



Help the Aged

Memorandum by Help the Aged (VOT 42)

Older People

In 2002, there were 9.5 million people aged 65 and over in the UK. The number of older people in our population has increased over the past few decades, and is projected to continue to grow in the future. During the fifty years 1971 to 2021, the number of people in the UK aged 65 and over is expected to have increased nearly 70 per cent, from 7.3 million to 12.2 million.

The section of the older population, which has increased most rapidly, both in actual size and in relation to the total population, is that of people over 75. The proportion of people in this age-group is projected to increase from 4.5 per cent in 1971 to 9 per cent in 2021.

A growing section of our older population is very elderly. For example, the proportion of people in the UK aged 85 and over increased from 0.7 per cent in 1961 to 1.9 per cent in 2002. The number of people aged 90 and over in Great Britain has tripled since 1971; in 2002 there were 380,000 people in this age group, representing 4 per cent of the population aged 65 and over. By 2021 there are expected to be 601,000 people aged 90 and over. (*Social Trends 34*, 2004)

Problems older people face when voting

There are a number of features of the voting process, which may have served to disenfranchise vulnerable older voters in the recent all postal trials. Similar issues may be relevant in terms of electoral registration.

- The ballot paper itself – the sample ballot paper from the recent pilot in the East Midlands region, provided to Help the Aged, failed to meet basic accessibility standards in terms of its layout and font size. In particular older people with visual impairments and failing eyesight would have struggled to read the instructions on how to vote and information on where to get help if they were struggling.
- The folding rules – the ballot paper from East Midlands came with strict instructions that the paper should be folded in a particular way, explaining that papers folded incorrectly would be deemed invalid. This system was insensitive to the needs of older people with joint and movement problems who may have difficulties in carrying out precise procedures such as folding. Furthermore, given the small size of the font explaining the rules, it is possible that other physically

able older people may have had their ballots rejected due to being unable to read the folding instructions.

- The need for a counter-signatory - it is an unfortunate fact of life that there are a large number of older people living alone who are very isolated. The need for a counter-signatory on postal ballots, may have presented particular challenges for these groups.
- The lack of access to help – it is clear that the current requirements for the provision of assistance and delivery points for postal voters are not sufficient to meet the needs of older people. We are aware that, for example, in the Derbyshire Dales District Council area only one assistance and delivery point was made available, and that, for some vulnerable older voters in that area, getting to the point would have meant travelling 40 miles and taking up to 4 different buses. Whilst we do not know the extent to which these points were used during the election, its clear that given the excessive distances involved, and the potential for older people to be unaware of their existence (especially given the small font size used to give ballot information) it's highly likely that many older people would have been unable to contemplate even attempting to access them in the first place.

Help for vulnerable voters must be a key priority and must be well signposted and easily accessible within the community.

Household versus individual registration

In 2001, two new provisions to the Representation of the People Act 2000 came into force which made it easier for homeless people to register to vote. Until then, the need for an address at which to register has been a major barrier to registration. However, under s6 of the new Act, a homeless person can make a declaration of local connection to enable them to register to vote. The section sets out a prescribed format for the declaration, which must include amongst the standard requirements, a required address which is the address of, or which is nearest to, a place in the UK where he [sic] commonly spends a substantial part of his time (whether during the day or at night). The Act also introduced a "rolling register" which means that electoral registers will be updated monthly rather than annually.

Whilst the registration rules for homeless individuals have been made easier, a move towards individual registration could assist those older people who move frequently or have no fixed abode. Changes could also benefit people who live in houses of multiple occupations. There are estimated to be 10,000 older people homeless and with priority needs.

More research is needed into the impact of moving registration from household to individuals in relation to the 30,000 care homes, which provide accommodation for 577,000 people in the UK.

Difficulties with completing forms

There is a need for a variety of tools to help vulnerable individuals register (including home visits and alternative formats). JRF research on meeting the needs of Chinese older people recommended courses to teach older people to fill in application forms. JRF also published, in 2003, 'Older people's views on information, advice and advocacy' which also highlighted the problems some older people have completing forms.

Availability and confidentiality of the Register

Confidence in the confidentiality of the Electoral Register is vital if the most vulnerable individuals are to be encouraged to register to vote. Where there are fears that the Register is not confidential, those estranged from their families, or those who have been persecuted either at home or abroad may be reluctant to register.

Technology and older people – electronic registration

Only 18% of older people ever use the internet and only 24% of over 75s own a mobile phone. If government develops systems of electronic registration, there must be an alternative exceptions service for those who cannot access the technology. If electronic registration moves forward, websites must meet the highest accessibility standards.

Government will soon be making an announcement on digital TV switchover. Help the Aged believes that Government could play a key part in reducing the digital divide by providing and encouraging industry to provide, set top boxes which give internet access into the homes of older and vulnerable people.

Pin numbers/signatures/voting cards

New research by UCL highlights the problems which older people have with pin numbers. The research reveals that even mild levels of cognitive impairment affect the ability to use a pin number and pin machine. The research implies that the majority of people with dementia would have problems using a Pin system. The Alzheimer's society estimates that 775,000 people in the UK have dementia.

Exceptions

Any changes to electoral registration would need to be backed up by an exceptions service for those who could not cope with the new arrangements.

More research

Any changes should be backed up by research and should be well planned. The failure of the postal voting trials was partly down to bad planning and partly due to a lack of research. More research is needed into the older person's experience of electoral registration, voting and voting systems. It is clear that proposals such as electronic registration could pose particular challenge for this generally technologically excluded group.

Basis for individual registration

Many BME women will not have an NI number, particularly Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Romany. Providing a birth date can also be difficult for some refugee communities. Obtaining other documents such as birth certificates can be difficult for some minority and refugee communities.

Strategies for encouraging registration

There remains a need for better information and access to information available for ethnic groups, particularly non-English speaking. There is a need to stress to minority communities, the benefits of voting.

Strategies for encouraging registration could include: advertising in ethnic press; advertising on ethnic radio; and advertising at convenient places e.g. faith centres, day centres, community centres.