Learning Disability England

Submission from Learning Disability England to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Political participation of persons with disabilities – the experience of people with learning disabilities in the United Kingdom

About Learning Disability England

Learning Disability England is a membership organisation that brings together people with learning disabilities, families, friends, and paid supporters on an equal basis. The organisation works to make sure that people with learning disabilities are treated equally and living good lives. LDE connects members to share knowledge, influence policy, and drive social change. Members include self-advocacy groups, family carers, provider organisations, and individuals with lived experience.

Learning Disability England is part of a growing movement that believes people with learning disabilities must be at the centre of decisions about their own lives, including decisions made through democratic and political systems.

People with a learning disability and elected office

There have been examples of success.

These include:

- **Gavin Harding**: In 2011, Gavin Harding became the first person with a learning disability to be elected as a local councillor in the UK, representing a ward in Selby, Yorkshire. He was an advocate for people with disabilities and supported "Hear My Voice" campaign to encourage others with learning disabilities to vote and get involved in politics.
- **Sara Pickard**: An engagement officer with a learning disability, Sara Pickard was elected as a local councillor and has been politically active for two decades. She is also known for her work with the organization Mencap Cymru.

There are other examples of people serving on local council or parish councils but they are rare and we are not aware of any learning disabled Members of Parliament in the UK.
People with learning disabilities still face barriers to political participation. In the 2022 LGA Councillor Census, only 15.5% of councillors reported a disability, compared to over 20% of the general population.

1. Data and monitoring on representation

There is very limited national data on the political representation of people with learning disabilities in the UK. While disability data is sometimes collected in relation to voting access or public appointments, it rarely distinguishes between types of disability. This means that representation of people with learning disabilities in elected positions is largely invisible in national statistics.

The UK Electoral Commission and Office for National Statistics collect data on voter turnout and political participation among disabled people generally, but there is no consistent monitoring of how many people with learning disabilities stand for election or hold office at local or national levels. Existing information relies on individual case studies, self-reporting, or small-scale research projects often led by self-advocacy and academic collaborations.

The lack of clear data makes it difficult to monitor progress, understand barriers, or design evidence-based interventions. This invisibility contributes to the continued underrepresentation of people with learning disabilities in decision-making roles.

2. Legal restrictions on running in elections or holding public office

The UK does not have explicit legal bans on people with learning disabilities standing for election, but there are still indirect legal and procedural barriers.

Under the Mental Health Act 1983 and associated electoral law, individuals detained under certain mental health provisions can be disqualified from serving as Members of Parliament or from some local authority positions. While these rules are primarily targeted at people detained for psychiatric reasons, their existence reinforces harmful assumptions that people with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities lack capacity to perform public duties.

In theory, anyone who can meet eligibility criteria (for example, age and citizenship) can stand for election. In practice, returning officers or political parties may question a candidate's capacity to understand nomination papers, campaign responsibilities, or governance duties. There are no formal supports or accessible processes to help individuals with learning disabilities navigate candidacy requirements or public office responsibilities.

This lack of reasonable accommodation indirectly discriminates against people who may require communication support or easy-read materials. It can also discourages potential candidates from even attempting to run for office.

3. Stigma and ableist attitudes

People with learning disabilities continue to face deep-seated stigma about their competence, intelligence, and decision-making capacity. .

There is still a widespread assumption that people with learning disabilities cannot understand complex political issues, or that they are too vulnerable to participate independently. These beliefs can be internalised, leading many individuals to doubt their own right to engage in civic life.

Media coverage and political discourse also rarely include the voices of people with learning disabilities. As one Learning Disability England self-advocate member put it, "We are talked about in policies but not asked to make them."

These attitudes are reflected within political parties too. Few parties have accessible materials or support for potential candidates with learning disabilities, and party structures often assume high levels of literacy and bureaucratic competence.

4. Other barriers to entering politics and holding public office

Beyond stigma, people with learning disabilities face a range of structural and practical barriers to political participation:

a. Accessibility barriers:
Most political information, campaign materials, and election procedures are not produced in easy-read or accessible formats. Election websites,

nomination papers, and public consultations often use complex language. This makes it difficult for people with learning disabilities to understand what they are voting for or how to stand as a candidate.

b. Financial barriers:
Standing for election typically requires personal funding or the ability to take unpaid time off work, both of which are challenging for many people with learning disabilities who are disproportionately affected by poverty and insecure employment. Campaigning may require travel, publicity materials, or technology that are financially out of reach without external support.

c. Lack of inclusive political culture:
Even when formal barriers are low, the culture of politics remains inaccessible. Meetings, council papers, and policy discussions are often long, jargon-filled, and dominated by professionals. Without accessible versions or support to participate meaningfully, elected roles can become isolating rather than empowering.

d. Intersecting discrimination:
People with learning disabilities often experience multiple layers of disadvantage, including gender, race, or socio-economic inequality, that compound the barriers to representation. Disabled women, and particularly those from minority backgrounds, are even less visible in public office.

5. Good practice and support measures

As of October 2025, there is no government-run "Access to Elected Office" fund available for candidates across the UK.

- **Fund closure**: The most recent Access to Elected Office Fund and its successor, the EnAble Fund for Elected Office, both closed in 2020 and have not been re-established.
- **Future plans**: The government's 2024 Disability Action Plan promised a new scheme for 2025 to provide financial support to disabled people seeking elected office. As of late 2025, this fund is still in the design phase.
- **Interim guidance**: The Disability Unit (DU) published guidance in the summer of 2024 for political parties and elected bodies on how to support disabled candidates, but this does not include direct funding for candidates themselves.

There are growing examples of projects and campaigns working to remove barriers and promote democratic participation among people with learning disabilities. One of the most significant recent initiatives is My Vote My Voice.

My Vote My Voice is a UK-wide campaign that actively supports the principle of disabled people's democratic participation. The project brings together people with learning disabilities, self-advocacy groups, and organisations like Learning Disability England to raise awareness about voting rights, accessibility, and representation.

The campaign has focused on:

- Encouraging people with learning disabilities to register to vote and understand the election process using accessible materials and peer-led workshops.
- Challenging barriers such as inaccessible polling stations or lack of support in completing ballots.
- Promoting the message that people with learning disabilities not only have the right to vote but also the right to stand for election and hold public office.
- Working with political parties and local authorities to improve accessibility and inclusion in democratic participation.

Through its activities, My Vote My Voice helps create an environment where people with learning disabilities are empowered to take part in public life at every level - from local consultation groups to national policymaking and electoral roles.

Other positive examples include

- local self-advocacy groups that hold mock elections and accessible hustings, ensuring people can meet candidates and understand their choices.
- The Promote the Vote campaign and resources led by and aimed at Social Workers. The campaign calls for all Social Workers to make people with a learning disability aware of their rights and facilitate access to political engagement.

There is some evidence from these initiatives that when people are provided with accessible information, encouragement, and a sense of belonging, participation grows.

Conclusion

People with learning disabilities in the UK continue to face major barriers to full political participation - from missing data and inaccessible systems to stigma and financial exclusion. Yet there are strong examples of leadership, activism, and peer support that show what inclusion can look like.

Projects like My Vote My Voice are helping to change attitudes and build the confidence, tools, and environments needed for genuine democratic participation. To achieve equality, political systems must embed accessibility, collect better data, provide reasonable accommodation, and recognise the leadership potential of people with learning disabilities.

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https://www.learningdisabilityengland.org.uk/

Info@LDEngland.org.uk