

March 2018

## **Royal Blind submission to the Scottish Government's Consultation Paper on Electoral Reform**

### **Introduction**

Royal Blind is Scotland's largest vision impairment organisation. Our vision is to see a community in which blind and partially sighted people, including those who have other disabilities, are fully included and lead fulfilling lives. We operate only in Scotland and care for, educate and employ blind and partially sighted people from across the country, with occasional referrals from the wider UK. We are wholly separate from the RNIB, although we work in close partnership.

We support people of all ages - babies and toddlers at our pre-school playgroup; children and young people at the Royal Blind School and Kidscene after school and holiday club; young adults through our supported accommodation and respite care and older people in our care homes. We also run the Scottish Braille Press, which provides large print, audio and Braille transcription for individuals and businesses across the UK. Our sister charity, Scottish War Blinded, gives free support to ex-service men and women, no matter if they lost their sight during or after service. Together, we operate as the Royal Blind Group.

### **Responses to questions in the Consultation Paper**

The charity wishes to focus on those issues which are most directly relevant to the ability of vision impaired people to take part in elections. Therefore we have confined our answers to questions which raise the issues which most concern Royal Blind, and those are questions 2,3,7,10,12,13,14,15,23 and 24.

#### **QUESTION 2: Do you have any other comments or suggestions on term lengths?**

Royal Blind does not have a specific view on what the length of the parliamentary term should be, but believes it is important to take steps which avoid clashes between elections to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish local authorities. There are important and distinct policy issues at a Scottish Government and local authority level which affect people with vision impairment and the services which they rely on. Royal Blind believes it is important the political debates which occur during elections around the future direction of these policies should take place separately. This is vital so there can be the appropriate level of focus on the separate proposals and manifestos for the different tiers of government as they affect people with vision impairment, and so policy debates are not clouded or confused by elections for parliament and local authorities taking place at the same time.

**QUESTION 3: Do you agree that the Electoral Management Board and the Board's Convener should be given the same functions in relation to Scottish Parliament elections as they already have for local government elections?**

Royal Blind is supportive of this proposal. The charity notes the current remit of the Electoral Management Board includes “the operational detail of planning the delivery of the local government elections at the national level; promoting best practice by providing advice, guidance and information; and providing strategic consideration of legislation and policy.” Each of these areas of responsibility are crucial both for voters with vision impairment and candidates as well, and Royal Blind shares the ambition of the Scottish Government that there should be more disabled candidates for elected office in future. Effective planning at a local level must ensure accessibility issues to polling places are fully considered for people who are vision impaired, many of whom will have mobility challenges as well. Strategic consideration of legislation and policy is also important. It is vital policies are developed which are informed by learning from poor experiences of participation by disabled people in elections, that policies are modified to take account of innovation which promotes participation, and legislation is in place which enables such developments in policy to be implemented effectively. Promoting best practice is also crucial for those officiating at elections and for candidates and parties. Royal Blind would like to see more promotion of advice to parties and candidates on how they can provide accessible election publications to voters with vision impairment, and published far enough in advance of elections so that those voters have a reasonable amount of time to consider that information. In developing such guidance on best practice we would wish to see the Electoral Management Board conduct ongoing dialogue with those organisations with expertise in providing services to people with vision impairment and also with vision impaired voters and candidates directly so there can be learning from their experiences to inform practice at future elections.

**QUESTION 7: Do you have any other comments or suggestions about who should have the role of Returning Officer or how Returning Officers should be paid?**

Royal Blind does not have any specific view about who should have the role of Returning Officer or how they should be paid, but the charity believes it is essential that those people taking up the position of Returning Officer have an appropriate level of awareness of accessibility issues for people with vision impairment in taking part in elections. Awareness of the importance of accessibility for disabled people and the issues this involves should be part of the person specification and job description for Returning Officers, and appropriate information and training on accessibility should be made available to them.

**QUESTION 10: Do you agree that, in order to counteract the list order effect, a change should be made to the way in which candidates are listed on election ballot papers? If so, what form of new system would you favour: rotation; randomisation; alphabetical-reverse alphabetical? Any other?**

The consultation document itself acknowledges: “There are concerns that moving away from alphabetical ordering may also lead to additional difficulties for those who have difficulty reading, due to visual impairment or for other reasons.” Royal Blind understands the concerns over the “list order effect” but from the perspective of vision impaired voters finds it difficult to conceive how a change from the current format of ballot papers would not be detrimental. For a vision impaired voter an alphabetical list can be helpful in helping them more easily locate on the ballot paper their preferred

candidate. It is hard to see how moving to a different, more complex system would be beneficial for voters who are vision impaired.

**QUESTION 12: Voting Machines: Would you be happy to use an electronic voting machine in a polling place instead of a traditional ballot paper? Would you like voting to be possible on more than one day? Would you like to be able to vote at any polling place in Scotland? Do you have any other comments?**

The key aspect for Royal Blind in the introduction of any new technology for the purpose of voting is that it is accessible for people who are vision impaired. New technology can be helpful, but not if it means a vision impaired voter would actually need more assistance to cast their vote from staff and potentially further diminish their ability to cast their ballot in secret – an issue which the charity is already concerned about in the current system. While new technology can help, there are already challenges in ensuring staff can provide appropriate assistance with current technology, for example tactile voting devices, and that there is the right support for vision impaired voters to use them.

The ability to vote on more than one day is a development which could help vision impaired people who vote in person. This would give them an opportunity to vote earlier at a time when polling stations are less busy which could help them in having enough time to cast their vote and appropriate support from polling staff who would be under less time pressure. It may also be beneficial for vision impaired people to be able to vote at any polling place. The challenges in accessing transport for many vision impaired people will mean not all could take advantage of this, but for those that could it could enable them to use a polling station which vision impairment organisations have recommended as being particularly accessible for them, and where they could be confident staff had received awareness training to support vision impaired voters, for example in using tactile voting devices. But the priority must be to ensure that all polling places are accessible, with appropriate signage and in buildings which are accessible for disabled people, and for all polling staff have access to relevant advice and training.

**QUESTION 13: Internet and Mobile Phone Voting. If internet or mobile phone voting was available, would you choose to use that rather than vote at a polling place or by post? If internet or mobile phone voting was available, would you be more likely to vote?**

Royal Blind acknowledges that there will be debates around security in regards to this proposal, but both Royal Blind and our sister charity Scottish War Blinded provide training to vision impaired people on using digital technology which can help them read documents and go online, using large print, audio software and assistive equipment. Online voting conducted through a straightforward format could benefit many vision impaired people, although the issue of digital exclusion is a real concern for many people living with sight loss and so the need to have a process of voting in person which supports people with vision impairment will remain vital.

**QUESTION 14: Do you think that we should move to a rolling programme of reviews of local government electoral arrangements?**

Royal Blind has no strong view on the timescales for reviewing local government electoral arrangements but believes that review processes should ensure people who are vision impaired have the same opportunities as everyone else to input into the decision making process, be informed about proposals and have their views included. The advantage of

having all boundaries for local authorities reviewed at the same time is that it makes it easier for third sector organisations to ensure their membership and those they represent are made aware a review is ongoing and to encourage and support them to have their say in the process.

**QUESTION 15: Independence of boundary reviews: Should Scottish Ministers be able to change the recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland on Scottish Parliament constituencies and council wards? Should the Scottish Parliament be able to challenge the recommendations of the Boundary Commission on Scottish Parliament constituencies and council wards? Should the recommendations of the Commission be implemented without change?**

Royal Blind has no strong view. Wherever the final decision is made it needs to be evident that the public have been consulted ahead of that decision and that disabled people, including those who are vision impaired, have had an equal opportunity to take part in that consultation.

**QUESTION 23: What other action could the Scottish Government take to widen access to and remove barriers to voting and elected office?**

Royal Blind welcomes the pilot of the Access to Elected Office Fund (Scotland), which provided support to disabled people standing for elected office, administered by Inclusion Scotland and funded by the Scottish Government, providing financial assistance to 44 potential candidates of whom thirty nine were selected as candidates and fifteen successfully elected.

We believe this was a successful outcome in helping candidates in the provision of, for example, accessible transport or communications support. We hope the scope of the fund will be broadened, that it will continue and support more candidates in the future.

To help encourage more vision impaired people to vote and stand in elections it is vital that they have the right support and encouragement to take part in elections and learn about democracy while in education. That is why Royal Blind has highlighted the need for children and young people who are blind and partially sighted to receive support from teachers with qualifications in vision impairment, whose numbers have reduced at a time of increased need. These qualified teachers will be able to ensure vision impaired pupils have the right skills, information and advice to take part in elections once they are old enough to vote.

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