide any aids and assistance to help disabled people to access the service.

What is important to remember however, is that when accessible voting is referred to, it does not simply mean providing a ramp to allow easier physical access to a polling station, there are far more ways of making voting accessible to different groups in the community and Caerphilly County Borough Council already provides a wide range of options to help everyone who wishes to exercise their right to vote.

Section 3 - Accessibility Issues

To be eligible to vote an individual must be on the Electoral Register. Accessible voting considerations would mean that any awareness raising on the importance of voting and being on the Electoral Register must be done in a variety of ways - not only as bilingual printed or electronic information, but in other languages or formats where necessary and maybe for example, by directly targeting various groups in the community and running specific awareness sessions, e.g. sessions with young people in 6th forms or colleges who may be eligible to vote for the first time, or with the Deaf clubs in the county borough via British Sign Language interpreted sessions.

Voting can be done in one of the three ways - in person at a polling station, by postal vote or by a proxy vote. It can often be overlooked that the latter two options are perfectly valid accessible voting options - anyone with mobility issues due to age or disability for instance, could be encouraged to vote by post or by proxy if they are unable to get to a polling station easily, but wish to exercise their right to vote.

Voting by Post or by Proxy

Postal voting is open to everyone and they do not have to give a reason to vote in this way. The individual must apply to vote by post well in advance of the election.

Voting by proxy means that an individual nominates someone else to vote on their behalf.

Forms for voting by post or by proxy can be requested from the Council's Electoral Services section :-

In writing:	Electoral Services Enterprise House 2 Tir-y-berth Industrial Estate New Road Hengoed CF82 8AU
By telephone:	01443 864204
By fax:	01443 864379
By email:	electoralservices@caerphilly.gov.uk

Remember that an individual has the right to request these forms in English or Welsh, large print, Braille or any written language but they themselves have some responsibility as well, to inform Electoral Services of their requirements as soon as they possibly can, in order for the forms to be provided correctly in the first instance. The initial point of contact with an individual who wishes to vote is the ideal time to check for these requirements.

Voting at the Polling Station

During an election, polling station staff must ensure that no voter is offered a lower standard of service than anyone else and should be able to explain what assistance is available to voters wishing to vote in person at a polling station.

At the polling station itself there are a number of provisions in place for people with disabilities or other issues.

All signage, both internal and external, must be bilingual and in large, clear print and the location of the actual polling station within a larger building or campus should be obviously signposted. Ramps must be provided to allow easy access to polling stations for wheelchair users and anyone with mobility issues. If an individual is unable to enter the polling station because of physical disability and the station is not accessible, the presiding officer may take the ballot paper to them, though this is not an ideal option.

Every polling station must display at least one large print copy of the ballot paper, and this must be provided in a clear and simple font. There will also be handheld large print copies available to take into the polling booth, however votes must be cast on the standard ballot paper issued to the individual. Magnifiers are also provided as standard in every Presiding Officer's pack. Large grip pencils are provided as standard, and so help those who have physical issues in terms of holding smaller pencils.

If polling station staff have Welsh language skills or can use BSL, or speak other languages, this can be advertised by the use of posters at that particular polling station, in order to give voters improved accessibility in terms of language use when voting in person (see [Appendix A](#)). There is no need to use the poster if none of these skills are available at a particular station. Staff should also speak clearly if an individual voter has hearing difficulties, bearing in mind the need for confidentiality when voting.

All polling stations must provide a tactile voting device - these have a sticky backing, which attaches on top of the ballot paper. It has numbers in Braille to represent candidates, on lift up flaps to indicate where the boxes are, in order for the individual to make a mark. This makes it easier to vote without another person's help if the individual is blind or visually impaired. Alternatively, an individual can request assistance from the Presiding Officer on duty, or they can take a companion with them to assist with their vote - these must be a close family member aged over 18, or someone who is eligible to vote in the UK election.

Polling Station Inspectors

The Electoral Commission has guidance for Polling Station Inspectors on its website, which note how important a point of contact the inspectors are for any problems that arise on the day of the election. They also have an important role to play in checking that the polling place is suitable and make four visits to each site during the day.

There is a checklist that the Electoral Commission includes in its guidance that covers a number of accessibility issues in order to ensure that anyone with access issues is treated fairly, however polling staff and inspectors in Caerphilly county borough should remember that there are Welsh language requirements in terms of bilingual signage and literature, that must be complied with in addition to this checklist.






Section 4 - Useful Websites

More information on Voting and Elections, and on Equalities issues can be found at the locations below :-

Caerphilly County Borough Council - Electoral Services www.caerphilly.gov.uk/elections
Polls Apart (Scope's campaign aims to end voting exclusion of disabled people) http://www.pollsapart.org.uk/
The Electoral Commission http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/
Caerphilly County Borough Council - Equalities and Welsh Language www.caerphilly.gov.uk/equalities
Equality and Human Rights Commission http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/wales/

APPENDIX A - Language Poster for Polling Stations

A blank A3 version is in all presiding officers' packs for use in polling stations where staff have language skills other than English. Write in the polling station name, tick any appropriate box on the right and if relevant, write in the name of the other language in the third section.

Equal Opportunities	 Cyfle Cyfartal	equalities@caerphilly.gov.uk cydraddoldeb@caerffili.gov.uk	
<h1>GORSAF BLEIDLEISIO</h1>			
<hr/> <h2>POLLING STATION</h2>			
	<p>MAE AELOD NEU AELODAU STAFF YN YR ORSAF BLEIDLEISIO HON YN SIARAD CYMRAEG</p> <p>ONE OR MORE STAFF MEMBERS AT THIS POLLING STATION CAN SPEAK WELSH</p>		
		<p>A STAFF MEMBER OR STAFF MEMBERS AT THIS POLLING STATION CAN USE BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE</p>	
		<p>A STAFF MEMBER AT THIS POLLING STATION CAN SPEAK</p> <p>_____</p>	
 <p>A greener place Man gwyrdach</p> 