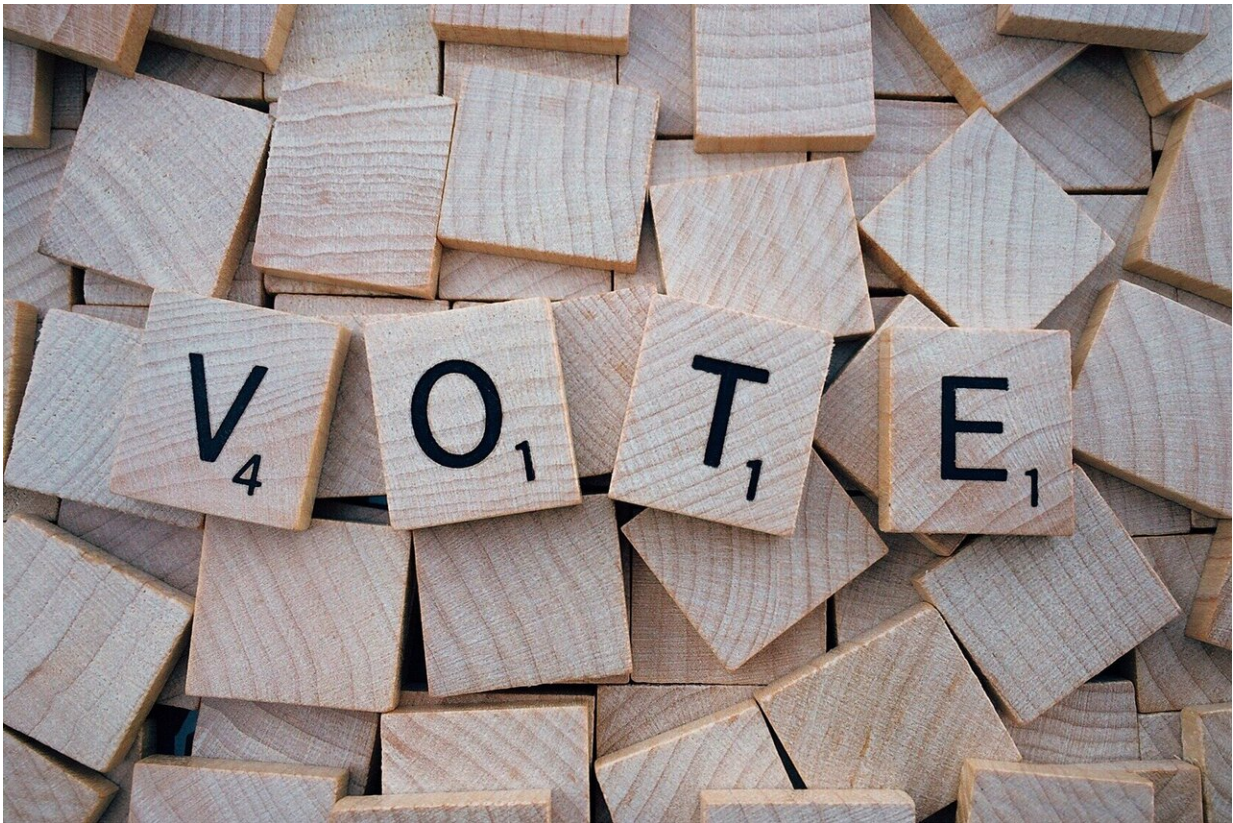


# Report: Barriers to elected office for disabled people

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A report co-authored by the University of Strathclyde and Goldsmiths, University of London has highlighted the barriers to elected office faced by disabled people.

Disabled people comprise around one in five of the UK population but are thought to be under-represented in politics across the country and internationally.

The report, [commissioned and published by the Government Equalities Office](#), found that barriers including accessibility, formatting of materials, perceptions and finance were present throughout all stages of political recruitment and the representation lifecycle.

The report was produced by Dr. Stefanie Reher of the School of Government and Public Policy at Strathclyde and Dr. Elizabeth Evans of Goldsmiths.

The authors conclude that there is a widespread problem in making politics accessible for disabled people at both local and national levels.

## **Challenge perceptions**

They interviewed 45 disabled MPs, former MPs, local councilors, prospective candidates as well as those considering standing for election across England and Wales. Many reported barriers to participation, selection, election and representation in office.

Interviewees also identified various strategies for overcoming the barriers including: the development of personal and informal support networks; the use of social media to make their work and campaigns visible; assistive technologies; developing a sense of assertiveness to challenge perceptions; and securing funding, from schemes such as the Access to Elected Office Fund.

Whilst the Access to Elected Office Fund Scotland has supported candidates in Scottish elections since 2016, the UK-wide Access Fund supporting disabled candidates in the [general election](#) was terminated in

2015, and the interim EnAble Fund only existed in England in 2019/20.

The Equality Act 2010 states that political parties must not directly or indirectly discriminate against disabled members or candidates and must make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that disabled people are not treated unfairly.

## **Equal rights**

Dr. Reher said: "A core principle of representative democracy is that all sections of the public have equal rights and opportunities to participate in political decision-making, both as citizens and as representatives.

"Yet, as this report shows, disabled people who stand for elected office or seek to do so face a multitude of barriers. The nature of the barriers varies between individuals, and depends, for instance, on a person's impairment, political experience, and the levels of support they receive from their party. At the same time, the research reported here also finds many similarities in the experiences of disabled people in politics as well as continuities across the various stages of the representation process at both the local and national level. All of the interviewees emphasized the importance of reducing the barriers and improving access in order to increase the presence of disabled people in politics."

The report acknowledges that since disabilities are often invisible or 'hidden' it is only possible to obtain reliable data on disabled politicians by asking politicians directly—something political parties are often hesitant to do as information is perceived as personal and confidential.

Stigma about being disabled can also mean elected representatives are reluctant to disclose their disability even if asked confidentially.

After the 2017 General Election only five MPs publicly identified

themselves as disabled, whereas The Speaker's Conference on Representation report from 2010 suggested that the House of Commons would include 130 disabled MPs if it were to be representative of the UK population.

## Financial barriers

A [second report](#) explores financial barriers in greater detail by surveying those who have applied for the EnAble fund, which provided support for disabled candidates in English local elections in 2019.

The report outlines the scope, procedures, and funding awarded by the EnAble Fund and provides an evaluation by applicants as well as the administrators at Disability Rights UK and the Local Government Association.

The response to the Fund by disabled candidates was overwhelmingly positive; 92% of those who responded to the survey had a positive experience with the EnAble Fund, reported that it helped decrease barriers in the [election](#) process, and believe that the provision of funding is "extremely important" for increasing the numbers of disabled people in politics.

In its [National Disability Strategy](#), published on the same day as the reports, the UK Government pledges to launch "a new scheme from April 2022 to support those seeking to become candidates and—as importantly—once they have been elected to public [office](#)."

Provided by University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

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