

# DEMOCRACY VOLUNTEERS

BLIND AND PARTIALLY  
SIGHTED VOTING

Final Report



# **Blind & Partially Sighted Voting – An Assessment report on accessibility in the May 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, London Mayoral and Assembly Elections**

## **Objectives of the Research**

1. To assess the suitability of the current procedures of voting for blind and partially sighted voters in Greater London.
2. To discover what voting aids blind and partially sighted people believe would help them vote independently in polling stations.
3. To make recommendations on how the voting process can be improved for blind and partially sighted voters in the future.

Democracy Volunteers visit thousands of polling stations each year to assess how the electoral process is performing by collecting large data sets on a variety of issues. Our observation of the May 6<sup>th</sup> 2021 elections represents the biggest observational data set of any election in UK history. Subsequently, this report lays out the findings collected from within polling stations as well as from meetings with NGOs and supplementary survey data.

Throughout the electoral cycle there are many steps which need to be taken to ensure the process is accessible for all voters, including those that are blind and/or partially sighted. Information about how blind and partially sighted voters can use the Tactile Voting Device (TVD), large print ballot papers and assistance they can be given whilst voting, should be available to voters and polling staff alike.

Ameliorations that are in place for blind and partially sighted voters should be well-practised. This report focuses on the voting experience inside polling stations and the ways in which these can be improved for blind and partially sighted voters.

## **Democracy Volunteers and Accessibility at Elections**

Democracy Volunteers has now observed local elections, national elections, and referendums in the UK. We have also observed elections across Europe and North America. Practices vary across the jurisdictions and Democracy Volunteers have always attempted to share best practice when we see it around the world. Physical accessibility is often much simpler to evaluate for our observers so we produced bespoke training in 2021 for our observers to identify aspects of the voting process which could present challenges to the blind or partially sighted.

## The Report Authors



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John has worked in elections throughout the UK and the United States since the 1980s. He has observed on behalf of the OSCE/ODIHR in parliamentary elections as far afield as Kazakhstan and is former Chair of the UK's Electoral Reform Society.

He has served as Head of Mission on numerous elections for Democracy Volunteers, including the UK general elections in 2017 and 2019, and the Finnish presidential and Dutch elections in 2017, 2018 and 2019. He has also been a consultant on the subject of electoral and parliamentary reform in Moldova. He has also been an election expert consultant for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. He is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter and has lectured at Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Manchester.



**Harry Busz FRSA** is Democracy Volunteers' Head of Operations and has worked for the organisation since October 2019. He is a graduate, having gained a BSc in Human Geography at Cardiff University and an MA in International Relations from Exeter University.

He has participated in numerous domestic and international observations such as the 2019 local elections in Northern Ireland, the provincial and Water Board elections in The Netherlands, and national elections in Austria, Slovakia, Ireland, and Gibraltar. He was also the general election coordinator for the 2019 UK general election for Democracy Volunteers. In 2019, he also recommended changes to blind and partially sighted accessibility in Gibraltar, making recommendations to the Gibraltar Parliament, which have recently been adopted for the 2021 referendum.

## Credits

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## **Funding Statement**

Democracy Volunteers observers deployed for the observations during the London Mayoral and Assembly elections with the support of a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd. This was arranged by Democracy Volunteers, and this covered observers' travel and any accommodation, if appropriate at the time. This funding covered travel expenses, some accommodation, and subsistence for our volunteer observers.

## **Background**

Ensuring that all eligible voters have the right to participate in the electoral process is a fundamental aspect of a healthy democracy. Periodic and genuine elections whereby equal suffrage across the population is respected is crucial, as set out by both Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>1</sup> and the 1990 Copenhagen Agreement<sup>2</sup>.

As described by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Article 29<sup>3</sup>, this equal suffrage includes those who are living with disabilities. With regards to equality of participation in political and public life, this document states that to achieve this, equality signatories must abide by several standards such as ensuring voting equipment and facilities are easy to understand and use, allowing assistance to vote by a person of the voters choosing, and the use of new assistive technologies where appropriate.

It is only through ensuring that these conditions are met that all voters are given equal access to, and experience of, the voting process, where they are confident, they can vote in the way they intended whilst retaining the secrecy of their ballot.

## **Blind & Partially Sighted Voting in the UK**

The fundamental right of voters to be able to vote independently and in secret is of great concern for those who are blind or partially sighted across London and the wider UK. In a recent High Court Ruling, the UK's procedure for upholding the secrecy of the ballot for these individuals was found to represent 'a parody of the electoral process'<sup>4</sup>, with ameliorations, such as tactile voting devices (TVDs), proving

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

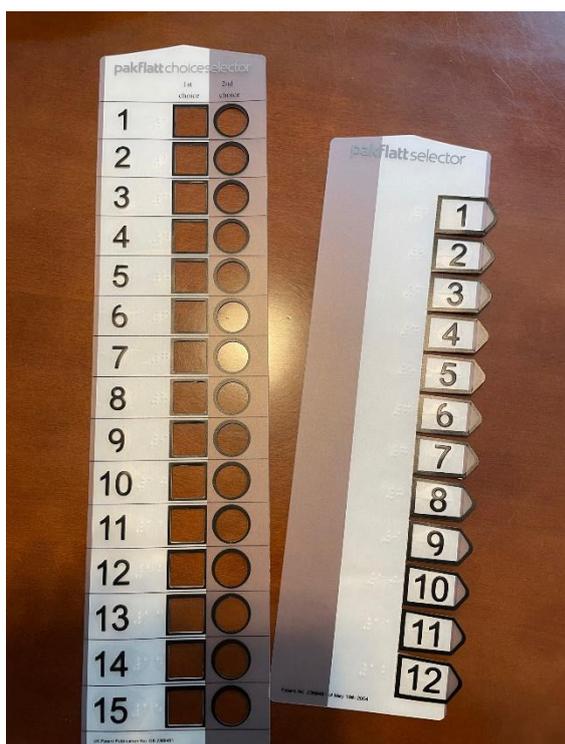
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14304?download=true>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-29-participation-in-political-and-public-life.html>

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, R (On the Application Of) v Minister for the Cabinet Office (2019) EWHC 1126. Available online at: <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2019/1126.html>

to be insufficient for the approximately 360,000 individuals in the UK who are registered as blind or partially sighted<sup>5</sup>.

Rachel Andrews, who brought the legal challenge, argued that TVDs do not allow an individual to vote in secret as assistance is still needed to read candidates' names and corresponding numbers to the voter, as these are not included on the TVD. Since this legal challenge was won in 2019 though, processes in polling stations have not been changed, leading to a second judicial review hearing being heard in June 2021<sup>6</sup>.



**Figure 1** The TVD allows blind and partially sighted voters to feel where their preferred named candidate is, using touch. (Supplied by Pakflatt)

Similarly, a 2017 report by the Royal National Institute of Blind People, surveyed its members to assess their experiences of voting and how accessible their experiences were. This report, entitled 'Turned Out 2017'<sup>7</sup>, discovered that only one in four blind or partially sighted voters were able to vote independently and in secret. The report concludes that similar issues have persisted over many electoral cycles, and that significant changes were needed.

These findings were reinforced by the RNIB's 'Turned Out 2019'<sup>8</sup> report which again showed that only 24% of voters believed they could vote independently and in secret, with only 13% of blind voters believing they could do so. As 44% of partially sighted people believed they could

vote independently and in secret, the use of some usable vision is often sufficient to cast a secret and independent vote.

As such, improving aspects such as lighting and positioning large print ballot papers more prominently can clearly aid some of these voters.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vision-loss/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.leighday.co.uk/latest-updates/news/2021-news/high-court-to-hear-second-challenge-to-blind-voters-provisions/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.rnib.org.uk/campaigning-policy-and-reports-hub-access-information/access-information-reports>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/RNIB%20Turned%20Out%202019.pdf>

**Amtlicher Stimmzettel für die Nationalratswahl am 29. September 2019**  
Regionalwahlkreis 9A Wien Innen-Süd

Liste Nr.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Partei- bezeichnung	Liste Sebastian Kurz – die neue Volkspartei	Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs	NEOS – Das Neue Österreich	JETZT – Liste Pilz	Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative	Alternative Listen; KPÖ Plus, Linke und Unabhängige	Wandel – Aufbruch in ein gemeinwohlorientiertes Morgen mit guter Arbeit, leistbarem Wohnen und radikaler Klimapolitik. Es gibt viel zu gewinnen.	BPO – Bierpartei Österreich
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**Figure 2** This TVD from Austria shows how complex some can be. The ballot paper is placed underneath the black cover and using braille the voter can choose their candidate or party of choice. (Supplied by the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior.)

As is the case across many countries, being a signatory to the international agreements and domestic legislation, the UK has specific goals it must accomplish to make polling stations accessible for all voters. The Representation of the People Act 1983 legislates that polling stations in the UK must have a large print copy of ballot papers and a device (such as a TVD) which allows blind or partially sighted people to vote independently.

The data we have collected provides a detailed picture of the state of polling stations in the UK, by not only assessing the availability of TVDs and large print ballot papers, but also recording the lighting levels in polling booths, general accessibility of polling stations, and how well staff are trained to aid voters.

The most recent report on disabled access at UK elections undertaken by the Electoral Commission (EC) entitled 'Elections for Everyone'<sup>9</sup> states:

<sup>9</sup> Electoral Commission (2019) Report: Elections for Everyone. <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/report-elections-everyone>

*'There should be no barriers to voting for people with a disability. Everyone should have the right to vote on their own and in secret. Some people told us they feel excluded from elections.'*

The report also notes that blind voters often feel excluded from voting in a polling station and instead request postal votes. This is a methodology of voting that can be more open to 'family voting' where the voter potentially faces intimidation or coercion in a household setting in an unsupervised context unlike a polling station which encourage and implement the secret ballot.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the other recurring themes the report highlighted were issues inside polling stations in the following areas:

- 'Staff did not know how to use the tactile voting device or did not offer it to people who might need it.
- People did not know they could ask for a tactile voting device
- Staff or other voters could see how people voted – they could not vote in secret
- People could not vote by themselves
- Staff were unhelpful and unfriendly
- The large print ballot paper was not useful
- The instructions were not clear about how to vote'<sup>11</sup>

However, it is important to note that even when comparing outcomes in polling stations to the guidance set out by the Electoral Commission, this guidance often does not guarantee blind and partially sighted voters have the right to vote in secret.

The European Blind Union (EBU) has produced research which examines differences in voting practices for blind voters across the continent and proposes recommendations to make the voting process more inclusive and accessible<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Family voting is described by the OSCE/ODIHR as an unacceptable practice. It involves a family member choosing, on behalf of their family member, who their vote is cast for. This can happen directly or in several different forms in a polling station, which Democracy Volunteers regularly assesses. It mainly affects women, younger voters, the elderly and those who are perceived to require family assistance.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> EBU (2018) AVA - Accessible Voting Awareness-Raising: Report on the Accessibility of elections for Blind and Partially Sighted Voters in Europe. Version 1

Many of these recommendations involve further steps to make the voting process accessible to blind/partially sighted voters, beyond the measures already in place. Many of these recommendations build on the work of other European nations and attempts to identify best practice. Key recommendations included:

- Minimum font sizes for ballots.
- Magnifiers at the polling station.
- Allowing voters to bring an assistant to the polling station to help them cast their ballot in addition to polling staff. There should be no administrative barriers to this.
- A dedicated assistant to help disabled voters in each polling station.
- Signature Requirement for Assistants if they are to mark the ballot for the voter, to ensure secrecy of the ballot between the voter and assistant and to ensure they won't influence the voter.
- Central production and timely delivery of stencils (TVDs) which are accessible in design where voting methodologies allow stencils to be useful for blind/partially sighted voters.
- Unified ballot design.
- Reduced ballot formats to allow for stencil (TVD) usage.
- Audio-files for ballots inside the polling booth or a free phone hotline which can be used in the polling booth.
- Training on stencil voting for blind/partially sighted voters.
- Advance ballots being available online before election day so blind/partially sighted voters can familiarise themselves with it before election day.
- Universal postal voting.
- Accessibility as an obligation on voting machines.
- Common legal provisions between different elections.
- Mandatory training for elections staff.<sup>13</sup>

Polling station accessibility for blind and partially sighted voters and their ability to cast their ballot in secret vary widely across different nations. A 2014 report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)<sup>14</sup> explains the state of voting for disabled people in elections, held across Europe, in the years before the document was created. Domestic legislation varies greatly across countries as does the on the ground implementation of these aids. In the UK's context, a wide scale

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> FRA (2014) *Accessible polling stations: Indicators on political participation of persons with disabilities. Background information: political participation of persons with disabilities.*

investigation into the state of the voting processes for disabled people in the UK was undertaken by Scope in 2010 and showed that 67% of polling stations visited had 'one or more significant access barriers to disabled voters'<sup>15</sup>.

Of course, not all the issues identified are directly related to the ability of blind and partially sighted voters. Some, such as polling stations not having a low-level polling booth are directed towards wheelchair users for example.

### **Focus Groups with London Vision**

To hear the experiences of blind and partially sighted voters, Democracy Volunteers also conducted two focus groups with voters, assisted by London Vision. During these group sessions, voters were able to comment on the challenges they identify with the current process and what would help them to vote independently and in secret.

Many focus group attendees told us of the inadequacy of the TVD in helping them vote independently and in secret. Audible information through a telephone service was highlighted as a possible solution as has been done in other nations such as Malta and Ireland, which, in the case of Ireland, we have previously observed in practice.

*'Choice is limited for blind and partially sighted people. Maybe you could ring up a telephone line and get information audibly. It's about being more creative and lobbying for some of those technologies that are in place right now rather than spending millions.'*

#### **Focus Group Participant A**

Several participants also spoke about their poor experiences inside polling stations. On multiple occasions we were told that staff often seemed unaware of the TVD, and how it functions, and the large print ballot paper and that these are not always offered to blind and partially sighted voters proactively.

*'Training of staff at the polling stations, you can go in and ask for the tactile device and they don't know what it is, they haven't got a clue, they know nothing about it. They need to be aware of our needs.'*

#### **Focus Group Participant B**

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<sup>15</sup> Scope (2010) Polls Apart 2010: Opening Elections to Disabled People

Registration and applications for postal and proxy votes was also highlighted as a barrier to voting independently. This led to some participants not wanting to register.

*'I've been using the proxy system; however, the paperwork is inaccessible. I can't do this independently.'*

### **Focus Group Participant C**

These two focus groups were held in 2020 and 2021 ahead of the planned, and eventually delivered, London Mayoral and London Assembly elections. The first was conducted at the offices of the Thomas Pocklington Trust in London and the second on Zoom.

### **Survey of Blind & Partially Sighted Voters**

Prior to polling day, Democracy Volunteers surveyed blind and partially sighted voters from across Greater London to supplement the qualitative data collected in these meetings. Of the survey participants the majority (56.3%) could not read braille, whilst 31.3% could read it very well and 12.5% could to some extent. According to the RNIB approximately 7% of registered blind people are proficient at using braille.<sup>16</sup> Just under 60% described themselves as blind with the rest being partially sighted. Over 80% were registered as blind.

Of these voters 56.3% stated that they usually vote in person at a polling station, with 40.6% opting to vote by post and only one participant voting by proxy. For those not voting in person, the most frequently given reason was 'It's just easier' followed by 'Privacy' and 'Safety due to COVID-19'.

63% of blind and partially sighted voters indicated that they did not believe that they had a secret ballot under the current voting procedures. When blind and partially sighted voters were asked to rate how useful the current improvements in polling stations such as TVDs and Large Print Ballot Papers, were in aiding them vote on a scale of one (Extremely Bad) to ten (Extremely Good), their mean response was just 3.8.

When identifying what ameliorations, they believed would be the most useful for helping them vote the following were the most popular responses:

- Large print version of the ballot paper in polling booths
- Magnifying Glass

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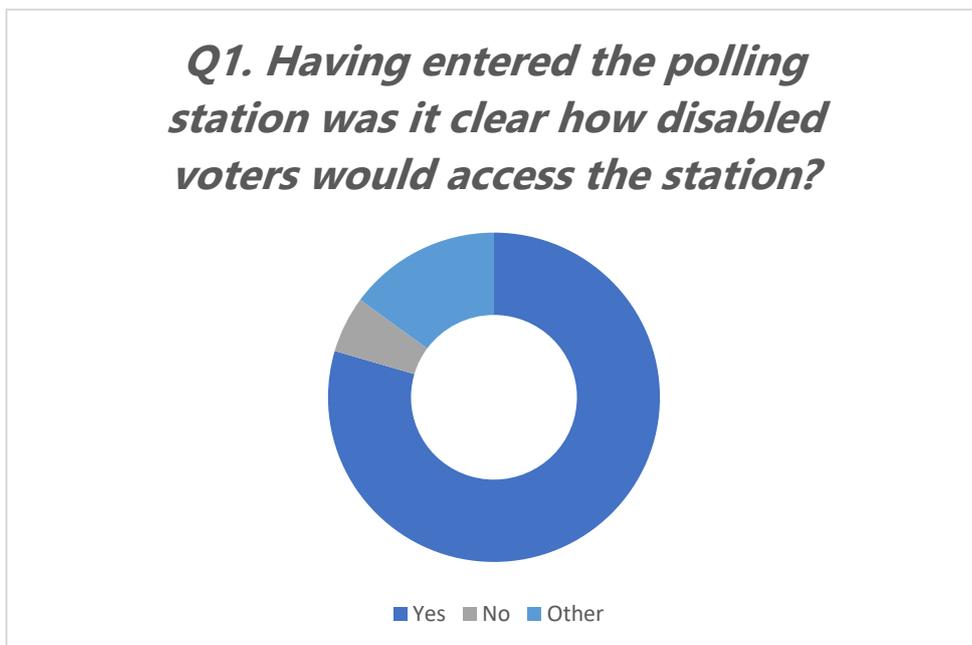
<sup>16</sup> <https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/research-reports/reading-and-braille-research>

- A dedicated assistant for blind/partially sighted voters
- Audio Device to Read Candidates Names alongside the TVD
- Better Lighting in Polling Booths

(The sample size of our survey was 33 full responses; we would like to see further research and piloting conducted around this area to fully understand the most effective ameliorations in polling stations).

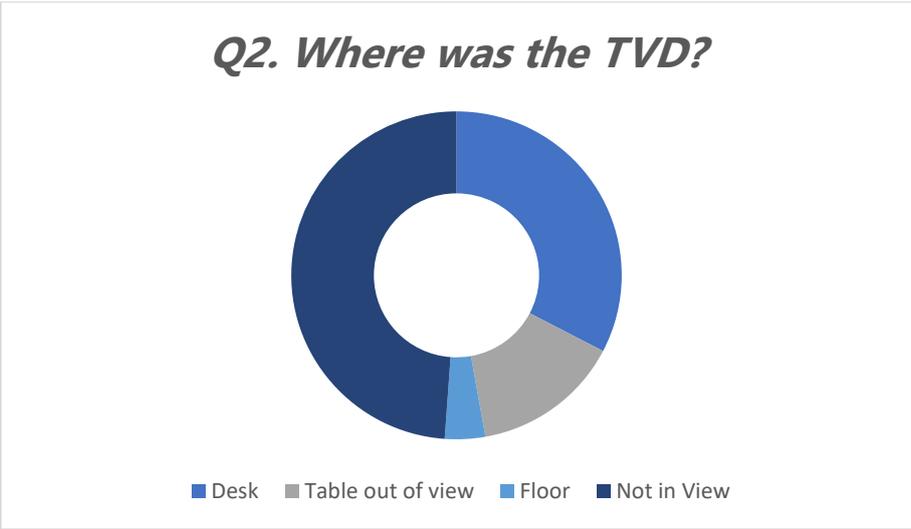
### Data from Polling Day Survey

On May 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, Democracy Volunteers deployed 48 observers, accredited by the Electoral Commission, across Greater London. In teams of two, observers visited 521 polling stations in order to assess the electoral process in polling stations, before feeding back this data to the core team. Alongside their assessments of other aspects of voting which can be seen in our full report<sup>17</sup>, they also assessed several issues relating to blind and partially sighted voters and disabled voters more widely.



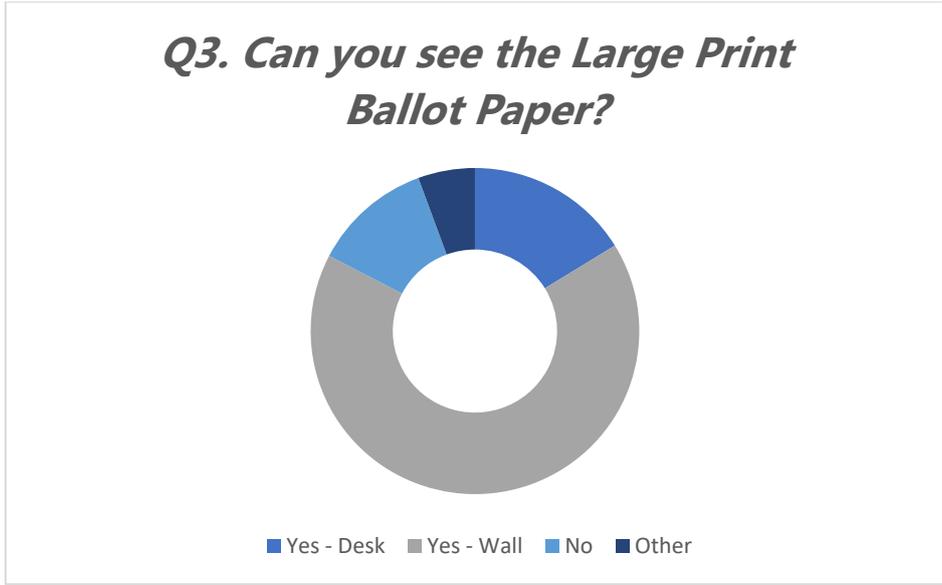
**Question 1:** Disabled access was generally good with over 79% of polling stations having adequate access for disabled voters. When making their assessments observers judged whether access was suitable for wheelchair users but also factors such as the route to the polling station from the door being clear and easily to follow and for signs aiding access. (N.521)

<sup>17</sup> <https://democracyvolunteers.org/category/domestic-observations/>



**Question 2:** Observers were asked if a TVD was accessible in each polling station. Worryingly in 45.5% of polling stations our observers reported there was not a TVD that was identifiable and as such, voters would not know that this was available to them even though they were in elections staffs’ election day packs.

Where TVDs were present many were not on polling staffs’ desks and were instead on a table that voters would not be able to see or on the floor behind the desk. The placement of the TVD in the polling station is especially important in ensuring it can be used by voters, especially as our survey showed that over 25% of blind and partially sighted voters did not know they existed. We encourage polling staff to put TVDs on their desk so that voters are aware of their presence and to offer them to voters when appropriate. (N.516)



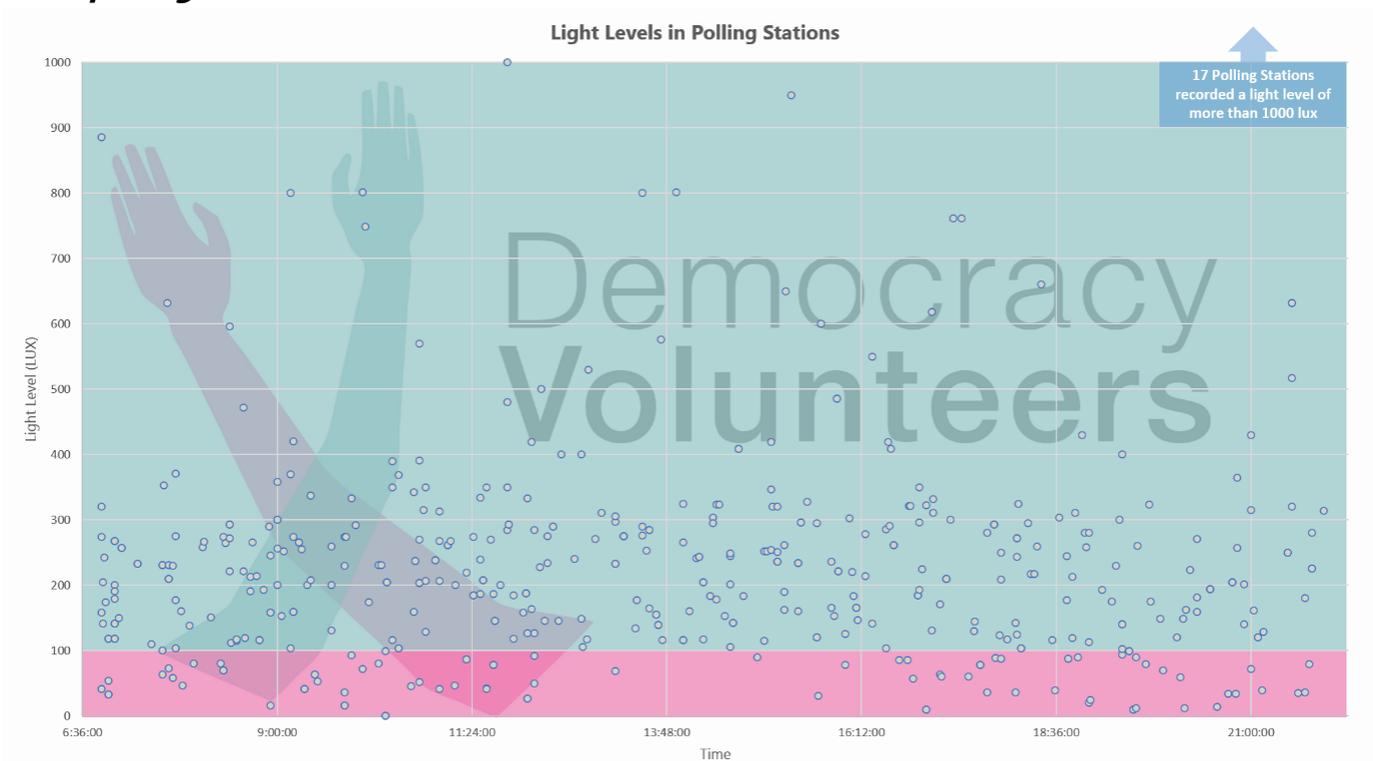
**Question 3:** Large print ballot papers were present in most polling stations observed (83%). However, these were most often found on the wall (almost as if a poster) inside the polling station and not on the polling staffs’ desk where it could be more easily inspected by partially sighted voters. Similarly, to TVDs, the Large Print Ballot Paper should be on the polling staffs’ desk so that voters are aware of their presence and should be offered to voters when appropriate. (N.518)

**Question 4:** *‘If any blind or partially sighted voters attended the polling station, please tell us more about this, telling us if they were assisted, whether they used the TVD etc.’*

We also asked our observers to assess how blind and partially sighted voters cast their ballots in the polling station.

As many blind and partially sighted voters cast their vote through the postal and proxy voting processes, it is not a common occurrence for our observers to be present when these voters vote in person. In person voting by a blind or partially sighted person was observed on thirteen occasions throughout the observation in London. The process by which Presiding Officers and polling staff aided these voters was not uniform, with some offering magnifying glasses but only one being offered a large print ballot paper and one being offered a TVD. (N.13)

**Question 5:** Finally, we asked our observers ' *What were the lighting levels in the polling station?*'



Our observations showed that almost 20% of polling stations did not have sufficient light to achieve an average of 100 Lux during our observations (definition of Work requiring limited perception of detail, such as manual workplaces) or the minimum of 100 Lux (defined perception of detail such as Work requiring Offices etc.)<sup>18</sup> which is level we set as the level for voters to see and comprehend signage and complete their ballot paper. (Those polling stations without sufficient lighting can be seen in the pink area of the graph above).

Good lighting conditions have been highlighted through our meetings and surveys as a crucial factor in allowing partially sighted voters to vote without assistance. (N.483)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg38.htm>

## **Recommendations**

1. Staff should undergo specific and detailed training of how to assist blind and partially sighted voters in the polling station.
2. The Tactile Voting Device and Large Print Ballot Paper should both be located on the polling staffs' desk so blind and partially sighted voters are made aware of their presence, and these should be proactively offered to voters when appropriate.
3. Lighting conditions in polling booths must improve and be consistently above the 100 LUX minimum to assure defined perception of detail for voters to cast their vote. We recommend councils check lighting levels in proposed polling stations as part of their regular reviews of polling places, generally conducted before every major election.
4. Large Print ballot papers should also be displayed in disabled access polling booths as well as under Recommendation 2.
5. Public pilot trials should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of a range of ameliorations such as increased lighting, large print ballot papers in polling booths, telephone services to aid voting and wider use of magnifying glasses already placed in polling booths.

## **Conclusions**

Blind and Partially Sighted Voters continue to face extensive challenges in aspects of voter registration, polling day operations and having equal access to a secret ballot as other voters.

We believe the various court cases that have stated that access for blind and partially sighted voters is "a parody of the electoral process". The secret ballot has been a required aspect of the UK's electoral system since the 1872 Ballot Act. Our focus groups and survey of blind and partially sighted voters in London show that most do

not believe they have a secret ballot. This is an unacceptable situation and one which needs to be remedied by those presently legislating through the Electoral Integrity Bill.

Whilst advanced methods of affording privacy are available, most partially sighted voters would be assisted with better lighting conditions and better deployment of the present equipment available in polling stations. These improvements can already be done by electoral administrators across the UK.

However, blind and partially sighted voters also need other aids to be able to fully participate on an equal basis as sighted voters. We would strongly recommend that the UK Cabinet Office, the Electoral Commission, and the devolved administrations identify and implement novel and effective methods to allow blind and partially sighted voters their franchise in line with our recommendations.