



Overcoming the barriers to disabled women's involvement in politics

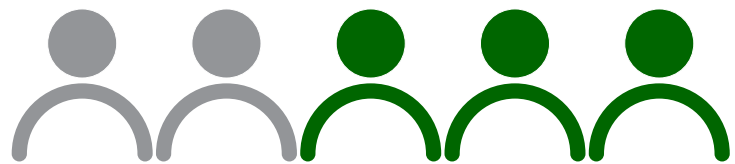
A report by politically active disabled
women convened by the Centenary
Action Group

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Foreword

UK politics does not reflect the diversity of the people it represents. With **one in five members of the working-age population** disabled, a fully representative Parliament would have approximately 130 disabled MPs. The reality is there are just five MPs who have disclosed a disability, and of those three are women. Moreover, the intersection of gender and disability means that the imbalance of power and experience of discrimination is even more acute.

It's a core principle of representative democracy that all sections of the public have equal rights and opportunities to

participate in political decision-making, both as citizens and as representatives. But if disabled people are under-represented so too will be the issues unique to them and the voice of those who can speak to their specific experiences. Legislation and policy will be poorer for the lack of that lens. We cannot claim to be a truly progressive democracy unless we challenge the barriers that prevent disabled women from being politically active and getting elected.

There are a multitude of barriers to elected office for disabled women, including financial, social and individual attitudes, and the lack of accessibility. Strategies to remove barriers to elected office should be underpinned by the social model of disability, which recognises that 'people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference'. However, it shouldn't end there; once in office, there should be ongoing monitoring of barriers to ensure these are removed so that the disabled MP is able to fully participate in our democratic processes. When disabled women are at the decision-making table, they give voice to the importance of access for all people.

Centenary Action Group, with Elect Her, have run regular roundtables and brought together D/deaf and disabled

women who are active in politics with disability organisations to share experience and learning. This report examines the many barriers that the network identified and makes recommendations for change that we believe will give greater opportunities for disabled women to contest, be elected, and represent their constituents.



Daisy Cooper MP



**Dr Sarabajaya Kumar
CAG Steering Group**

The barriers to election

Many disabled women in the network were heavily involved in activism and local campaigning prior to considering the pursuit of more formal politics. However, when deciding to pursue their career, they identified a number of barriers:

Financial

On average, **it costs a candidate £11,118** to contest an election, and research shows that it takes women, on average, three times as long to be elected as their male counterparts. For disabled people this cost is even higher. For instance, one Deaf candidate who stood in 2019, was disadvantaged by the fact that he was only able to raise £5,000 of the £20,000 needed for a British Sign Language interpreter. The interpreter was necessary for him to be able to challenge his opponents on a level playing field and run a full election campaign.

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Councillors who are elected to local government, but who are not cabinet members, receive a very small allowance. This often amounts to less than they would have received from paid work, and is compounded by the fact that they may need to reduce paid employment to effectively represent their ward. This is a huge disincentive to disabled people considering contesting a local government seat.

Attitudinal

Disabled women can experience negative perceptions from non-disabled party members, which can be a barrier to contesting an election in the first place. The double discrimination of being disabled and female can have a huge impact. Social and individual attitudes have put many disabled women off for a variety of reasons. For instance, some members suggest that the electorate will not vote for a disabled person. Others have experienced the erasure of disabled candidates from campaign literature and have not been supported. Conversely, others have spoken of being tokenistically included in photos and campaign literature if they are visibly disabled, but actively excluded from campaigning more generally. In all instances, these attitudes from colleagues and the already elected can deter disabled women from seeking election and limit career progression.

Accessibility

The failure to make reasonable adjustments by government and political parties, is a frequently cited barrier for disabled women when deciding to contest an election. Accessing public and other forms of transport, and attending hustings and other events, were cited as physical barriers to campaigning. Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP, the first wheelchair user elected to the Scottish Parliament in May 2021, has spoken of her experience of attending the count. No one believed she was a candidate and she was not able to enter as the building as it was not wheelchair accessible. Another candidate who is a wheelchair user highlighted that the counting process was inaccessible as the television screens were too high, so they were unable to carry out their role of monitoring the ballots. The negative experiences of disabled women who do seek election can deter others from deciding to put themselves forward.

Campaigning methods

For some disabled women, including wheelchair users and those with energy limiting conditions, traditional methods of campaigning such as door knocking or staying up late for the count are often not possible. This is further compounded by the

fact that candidates are often asked to sign agreements with their political party in which they are given targets. These targets can be harder for some disabled candidates to meet, and if not achieved, may ultimately lead to their deselection. For instance, a wheelchair user may struggle to meet a target centred on door knocking due to the inaccessibility of the built environment.

Institutional barriers

Long hours

Elected representatives must often spend long hours in the chamber, not knowing when they will be called to speak. Daisy Cooper MP, who has a hidden disability, **has spoken** of her experience as an MP before the hybrid system. Daisy referenced at least three occasions where she felt faint in the Chamber, having not eaten as a result of being unable to plan her day. In her evidence to the Procedure Committee, Daisy Cooper stated that *'the introduction of call lists [during hybrid proceedings] has been revolutionary for me'*.

Culture

The difficulties obtaining reasonable adjustments have also been an issue for disabled MPs elected to Parliament. For

instance, Daisy Cooper has highlighted that she was originally not allowed to bring a water bottle into the chamber, which is something she needs for her hidden disability. As well as this, the lack of accessible documentation and BSL interpretation in Parliament, including during COVID-19 press briefings, all have a negative impact. Finally, the lack of something as basic as accessible toilets is a barrier to inclusion.

Barriers to career progression

Career progression in politics often depends on patronage and existing networks, which disabled women may be less likely to have access to. Once elected, ableism can mean that disabled people are only considered to have expertise on disability. This means they are not invited to speak on other issues which they may well have expertise in. This then has a knock-on effect with disabled women less likely to be considered for cabinet or shadow cabinet positions.

Simultaneously, and conversely, there have been instances where disabled elected representatives have been actively excluded from being involved in decisions concerning disability. In July 2021, **two councillors were told** they had '*a prejudicial interest*' in a vote on improving accessibility in the town centre

because they were Blue Badge holders. They were told to leave the room during the vote and that they had to declare their disability as a conflict of interest. As reported in iNews, The York Disability Rights Forum responded saying that *'In a debate about disability they were silencing disabled councillors. It's already hard enough for disabled people to take part in local politics.....The council needs to listen to people who have lived experience of being disabled.'*

Recommendations for change

Accessibility

Venues need to be accessible, with ramps and accessible toilets as a minimum. Accessibility should be a key consideration during Parliament's Restoration and Renewal, and disabled women and Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations must be actively involved in the planning process.

Improved procedure and process

Processes should be put in place to promote and allow the use of greater technology. The 'Hybrid Parliament' allowed MPs who couldn't be physically present as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic to carry on representing their constituents from home in many parliamentary activities. For many disabled women, being able to join meetings virtually made politics more accessible. CAG's report '**Remotely Representative Parliament: Lesson Learning from the Hybrid Parliament**', sets out 21 recommendations for a 21st century Parliament which is inclusive and responsive. These recommendations would see an effective virtual Commons that complements

rather than detracts from the physical. Where there is no meaningful detriment to the overall effectiveness of the House of Commons, Members should be free and entitled to decide how they participate.

It has also been suggested that ‘In *the spirit of ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’*, [Parliament should] establish a forum for Members, who are disabled, have a long-term condition (fluctuating or otherwise) or other medical needs to help in the development of disability-friendly practices.’

Flexible working

Job-sharing for MPs and local councillors has been advocated as a way in which to support an increase in elected disabled representatives. One of the co-founders of **Disability Politics UK** sought to stand in the 2010 General Election as a job-share but was refused permission by the Electoral Services Department at Hillingdon Council after they took advice from the Electoral Commission. **Two Green Party members went to the High Court in 2015 to have the decision to refuse them permission to stand as a job share team judicially reviewed.** The Judge who rejected their case said, in essence, it was a matter for Parliament to decide. If Parliament is unable to make

a decision on this issue, the courts should be invited to take another look at the statutory position and see if it is compatible with the Equality Act 2010 and Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Since the case, the Fawcett Society **has set out legal analysis** of job-sharing, why it is needed and how it would work in practice. The Welsh Government has legislated to enable cabinet members at local authority level to job-share in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2020.

Positive discrimination

Prior to being selected to contest an election, more needs to be done to actively support and encourage disabled members to put themselves forward. Some parties are considering implementing the '**Rooney Rule**', which would guarantee candidates with protected characteristics, such as 'race' or disability, an interview for selection. In employment settings,

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employers can sign up to the **Guaranteed Interview scheme**, whereby disabled people should be automatically offered an interview if they meet the minimum criteria for the job vacancy.

Mentoring

Shadowing, coaching, and peer support can assist in supporting underrepresented women into politics. These activities provide access to broader networks and mentors of disabled and non-disabled people, who are willing to share experience and provide insight and advice. Most parties have specific programmes, schemes, or networks aimed at supporting people with protected characteristics, such as women, into politics, although there are not many specific schemes aimed at supporting disabled women in particular. Disabled women need to be fully included in the networks that exist for women. There are also some non-partisan initiatives including **Equal Power**, **Activate Funding**, and roundtables run by **Elect Her** and **CAG**.

Financial support

Financial support is most commonly cited by disabled women as a requirement for contesting an election. This support is needed at all stages, including during campaigning and after

having been elected. Research into barriers to elected office for disabled people **recently published by the Government's Equalities Office**, re-affirms this, stating that 'one of the key findings emerging from this initial stage of the project is the impact of financial barriers on the selection and election of disabled people'.

Previously, the Government's **Access to Elected Office Fund**, latterly the **EnAble Fund**, provided funding to disabled candidates in Westminster and local elections in England and Wales to cover the additional costs. However, this Fund was closed. In Scotland, the **Access to Elected Office Fund**, which is delivered by Inclusion Scotland and supported by the Scottish Government, offers financial assistance to disabled candidates.

The removal of the EnAble Fund has effectively excluded many disabled people from politics. The impact is gendered, as **ONS statistics** show that women are more likely to be disabled than men, at 21.1% and 16.6%, respectively. The Government has announced that the Fund will be reintroduced in April 2022 but no further announcement has been made. However, this will be too late for disabled candidates who want to contest elections in May 2022.

The Cabinet Office must work with disabled people, and disabled women in particular, involved in politics to improve the processes around the Fund. For instance:

- The process itself was inaccessible and there were a number of administrative hurdles before even filling out the form;
- The Fund needs to be better promoted, as many candidates, or those who considered putting themselves forward, did not know the fund even existed;
- The window in which support is given is too short. Disabled candidates need funding to pay for access costs, such as BSL interpretation or travel costs to internal party hustings, in order to even be selected by their party before the election period;
- The funding given to candidates needs to be higher and there must be more flexibility in what funding can be spent on, given there may be unforeseen costs

Conclusion



There are numerous barriers which prevent disabled women from becoming elected representatives, and that make participation difficult even if elected. They face discrimination both as women and as disabled people. Change needs to be made at every juncture: from access to local politics, the selection process, campaigning and being elected, to progression once elected. In addition, disabled women themselves are not a homogenous group and may have multiple protected characteristics, which further compound barriers to elected office. Barriers which prevent LGBTQ+ people, racialised and religious communities, people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those with caring responsibilities from entering politics will also affect disabled women.

Efforts towards removing barriers to disabled participating in politics cannot be left to political parties alone, as this is harder for smaller parties and independent candidates. The Government must take the lead in measures to remove the barriers to disabled women's representation.

By ensuring disabled women have a seat at the decision-making table, we will improve governance and change our society for the better.

Get in touch

If you would like to get involved with our network or find out more about this issue please get in touch.

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