General Election Research 2005 – **Accessibility Review**

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Acknowledgements

Accessibility Review Research Team

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Executive Summary

The **Accessibility Review** examined the accessibility of information used by the electorate to inform them about the May 2005 General Election. This included both the campaign and the electoral process.

This work has been undertaken by a partnership of organisations for the Electoral Commission. The partnership consisted of Disability Action Northern Ireland, Scope, Capability Scotland and The Pollen Shop

The **Accessibility Review** considered the needs of people with low literacy and disabled people including people with a learning disability.

The research concentrated on information and the processes necessary to delver accessible information to voters. We did not consider other access issues such as the accessibility of polling places.

Research overview
The **Accessibility Review** looked at information produced by the political parties, local government and the Electoral Commission. This included leaflets, manifestos, posters, Party Election Broadcasts and TV advertising. We also examined how these organisations provided support to voters by looking at websites, email and telephone support. We audited these against a set of standards. In addition to this we also undertook a number of focus groups where we could get more information from people with low literacy and disabled people including people with a learning disability.

Leaflets
We looked at a representative sample of candidates leaflets from all the main parties. In total this amounted to several hundred candidate leaflets.

We were surprised by the overall inaccessibility of the leaflets used in the May General Election. It was obvious that the vast majority of leaflets used did not meet basic access standards.

Manifestos
Most of the main political parties indicated that they had produced their manifestos in

- Large print
- Braille
- Audio

The Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Scottish National Party indicated that they had produced Easy-read manifestos.

This did not necessarily mean that political parties produced the manifestos to an acceptable standard. For example, some simply produced a Microsoft

Word version of their manifestos. These documents were often not large print versions of manifestos but a 14 point word version of the text from the manifestos. The difference is that any content that relied on graphics, images or graphs was often lost. We did not consider these documents to be an accessible large print document.

Websites

Some of the parties websites were accessible to a basic standard. We used the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) level "Single A" as a benchmark for minimum access standard. Most of the local government websites exceeded this standard and were Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) level "Double-A" compliant.

Although it is commendable that these parties had achieved a basic level of accessibility it should be noted that this level of accessibility was below that expected of government departments and that which is now adopted by much of the public, private and voluntary sector.

Telephone and email support

We undertook a number of mystery shopper exercises. These identified if political parties and local government could process basic inquires from disabled people by telephone and email.

We also used the mystery shopper to identify if political parties had the structures in place to actually deliver alternative formats of their manifestos to voters.

Local government in England, Wales and Scotland provided a good service to voters.

DDA compliance

As part of the **Accessibility Review** we have been asked to provide an assessment of the information and support available to voters in light of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

There are no existing benchmarks against which to assess organisations such as political parties or local government. Organisations have an obligation to ensure that the information they produce and support they offer is accessible to disabled people. Political parties should not, for example, discriminate against a visually impaired person by not providing basic information in large print. Within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act a disabled person has the right to expect an organisation to make reasonable adjustments in order to make an inaccessible service accessible.

Our assessment of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats is that it is likely that the campaigns run in England would be assessed as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. By this we mean that they made a number of reasonable adjustments to make their

campaigns accessible to disabled people, including people with a learning disability. This does not mean they did everything accessibly.

We do not consider that any of the other parties would have met their obligations under the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. We do not consider that the Conservative, Labour and the Liberal Democrats campaigns in Wales and Scotland would have met their obligations under the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act .This does not mean they did everything inaccessibly or that they did not meet the needs of some disabled voters.

What all parties failed to deliver was an accessible election for voters. Some parties produced accessible information but few voters that needed it actually saw it. Even when accessible material was produced this did not often reach voters unless the voters requested it through the party helplines.

Local government

Our assessment of local government is that they are unlikely to be assessed as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. Our assessment only covers that information and support provided by local government for the General Election. In part this assessment of non-compliance is due to the fact that much of the information local government is required to produce is prescribed by law. Information such as polling cards and ballot packs must meet particular specifications which in general are not accessible. On a more positive note website, telephone and email support, which is not prescribed, was generally of a good standard of accessibility.

The Electoral Commission

Our assessment of the Electoral Commission is that it is would be likely to be assessed as having met its obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. The Electoral Commission provided voters with a range of information on the election. This was generally accessible. The Electoral Commission provided good support to voters through its telephone helpline.

Northern Ireland

The General Election and the local elections in Northern Ireland were less accessible than in the rest of the UK.

There are major gaps in the provision of support for disabled people including people with learning disabilities and people with low literacy in Northern Ireland through the election cycle. These gaps in provision need to be addressed even if this means changes to the current legislation to ensure that the organisations involved in delivering elections in Northern Ireland provide and accessible service to all voters and meet their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Introduction

The objective of the **Accessibility Review** was to examine the accessibility of information used by the electorate to inform them about the 2005 General Election. This included both the campaign and the electoral process across the UK.

The **Accessibility Review** considered the needs of;

- Disabled people
- Learning disabled people
- People with low literacy

The **Accessibility Review** research concentrated on information and the processes necessary to deliver information accessibility to voters. We did not consider other access issues such as the accessibility of polling places.

The research was undertaken by a partnership of 4 organisations with considerable background in auditing elections and other communication processes.

The partnership consisted of

- Disability Action Northern Ireland
- Scope
- Capability Scotland
- The Pollen Shop

The research covered the whole of the United Kingdom. We modified our research to make sure it reflected the experiences of voters in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Format of the report
We have grouped different types of information together which we hope will enable different audiences to take from the report information that is of interest to them.

We have concentrated most of the technical detail within the **Research Overview**. This contains information on our technical access audits and focus groups.

The chapter on **Experiences** uses a number of case studies to highlight how disabled voters or voters with low literacy experienced the election.

We have then considered the accessibility of the campaigns run by the **Political Parties.** We have provided an indication of the level of service the political parties provided in relation to their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Following this we have included comment about the information provided for voters as part of the ***Administration of the Election*** and the accessibility of the support available to voters.

The General Election in ***Northern Ireland*** has a number of unique features which we have considered separately. We have also highlighted in a short section and ***Wales and Scotland*** how devolution has created a number of issues that parties need to resolve to make elections accessible outside England.

Disabled people

The Disability Rights Commission estimates that one in five people are disabled. This works out at about 16,000 disabled voters in each constituency.

The 1 in 5 estimate includes anyone with an impairment or a long-term health condition that has an impact on their day to day lives. It includes people with serious medical conditions such as cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis and heart conditions. It also includes people who have mobility, hearing or sight impairments. The same is true of people who have mental health conditions or learning difficulties. This definition of disability is far wider that simply people with obvious impairments.

People in all these circumstances are likely to have rights under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

The Disability Discrimination Act offers protection for any disabled person against being treated unfairly. It is important to recognise that the person does not have to define themselves as being "disabled" so long as they are considered "disabled" according to the Disability Discrimination Act.

For example, an older person who can only read documents in large print is protected in the same way as a person who has no vision and read Braille.

All the organisations involved in delivering the General Election including local government, the Electoral Commission and the political parties had a duty under the DDA to ensure they were taking reasonable steps to make the election accessible.

The ***Accessibility Review*** specifically focused on the accessibility of information. We have considered how organisations deliver this information to all disabled voters but we have gone into more detail with two groups that are particularly affected by inaccessible information. These are people with visual and communication impairments.

There are many types of communication impairments. Impairments such as dyslexia are common but are often hidden. People with communication impairments tend to access written information graphically. Complex language can also make a document inaccessible. To take account of the needs of people with communication impairments organisations should have ensured

that their election material was presented simply and with graphics to explain complex issues or processes.

Learning disabled people

The Electoral Commission asked us to specifically consider the needs of people with learning disability.

The Department of Health estimates there are 210,000 adults with "severe" leaning disabilities and another 1.2 million adults with mild to moderate learning disabilities in England.

Severe learning disabilities is a medical description. A more accurate description is that this group of people have high support needs. That is they require significant support in their daily lives. People with high support needs usually live in residential or supported housing. It is likely in these circumstances that a person will require direct support to enable them to vote.

Most people with "mild to moderate" learning disabilities have low support needs. That is they require some support by not always daily. Some learning disabled people with low support needs live in residential accommodation but others live in the community. It is likely in these circumstances that a person will require some support to enable them to vote

Learning disabled people explicitly have rights within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. The vast majority of learning disabled people have the capacity and the right to vote.

Learning disabled people may need support to access information. This can take many forms and will largely depend on the individual. A learning disabled person may need the help of a support worker to go through simple documents or they may just need the reassurance of calling a telephone helpline to check they understand something correctly. Organisations involved in the election should have produced important documents in Easy-read and have trained their helpline staff to be able to take calls from learning disabled people.

People with low literacy

People with low literacy constitute a significant minority of potential voters. There are different levels of low literacy. Some people are able to read simple documents other people cannot read very simple sentences.

The Department for Education and Skills, **Skills for Life survey** estimates 5.2 million adults in the England have poor literacy skills. This includes around half a million people with low English literacy skills because English is not their first language.

People with this level of literacy have some literacy skills but cannot understand short straightforward texts on familiar topics accurately and independently or cannot obtain information from everyday sources.

There are however a group of voters with significantly less literacy skills. According to the Department for Education and Skills, Skills for Life survey 1.7 million (5%) of adults aged 16-65 have literacy skills below Entry Level 3

Entry Level 3 is defined as being able to understands short texts with repeated language patterns on familiar topics or able to obtain information from common signs and symbols. It is unlikely that this group of people would be able to access a ballot paper without some support.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland different definitions are given for low literacy.

The Scottish Executive estimate in their **Adult Literacy and** Numeracy **in Scotland** Report that 800,000 voters have very low literacy and numeracy skills.

The **National Basic Skills Strategy for Wales** quotes a figure of 780, 000 as having literacy and numeracy problems in Wales.

The **Essential Skills for Living Strategy** indicated that Northern Ireland 24% of adults have low literacy. This is defined as being lower than grade G GCSE English literacy skills.

Research Overview

Introduction

This chapter includes our research structures, methodologies and results.

We have concentrated technical detail within this chapter to enable us to present an uncluttered description of the accessibility of the 2005 General Election in the rest of this document.

The Electoral Commissions objectives

The Electoral Commission described the objectives of the *Accessibility Review* as

> "The overall objective of the research is to provide a description and evaluation of the accessibility of the information used by the electorate to inform them about the General Election. This will include both the campaign and the electoral process across the UK and will specifically focus upon those electors with disabilities, low levels of literacy, and learning disabilities."

We understood from this that the Electoral Commission wanted more that a simple list of what was accessible and what wasn't. The Electoral Commission required from us an understanding of how disabled voters and people with low literacy experienced the 2005 General Election.

Before we could do this or look at the election as a whole we had to examine the different components that made up the election. To do this we examined each communication structure separately. We used a mixture of techniques. This ranged from examining the HTML code that websites are written in to running focus groups with people who may have found it difficult to read information about the election. Individually these can seem abstract processes but taken together can build up a picture of how different groups experienced the election.

Assessing something of the magnitude of a General Election is a complex process. The scale of the information produced is in many ways unique. There were 44 million individual polling cards, thousands of candidates, and hundreds of thousands of elections leaflets.

To make the research manageable we focused our attention on the major political parties and a selection of diverse local authorities. We covered the whole of the United Kingdom as well as reflecting differences in geography, turnout and the political allegiance of sitting MPs

We have tried to present our results in a way that is understandable to people without expert knowledge in evaluating the accessibility of communication processes and information. Where we have provided more detail this is to highlight a specific issue of importance.

Research outcomes

The *Accessibility Review* had a number of specific outcomes.

- "A review of the accessibility of the information produced by the political parties, party candidates and independent candidates, such as party leaflets, manifestos, free mailings, posters, party political broadcasts, and information on party websites;

- "A review of the accessibility of the information produced by local authorities (or others responsible for electoral administration) such as poll cards and postal ballot packs (and other equivalents), information on their web-sites, helplines, and any leaflets produced;

- "A review of the materials produced by the Electoral Commission to encourage turnout and to explain the electoral process, namely the Commission's advertising campaign (TV, radio, and press ads), web-site (www.aboutmyvote.co.uk) and helpline;

- "An overall assessment of any innovative approaches used by the political parties, local authorities (or others responsible for electoral administration) and/or the Commission to try and engage disabled people;

- "An assessment of the information/help available to electors in the light of the new provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (which came into force on 1 October 2004);

- "A comparison with previous elections."

Research phases

To achieve the outcomes we broke the research down into three phases

Phase 1 – Audit

We audited the accessibility of a range of communication techniques. We did this by evaluating a wide range of information and processes used during the election against a set of standards. This is called a *Technical Access Evaluation*. In addition to this we also undertook a number of focus groups where we could get more information from disabled people including people with a learning disability and people with low literacy.

Phase 2 – Assessment

Using the results from the audit we then made an assessment of how different people would have experienced the election.

Phase 3 DDA compliance and comparison

Finally we looked at the information provided as a whole by the stakeholders and considered if they were compliant with their duties under the DDA.

Technical Access Evaluation

Introduction

A ***Technical Access Evaluation*** is where we consider the accessibility of information or process against a set of standards. We do this through testing, reviewing documentation and mystery shopper exercises.

Research techniques

We used a number of techniques to look at different information or processes. Where possible we have used accepted auditing procedures. Where these were not available we have defined to what standards we believe information or processes should have been made accessible. We have often used multiple techniques to look at one communication

For example we used two techniques when considering the accessibility of websites. We first audited websites to see if they conformed to set accepted international standard for accessibility. This is the Web Accessibility Initiatives, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

This however only provides one component when looking at the overall accessibility of a website. We also identified how easy it is to get basic information of a website. We did this by getting disabled people including people with learning disabilities and people with low literacy to use websites and measures in "page links" and how long it took to find telephone or email contact information.

Research team

Due to the size of the project we used a large number of people to undertake the research. To ensure conformity and quality we used an evaluation framework throughout the UK to ensure that a uniform approach is taken to methodology, process and recording.

Information and processes examined

As part of the ***Technical Access Evaluation*** we looked at the following

Political parties
- Leaflets and free mailings,
- Manifestos,
- Posters,
- Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs),
- Websites,
- Email and telephone support.

Local Authorities
- Polling cards,
- Postal ballot packs,
- Websites,
- Email and telephone support,

Electoral Commission
* Electoral Commission advertising,
* Websites,
* Telephone support.

Political parties

There were a large number of parties that took part at the General Election. We selected political parties eligible for a set of Party Election Broadcasts to undertake Technical Access Audits on their information or processes.

We considered England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales separately. This meant we looked at the UK parties devolved components, in Wales and Scotland. For example we audited information from both the Labour Party and the Wales Labour Party.

We did not consider the accessibility of information or processes produced by the British National Party.

Political Parties

We audited material from the following parties,

* Conservative (UK)
* Liberal Democrats (UK)
* Labour (UK)
* Green (England and Wales)
* UKIP (UK)
* Scottish National Party (Scotland)
* Scottish Socialist Party (Scotland)
* Scottish Green Party(Scotland)
* Scottish Labour Party (Scotland)
* Scottish Liberal Democrats (Scotland)
* Scottish Conservative Party (Scotland)
* Democratic Unionist party (Northern Ireland)
* Ulster Unionist Party (Northern Ireland)
* Alliance Party (Northern Ireland)
* Sinn Fein (Northern Ireland)
* SDLP (Northern Ireland)
* Plaid Cymru (Wales)
* Wales Labour Party (Wales)
* Welsh Conservatives (Wales)
* Welsh Liberal Democrats (Wales)

We have described these parties in the remainder of this document as the *main parties*. We also looked at information and processes in a more limited way from other parties and independents. These have been described as smaller parties.

Leaflets

We undertook an audit of leaflets used by candidates standing at the election.

We focused on areas where we were reviewing the accessibility of information provided by local authorities. We looked at a representative sample of candidates leaflets from all the main parties. In total this amounted to several hundred candidate leaflets.

Audit for leaflets

We created an audit framework for looking at the accessibility of leaflets. This relied heavily on the RNIB's clear print guidelines but also considered the accessibility of the leaflets for people with low literacy, people with learning disabilities and people with coordination impairments.

The framework used a number of checkpoints that could be quickly identified as having been met or not met. We considered the following;

Typeface
- Is the main typeface at least 12 points or above?
- Is contact information in a typeface of 14 points of above?
- Is a typeface like Arial being used for the main text?
- Does the main text contrast clearly with the background?
- Is text all left aligned and not wrapped around images?
- Is there only one typeface being used?
- Is the text in lower case and not in upper case (capital letters)
- Is the text printed using one style i.e. plain, not mixing bold and italics?

Layout
- Is the page layout clear and unfussy?
- If there are images, are they easy to understand?
- Are images clearly separated from the text?
- Is the leaflet easy to unfold?
- Do images which are important to the understanding of the document have a clear caption which is in at least 12pt?

Accessibility of key information
- Does the leaflet explain where you can get alternative formats from?
- Does the leaflet provide a contact telephone number?
- Does the leaflet have a text phone number or at least an email address for people with speech and hearing impairments?
- Is the text in plain language that is easy to understand?

Paper
- Is the material printed on a matt paper?

We were aware from the outset that it was unlikely many leaflets would meet all the checkpoints but we wanted to build up a picture of the type of access barriers that may be present.

Assessment

We were surprised by the overall inaccessibility of the leaflets used in the General Election. We did not consider a leaflet to be inaccessible if all the checkpoints had not been met but it was obvious that the vast majority of leaflets were not accessible and a large proportion did not meet basic access standards.

The most common access barriers were

- Small print (lower than 12 pt) for main or contact information
- Complicated layout
- Lack of contact information
- Lack of information on how to get information in alternative formats
- Pale text on light coloured background or darker text on dark backgrounds.

Main political parties

Candidates standing for the main political parties tended to use one of a number of generic formats for their leaflets. These followed a set pattern of layout and content. May leaflets were at times indistinguishable between candidates standing in different constituencies.

No party produced significantly more accessible election leaflets than the others.

The Conservative house style produced a range of leaflets that had simple clear text. These were often let down by a poor choice of font. Many Conservative leaflets had lots of small print and poor colour contrast.

The Liberal Democrats tended to have the least accessible leaflets of the major political parties. The use of yellow and black alternating text would have created significant access barriers for people with visual impairments.

More than other parties, the Liberal Democrats used images to help convey information or alongside the text. This is a commendable way of increasing the accessibility of a leaflet if it is done right. Images however tended to be accompanied by too much text or were not laid out in an accessible framework.   Plaid Cymru and Scottish National Party leaflets were often similar in design to the Liberal Democrats.

Labour candidate leaflets often had white, yellow and red text on red background or pale backgrounds.

Minor parties and independent candidates

Leaflets produced by minor political parties and independent candidates tended to be less accessible that the main political parties. By this we mean that they were more likely to have basic access barriers such as small text or poor layout.

Other strategies

In some marginal constituencies slightly different designs of leaflets appeared. We looked at leaflets in more detail in Bethnal Green and Bow, Guildford and Cardiff Central. We audited leaflets produced by the Respect-Unity Coalition party in Bethnal Green and Bow.

Although leaflets contained many access barriers we noticed that some of the candidates were at least trying to maximise the accessibility of their election literature.

They did this by using larger text for some important information and images that provided a narrative to explain the content. What was most noticeable was that voters were encouraged to contact candidate and contact information was far more prominent.

Against this however as much information as possible was also crammed into the leaflets which meant that the good practice was often hidden within an overall inaccessible leaflet.

This may have been a reflection that where an election race was close, more consideration was made to leaflet design.

We also noted that in some constituencies with a high Muslim population the Labour Party produced a leaflet specifically for Muslim voters *Delivering for Muslim communities*. Although this was commendable the leaflets were not particularly accessible and would have posed significant barriers for people with low literacy.

Northern Ireland

It was noticeable that leaflets in Northern Ireland were generally more accessible in both design and content than the rest of the UK. Layout was clearer and simple language and images were used. Contact information was also more prominent.

Election leaflets also included information to help voters, such as reminding them of the need to bring photographic identification when voting at a polling station.

We were particularly impressed with some of the leaflets produced by the Democratic Unionist Party. Although many of the DUP's leaflets fell into the same trap as those of the other parties contesting the Westminster election, we noticed that the party used a set of clear imagery and simple text to convey central campaign messages throughout their election leaflets. These were set out over and over again in the same format and in a clear format. They also kept reinforcing contact information. These simple techniques will have made the DUPs election leaflets more accessible to more people than any other party at the election.

Manifestos

We looked at a sample of the manifestos produced by the main political parties. We looked at printed manifestos and versions downloaded off the internet as pdf.s

Our audit considered if the main documents were accessible in design and content. Although it may have appeared as if there were considerable differences between the party's manifestos, they were broadly similar in terms of their accessibility. As long policy documents a considerable amount of their accessibility will be dependant on alternative formats and how they were distributed to the people who needed them.

Length of manifestos

The relative length of manifestos is also an issue of accessibility. The Labour Party in particular produced a manifesto that was considerably longer than the other parties. Although this may be commendable for providing the voter with as much information as possible the scale of a document like this provides an access barrier to many people. The Conservative manifesto on the other hand was shorter, and in our opinion more accessible.

The Scottish National Party produced a fairly lengthy manifesto but sent a shorter pull-out disability section covering issues and commitments of interest to disabled people to a range of disability organisations.

Formats

Most of the political parties indicated that they had produced their manifestos in

- Large print
- Braille
- Audio

The Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Scottish National Party indicated that they had produced Easy-read manifestos.

Quality of formats

There was significant variation in the quality of formats. The quality of production and design of an alternative format is important because it defines whether a format is actually useable. For example an organisation may provide its manifesto on tape but the quality of taping and the way the information is arranged in an audio format will determine if a person with a visual impairment will understand the content.

We looked at two formats; Easy-read and large print. There are no specific standards for both these formats. Large print is usually defined as being over 14 point font sizes.

Only the UK versions of the main political parties and the Scottish National Party produced their manifestos in Easy-read. Easy-read is a format that

many people with learning disabilities use. It combines simple text with simple graphic or photographic images.

We believe it would be reasonable for a political party within the context of the Disability Discrimination Act to produce information for people with a learning disability. As such political parties should have produced information in Easy-read.

There are no standards set for Easy-read. Due to this there was considerable variation between the layout and content of the different documents. This may have resulted in significant problems for people with a learning disability accessing the election.

For example, the Scottish National Party's Easy-read version of its manifesto differed only slightly from its ordinary version. The language used in this document was complex and as such inappropriate. This manifesto would consequently be inaccessible for most people with a learning disability.

Many of the political parties produced information, or made information available, in large print.

The main UK political parties produced information in large print. The Labour and Conservative Parties produced high quality large print manifestos. These had graphics, images and were designed with high production values.

Other parties tended to produce a word version of their manifestos, where the text had been enlarged to 14 point. These documents were often not large print versions of manifestos but a 14 point word version of the text from the manifestos. The difference was that any content that relied on graphics, images or graphs was often lost. We did not consider these documents to be an accessible large print document.

Posters

We undertook a basic audit of posters used at the General Election for accessibility.

Paid for advertising posters remain one of the most visible election techniques that the main political parties use. These were generally one of the more accessible communication processes used by political parties. The contained a simply message and often accompanied simple text with an easy to understand message.

It was noticeable that where the main political parties had paid for advertising this tended to be more accessible and understandable than other information sources. There was for example a gulf between the accessibility of leaflets which was generally poor and the accessibility of posters which was generally of a high.

Posters produced by political parties that are displayed by supporters, also contributed to awareness of the election. In the majority of cases the poster simply displayed a candidates name, the party logo and the party name.

Supporter posters tended simply to be colour coded simple messages that indicated to a voter that a particular party had support in the area. The text on the posters was not often that accessible; candidate's name and party often tended to be inaccessible. Red was used by Labour, Yellow and Black by the Liberal Democrats and Blue by the Conservatives. This obviously raised issues for people who can not differentiate between colours but it also creates a barrier for people who do not understand the colour codes.

In Wales Plaid Cymru used Green and Red but this was similar to the Green party. In Scotland the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats share a similar pallet.

These colour codes are also subtly changing. Respect Unity Coalition party used Red and Green. Red was also the primary colour of the smaller parties such as Forward Wales, the Scottish Socialist Party and independents like Peter Law in Blaenau Gwent.

In some inner city areas with concentrations of people from Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities some political parties adopted a different approach to posters. These tended to feature a very prominent photograph of the candidate, who was usually though not exclusively, part of a prominent BME community. The party logo and colour were considerably less prominent.

This indicates that the parties had in some way identified that traditional colour coded posters were not the most effective communication tool. A picture of a candidate added value to the usefulness of the poster. This may have reflected a higher number of voters with low literacy or people who are unsure of the colour code.

Where posters were placed along roadsides, it was often difficult to identify who the poster would have been for if you did not understand the colour codes. There was a particular poster used in rural areas by the Conservatives where the text used was almost impossible to read by any passing motorist.

Party Election Broadcasts
We looked at the Party Election Broadcasts aired between 11 April and May 4 2005.

Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) are specific communication techniques which parties aim at specific groups of voters before an election.

There was again very little to differentiate between the parties in terms of access. There were a number of common factors. We noted that many of the PEBs used background music over people speaking and talking heads came in and out of the frame. These are two obvious potential access barriers to people with hearing impairments.

At the end of Labour Party PEBs the contact information given was phone, textphone and website. This was good practice and should be adopted by the other parties.

Some British Sign Language (BSL) versions of the PEBs were broadcast and many of the parties included transcriptions on their websites.

Ofcom Rules on Party Political and Referendum Broadcasts (14 October 2004) do not include any guidance on the accessibility of party election broadcasts.

Websites

We looked at all the main party election websites and considered their accessibility. We did this in two ways.

- WCAG audit
- Basic usability study

WCAG audit

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0 is used as a benchmark for measuring the accessibility of websites. They are accepted by many organisations across the globe, including the UK Government. There are three levels of compliance "Single-A", "Double-A" and "Triple-A". "Single-A" being the least demanding to achive. The UK government has accepted "Double-A" as a benchmark that should be adopted by government sites, including those used by local authorities. In addition it is widely held, though not legally tested in this area, that an organisation's duties under the Disability Discrimination Act would normally mean that their websites should conform to the "Double-A" standard.

For further information on the WCAG visit the Web Accessibility Initiative website www.w3.org/WAI/

We looked to see if the party websites conformed to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) level "Double A". The purpose of exploring WCAG compliance is not just to identify if a particular website is accessible. It gives a clear indication if a party has thought through its obligations to make their campaigns accessible to disabled people.

We looked at the main election campaign site or mini site. Our audit took place during the election campaign. We looked at a representative sample of pages and entered the site through the main advertised URL. For example when we looked at the liberal democrats we initially visited www.realalternative.org rather than the main www.libdems.org.uk

WCAG "Double-A" compliance

In our opinion none of the main political parties achieved WCAG "Double-A" compliance.

WCAG "single A" compliance

Several parties achieved "Single-A" compliance for their websites.

The main UK Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green Party (England and Wales) and Scottish Green Party websites were all WCAG "Single-A" compliant. We believe that the Scottish National Party website was close to being compliant.

These site were for the most part excellently designed and could have been made "Double-A" compliant if the parties had wished. These parties had the choice to make a website fully accessible or not to.

Although it is commendable that these parties had achieved a basic level of accessibility it should be noted that this level of accessibility was below that expected of government departments and that which is now adopted by much of the public, private and voluntary sector.

The devolved versions of the political UK political parties were not WCAG Single-A compliant. For example www.scotishlibdems.org.uk was less accessible than www.therealalternative.org.

UKIP was not WCAG "Single-A" compliant. It failed basic accessibility tests such as not using alt tags appropriately. The site did however contain information on how to make the site more accessible by changing the font sizes. This is however not the same as making an accessible website.

Plaid Cymru, Democratic Unionist Party, Ulster Unionist Party, Alliance Party, Sinn Fein or the Social Democratic and Labour Party were not WCAG "Single A" compliant.

Usability Study

In addition to undertaking a WCAG audit we also looked at the usability of websites. To do this we used a mystery shopper exercise where people with a range of impairments visited the main parties websites. Their aim was to find contact details of the main telephone switchboard. We measured the number of "page links" before a person could get the party contact details.

The majority of people found the contact information within 2 page links on all sites. We regard this as a good standard of accessibility.

Telephone support

We undertook a mystery shopper exercise to evaluate the availability of alternative formats and to identify if political parties could process inquires from disabled people by telephone.

Mystery shopper exercises were conducted by people in the relevant nations for example we got Scottish people to make the mystery shopper calls to Scottish parties.

The calls were made using a simple script and were made between the 21 April and the 2 May.

We called numbers that were identified through the primary point of contact from the web testing, as outlined above. In the majority of cases this was the main advertised number and put the caller through to a call center or switchboard.

We used the following question:

"Can you tell me where a disabled person can get information on your policies in large print?"

If the caller was put through to a second person, for example, an information officer, they simply repeated the questions.

To achieve consistency we also recorded any other information that arose. We recorded replies or calls using a standard set of codes. It was possible for more than one code to be recorded for each call.

- We can send you a large print copy of the manifesto (or other information) in the post
- We can send you a large print copy of the manifesto (or other information) in the post (after prompt)
- You can get the large print manifesto of our website
- We do <u>not</u> have any large print information
- Call handler polite and helpful

It would be reasonably expected for political parties to be able to distribute information in large print. We would normally expect this to be available both on-line and by post.

The main UK Labour and Conservatives telephone switchboards said they would send information and that it is available on their websites.

The Liberal Democrat switchboard put us through to an information officer. The information officer said that they did not have large print copies of their manifesto in a paper format but were happy to print off a copy of the large print manifesto that is available as a pdf, and send it to us.

The Green Party switchboard was not aware of any large print versions of manifestos but would try to provide a copy.

The United Kingdom Independence Party switchboard was not able to provide a large print copy of any documents as they had not produced them. They suggested that they could not do everything, highlighted the accessibility of their website and suggested that we printed out a copy of their website.

The Scottish Labour Party referred the caller to the main UK labour party number.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats and Scottish Conservatives told the caller to visit their websites where the manifesto could be downloaded and then converted to large print. The Scottish Conservatives also then sent the UK rather than devolved Scottish manifesto.

The Scottish Greens, and after some hesitation, the Scottish National Party could provide large print versions of their manifestoes. The Scottish Greens also offered to send an audio manifesto and audio general policy leaflet.

Plaid Cymru were not aware of a large print manifesto but told the caller they would find out what could be done. They told us they would try to make a pdf manifesto into large print if that is what we wanted.

The Welsh Conservatives sent us a UK rather than devolved Welsh manifesto

The Welsh Liberal Democrats said they that we should contact our local candidate who would be able to provide the information.

The Wales Labour Party told us we could increase the font size on the pdf document and make it large print. This is not possible without additional software.

The Social Democratic and Labour Party directed us to their website and also indicated that information was available on tape.

The Alliance Party said that they would post the manifesto to us.

The Democratic Unionist Party told us to phone back tomorrow as they were waiting for large print manifestos from a supplier.

The Ulster Unionist party said they would send a hard copy of a large print manifesto.

Sinn Fein was not able to provide a large print manifesto but did suggest that we call a Dublin number.

Email support

We undertook a mystery shopper exercise to evaluate the availability of Easy read and to identify if political parties could handle inquires from people with a learning disability by email.

Mystery shopper exercises were conducted by people in the relevant nations for example we got Scottish people to email Scottish parties.

Emails used a standard text and were sent between the 21 April and the 2 May. We did not supply other contact information.

We emailed addresses that were the primary point of contact from the Web Usability study as outlined above. In the majority of cases this was the main email address.

For example we emailed info@libdems.org.uk for the Liberal Democrats and scotland@new.labour.org.uk for the Scottish Labour Party.

We used the following question

"Please could you tell me where I can get your manifesto in an Easy-read format?"

We recorded the emails returned using a standard set of codes. It was possible for more than one code to be recorded for each call. We did this to achieve consistency but we also recorded any other information that arose.

- We can send you an Easy-read copy of the manifesto (or other information) in the post
- We can send you an Easy-read copy of the manifesto by email
- You can get an Easy-read copy of the manifesto off our website
- We do not have any Easy-read information / what is Easy-read?
- What is Easy-read?

The main Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat email addresses replied with information where Easy-read manifestos could be found on line.

The Scottish Labour Party signposted the enquirer to their website and offered to send a paper copy at a cost. The Scottish Liberal Democrats offered to send a copy in the post, and the Scottish National Party attached their easy-read version in their email reply. The Scottish Socialist Party P could not provide an easy-read version, but offered a pdf or audio format of the manifesto instead.

No other party was able to supply Easy-read information. The Green Party replied that they could provide information on tape.

The devolved versions of the main parties were not able to supply Easy-read versions of their manifestos.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats, Welsh Conservatives, Welsh Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, Democratic Unionist Party, Ulster Unionist Party, Alliance Party, Sinn Fein and SDLP did not reply to this request.

Administration of the election
We have looked at information produced by electoral administrators, local authorities and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI). We have evaluated information produced by the Electoral Commission separately.

Local government

In addition to looking at political parties, we also looked at information and processes used by local government at the 2005 General Election.

We undertook a *Technical Access Evaluation* of information, processes and material used in the election covering the following local government areas.

England

Maidstone Borough Council
Canterbury City Council
Newark and Sherwood District Council
London Borough of Haringey
London Borough of Lambeth
Guildford Borough Council
Macclesfield Borough Council
Chester City Council
South Tyneside Council
Wakefield Metropolitan District Council
High Peak Borough Council
Brent Council
London Borough of Tower Hamlets
London Borough of Redbridge
Colchester Borough Council
Torbay council
Brighton & Hove City Council
West Wiltshire District Council,
London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham

Wales

Cardiff Council
City and County of Swansea
County Council of Ceredigion
Denbighshire County Council

Scotland

Dundee City Council
Moray Council
West Lothian Council
North Lanarkshire Council
Glasgow City Council
East Ayrshire Council
Argyll and Bute District Council
Stirling Council

Northern Ireland

Newtownabbey Borough Council
Castlereagh Borough Council
Omagh District Council

Belfast City Council
Newry and Mourne District Council
Down District Council
Limavady Borough Council
Ards Borough Council
Lisburn City Council
Magherafelt District Council

We have referred to these in the rest of this document as our ***Target Local Government Areas***.

Polling Cards

There were 44 million polling cards sent during the General Election. They came in a range of sizes and designs but had almost identical information on them.

We considered the accessibility of polling cards from a range of constituencies within our local government target areas. We identified the accessibility of printed text and layout.

We were unable to identify a fully accessible polling card but there were many examples where local authorities had tried to make the polling card as accessible as possible. There were some with accessible fonts and others had maps. We noticed that in Scotland, in particular, there were many examples where there was an attempt at creating an accessible document. For example, some were A5 size and had larger, plainer font. In general however polling cards are not an accessible document and would not provide information to several groups, including people with visual or communication impairments, people with low literacy and people with learning disabilities.

Having reviewed a large number of polling cards we consider the prescribed format and the way the information is presented to be inherently inaccessible.

Postal ballot packs

We looked at a number of postal voting packs used within the target local government areas. There were considerable differences between different types of packs that were used.

All ballot packs consisted of

- Declaration of identity
- Ballot paper
- Ballot paper envelope
- Return envelope

Some packs send everything loose within an envelope and explanation leaflet. Alternatively some voters received one piece mailers, where the voting forms had to be detached. The accessibility of the pack largely depended on the accessibility of the explanation of how to complete the ballot

pack. Many local government areas issued guides that provide pictorial instructions which added to the accessibility of postal voting.

In our opinion the accessibility of all the packs was compromised by the language in which they were written. This was overly complex and could have easily been simplified.

We have not been asked to consider the accessibility of this specific postal voting format; however it is our view that the Declaration of Identify process in this form created an additional access barrier.

Websites

We looked at the accessibility of on-line information about the election provided by local government. We did this by

- WCAG assessment
- Basic usability study

WCAG assessment

We undertook a short WCAG assessment of the election areas of local government websites. Most of the websites were WCAG "Double-A" or "Single A" compliant. Where they were not compliant, this was a site wide access problem and not related to the election pages. A small number of local authorities used election "minisites". These were outside the local authority's main websites structures and were often inaccessible.

We noted that the Elections Office for Northern Ireland website was not WCAG "Single- A" compliant.

Basic usability study

In addition to undertaking a WCAG audit we also looked at the usability of election websites. To do this we used a mystery shopper exercise where people with a range of impairments visited the main local authority websites with the aim of finding a telephone number or email address they could use to ask for information about the election.

Several local authorities route all enquires to a central telephone switchboard. Where this happened we recorded this information for the mystery shopper exercises described below.

The majority of people could not find this information within 4 page links. We consider this to indicate that some voters would have had difficulty finding this basic information during an election. A number of councils were aware that this potentially could be an issue and introduced graphics on their home (index) page that linked to the electoral services page. It is our impression that these graphics were either not strong enough or linked to pages without obvious contact information.

Telephone support

We undertook at mystery shopper exercise to evaluate the support that was given to people with a visual impairment by local authorities.

This process helped us identify if the correct information was given to voters with visual impairments.

Mystery shopper exercises were conducted by people in the relevant nations for example we got Welsh people to make the mystery shopper calls to Welsh local authorities.

The calls were made using a simple script and were made between the 21 April and the 5 May.

We called numbers that were the primary point of contact from the web testing as outlined above.

We used a script to phone local authorities to see if they could identify "where a visually impaired person can get support to vote on the Election Day?"

We recorded a number of the responses using the following categories.

- You can get help at the polling station from the presiding officer to vote
- There is a tactile template or 'tactile voting" devise at polling stations
- You can bring a friend or supporter to help you vote
- No help
- Call back later
- Can I take your telephone number and call you back later

The caller should have been told that there were three types of support available.

1. You can get help at the polling station from the presiding officer to vote
2. There is a "tactile template" or "tactile voting devise" at polling stations
3. You can bring a friend or supporter to help you vote

Only 3 out of 31 local authorities we called in England, Scotland or Wales identified all three types of support. 1 was in Wales and 2 were in Scotland. The same local authorities in Scotland also offered additional information unprompted

16 identified that a tactile template and support was available from the presiding officer. It was noticeable that our callers in these instances spoke to people in elections offices or the electoral administrator.

We were however told by people in elections offices that
- There is a machine for enlarging ballot papers
- All the help that a person needs
- No specific help unless it is arranged before hand

- There would be signs for disabled access.
- Staff had received training on access issues.

Problems arose where we spoke to people at switchboards or call centres. These calls did not provide adequate information about support.

A different picture emerged in Northern Ireland. Calls in Northern Ireland did not result in the correct support being given. In the majority of cases no support was given on an initial call.

The electoral system in Northern Ireland is structured differently with many of the functions of the electoral administrators and electoral registration officers being undertaken by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.

Email support

We undertook at mystery shopper exercise to evaluate what support would be made available to people with a visual impairment if they contacted their local authority by email.

Mystery shopper exercises were conducted by people in the relevant nations for example we got Scottish people to email Scottish local authorities.

Emails used a standard text and were sent between the 21 April and the 2 May. We did not supply other contact information.

We emailed addresses that were the primary point of contact from the web testing as outlined above.

We used the following question

"Please could you tell me what help I can get at the polling station? I am visually impaired"

We recorded the emails returned using a standard set of codes. It was possible for more than one code to be recorded for each call. We did this to achieve consistency but we also recorded any other information that arose. We recorded a number of the responses using the following categories.

- You can get help at the polling station from the presiding officer to vote
- There is a tactile template or 'tactile voting" devise at polling stations
- You can bring a friend or supporter to help you vote

We believe that an email should have been returned indicating the following three types of support were available.

1. You can get help at the polling station from the presiding officer to vote
2. There is a "tactile template" or "tactile voting devise" at polling stations
3. You can bring a friend or supporter to help you vote

We received replies to all emails sent apart from on local authority in Scotland

We received 6 replies out of 24 send emails to local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales that correctly identified the three main types of support.

15 replies indicated that a tactile template and support was available from the presiding officer.

Some Scottish local authority responses provided additional information relating to large print ballot papers that are on display in polling stations.

1 reply indicated that a presiding officer would provide support

The other replies were automated responses that were not followed up.

Electoral Commission

We audited a number of materials and processes used by the Electoral Commission during the 2005 General Election.

Electoral Commission print advertising

The Electoral Commission print advertising was audited against a number of standards. We did not consider that the Electoral Commission advertising was accessible to many people with visual, communication or learning disabilities.

Barriers present include
- Unclear central message
- Centred text
- Unfamiliar handwritten capitalised fonts
- Some text in relatively small text

Websites

The Electoral Commission had two websites that provided information to voters during the General Election. www.aboutmyvote.org.uk and www.secureyourvote.org.uk.

Both websites provided voters with key information about the democratic process. They were one of the few places where voters could get accessible information in different formats, so they were of particular use to people with visual, communication or learning impairments.

WCAG audit

Both sites were designed to a high standard but did not did not conform to WCAG "Single-A". As such they did not reach the minimum standard that would be normal expected under the Electoral Commission's duties in relation to the Disability Discrimination Act.

Usability study

In addition to undertaking a WCAG audit we also looked at the usability of election websites. To do this we used a mystery shopper exercise where people with a range of impairments, including those with learning disabilities, visited www.aboutmyvote.org.uk to find information on the election and the contact information for their electoral administrators.

We did not measure page links but perception of how easy it was to find information. General information was found relatively rapidly, finding contact information for electoral administrators was more difficult for many people.

As part of the website usability study we also asked people taking part in the mystery shopper exercises looking at local government websites, to look for links to www.aboutmyvote.org.uk . This was not undertaken in a structured format. We were simply looking to identify if local government sites highlighted that different formats were available on the Electoral Commission's website. Although many local government sites linked to www.aboutmyvote.org.uk they did not mention or link to the alternative formats. This may indicate a failure to fully exploit the potential of www.aboutmyvote.org.uk .

Telephone support

We undertook a mystery shopper exercise to evaluate the information given to disabled people, people with low literacy and people with learning impairments by the Electoral Commission during the General Election.

Calls were made on a number of different subjects in the last two weeks of the campaign. All calls made received the appropriate replies and we believe the Electoral Commission's telephone helpline offers a good accessible service to disabled people and people with low literacy.

Focus groups

We held a number of formal focus groups to get detailed information on the accessibility of the election.

The objectives of the using focus groups is to gain

- Detailed information on the accessibility of the materials, process and structures
- Views of disabled people, people with a learning impairments and people with low literacy on innovation and good practice.

Focus group methodology
We used a standard set of questions that focused on experiences during the election.

Focus groups were held in the two weeks after the General Election.

- Torbay: Learning disabled people
- Swansea: People with low literacy who are not linked to formal public of voluntary sector support
- Chester: Disabled people with low literacy including people with visual and learning impairments
- London: Disabled people including people who are politically active
- Glasgow: People with complex impairments and high care needs
- Belfast: Disabled people including those with visual, communication and physical disabilities.

In addition we held 3 focus groups in Cardiff to try to get more information on the accessibility of materials and information used by local authorities and the Electoral Commission at the election.

We will discuss our finding from the focus groups in the next chapter on people's experiences of the election.

Experiences

To enable the Electoral Commission to understand the experiences of voters at the 2005 General Election we have created a number of case studies that illustrate how an individual engages with the electoral system and the barriers they face in trying to do this.

Rather than simply saying which individual communication techniques were accessible and which were not, we have used case studies to illustrate the experiences of different groups of people when they tried to vote. Each case study is an amalgam of a number of individual's experiences.

These case studies are based on:

- Evidence from the focus groups
- Experiences of people who have contacted the research team or Polls Apart
- Representations from groups of disabled people or people with low literacy

John

Who is John?
John is a young person with low literacy skills.

John is an intelligent but inarticulate young man who has ideas about how his community can be made better.

Facts about people with very low literacy
According to the Department for Education and Skills, Skills for Life survey 1.7 million (5%) of adults aged 16-65 have literacy skills below Entry Level 3.

Entry level 3 is defined as being able to understand short texts with repeated language patterns on familiar topics or able to obtain information from common signs and symbols.

John's experience of the election
John did not vote. He doesn't know if he is registered to vote. He has a low awareness about politics. He tells us he does not care who won the election.

No one has ever talked to John about voting. He never watches anything about politics on TV. When anything comes through the door about elections it goes straight in the bin.

He thinks one way elections could be made better if there were fewer Party Election Broadcasts.

Making elections accessible to John

Communicating with John is a challenge. Getting him to vote is even more difficult. But it is not impossible.

By the time an election is called it is too late. John can't read leaflets, polling cards or newspaper adverts. It is unlikely that a clever advertising or party political broadcasts are going to entice John into the polling station.

John told us the best way to communicate with him was to talk to him. He wanted politicians to know about his life and that of his friends.

No one has talked to John about his politics. His friends don't vote and most of his family don't vote. Politics and politicians are not part of the community that he lives within.

Getting John interested enough to consider voting is not going to happen by simply improving the accessibility of information or processes. John needs to engage politically with people who are going to listen to him. If democracy is to be made accessible this must start with political parties engaging with all voters.

Anne

Who is Anne?

Anne is in her 40s. She has low literacy but can read a bit. She thinks of herself as being averagely political.

Facts about people with low literacy

The Department for Education and Skills, Skills for Life project, estimate in England there are around 5.2 million adults that have problems with functional literacy or numeracy.

This means they cannot understands short straightforward texts on familiar topics accurately and independently or cannot obtain information from everyday sources

In Northern Ireland 24% of the adult population have lower than grade G GCSE English literacy skills.

To put this into perspective the DfES says that as many as 1 in 5 adults of working age cannot look up a plumber in the Yellow Pages and 1 in 10 cannot understand the instructions on a medicine bottle.

About half the people who have problems with functional literacy are women and a quarter are aged 56-65. 46% of people with problems with functional literacy are defined as being in the semi-skilled or unskilled social classes.

People with this level of literacy are more likely to be on lower incomes or be socially excluded but many people outside these groups are also affected.

Anne's experience of the election

Anne is happy to tell us she is a Labour voter.

Anne tells us that everyone she knows is a Labour voter. Anne does not know the name of her MP but she knows she is Labour.

She isn't that happy with the Government but there isn't an alternative she would consider.

After talking to Anne for a while she tells us that she didn't vote at this election. But she would vote if it was close.

Despite being a "Labour voter" Anne wasn't actually motivated enough to vote. She didn't read any of the party information sent to her but told us it is always the same anyway. She didn't watch much on TV about the election but she liked the Labour advertising posters.

Anne hasn't had any contact with any of the parties. Usually someone comes from the Labour party on Election Day to check if she has voted. This didn't happen this time but she probably wouldn't have voted anyway.

Anne has seen fewer posters in people's houses and thinks that elections are less of an event than in the past.

Anne buys a newspaper most days but finds some of the words difficult. She didn't notice the Electoral Commission advert.

When we show Anne the advert she tells us she finds the layout confusing. She can read "Don't sit on the fence. Vote. May 5" but doesn't know what the advert is about. When we read the advert to Anne she tells us the advert is for people who don't vote because they can't decide who to vote for. Anne knows who to vote for so didn't feel that advert was relevant to her.

Making elections accessible to Anne

Anne will vote if she feels the election is important. She didn't feel that the General Election was important enough to vote. She has made what she believes is a rational decision not to vote – her vote wouldn't make a difference.

If the Electoral Commission is to challenging these perceptions it needs to make sure its advertising material is as simple and accessible as possible.

Political parties must reach out to Anne. This means more than getting the campaign message right but thinking carefully how this is delivered to people with low literacy.

If Anne lived in a marginal constituency the parties would have done more to reach her. She might have had a more accessible leaflet from the parties explaining why it was imported she voted or she might have had a call encouraging her to vote.

Margaret

Who is Margaret?

Margaret is a disabled person living in Wales. Margaret has multiple impairments. Her condition means she cannot read documents unless they are in large print. She regularly uses the internet and email as a way of communicating. When she looks at websites she uses a computer browser that enlarges text.

Facts about people who need information in different formats

There are 2 million visually impaired adults in the UK. Visually impaired people access information in a range of different formats including large print, tape and Braille. It is now relatively common for the private sector to use these formats when communicating important information to customers.

There are other formats such as British Sign Language videos and Easy-read.

It would be reasonably expected that political parties produce a range of information in large print and other formats.

Margaret's experience of the election

Margaret is not a member of a political party but regard her self as being highly political. She used a postal vote but didn't think the forms were particularly accessible. She marked the ballot paper and got her personal assistant to do the rest.

Margaret thinks that disabled people don't get a fair deal at election time. She told us that she is angry that parties that support the Disability Discrimination Act do not produce information in basic formats.

Margaret is surprised when we tell her that she could have got the some of the party manifestos in large print. She wanted to know how she could have got hold of them. She feels that manifestos are only the start and wonders why none of election material that came through her door was of any use to her.

Margaret wanted to know why she could look at the main party websites but she couldn't look at the same parties' websites for Wales.

Making elections accessible to Margaret

Margaret has got used to receiving information in large print. More importantly Margaret expects that political parties take her needs into account if they want her vote.

The General Election was a significant step forward for many political parties who produced a few documents in many different formats. Parties were less successful at getting this information to the people who wanted it. In future elections more information including candidate information and policy documents should routinely be made available in:

- Large print
- Braille
- Audio

A greater amount of information should also be made available in:

- British Sign Language
- Easy-read (for voters with a learning impairment)

Fatima

Who is Fatima?

Fatima is an older voter who lives alone. She has always voted and wants to continue doing so. Fatima has recently moved into a new flat where she receives some support with weekly tasks like shopping and going to the doctors. She has a high degree of mobility in her home but finds it difficult to travel further a field. Fatima also has a recently acquired visual impairment.

Facts about older people with visual impairments

According to the RNIB 90% of the two million people with visual impairments are over the age of 60. By the time people reach the age of 75, one in six people has a visual impairment.

Four out of five older people with a visual impairment cannot read letters or bills in standard print. Unlike younger disabled people they are often not aware of the support or formats like large print that are available to them.

Fatima's experience of the election

Fatima votes at every election. She votes out of principle because people before her fought for her right to vote. She also likes voting and thinks it is important. Fatima made sure she changed her electoral registration details so she could vote at her new home.

In her last house someone phoned from the Conservative Party a few days before the election and offered her a lift. This happened at every election. At this election she didn't get a call and didn't know who to ask.

Fatima looked at the leaflets that had come through her door to see if she could find a telephone number to call but she couldn't read the text. She thought about walking to the polling station but called a friend who came to collect her.

When the friend asked where the polling station was Fatima said she didn't know but had her polling card. Fatima couldn't read the card but with the help of her friend they found the polling station.

Making elections accessible for Fatima

Older people who suddenly acquire impairments can get excluded from many things they once took for granted.

Moving house can also mean that a person can lose links with their community. Building the links again can be more difficult when a person finds it difficult to leave their house or access written information.

It is important that political parties and local authorities put in place strategies to make sure people who don't realise they have a disability can get information. One of the easiest ways to do this is to always include a helpline telephone number in very large print (at least 16 point) on all printed information material.

Many older people like Fatima do not like to have to ask for help. Although Fatima voted this time she might not bother her friend at future elections.

Jane

Who is Jane?

Jane voted at the 2005 General Election for the first time. Jane has a learning disability and is part of a self-advocacy group that supported several people voting at the election. Jane has lived with her parents and in residential accommodation. She now lives independently.

Key facts about people with learning disabilities

The Department of Health estimates there are 210,000 adults with severe leaning disabilities and another 1.2 million adults with mild to moderate learning disabilities in England. The vast majority of learning disabled people have the capacity to vote.

Until the 2005 General Election there was little information about voting for learning disabled people. At this election there was a lot more materials for learning disabled people. The main political parties produced information in Easy-read and the Disability Rights Commission and the Valuing People support team sent out over 10,000 Right to Vote packs aimed at learning disabled voters.

Jane's experience of the election

Jane voted for this first time at the 2005 General Election. At previous elections she wasn't encouraged to take part by her family or the people who worked in the residential home she lived in.

Jane's self-advocacy group received a pack about the election. This was designed to help learning disabled people understand the General Election.

Jane's self-advocacy group held a hustings where the election candidates came to speak to them. They also downloaded Easy-read versions of the manifestos from the web.

On Election Day Jane was still scared about voting. She thought the polling station would be very intimidating. To help her support worker talked though what would happen and came with her to the polling station.

When Jane got to the polling station she found it difficult to read the ballot paper but remembered to look for the logo of the party she wanted to vote for. Jane voted and is looking forward to the next election.

Making elections accessible for Jane

Jane was lucky. She was part of a group that supported her through the process of voting. Many other learning disabled people did not have same opportunities.

Learning disabled people need information in formats they can use such as Easy-read but they also need support. Learning disabled people who are members of advocacy groups or other rights based networks are more likely to receive this type of information and get the right level of support.

Providers of care and residential services for learning disabled people need to look at how they support their service users to take part in elections.

Political Parties

We looked at the political parties within a UK and devolved framework.

There was a considerable difference between the different types of political parties. Some campaigned throughout the United Kingdom; others fought the election in Wales or Scotland. In Northern Ireland the electoral contest was completely different with none of the main parties fighting the election against the party of Government.

We audited campaign materials and examined how the following main parties engaged with disabled voters and voters with low literacy.

UK
- Conservative Party
- Liberal Democrat Party
- Labour Party
- Green Party (England and Wales only)
- UK Independence Party

Scotland
- Scottish National Party
- Scottish Socialist Party
- Scottish Green Party
- Scottish Labour Party
- Scottish Liberal Democrats
- Scottish Conservative Party

Northern Ireland
- Democratic Unionist Party
- Ulster Unionist Party
- Alliance Party
- Sinn Fein
- SDLP

Wales
- Plaid Cymru
- Wales Labour Party
- Welsh Conservative Party
- Welsh Liberal Democrat Party

Candidates and political parties

At the 2005 General Election there were thousands of candidates standing for election in 646 constituencies. Most candidates were standing for political parties, although there were also a large number of independent candidates.

Candidate's campaigns and political parties are separate but linked entities which are governed by different rules. Candidates make their own choices

about how they run their campaign. This is controlled to a certain extent by the party structures. For example candidates can usually decide what goes in their election communications but they have to ensure that it does not conflict with the party policy. The leaflet will also have to conform to a house style and use the party logo and colours.

The relationship between a candidate and a party is a complicated one but most voters see the candidate and the political party as being largely the same thing. Some parties and some candidates handled this perception better than others.

A number of voters complained that contacting local candidate campaigns or local party offices to request accessible information was not dealt with appropriately. Learning disabled people or people supporting them found it particularly difficult to find accessible information through local campaigns. This was in direct contrast to the main party switchboards which handled calls professionally and were able to provide assistance.

Political parties have the responsibility for ensuring that their candidates run accessible campaigns. They could do this by providing clear information and training to candidates and their agents on what is expected of them. They could provide advice on how to produce accessible formats and to ensure that clear contact information in large print is included on each election mailing.

Not all voters are equal

It is in all parties' interests to engage with voters but they have finite resources and time. Party organisations concentrate their efforts on winning votes in marginal seats.

We noticed that in marginal constituencies more thought seemed to have been put into the accessibility of campaign material. This included more prominent contact information, larger print for contact information and an increased use of relevant images.

It is also likely that voters would have been phoned by the parties or would have been visited by canvassers. It was a feature of our focus groups that people who did not live in marginal seats were rarely contacted by candidates from any political party. Many disabled people and people with low literacy rely on this personal contact as a way of engaging with the campaigns.

Disability Discrimination Act assessment

As part of the *Accessibility Review* we have been asked to provide:

"An assessment of the information/help available to electors in the light of the new provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995."

There are no existing benchmarks against which to assess organisations such as political parties. Organisations have an obligation to ensure that the information they produce and support they offer is accessible to disabled people. Political parties should not, for example, discriminate against a

visually impaired person by not providing basic information in large print. Within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act a disabled person has the right to expect an organisation to make reasonable adjustments in order to make an inaccessible service accessible.

If a party were to contest all 646 constituencies, its expenditure limit would be £19.38 million. Within this context it would be reasonable for a party to spend a few thousand pounds to produce a range of accessible information, have an accessible website and to have structures in place where disabled people could be sent information in the appropriate format.

We believe it is likely that a party would have met its duties within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act if it:

- Produced information in a range of formats including large print, tape, Braille and Easy-read.
- Had an accessible website whose information and contact pages conformed to WCAG Single-A.
- Provided information to voters in the relevant formats on request.

This is not a definitive list of everything a party should have undertaken. It however covers access needs for people with communication, visual and learning impairments. It highlights that a party has made steps to ensure electronic communication is accessible and that the party is able to deliver accessible information when it is requested.

Taken together however we believe that this indicates that a party has taken reasonable steps to ensure that its general campaign is accessible. If challenged by a disabled person a party may well have to make other steps to ensure it provides an accessible service to a specific individual.

We have not however considered the accessibility of material produced by candidates in our assessment of the overall accessibility of the party campaigns. This is because although the parties should take responsibility for ensuring candidate literature is accessible it is an area where the candidate and their agent retains control.

What all parties failed to deliver was an accessible election for voters. Some parties produced accessible information but few voters that needed it actually saw it. Even when accessible material was produced this did not often reach voters unless the voters requested it through the party helplines.

Main political parties

In terms of the accessibility of their campaigns the main three UK political parties were almost interchangeable. The UK Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat party structures, for example, produced information in large print for people with a visual impairment and Easy-read for people with learning disabilities. Their websites were accessible to a basic standard and their telephone and email support offered a good service to disabled voters.

Our assessment of the Conservative, Labour and the Liberal Democrats is that it is likely that their campaigns in England would be assessed as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. By this we mean that they made a number of reasonable adjustments to make their campaigns accessible to disabled people, including people with a learning disability. However, this does not mean they did everything accessibly.

Although the main campaigns were accessible at a local level things were very different. The main parties did not encourage candidates to produce accessible leaflets. They also only appeared to provide additional support to candidates who wanted to run user friendly campaigns in marginal constituencies.

The big political parties made efforts to reach out to disabled voters when approached. This was however a very passive approach and tended to happen through a central contact.

Party activists were often not aware that information was being produced accessibly. Party activists and even prospective parliamentary candidates were unaware, for example, that information was produced in Easy-read for learning disabled people.

Our assessment of the United Kingdom Independence Party is that it is unlikely that their campaign would be considered as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. The UKIP did not have a website that met basic accessibility guidelines. The UKIP party did not provide basic information in a range of formats.

Our assessment of the Green Party is that it is unlikely that their campaign would be considered as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. The Green Party did not provide basic information in a range of formats.

Devolved versions of the main parties

The main UK parties had devolved equivalents in Wales and Scotland. For example, there is the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Liberal Democrats and the Welsh Liberal Democrats.

Again these parties tended to behave very similarly and provided a similar service to voters.

Although the main political parties retained centralised control of the campaigns, the devolved version of the UK political parties ran distinct campaigns.

As a result the Liberal Democrats fought three separate campaigns.

- Overarching Westminster campaign
- Devolved Welsh campaign

- Devolved Scottish campaign

Although the campaigns had a central core of messages they were very different. The overarching UK campaign and the Scottish campaigns were particularly different as in Scotland there is a fourth major party, the Scottish National Party.

The Scottish Liberal Democrat manifesto contained differences in content and emphasis from the main Liberal Democrat manifesto. Liberal Democrat voters in Scotland were not directed to the main Liberal Democrat website but to a Scottish equivalent. The parties did this to take account of devolution.

The devolved versions of the big political parties did not appear to have as such developed accessible campaigns. For example, we found it more difficult to get hold of accessible versions of the Welsh manifestos. Telephone and email support was poor or was routed to the main party structures. This meant that disabled voters in Wales received the UK manifestos rather than the Welsh specific manifestos.

Our assessment of the Scottish Labour Party, Scottish Liberal Democrats, Scottish Conservative Party, Wales Labour Party, Welsh Conservatives and Welsh Liberal Democrats is that it is unlikely that their campaigns would be considered as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Disabled voters in Scotland and Wales received a significantly less accessible service from the main political parties than voters in England.

The smaller political parties across the UK ran very different campaigns but generally did not provide an accessible service to disabled voters. There were in many cases good intentions but it was clear that the smaller parties did not have the same structures to make sure they provided an accessible service to voters.

Although there were considerable differences in the way smaller parties engaged with voters they tended to find it difficult to understand their obligations to make information accessible to voters.

This does not mean that all smaller political parties ignored the needs of disabled people. Some smaller parties provided a good service to some disabled people. They did however not have the compliance structures in place to ensure that their campaigns were accessible.

Parties standing only in Scotland

Our assessment of the Scottish National Party is that it is unlikely that their campaign would be considered as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. The SNP were however an example of a party that had tried hard to make their campaign accessible. They for example produced an Easy-read manifesto and distributed this to disability organisations. The SNP were however unable to provide basic information in

a range of formats during our mystery shopper exercise. Though their website was close to being WCAG "Double-A" accessible it failed a number of the more basic WCAG single A checkpoints.

Our assessment of the Scottish Socialist Party is that it is unlikely that their campaign would be considered as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. The Scottish Socialist Party did not have a website that met basic accessibility guidelines. The Scottish Socialist Party not provides basic information in a range of formats.

The Scottish Green party is a separate party from the Green Party that stands in England and Wales. Our assessment of the Scottish Green Party is that it is unlikely that their campaign would be considered as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. The Scottish Green Party had a website that met basic accessibility guidelines and was able to provide information in some formats. It was however unable to provide basic information in a range of formats.

Parties standing only in Wales

Our assessment of Plaid Cymru is that it is unlikely that their campaign would be considered as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. Plaid Cymru did not have a website that met basic accessibility guidelines. Plaid Cymru did not provide basic information in a range of formats.

Parties standing in Northern Ireland

The election in Northern Ireland was in many ways a different experience for voters from the rest of the United Kingdom. Election regulations, political parties and the actual process of voting were unique to Northern Ireland.

In addition to the General Election in Northern Ireland there were local elections being held across the province.

Our assessment of the Democratic Unionist Party, Ulster Unionist Party, Alliance Party, Sinn Fein and the SDLP is that it is unlikely that their campaigns would be assessed as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. None of the Northern Irish political parties had a website that met basic accessibility guidelines. All the parties indicated that they had information in a range of formats but were unable to provide them during the mystery shopper exercise.

The administration of the election

Overall accessibility of the voting process

We looked at the information given to voters as part of the administration of the election.

The first thing we noticed is that voters received relatively little formal information about the processes involved in voting. In the majority of cases voters received just a polling card.

This lack of information is somewhat curious. The voter is not told which parties are contesting the election and which candidates are standing until they arrive at the polling station; the voter is not given a summary about the candidates or a manifesto for what they hope to achieve; and the voter is not told how they can find out who won the election or what to do at a polling station. After the election the voter is not sent any information about their new MP or the full-election results.

It would be routine for trade unions, charities or public limited companies to provide this information for members but this only reaches a limited number of people.

Naturally it is hoped that voters will read through party leaflets but this assumes that a person receives all the candidate literature and that it is accessible.

Many people assume they are registered to vote but are not sure. The only conformation they get is when they don't receive a polling card. By this point it is then too late to register.

Explaining voting

Although voting at a polling station appears to be a relatively simple process it can be a daunting for people with low levels of literacy and learning disabled.

There is an assumption that everyone knows what to do at a polling station. Putting an X on a ballot paper next to a person's name appears quite straightforward. But for many people it is not that simple. The voter has to mark in cell within a row that contains a person's name, the political party and the logo of the party. The candidates' names are not presented in the way you would normally expect. John Smith becomes SMITH John. This may not seem like a significant barrier but if a voter with low literacy or a learning disability is not expecting it, it can cause confusion.

A simple pictorial guide on how to complete a ballot paper at each polling station would help to prevent confusion and may reduce the number of spoilt ballot papers.

Polling cards

This is the only official written documentation that a person who has not applied for a postal vote receives telling them that there is an election.

Polling cards are usually inaccessible. They contain small print; complex language and they do not clearly explain what it is for. It is not available in alternative formats. It may contain a map directing the voter to the polling station but this will be printed in black print on white card.

A person's full name and address is printed on the polling card but unlike envelopes it is seen as official document that many people believe can prove a person's identity. It is common for people to also think it is essential to present the polling card at the polling station.

To most people who are regular voters polling cards are not a useful reminder of the election. The media and election literature play that role. For people who may need further information or for people who are excluded from much of the election material and campaigning, the polling card in its current format is a wasted opportunity.

For many disabled people with communication or visual impairments, people with low levels of literacy and learning disabled people the polling card is useless.

Local government website, telephone and email support

High quality support was generally provided by electoral administrators to disabled voters when they asked for it. There were however considerable differences between organisations. During our mystery shopper exercise there were a number of instances when the caller was not put through to the electoral office, but to a call centre. Where this occurred inappropriate advice was often given.

Disability Discrimination Act assessment

Our assessment of local government is that they are unlikely to be assessed as having met their obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. Our assessment only covers that information and support provided by local government for the General Election. In part this assessment of non-compliance is due to the fact that much of the information local government is required to produce is prescribed by law. Information such as polling cards and ballot packs must meet particular specifications which in general are not accessible. On a more positive note website, telephone and email support, which is not prescribed, was generally of a good standard of accessibility.

Disability Discrimination Act assessment of The Electoral Commission

Our assessment of the Electoral Commission is that it is would be likely to be assessed as having met its obligations within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. The Electoral Commission provided voters with a range of

information on the election. This was generally accessible. The Electoral Commission provided good support to voters through its telephone helpline.

Northern Ireland

Overview

The General Election and the elections for local government in Northern Ireland were very much entwined. To take account of this we have considered both elections within the **accessibility review**.

Overall the General Election and the local elections in Northern Ireland were less accessible than the rest of the UK. Within this assessment however there were areas where organisations taking part in the elections provided information or support that was more accessible than the equivalents in the UK.

Political Parties

Northern Irish elections are contested by political parties which are less likely to provide accessible information than the main three UK political parties. We found that smaller parties throughout the UK did not have the systems or structures in place to ensure communication tools like websites or helplines which took into account the needs of disabled people or those with low literacy skills.

Leaflets

Party leaflets used in Northern Ireland for the UK election were more accessible than smaller sized parties in the rest of the UK. Few were fully accessible but more had basic good practice such as large print or clear contact information.

Voters in Northern Ireland also received election mailing from people standing in the local elections. Leaflets for the local elections in Northern Ireland often had three separate functions;

1. Support the General Election constituency candidate/campaign
2. Provide information on the candidate standing at the local election
3. Explain a preferred order of voting within the STV voting system

Some parties managed this better than others though it did mean that more information was crammed into leaflets with the resulting reduction in text size. We noted that local issues or issues that directly related to local elections were squeezed within the layout of the leaflets. For example one party's local election literature replicated their Westminster messages in 10-12 point fonts but included information on the candidates standing in the local election in text that was below 8 point.

It is likely that if the election was held separately from the General Election local issues would have had more prominence.

We did not notice a significant difference in election material across the target local government areas.

Several leaflets contain text in Gaelic. This obviously is not an access barrier. Leaflets containing two languages are also not unique to Northern Ireland. For example, in Wales leaflets were routinely bilingual or contained Welsh text.

Access barriers are created where languages are mixed within the body of a document and specifically where this is done without translation between languages. For example where in a list of bullet points one or two are in a different language and this is then not translated, this poses problems for people who have low literacy in either or both languages. Where leaflets were used for local elections the accessibility of Gaelic and English was reduced by the use of even smaller text.

Electoral ID card

The voting process is more complicated in Northern Ireland. An example of this is that voters have to provide photographic identification when voting. Although there may be sound security reasons for this, the process of obtaining (and remembering to bring) photographic identification will be a barrier for different groups. People living in residential or other care settings and people with learning disabilities will be particularly affected.

The specified photographic ID was restricted to

- Passport
- Driving licence
- Senior Smart Pass (Public Transport ID)
- Electoral ID card

Disabled people and people with low literacy are less likely to have driving licences or passports. They will be even less likely to have these forms of identification if they have learning disabilities, live in residential or other care or support settings or have complex or multiple impairments.

The specified voting ID did not include some forms of ID that disabled people were more likely to have. For example older people were able to use the Senior Smartpass, which is a widely recognised Public Transport ID. Visually impaired people were not able to use the Blind Persons' Smartpass which is a similar public transport concession ID.

It is likely that amongst the people who require an Electoral ID card there will be a higher concentration of disabled people and people with low literacy. It is within this context that we examined the process of obtaining necessary identification to vote if a person has a range of impairments or low literacy. Under such circumstances we would have expected the process of obtaining an electoral ID card to be fully accessible and highly user friendly.

The forms were however not available in Braille, Easy-read or even large print. The reason given for this is the application process is an automated process. There was no large print, Braille or Easy-read information to

accompany application form. A voter who is unable to sign the application form for an electoral ID is asked to get a second person to explain why they are unable to sign. Voters were, however, given a telephone number to call if they required further assistance. We do not consider this to be a reasonable adjustment within the context of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Electoral registration

Many people may not vote because they are excluded by not being on the electoral register. Individual registration in the format currently in use discriminates against people with low literacy, learning disabled people and other people who are unable to complete forms. We are particularly concerned that where a person cannot sign registration forms a third party is required to confirm a person's capacity to vote. We are aware that this has specifically prevented learning disabled people from voting.

Local elections

Combining the local and General Election s on one day created a number of specific access problems.

Both the local and Westminster elections ballot papers were of very similar colour. One was buff the other was white. This created a number of access barriers for voters with visual, communication or learning disabilities. Identifying which ballot paper was for which election was also difficult for people who have low literacy.

This was further complicated and made less accessible in that the local elections used a Single Transferable Vote system where parties stood a number of candidates. Voters not only had the choice of which party to vote for but which specific candidate to vote for and in what order.

At the General Election voters had to mark X and at the local election voters had to put ordered numbers (1,2,3…) next to candidates names. To maximise their votes many parties had a strategy for the local election of which order of candidates they would like their supporters to vote. To achieve this they supplied informal voter's guides or indicated their preferred order on formal election communications. A number of these were clear but some were difficult to understand.

The polling station environment

An unwelcoming, over politicised atmosphere outside a number of polling places was a unique feature to Northern Ireland. Examples of this included, large numbers of political activists or party vehicles parted directly outside polling stations.

Political parties may have good intentions, for example they may be trying to make some voters feel secure going to the polling station. The consequence however of too visible party activists is that it left other voters feeling vulnerable. We are particularly concerned that including people with mental health or learning disabilities may have been particularly affected.

Representations were made to the research team from organisations representing young people that this issue also left some young people intimidated.

Support for voters

We also identified that the formal support made available to voters in Northern Ireland was of a lower quality than the rest of the United Kingdom.

The administration of elections in Northern Ireland is not undertaken by local authorities but by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI). We believe the current arrangement does not provide the same level of support to disabled voters and voters with low literacy as electoral administrators in the rest of the UK.

An example of this is that EONI website does not meet the basic accessibility standard. We audited websites providing information on the election to the government accepted standards Web Content Accessibility Guidelines "Single A" standard. Most local authority websites democracy or election sections were accessible to the WCAG "Single-A" standard or above. The EONI website did not reach this standard. As we have indicated in the main ***Accessibility Review*** we consider WCAG compliance to be important as it indicates that an organisation has systematically considered the needs of disabled people.

Also many documents are not available in alternative formats in Northern Ireland.   For example in the rest of the UK electoral registration forms are available in audiotape, on a British Sign Language video, in Braille, in large print and in languages other then English. In Northern Ireland the system is more complex but no alternative formats are available.

In addition many local authorities in Northern Ireland were not able to give basic support to voters. We examined this using a mystery shopper exercise. We contacted local authorities by phone and by email to see if they could answer basic information on how a person with a visual impairment could get help to vote at the elections. Most local authorities were unable to provide this information and they also did not indicate that we could contact the EONI or the Electoral Commission for further information.

There are major gaps in the provision of support for disabled people including people with learning disabilities and people with low literacy in Northern Ireland through the election cycle. These gaps in provision need to be addressed even if this means changes to the current legislation to ensure that the organisations involved in delivering elections in Northern Ireland provide and accessible service to all voters and meet their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Wales

Research overview in Wales

We undertook a **technical access audit** on information and processes used by political parties, local government and the Electoral Commission for the General Election in Wales. We used a number of different techniques that were adapted to Wales such as auditing election leaflets to identify if they were accessible within a bilingual environment.

A number of focus groups were held in Wales. One concentrated on how people with low literacy living in Swansea accessed the election. We held three other focus groups in Cardiff. These brought together disabled people from across Wales to discus information used by local authorities and the Electoral Commission during the election.

Administration of the election

The accessibility of information and process used for the administration of the 2005 General Election did not differ greatly from that in England and Scotland.

Welsh Political Parties

The main Westminster political parties did not provide as accessible a service to Welsh voters compared with voters living in England.

An example of this is that the Welsh Conservatives, Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Wales Labour Party were all unable to provide us with large print or Easy-read versions of their Welsh manifestos. The UK manifestos were easily obtainable in these formats.

In addition the devolved parties websites were less accessible than the main UK counterparts. The majority did not reach the basic WCAG "Single-A" benchmark.

Like many smaller parties who fought the election across the UK, Plaid Cymru did not provide an accessible service to voters. Basic information was not made available in alternative formats such as large print or Easy-read.

Telephone and email support to all the parties was less formal and often was not able to answer basic access questions.

Disabled Welsh and Scottish voters and Welsh and Scottish voters with low literary were at disadvantage compared with voters in England. The political parties standing in Wales did not take account of their needs in a structured or planned way.

Scotland

Participating in the General Election for Scottish disabled people was a fairly inaccessible experience.

Because this was a UK wide election, the main political parties relied heavily on "parent produced" accessible information. The Scottish only parties seemed to follow this lead with less effort and resources targeted at providing accessible information. Consequently, accessible formats of key literature, such as the Scottish version of the manifesto, were either not available or available in a limited range of formats. Even where efforts had been made to produce accessible formats, these failed because the parties failed to understand what was meant by or equated to good practice in accessibility.

Party websites in Scotland were largely similar to UK ones. None met any level of WCAG compliance and were largely user-unfriendly. Telephone support was of widely varying quality, ranging from extremely helpful and knowledgeable to indifferent or needing to refer to someone else. The Scottish Conservatives had to call back and the Scottish Socialist Party only had a pre-recorded message point and did not return calls. All of this meant it was largely impossible for a disabled voter in Scotland to get what they needed in terms of information from a distance. One can only assume that parties did not consider it important to gear up for meeting requests for information, nor indeed, to provide that information in ways that met people's needs.

Candidates tended to produce all their own materials in Scotland. Some followed a centrally issued format, others amended this to suit local circumstances and others used their own template and layout. The result was a bewildering array of styles, fonts, colours, layouts and print sizes often across a very small geographical area. Few leaflets provided a range of contact methods; none offered accessible format versions of their literature. Only one candidate leaflet considered as part of this review came close to being DDA compliant.

The situation with statutory information and materials was little better. The overwhelming sense from election planning teams and electoral registration officers was one of going through the motions, of rolling out the usual electoral chess pieces. There seemed to have been little effort or resource devoted to pushing accessibility forward or innovating on accessibility standards. Fortunately for disabled voters in Scotland the starting base was quite high.

Most of the requests for information by telephone or email were largely, if not completely, met. The range and quality of information provided was inconsistent. In some case, requests for information were met with questions effectively to elicit details from the enquirer that were unnecessary. Specifically, our mystery shopper was asked twice to provide address details so that the request for information or support for a visually impaired voter could be met. It may have been that the electoral authorities were pre-

occupied with security and fraud issues, but such obstacles to information provision were unhelpful and unnecessary.

Comparison with previous elections would appear to indicate that accessibility in Scotland just about reached those standards. However, the evidence from this review would appear to indicate that disabled people in Scotland were not treated equally by political parties. The overwhelming sense is of everyone connected with the electoral process in Scotland treating the General Election as the secondary election. Accessibility, innovation, good practice and pro-active attitudes were much more to the fore at the 2003 Scottish Parliament and local government elections. We can only hope therefore that this is the intention of parties and election teams for 2007. Yet, they should listen to disabled people before undertaking such a two tier approach to election planning. In research undertaken by Capability Scotland before the General Election, 40% of disabled people thought the Scottish Executive had most influence over how Scotland was run: the same percentage thought the UK government had. General Elections are clearly as important to Scottish disabled voters as devolved ones: political parties and election planning teams need to recognise this and respond accordingly.

Research team

Capability Scotland

Capability Scotland is the country's leading disability organisation working for a fair and just Scotland. Capability Scotland works with children, adults and families living with disability to support them in their everyday lives.

Capability Scotland's *1 in 4 poll* is a unique standing research panel which surveys disabled people of all ages, family members and carers on topical issues and has a mystery shopper panel whose participants test access to a wide range of goods and services.

Capability Scotland was responsible for managing the *Accessibility Review* in Scotland.

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Disability Action Northern Ireland

Disability Action is a pioneering Northern Ireland charity, working with and for people with disabilities.

More than one in five (300,000) people in Northern Ireland has a disability and the incidence is higher in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. Over one quarter of all families are affected.

As a campaigning body, Disability Action works to bring about positive change to the social, economic and cultural life of people with disabilities and consequently our entire community.

Disability Action Northern Ireland was responsible for managing the *Accessibility Review* in Northern Ireland

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Scope

Scope is a respected national disability charity that has campaign and public policy expertise in a number of areas. Scope covers both England and Wales.

Scope has considerable experience campaigning on access issues. This includes anti discrimination practice within the remit of the Disability Discrimination Act and its impact on disabled people, business and the community; challenging discrimination in the media; and improving the services for people who use communication devises.

Scope was responsible for managing the *Accessibility Review* in England and Wales.

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The Pollen Shop

The Pollen Shop Ltd is a specialist communication consultancy that provided the expertise, systems and management for the *Accessibility Review*.
The Pollen Shop managed the overall research and data collection.

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