Our Vote, Our Voice

Peer training about elections by people with Learning Difficulties.

The Election Experience
of people with Learning Difficulties

(Interim Report August 2007)

(The content of this report has been gathered throughout the life of the Elections Project. Figures are the result of a survey on the 3 May Election. Quotes are a combination of survey responses throughout the project, and the result of a Feedback Day for the project organised in Dundee on 6 July 2007.)
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Introduction

Outside the Box has been given a grant by the Electoral Commission to produce a pack encouraging people with learning difficulties and people with autism to take part in elections. By the end of the project we will have a toolkit, DVD, posters, leaflets and useful contact details.

In order to find out what people need from the project, Outside the Box has been collecting opinions about elections.

It was felt by all the people who took part that it was important to tell other people what they thought. This report has been written so that the voices of people with learning difficulties can be heard.

The opinions outlined in the following report come from a number of sources:

- Questionnaires sent to groups across Scotland between February and June 2007.
- A survey sent out to groups of people who have learning difficulties following the Scottish elections on May 3 2007.
- Feedback from the Stop & Think Feedback Day held in Dundee on 6 July 2007 in order to assess the project and get opinion.
- Opinions gathered by People First Fraserburgh in workshops they held to explain elections to other people.

The responses have been collected from all over Scotland, including groups and people in:

- Edinburgh
- Glasgow
- Aberdeen
- Perth
- Fraserburgh
- Borders
- East Neuk, Cupar, St Andrews and other parts of Fife
- Dumfries & Galloway
- Inverness
- Shetland

Outside the Box Development Support would like to thank everybody who took part in this project, and who took the time to talk to us and send us feedback.

The contents of this paper covers what people have been telling us. Three important things to people are; the process of voting, issue that are important to them and having confidence in yourself and your right to vote.

Although these are three separate issues, they are very much intertwined for the people we spoke to. We have deliberately not separated some issues in order to reflect that.
What we did


We started by sending out discussion sheets and information about the project. People started to tell us what they thought about elections.

We sent out information reminding people that they had to register if they wanted to vote. We explained how to register, where to find out more information, and what registration meant.

We also sent out posters. The Key Housing Politics Group in Glasgow helped us make the posters by posing for photographs!

We launched a website to tell people with learning difficulties about elections, and to make sure there was a place where people could find all the information they needed. People First Fraserburgh started telling other people about elections.

Then we used ideas other people had, and some new ideas to produce a guide to voting in the Scottish Parliament and Local Council elections on the 3rd of May 2007.

We made more posters for the election and People First Fraserburgh and the Key Housing Politics Group in Glasgow helped us make those posters by posing for more photographs! Key Housing also helped by producing activities to explain voting.

After the election we sent out a survey to find out what people had thought about voting. We asked people to tell us their voting stories. People First Fraserburgh and the Out of the Darkness Theatre Company got busy filming the DVD.

On July 6 2007 we had a big conference in Dundee. Over 40 people came. We had a great day talking about voting and choices, how important voting was and what we would do if we ruled the world! We also saw some great drama from People First Fraserburgh and got a chance to try it as well!

Now we are writing this report to tell people what we have done so far. But this is not the end! We have lots more to do…

By the Autumn the finished information pack about elections and a DVD will be ready to send out to people. People will be able to use it to tell other people about elections and voting.
People’s Experiences of the 2007 Elections

Did you vote in the election on 3 May 2007?

Respondents: 49
Yes: 35
No: 14

Are elections important?

Respondents: 17
Yes: 14
No: 1
Not bothered: 2
Do you know who won the Scottish Parliament elections?

Respondents: 17  Yes: 12  No: 3  No, but I want to: 2

Do you know who won the local council election in your area?

Respondents: 17  Yes: 4  No: 11  No, but I want to: 2
Our Voice

Mark’s Story

Mark said his family filled in his postal vote.

They did not ask him who he wanted to vote for.

He would have liked to have taken the bus to the polling station and voted by himself.

Kate’s Story

Kate said that she had to concentrate but she voted ok.

She did have to help her Mum out because it was different to the way she normally voted.

Jane’s Story

‘Jane’s secondary carer asked Jane’s carer whether Jane had voted and the answer was a ‘scathing’ no.

It was felt by Jane’s carer that Jane was not in any way capable of making a decision on a vote or to understand why and that it was silly to try.

The secondary carer thought that we all choose to vote in different ways and Jane knows what Jane likes.

Some people chose by favourite colour or by the person not the Party or because someone promised to do one nice thing even if the rest of the promises were not.

Some people have even been known to close their eyes and pick where the cross will land!

Jane does know what Jane likes and who she likes, and is capable of showing happiness or disproval, so we should assume choice.’
Jay’s Story

‘I enjoy voting. I just took my time and choose the candidates I thought would make a good job.

I took my polling card along and showed it to the staff. They gave me my ballot papers.

They were friendly but did not offer me any help. I didn’t really need it but some people might.

I think it would be good to have different days for elections. It could be difficult for some people to understand.’

Peter’s Story

One member said he thinks it is important to have a private vote.

‘My dad stood for local councillor but we don’t talk about it with each other.’

Steve’s Story

Steve found it easy as he had voted many times before. But, he did have to teach his partner about the differences between the papers… when to put a cross and when to put a number.

Carol’s Story

Carol said she did not get enough help from the officers at the polling station.

‘It was a nightmare and very confusing. Usually you fold the paper, this time you were not supposed to. There were lots of spoiled papers because of this confusion.’

(Names have been changed to protect anonymity.)
Our Vote
Why did you vote?

‘I voted because it was important for me to do.’

‘I voted because I wanted to.’

71% of the people we spoke to had voted.

Lots of people voted because they thought it was important. A lot of people voted because they wanted to, and because they have the right to.

People also voted because they want to have their voices heard and they want things to change.

‘So that our opinions are heard.’

‘Everyone has the right to vote and I used mine to help us get the best services we can.’

‘To make sure the right party gets in.’

‘To put the right person in the government.’

‘If you don’t vote, you can’t complain.’

‘I feel if I do it maybe we’ll get listened to.’

‘I voted because if I didn’t things wouldn’t get done. Then someone you don’t want might get elected.’

‘Because we need help, if we don’t get help to vote we can’t get things done and if we didn’t vote they wouldn’t help the councillors to help in the community or pay for places for us to go, it costs a lot, we need funding.’

‘No reason not to. You are voting for the right people to take on the case of where you live and they should take into account people with learning difficulties and they should come and see all people with learning difficulties so they can see the problems.’
Why did you not vote?

‘I’m not registered.’

29% of the people we spoke to had not voted.

Most of the people who didn’t vote were not registered to vote.

There were other reasons too.

‘The papers didn’t arrive!’

‘I’ve never voted because I don’t like politics and I don’t understand voting.’

‘I’d like to vote but I’ve never voted.’

“I’d like to learn but nobody told me what’s going on”

‘I’ve never done it, I think I’ve got to ask the doctor because I’m on a section.’

‘I’ve never voted, it’s awfie confusing.’
Are elections important?

‘Yes!’

82% of the people we spoke to thought elections were important.

They also had opinions about politics, and the important of choosing the right people for the job.

‘Elections are important but politicians don’t always do what they say they’re going to.’

‘There aren’t enough people with learning disabilities in the government.’

‘It’s confusing but still important.’

‘It is important to elect the right person to do the job.’

‘I think it’s important people with learning difficulties get to vote but I’ve never done it before.’

‘Yes – elections are important so that people can get decent services and transport.’
How did you feel about voting?

“Voting made me happy!”

Almost everybody we spoke to who had voted felt positive about the experience, even if for some people, it was a bit scary or confusing.

‘You had to think about it – some numbers and some crosses!”

‘I was excited to vote.’

‘A bit nervous.’

‘Getting better.’

‘I felt fine.’

‘Happy.’

‘It gives you independence.’

‘It gives you the chance to elect the person you want.’

‘Officers at the polling station gave a good explanation on how to vote on each paper.’

‘I feel good and proud that I voted.’

Some people though, did not have a good experience of voting.

‘One member went along to the polling station but couldn’t manage to vote. He would have liked some help.’

‘Tom said that no one in the polling station had been helpful. He said that one of the people there had been angry with an old lady who needed some help.’
People also said it was important to find out who had won, or to get help to find out.

‘Everyone found the voting paper very hard to understand even though we had talked about it a lot.’

‘I got a letter to register and then a card to vote. I’m worried it is changing though. Before it was a cross and now you have to put numbers. Does that mean you vote for 4 people? It is confusing.’

‘I had lots of help. A voting officer went through the ballot paper explaining everything. But I don’t know who won. Nobody in my group does.’

‘No one told me who won.’
Are there things you want the people who have been elected to do?

What are they?

‘To think more about what people with disabilities want.’

The people we spoke to had lots of different ideas about what they wanted politicians to do.

‘Look after the environment.’

‘Make sure disabled people are heard and that they have someone to talk to. Also to make sure they answer the questions we have for them.’

‘Help me to talk about my rights.’

‘To help make me feel safe in my local area.’

‘To make sure that people with a disability get a proper house, job and get a chance to do things like everybody else.’

‘Bullying and harassment and personal safety are important things.’

‘We need better transport. And we should let people keep their bus passes so they don’t just stay in the house because they can’t afford the fares. It’s not good for people.’

‘People with learning difficulties should be able to earn more before their benefits are cut.’
Do you know how to contact the people who have been elected and tell them what you think?

70% of the people we spoke to knew who had won the Scottish Parliament elections.

24% of people knew who had won the Council election in their area.

64% of people did not know who had won their Local Council election.

Most people did not know how to contact their representatives. People thought support staff could help with that.

‘No.’

‘No, but I could with staff help.’

‘Not sure.’

‘I think there is a number you call but I do not know it.’

Some people did know how to contact their representatives.

‘I can email them or ring them up or go to their surgeries.’

‘Write to MSPs, go to the Parliament.’

‘I would phone or email them.’

‘Meet people by going into surgeries and they take on our views and action them, it’s a good way to make contact.’

Other people pointed out that it is hard to know the difference between the different people who get elected.

‘I don’t really understand the difference between MPs, MSPs and Councillors.’
Is there anything that would make it easier for you to vote?

The people we spoke to had strong views on what would make it easier for them to vote.

Their views covered a number of different topics:

Voting Papers:

- ‘Easy to read voting papers.’
- ‘It was a wee bit hard to fill out the form, so that could be easier.’
- ‘Information Officers at all polling stations to help voters understand the ballot papers.’
- ‘Colours of different parties on the voting papers.’
- ‘Get rid of the voting papers used recently as I could not follow them.’
- ‘Ballot papers should have photographs of candidates to make it easier.’
- ‘Symbols should be used.’
- ‘All election information should be available in easy-read versions.’
- ‘Somebody said that Enable Scotland and Capability Scotland had objected to the voting paper.’

A lot of people thought photographs of candidates should be on the ballot papers.

Some people at the Stop & Think Feedback Day in Perth on July 6th 2007 also thought that papers should be available in large print, Braille and easy read formats.

‘It is not so easy to have a private vote when you need help.’
People also had views on the polling places themselves:

‘Someone to explain it so I can understand. Instead of leaflets, an audio-tape to explain what to do.’

‘Clear notices at the voting station telling you how to vote.’

‘There should be more help from the staff at the polling station – e.g. to direct you to the right booth to vote in.’

‘Disability awareness training for the polling station staff would be good.’

‘More help for older people to get to the polling place.’

Some people had ideas about different ways of doing things:

‘Vote at home.’

‘More officials going round the houses to help people with disabilities and learning difficulties.’

‘More public meetings.’

‘We should be able to vote online.’

‘Postal voting should be encouraged. (I will use a postal vote).’

‘Support staff should help more.’

They used different language from us…I can understand but other people cannot understand….they need to change their wording and how they say it.’

‘More info packs targeting people with learning difficulties.’
How do you decide who you vote for?

One of the things people have been telling us is that it is very hard to decide who to vote for. There are so many leaflets and things to read that some people are put off.

‘I never understand what they mean or tell us, it is confusing. They sometimes say they will come and see but I would not know what to say if they knocked on my door, I think they should come and explain better. Maybe make a big huge paper with party and what the party promised like an easy read poster for them all, one big sheet, maybe a photo.’

People said they got their information from leaflets, TV and radio. They said that information should be easy to understand.

People didn’t really understand the difference between MPs, MSPs and Councillors.

Lots of people and groups had suggestions for things that would help:

‘You should read the election leaflets that are posted through your door. Ask someone for help if you find this difficult.’

‘You should go to meetings where the candidates talk and ask them questions.’

‘Watch election programmes on television.’

‘Ask candidates what they will do for people with learning disabilities. Try and decide if they answered you honestly.’

‘Did you feel they were interested in your problems?’

‘Invite candidates to meet your group.’

‘Look at what candidates have done before. Did they keep their promises.’

‘We listen to what the MP, MSP or Councillor says they will do for us, if they do not do what they said they would do then we do not vote for them next time.’
Asking for help

One thing people have been telling us is that it is important to ask for help.

It is also important to people that staff, support workers and family members can help them and encourage them to make their own choice.

‘I need to ask my key worker to come with me.’

‘I’ll ask my friend to help me.’

‘I was allowed to watch the ballot papers on the tables, I understand the counting.’

‘I enjoy voting and managed fine with the help of my support worker.’

Self-confidence

People also told us about how important it was to have confidence in themselves.

‘Last time I went along my name was not on the list, I said “that’s not right”.’

‘I thought about it before and decided I really wanted to vote.’

‘People who are in hospital have the right to vote, but staff don’t let them register or don’t let them go to vote on the day. Staff need to be told that people can vote and should get information and support to register and vote.’

‘We need a disabled person to be an Ambassador for other disabled people.’

‘I talk to friends and family, but I decide who I like most. Then I vote for them. It is my decision.’

‘I make my own choice.’
Helpful ideas

Edinburgh Advocating Together has produced a list of things they think are important about elections.

- The voting papers should be simpler.
- Someone should be there to help people with learning difficulties.
- One way of finding out who to vote for is to ask politicians what they have done before.
- Meetings like hustings can be a good way of finding out as long as they don’t use jargon and they are honest.
- A lot of people have never voted.
- A lot of people think it won’t make a difference.
- A lot of people need help and support to vote. Work needs to be done with people who support them, like parents and support workers.
- People can find out about voting in advocacy groups.
- People need plenty of time to make up their mind, they should not be rushed.
- Support workers have to help people because a lot of parents are getting older and they can’t support their children anymore. Also, some parents will tell people what to vote – that’s not right.
- It would be useful to have a list of all parties/candidates explaining what they do, instead of lots of leaflets coming through the door.
- We need easy read documents, and in different formats like large print or Braille. We need clear information about who we can ask for this.
- Support workers need to help people look through the information.
- The support agencies need to get the information about voting to make sure all support workers have it and will help people with it if they want to.
• Support workers and maybe parents or carers need training to learn how to tell people about voting without telling them what to vote for.

**Edinburgh Advocating Together have also told us about the things they think are important about making choices and decisions.**

• Advocacy groups can give people confidence to speak up and learn to make up their own minds.

• People need plenty of time to make big decisions.

• Some parents want to protect their children even when they are adults. They want to decide for them because they think they know what’s best. Adults should be allowed to make their own choices.

• People need someone they trust (an advocate or maybe a social worker) to help them to put their point across when other people are not listening.

• Support should be flexible, some people still don’t get to do what they want and it’s not right. Often there is not enough time or not enough staff.

**Perth ACE Group had a pretend vote so that they could practice before voting day.**

‘We had a “pretend” election with Allison, Euan and Lee Ann as candidates.

• Allison was the candidate for the Dance Fever Party.
• Euan was the candidate for the Billion Dollar Party.
• Lee Ann was the candidate for the Ordinary People’s Party.

‘The candidates talked about what they would do if they were elected and then we voted.

• Lee Ann got 6 votes.
• Allison got 2 votes.
• Euan got 1 vote.

‘If this had been a real election Lee Ann would have won. A big thank you to Lee Ann, Allison and Euan for taking part.’
Finding out more

Below there is a list of useful places for finding out more information about elections.

**www.votescotland.com**
This website tells you more about voting in Scotland

**www.aboutmyvote.co.uk**
This website is by the Electoral Commission. It tells you all about registering and how to vote. It is Access Enabled.

**www.electoralcommission.org.uk**
This is the main website for the Electoral Commission. It has information about elections all over the country.

**www.drc-gb.org/easyread**
This is the Disability Rights Commission website. It has lots of useful information about voting. It is easy to read.

**www.vote.org.uk**
This is Capability Scotland’s website called Vote 2007.

**www.otbds.org/vote**
This is the Outside the Box voting website. It has lots of useful information about voting. It is easy to read.

**www.ldascotland.org**
Before the Scottish Election in 2007, The Learning Disability Alliance made two documents. One explains what people think should be done for people with disabilities, and the other explains what the different Parties in Scotland planned to do if they won the election. You can find them in the campaigns section of their website.
The Next Steps…

Outside the Box is now working on the final part of the Elections Project.

The final part is to produce an information pack and a DVD about voting that people with learning difficulties can use to explain voting to other people with learning difficulties.

We will be taking all the ideas people have given us and using them to help us produce the final pack.

We will be showing the pack to some people to get their opinions.

People First Fraserburgh and Out of the Darkness Theatre Company in Elgin have been working with us.

They have been very busy producing the DVD.

We hope that the pack and the DVD will be available in the Autumn of 2007.

You can find out more about what we have been doing on our website:

www.otbds.org/vote.