

Speech: Minister calls for evidence to improve the accessibility of elections

Thank you, Mark, for inviting me to today's meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Learning Disability. As the Minister responsible for elections, it is very important to me that everyone who is eligible to vote is able to do so.

To play their part in choosing the person whom they believe will best represent their interests, whether as their Member of Parliament or local mayor or councillor or head of their police force. A thriving democracy depends upon the participation of all eligible electors.

To meet this important aim I have visited every region and nation of Great Britain to learn about the barriers that prevent certain groups in society including people who have a disability from participating in the democratic process. I want to find out how these identified barriers can be best overcome.

I have been very impressed by the enthusiasm for voting and level of understanding of its importance that has been told to me, including when I met with organisations who represent the interests of people who have a learning disability. These have included Mencap and, last month when I visited Brighton, Speak Out.

As a direct result of this wide engagement I have been able to push changes to improve the accessibility of elections.

At my request the Department of Health has recently made changes to the Certificate of Visual Impairment so it can now be used by local authorities to support blind and partially sighted people to vote at elections, once their consent has been provided.

The government is also making the process easier for disabled people to register to vote by undertaking an accessibility audit of the website, so the process for online registration is as user friendly as possible. This will include considering providing a facility to request that election materials are available in alternative formats from local authority electoral service teams.

I want to go further to strengthen our democracy and to ensure future elections are even more accessible to disabled people, and this is why today I have launched a Call for Evidence.

The Call for Evidence is asking for people to provide information that will:

- enhance the government's understanding of the experiences of disabled people in registering to vote and casting their vote.
- help identify if current mechanisms to support disabled people to participate in the democratic process are sufficient; and

- identify examples of good practice provided by Electoral Service Teams to disabled people at elections.

In partnership with the members of the Cabinet Office Accessibility Working Group which includes Mencap, the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission the Government will review the evidence we receive and produce a report of key findings and recommendations.

I would warmly welcome responses from all here today to this Call to Evidence – which is available in alternative formats including Easy Read – as part of the process to help ensure that every disabled person is able to have that equal chance, that equal right, to participate in our democracy, and to have their say.