

Access To Democracy A Short Report by MDPAG Manchester 2010

1. Introduction

I visited a handful of polling stations in the afternoon of 15th September 2010 with representatives from Democratic Services. We focused on Polling Stations that had been noted as problematic. Specific feedback was given at the time of visit about each polling place and polling station. Some general comments are given below.

2. Parking

2.1 Several polling stations did not have parking spaces on site, relying on voters to park on the street. There are problems with this in relation to blue badge holders

2.2 There is no guarantee that a blue badge holder will be able to park close enough to the main entrance to get to the polling station.

2.3 The pavements outside two of the polling stations were narrow and there was an absence of dropped kerbs. This means that a blue badge holder who is a wheelchair user would have to park on the side of the street leading to the polling station.

2.4 The streets in question were crowded with cars in the normal run of the day. On polling day, they are likely to be even busier.

2.5 Some of the polling stations were sited on narrow pavements which were further blocked with cars parked on the pavements.

3. Parking Solutions

3.1 Try where possible to use venues which either have proper blue badge parking provision, or can make temporary provision for disabled drivers.

3.2 Only use other venues if there is no alternative.

3.3 Consider requesting dropped kerbs to be provided near the premises that need this provision – there should be a budget in the highways department for this kind of work and it is appropriate to request dropped kerbs near school buildings and community centres in any case.

3.4 If this is not an option, try and provide temporary dropped kerbs at places near the polling station on polling day.

3.5 Include detailed directions and bus routes if possible to encourage people to walk to the polling station where possible to ease pressure on traffic congestion, as this would enable voters who have to use cars to park more easily.

3.6 Consider getting traffic wardens out for two days prior to polling day to ticket people who park on pavements (it is illegal, damages pavements and causes obstruction).

4. Route to the polling stations.

4.1 Some routes from the parking or public entrance point were long and uneven.

4.2 Some routes to the polling stations were sloping with no handrails.

4.3 Where possible the route to the polling station should be level or (as in the case of the school where the sports hall was being used) there should be a clear understanding of a reasonable adjustment to allow a disabled driver to drive right up to the entrance along a pedestrian route in order to access the polling station.

5 Access Issues Concerning Doors

5.1 The entrance doors to many of the buildings were either double leaf doors or heavy doors or both, and some had inappropriately designed handles at inaccessible heights.

5.2 It should be noted that doors that are held open can create an access barrier for other disabled people. A visually impaired person may not perceive the edge of the door and may walk into it. Visually impaired people often use furniture as a way of negotiating a space. They will be expecting to feel for a door handle and this will give a clue that there is a doorway. This is especially the case if they are familiar with the building. If there is no door, where they are expecting it, this could lead to disorientation and confusion.

5.3 If doors are going to be propped open, the edge of the door should be clearly marked with hazard tape, or even protected with rubberised edging.

5.4 Another problem with the expectation that a door is kept open is that, if the weather outside is inclement (in May) then there will be a tendency

for staff inside the polling station (who are going to be sitting down for considerable periods and may themselves have impairments that are affected by draught and cold) to want to close the doors, especially as it gets later and darker in the evening. There could be safety implications about this too.

5.5 Consideration of the feelings of the staff should be made, and clear warnings should be given to those who are working in a building where the door is open for access purposes, so that they can prepare with suitable clothes. If it is essential for all the doors into a building to be kept open at all times on polling day, staff should be able to take regular comfort breaks in an enclosed room where hot drinks can be provided.

5.7 Buildings with open doors present a different acoustic environment, and staff may find that they could struggle to talk to voters, especially if either has a hearing impairment.

6. Door Solutions

6.1 Design for Access 2 manual says this about door furniture:

- Door and window weight should be as low as possible for the purpose and location. Hinges should be of sufficient strength and positioning for leaf width.
- Where possible, use power-assisted activators for windows and doors which are operated by remote control, or design the structure to allow for powered control in the future. In all cases devices should 'fail safe' for manual operation in case of power failure.
- Use fittings which are capable of being adapted to specific requirements.
- All handles, levers, catches, keys and locks should be large enough to hold easily and not be circular in design. Keys and locks should, where possible, be useable within a 90 degree radius. The use of sliding bolts is not recommended.
- Catches, handles and projections should contrast all in colour and luminance* with their surroundings.
- Door fastening mechanisms should be of the lever type and fixed at a height not exceeding 900mm. Where a lock is needed for privacy (for example, for toilets, changing rooms or counselling

rooms) this should be externally accessible, in case of an emergency, and should incorporate an 'engaged' indicator.

- Where horizontal handles are fitted these should be of minimum width 400mm and fixed 900mm above floor level.
- Diagonal and vertical 'D' type handles should be fixed at 900mm from the centre of the handle to the floor.
- Catches and locks should be smoothly free turning and maintained for low friction operation.

6.2 In some instances, it is recommended that a lowered handrail is provided by the electoral department prior to polling day.

6.3 In other cases, it was noted that both doors could be held open at all times.

6.3.1 In the cases of buildings with open doors, it is recommended that portable induction loops are provided in case they are requested. It should not be necessary to have portable induction loops in closed, quiet environments, as long as staff are suitably trained in deaf awareness issues.

6.3.2 As an alternative to the held open doors is an extra member of staff, to open the doors when necessary. Staff should be briefed that it is their role to do this, and constant vigilance will be required.

6.3.3 Where staff are on door opening duty, it may be appropriate to provide a door entry system that is clearly sited not more than 900mm from the floor, with both audible and visual indicators, so that a user can alert a member of staff to their presence.

6.4 It is understood that there are two members of staff on duty at each polling station at all times. It could be that one member of staff could be on 'door duty' whilst the other deals with the paperwork. Or it may be possible to site both members of staff within sight of the door.

6.5 Staff training is the key to a positive voter experience. People tend to make assumptions about disabled people which may not be correct, even if they have had some disability awareness training.

6.6 It is essential for staff to talk to the disabled person directly and not to anyone else.

6.7 Make it clear that assistance is available, but staff must wait to be asked. If they want to offer assistance they should ask the person if they need any assistance and be prepared to take no for an answer.

6.8 Staff offering assistance should be aware that many disabled people are fed up with people assuming that they are incapable, and might be quite brusque if asked by a member of staff if they need assistance, when it has already been made clear that assistance is available on request. Replies from staff of 'there's no need to be like that, I'm only trying to help' can lead to conflict and negative feelings.

6.9 Internal lighting levels should be maintained at a reasonable level for visually impaired people.

6.10 Queues are difficult for people with mobility impairments who don't use wheelchairs. Seats should be provided for people with mobility impairments to sit on, and those seats should be suitable for adults, with a seat at least 480mm from the floor and arms, to enable a person to manoeuvre themselves out of a sitting position.

6.11 If the route from the nearest blue badge spaces or convenient parking spaces is more than 30m, then seating should be provided en route. Again this needs to be suitably designed with a seat at least 480mm from the floor and with arms.

7. General Feedback on voting from our members

7.1 Many members felt that the postal voting service was ideal for them.

7.2 For those who go and vote, the feedback has been

- Try and use polling stations that are on the ground floor – there was a poorly designed lift to one of the polling stations used last year and it caused some difficulty.
- Lighting levels were poor and led to it being difficult to see, both on the route to the polling station and within the station itself.
- Well meaning staff made the voting experience difficult, talking to the companion not the disabled person, making assumptions about the person's access requirements.
- On the other hand, when there was a queue at the polling station, a member of staff who could have been telling people where to go did not and this led to a disabled person having to queue twice, having got into the wrong queue.

- Lack of signs showing people the accessible route.
- Lack of suitable parking.
- Lack of seating whilst queuing.
- Long internal route from doorway to polling station, and lack of seating.
- Small cramped booths with low tables that were difficult to use.

8. Conclusion

8.1 This small study has focussed on a few barriers at a handful of polling places. There are many other polling places where access barriers exist.

8.2 It is recommended that as many polling places are surveyed as possible, using a standard checklist that covers all the issues for all the disabled people.

8.3 There is always a danger of trying to remove barriers for one group of people (usually wheelchair users) and in doing so, creating barriers for other groups of people, or ignoring the very real access requirements of a much larger number of disabled people, those who can walk but not very far. This group of people has a completely different set of access requirements to wheelchair users.

8.4 It is recommended that, before the survey takes place, staff are trained to complete it properly so that meaningful information is gathered.

8.5 It is recommended that polling station staff are trained on access issues prior to the next election.

8.6 It is recommended that a short guide to dealing with disabled voters is produced in conjunction with disabled voters and sent to every polling station as a reference for the staff there.

8.7 It is recommended that, where particular difficulties have been identified in a specific location, staff are trained, by disabled people, to deal appropriately with the reasonable adjustments outlined in this project.

