

Participation in the 2005 General Election by People with a Learning Disability

Political Participation

It is generally accepted that: people with an intellectual disability are under-represented at the polling booth. The presumption is, following the UK Social Model of Disability, that they are denied the right to vote as a consequence of barriers - inaccessible polling stations and documentation - and, prejudicial attitudes against people with a 'mental disability'.

A recent survey found that 31% of people with an intellectual disability said they voted in the 2001 General Election compared to a figure of 71% for the general population.

- *Valuing People* included a specific commitment to support people with a learning disability to vote
- The *Electoral Administration Act 2006* requires that reasonable and practicable steps are taken to ensure that polling stations, along with relevant literature and forms, are accessible to people with disabilities (physical and sensory impairments) and those low literacy skills.
- The *Electoral Administration Act 2006* removed the common law impediments to voting on grounds of 'lunacy' and 'idiotcy'.

Our Study

Following the General Election in May 2005 we sought to find out the:

- percentage of people known to the learning disability service in Cambridgeshire who were **registered to vote**
- percentage who **voted** and whether they voted in person, by **post** or by **proxy**

We also considered whether factors such as: **Age, Sex, Type of residence & neighbourhood deprivation** influenced either registration and/or turnout.

The Cambridgeshire Learning Disability Partnership (CLDP) provided a list of the 1616 individual known to their service aged 18 or over on the 5th May 2005. This list included the service user's name, postal address (allowing identification of residence type) and date of birth.

Individual parliamentary constituencies and electoral wards were identified using the *All Fields Post Code Directory* (now known as the National Statistics Postcode Directory).

Copies of the marked electoral register for the 2005 General Election for six of the seven electoral constituencies in Cambridgeshire were obtained from the Department for Constitutional Affairs (Peterborough, a unitary authority in Cambridgeshire, did not provide details of people using their learning disability service).

Method

The marked electoral registers were searched for each adult on the list provided by the CLDP. Searching and matching names and addresses established i) whether a person who was known to CLDP services was i) registered to vote (assuming there had been no change of address); and if registered, ii) whether he or she had voted.

Of the 1616 names and address supplied by the CLDP 92% were matched with the marked electoral register (n=1491).

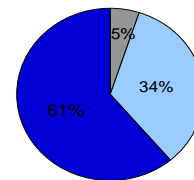
Also recorded was whether an individual was registered for a postal or proxy vote (a used proxy vote is marked on the register); the type of residence, family home or supported living (nursing home, supported living, Independent living) and, neighbourhood deprivation scores.

Principal Findings

Participation

East of England region

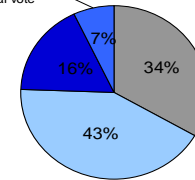
N = 4,100,000



Cambridge Learning Disability Sample

N = 1491

Registered for a postal vote

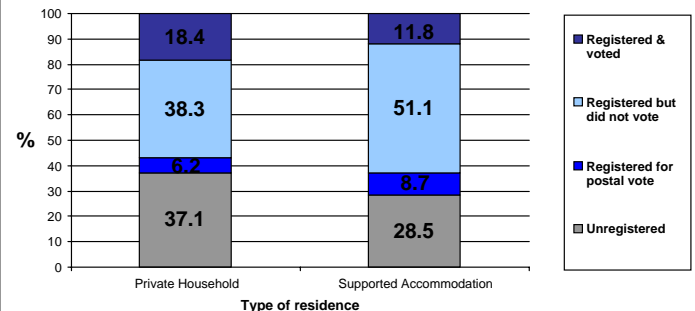


Unregistered
 Registered but did not vote
 Voted

People with a learning disability known to services are less likely to be registered, and less likely to vote, than members of the general population.

Participation by Accommodation type

Percentages of people with LD in private households and supported accommodation who participated in the general election



Type of residence affected both rates of registration and voting. People in supported accommodation (residential care homes, supported living homes or nursing homes) were less likely to vote in the election than those in private households, despite a higher rate of registration. People in supported accommodation were more likely to be registered than those in private households (Fisher's Exact Test $p=0.001$), but were less likely to turnout to vote when registered (Fisher's Exact Test $p=0.00$).

Discussion

Can the confirmed low level of participation at the 2005 General election by people with a learning disability be attributed to disabling barriers and prejudices?

What role are the attitudes of carers - both family and professional - playing in determining registration rates and voter turnout?

What role is the degree of intellectual impairment playing in decisions to register a voter and in supporting them to vote?

Does it make sense for legislation regulating elections, the Disability Rights Commission, and campaigning voluntary sector organizations, to discuss 'disability' without reference to the specifics of voting with intellectual impairment?