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Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill: Follow up to evidence session

RNIB Scotland Director, James Adams, very much appreciated the opportunity to present at the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill: Stage 1 Evidence Session on 18 April 2024.

The scope of the current Scottish Elections Bill covers a range of important issues, but as our key focus is on making voting accessible for people with sight loss, our initial response to the committee's call for views concentrated on electoral pilot schemes with brief comment on digital poll cards and funding to increase democratic engagement.

The evidence session was thought-provoking, and we would like to take up the opportunity to present some further information to the committee on issues discussed during the session, that is, on digital imprints and making digital campaigning by parties accessible, and access to political office. We have also received further information on electoral pilot schemes which we would like to highlight.

Digital imprints and making digital campaigning by parties accessible

At the evidence session James Adams raised the need to make digital imprints accessible to people with sight loss saying that "unless the people who put material out for social media, such as Twitter, or X—whether they be in a political party, an individual candidate or the beneficiary of the reason for the imprint— put alt text on their social media images, the imprint becomes redundant for blind and partially sighted people".

There are two simple things RNIB Scotland recommends political parties and candidates do online to make digital campaigning more accessible:

- Always add ALT text to images
- #CapYourHashtags

Alt text

Most people have heard of ALT text, but many aren't sure what it is or how to use it. All social media platforms give you the chance to add alternative text to describe the picture you are posting. It only takes a few seconds, and it means a blind or partially sighted person can hear a summary of what is featured in the image and connect more with what you post.

#Hashtags

Next time you do a #Hashtag make sure you capitalise each word – #Hashtags are a big part of your online messaging but will not be picked up by parts of the electorate without capitalising each word. Screen readers struggle to pick up hashtags and that small change means those using them can decipher hashtags more easily and understand your message.

RNIB has produced a practical guide on how to make campaigning accessible. In March 2024 we wrote to Party HQs in Scotland to share the accessible campaigning guide and ask that we work together to make the upcoming General Election the most accessible ever.

Accessible campaigning matters. On average, there are more than 500 people with sight loss in every Westminster parliamentary constituency. Small changes, especially online, can ensure that blind or partially sighted constituents have greater inclusion in the democratic process.

Access to political offices

Society recognises that people with disabilities need additional support in a range of ways, through the social security system, through help with access to work and through other mechanisms that acknowledge that it just costs more money for somebody with a disability to participate in any given aspect of society. We want that principle to be extended to the area of participation in democracy.

We are aware that the Access to Elected Office Fund (Scotland) run by Inclusion Scotland assisted several disabled people to run as candidates in the 2021 Scottish Parliament Election and the 2022 local government elections and we would welcome its continuation and extension.

Electoral pilot schemes

The Bill will extend the power to propose electoral pilots to Scottish Ministers, the EMB (Electoral Management Board) and EROs (Electoral Registration Officers).

The Policy Memorandum states that "It is hoped that this will increase the prospect of pilots on electoral innovations being undertaken." The Delegated Powers Memo says that the reason for taking power is "to expand what is seen as an overly restrictive existing regime on who can propose pilot schemes for electoral purposes. By allowing other organisations in addition to local authorities to initiate pilots the Bill will allow for increased flexibility in electoral innovation." It gives examples of possible future pilots as including "the use of digital poll cards (transmitted to voters by email or App), either in addition to or in place of paper poll cards - this would be aimed at making these accessible for people with sight loss. Other possibilities include a pilot of a new tactile or audio voting aid."

In our response to the call for views we said that the references to electoral innovation and pilots of a new tactile or audio voting aid are encouraging. However, we expressed concern that no pilots are currently being planned "under this legislation".

We now understand that the type of pilots that are referred to in the Bill are statutory pilots, which are those which can only take place if the existing electoral legislation is amended. The pilot legislation allows for the temporary amendment of elections rules so new approaches can be piloted. The Memoranda accompanying the Bill and the SPICe brief on the Bill do not spell this out so it would be helpful to add some supplementary information to the Bill papers to make this clear. This would be timely as the Bill is still at Stage 1 of its parliamentary stages.

Since the evidence session, from our involvement in testing a potential voting aid, we have learned that some changes that could make voting more accessible for blind and partially sighted people may not require a statutory pilot.

RNIB Scotland has been working with the Scottish Government Elections Team and Scottish sight loss organisations to test potential accessible voting solutions for blind and partially sighted voters. On 18 April 2024, we collaborated with the Forth Valley Sensory Centre, the Scottish Government Elections Team, and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland to test the usability of card ballot paper overlays, a potential replacement for the current Tactile Voting Device (TVD).

This was the first time the card ballot paper overlay had been shown to visually impaired voters for feedback and the aim was to see if it worked in assisting voting and how it could be improved. Six blind and partially sighted people gave their feedback. The test results were very encouraging although further work must be done, including discussions with election printers.

Options such as the ballot paper overlay, telephone helplines or other audio aids like QR codes would not need legislation since adjustments to the election rules are not required. That means these could be piloted without legislation being needed. However, legislation is highly likely to be needed if an alteration to the design of the ballot paper is proposed, for example, to enable visually impaired people to orientate it correctly. Therefore, a statutory pilot is likely to be required to make adaptions to make voting more accessible.

We appreciate that arriving at a solution which will enable blind and partially sighted voters to cast their vote in confidence and with confidence is complex and we understand the need for testing to ensure the integrity of the voting process.

We are keen and ready to work with people with sight loss and the Scottish sight loss sector alongside the Scottish Government Elections Team, the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, and the Electoral Commission to develop feasible accessible voting aids for blind and partially sighted voters. Election pilots will play a critical role in arriving at a better solution.