

Deaf Access to the 2015 General Election



The 2015 UK general election saw the highest voter turnout since 1997.¹ However, not all groups were equally engaged with the political process. Disabled people have been identified as a group who are less likely to vote with access issues being acknowledged as a potential reason.² This briefing discusses the level of access available to Deaf voters in the 2015 general election and how this might have affected their participation in the electoral process.

Background

10 million people in the UK have some form of hearing loss and 800,000 are either severely or profoundly deaf.³ Those who are deaf or hard of hearing have varied needs in terms of accessibility due to:

- **Age:** Some are deaf from birth whilst others become deaf or hard of hearing during childhood, adolescence or adulthood.⁴
- **Cause:** Deafness has a number of causes including hereditary deafness, deafness from infection (like Meningitis) and deafness that is part of a larger condition (such as Multiple Sclerosis).⁴ A person who is deaf might have no further conditions or may have coexisting disabilities (for example, 356,000 Deaf people also have visual impairments).³
- **Language:** Knowledge of English and British Sign Language (BSL) varies depending on the age at which the person became deaf, the language used in their childhood home and the type of education they received.⁵ There are an estimated 77,000 first language users of BSL.⁶

Deaf and hard of hearing people, as part of the larger disabled community, have been identified by the 2014 Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee as being less likely to be registered to vote and less likely to cast their vote.² This briefing will consider the access issues facing Deaf people during the 2015 general election and how this may have affected their participation in the electoral process.

Access Issues

The Deaf population has varied access needs depending on the factors discussed above (age, cause

Overview

- Deaf and hard of hearing people make up 15% of the UK population.
- The Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee has identified Deaf people, as part of the wider disabled community, as being less likely to vote than the rest of the general population.
- Deaf people face access issues at all stages of the traditional voting process. There is limited access to hearing loops, BSL translations and easy read versions of election materials.
- These access issues may leave deaf people disengaged with formal politics. However, the deaf community has shown engagement with informal politics through online campaigning and petitioning.

and language). Those who are hard of hearing and/or wear hearing aids may rely on hearing loops to understand spoken English whilst others may prefer lipreading, written English or BSL.⁷ The 2014 Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee suggested that electoral information should be available in both BSL and easy read format to make it fully accessible to various members of the Deaf community.² These provisions are vital as some Deaf people (especially those who were pre-lingually deaf) may not have English as a fluent first language.⁵ Access issues affect all stages of the voting process and this briefing will address these issues in registering to vote, choosing who to vote for and casting a vote.

Registering

Registering to vote in the 2015 general election could be done by post or online.⁸ Registration forms and guidance on the 'About My Vote' website were available in English and Welsh.^{8,10} However, there were no BSL or easy read versions.^{8,10} The lack of access at this stage may have resulted in fewer Deaf people registering to vote.

Choosing Who to Vote For

The 2014 Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee suggested that political parties should make manifestos and election material accessible to Deaf people by providing easy read and BSL versions.² All major political parties provided an easy read manifesto.¹¹ However, BSL manifestos were available for only four political parties (Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party and Green Party).^{12,13,14,15}

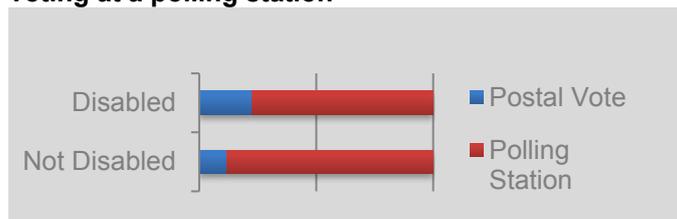
Attending local hustings or watching the televised leaders' debates were two other possible ways to decide who to vote for. However, these were not consistently accessible to potential Deaf voters. Local hustings relied on Deaf charities to provide accessibility measures such as speech-to-text, hearing loops and BSL interpreters.¹⁶ On a national level, the televised leaders' debates were only subtitled. There was no live BSL interpretation during the debates nor easy read transcripts following them.¹⁷ Inconsistent and inadequate access to information may have left Deaf people feeling too under informed to cast their vote, even if they had successfully registered.

Voting

The final stage of participating in the electoral process is voting. In 2015 it was possible to vote at a polling station (either in person or by nominating a proxy to vote on your behalf) or by post.¹⁸ This section will consider how accessible these methods were to the Deaf population.

The charity Leonard Cheshire Disability published a report after the 2015 general election investigating the accessibility of the voting process for disabled people. They report that 24% of disabled people found it difficult to vote in the general election.¹⁹ Access issues specifically related to deafness included staff who were not trained to communicate with Deaf people and hearing loops not being available at polling stations.¹⁹ The Electoral Commission's handbook for polling station staff provided recommendations on how to communicate with Deaf voters and also suggested use of a hearing loop.²⁰ However, not all polling stations successfully carried out the recommendations and the presence of a hearing loop was not mandatory.¹⁹

Figure 1. Bar chart showing the proportion of disabled and not disabled voters who used postal votes versus voting at a polling station²¹



Following the 2005 general election, the Electoral Commission reported that 17% of disabled people voted via post, compared to 7% of the rest of the population.²¹ This may be due to the accessibility issues related to voting at a polling station. However, Leonard Cheshire reported that 17% of disabled people who tried to vote by post in the 2015 general election found it difficult as the instructions were deemed too confusing and the typeface too small.¹⁹ Postal vote guidance was not available in either an easy read format or in BSL.²² In the 2015 general election, 3.3% of postal votes were rejected and 14.2% were not returned.²³ Disabled potential voters may have made up part of these not returned or rejected figures if they found the postal vote too confusing to complete or made a mistake that spoilt their ballot paper.

2010's Polls Apart report suggests that instead of voting at a polling station or by post, 35% of disabled people would prefer online voting.²⁴ This format could reduce accessibility issues as the guidance provided online could be available in a variety of accessible formats (for example, easy read and BSL).

Signs of Deaf Engagement

It could be that Deaf people feel excluded from traditional political processes, such as voting in the general election, because of the access issues outlined above and this is why their participation is lower than that of the general population. However, many Deaf people are engaged in politics in other ways. Deaf groups have a history of campaigning to raise awareness of Deaf issues, including in 2003 when they lobbied for the UK Government to recognise BSL as a language.²⁵ More recently, Deaf campaigners have used social media and online petitions to demand a BSL Act and to challenge changes to Access to Work.^{26,27} Unlike the access problems facing Deaf people in formal politics, these campaigns have various accessible formats to suit all needs. To allow Deaf people to engage to a similar extent in traditional political processes, the same level of access must be provided.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm>
- 2 House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (2014). *Voter Engagement in the UK: Fourth Report of Session 2014-2015*. House of Commons.
- 3 <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/your-hearing/about-deafness-and-hearing-loss/statistics.aspx>
- 4 <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Hearing-impairment>
- 5 Sutton-Spence, R. & Woll, B. (1999). *The Linguistics of British Sign Language: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- 6 <https://www.ethnologue.com>
- 7 <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/your-hearing/ways-of-communicating.aspx>
- 8 <http://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote>
- 9 <http://www.signs2english.co.uk/>
- 10 <http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/register-to-vote>
- 11 <https://www.mencap.org.uk/easymanifestos>
- 12 [Labour Party 2015 BSL Manifesto](#)
- 13 [Liberal Democrats 2015 BSL Manifesto](#)
- 14 [Scottish National Party 2015 BSL Manifesto](#)
- 15 [Green Party 2015 BSL Manifesto](#)
- 16 <http://limpingchicken.com/2015/03/23/richard-turner-people-and-politics/>
- 17 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05r0s83>
- 18 <http://www.gov.uk/voting-in-the-uk>
- 19 https://www.leonardcheshire.org/who-we-are/news-and-media/news-stories/barriers-voting-disabled-voters-polling-stations-inaccessible-.VYqx2KZk_Op
- 20 Electoral Commission (2014). *Handbook for Polling Station Staff*.
- 21 Sanders, D., Clarke, H., Stewart, M. & Whiteley, P. (2005). *The 2005 General Election in Great Britain: Report for the Electoral Commission*.
- 22 <http://www.gov.uk/voting-in-the-uk/postal-voting>
- 23 Rallings, C. & Thrasher, M. (2015). *The 2015 General Election: Aspects of Participation and Administration*. LGC Elections Centre.
- 24 Capability Scotland, Disability Action & Scope (2010). *Polls Apart 2010*.
- 25 <https://bda.org.uk/campaigning-for-a-better-life/>
- 26 <http://limpingchicken.com/2013/02/26/deaf-news-key-deaf-community-figures-unite-to-begin-campaign-for-bsl-act/>
- 27 <http://www.stopchanges2atw.com/>