

Every Vote Counts

supporting people to find out more about politics

Every Vote Counts is a campaign to make politics accessible. Historically, people with learning disabilities have been among some of the most marginalised groups in society and many feel disconnected from politics, despite the fact that their lives are shaped by decisions taken in local and national government. Just 16% voted in the 2005 general election.

In the run up to the 2010 general election, United Response and other disability charities set out to change this. By providing accessible information about politics and making voting easier to understand, the number of people with learning disabilities who voted in 2010 doubled. It showed a clear demand for political information to be provided in a way which people could understand.

The message we received was that people wanted accessible information about politics all the time – not just in the run up to elections. This, combined with the overwhelming response to easy read translations of reports from the Spartacus campaign and a question from disability activist Kaliya Franklin to Labour leader Ed Miliband at party conference, led to the creation of Easy News. An award-winning news magazine, Easy News is the first publication of its kind in the UK. As well as reporting significant news events and human

interest stories, the magazine takes complex political stories and makes them accessible by translating them into simple language with pictures to support the text.

The value of providing accessible information

can clearly be demonstrated by the impact of Easy News; within the first year of publication, the number of people with learning disabilities who felt that politics was relevant to their lives went up from 31% to 78% and the numbers of readers who could name a recent news story went up from 37% to 73%. The evidence is clear – if politics and the news are presented in a way which people with learning disabilities understand, they are much more likely to be able to engage with it and have their say.

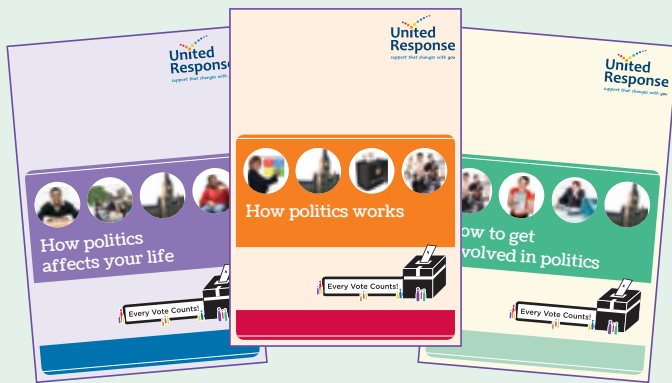
With the 2015 general election fast approaching, now is the time to begin looking at how people with learning disabilities can get involved and have their say. There are nearly 1.5 million people with learning disabilities in the UK – a huge group of people, who need to be heard and who could and should have a real impact on the outcome of the next election.



Every Vote Counts resources

Easy read information about Every Vote Counts is set out in three sections – how politics affects your life, how politics works and how to get involved. The resources are designed to help people think about how politics impacts their lives and how they can make their voices heard. While the resources have been designed with people with learning disabilities in mind, they may also be useful for other groups of people too, such as those who speak English as a foreign language.

The resources can be used by individuals, or by groups as part of a wider discussion about politics and voting. Some people may find it helpful to use all three booklets, while others may only be interested in one or two. The booklets are designed to be used as either a series or a standalone resource.



The first booklet – how politics affects your life – gives some examples of the way that politics makes a difference to everyone's life. It is not an exhaustive list and it is likely that people will be able to think of other examples which are specific to their lives and interests.

The second booklet explains how politics works. It explains how the country is run and looks at the role of different politicians who work at a local, national or European level. It should help to explain how political decisions are made and who makes them. There is a lot of information in this section and not all of it will be relevant to everyone who reads it. You might like to select just the bits that are useful for the people you support.

The final booklet explores how people can get involved in politics – and crucially, how to vote. It helps to show that there are lots of ways that



people can get involved and make sure that their opinion is heard. It presents a range of activities which people can do if they want to.

Starting a discussion

Different people will have different levels of understanding of politics and the news, so you will be the best judge of how to start a conversation or discussion with the people you support. For some people it may be helpful to work through all three Every Vote Counts booklets, while others may only need to look at one or two sections. You could start by reading through the Every Vote Counts resources and deciding which sections are most relevant to the people you support.

The questions below may help you to think about ways of beginning a discussion with the people you support.

Politics affects lots of different areas of people's lives. The first booklet – how politics affects your life – gives some examples.

- Are any of these relevant to people you support?
- Are there any other examples relevant to their lives?
- Is there something they are particularly passionate about? Is politics relevant to their interests?
- Are they interested in the news and current affairs?

Government and the way that politics works can be difficult to understand. The second booklet explains the way that politics works on a local, national and European level.

- Do the people you support already know a lot about the way that politics works?
- What would they like to know more about?
- Which bits are most relevant to their lives and interests?

The final booklet explains the different ways that people can get involved in politics. Some people may already be very active in politics or campaigning, while others may be voting for the first time in 2015. It's important to tailor your discussions to people's current level of interest and involvement.

- Have people voted before?
- Are they members of a political party?
- Are people already involved in politics or campaigning?
- Are they passionate about a particular issue?
- Would they like to join a campaigning group about that issue?
- Would they like to talk to their local politicians about their views?

For more ideas about how to prepare people to vote, sign up to our monthly Every Vote Counts newsletters by emailing everyvotecounts@unitedresponse.org.uk.

Key practice issues

During the first Every Vote Counts campaign, our research showed that people were worried about three key areas of practice when supporting someone to get involved in politics – advocacy, bias and influence and mental capacity.

Advocacy

A large part of the role of supporting someone is about advocacy. People can be unsure about advocacy and see it as something that is done by an external and independent person. This can, and sometimes should, be the case.

However, when we support people we are inevitably advocating for them all the time. This might be by recognising that they are ill and should see a doctor, or that they like to be outside when the weather is warm and making sure that this happens. There are many different

ways in which we advocate for the people we support on a daily basis.

It is important to help people understand the context of their lives and the things that affect them. Helping them discover the many ways in which politics affects them is a key part of this.

Letting people know that they have a democratic right to have a say in how the country is run and how decisions are made is very important. It is also important to recognise that voting is only one of many activities that allow everyone to be involved in the political process.

You may be aware of an issue that is affecting a person you support, but they might find it difficult to raise this. For example, they could be affected by the proposed closure of a local service. They may not be able to tell people, like councillors or MPs, how they feel about this.

As someone who supports that person and advocates for them there are things that you could do to help. For example, you could write to their local politicians or MP asking for a meeting. You could go to this meeting with the person you support and present concerns on their behalf. If the person does not want to, or cannot, say themselves how they feel about this, they can still make a powerful contribution simply by being present at this meeting.

It is OK for you, or other advocates, family or friends to tell politicians and other people about how things affect a person on their behalf. You should always do this with them if you can.



Bias

When we surveyed people about supporting others to take part in the political process, one of the key concerns was about bias. It was felt that worries about bias and influencing people could mean some people were reluctant to support others with activities like voting.

It is good to recognise these concerns and it can be extremely helpful to have a team approach to supporting people with these activities where possible. This allows people to discuss their worries and concerns about bias and influence and agree a way of working as a team.

To avoid bias when supporting people with activities like this, remember that your main role is to support someone to find and obtain relevant information that is readily available to everyone. However, the key thing to remember is that your job is to present this existing information to the people you support and not to influence their decision. It is the people producing the information (in this case, political parties and candidates) who need to be making it accessible to everybody, and this is still often not the case, which can make things harder.

As well as making politics accessible, a central aim of Every Vote Counts is to work with election officials, political parties, politicians and others to highlight the importance of making their information open and accessible to everyone. The easier their information is to access, the more people they can reach. It is their job to get their message across. If you remember that your key role is simply to present existing information to people then there are many ways you can support people with activities, such as voting.

Mental capacity

People with a learning disability have the same right to vote as everyone else. Like all other voters, they must be over 18 years old, and

must meet the nationality and residence criteria laid out by the Electoral Commission. They must also be registered to vote.

The Electoral Commission states that the person must also not have a legal incapacity to vote. The use of term "incapacity" here can cause confusion. A lack of mental capacity is not the same as legal incapacity. Someone with learning disabilities has the right to vote regardless of their mental capacity.

Some people have expressed concerns that the person they support may not have clear ideas about who they choose to vote for, or that they will simply pick someone "they like the look of". (In fact this could probably apply to a lot voters!) A person can choose who they want to vote for by any criteria they like. It is not up to anyone else to judge if reasons for choosing someone are valid or not. Equally the decision over whether someone would like to vote or not, must be theirs and theirs alone. Carers and support workers may not make decisions on behalf of the person they care for when it comes to voting.

With regards to voting by proxy then the Electoral Commission advises that under section 29 of the Mental Capacity Act (2005) a person's mental capacity must be considered and that a person can only appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf, if they have the mental capacity to do so. Whether voting in person or by proxy, however, the vote should be cast for the candidate that the person with learning disability chooses and no one else.

To find out more about what the law says about capacity to vote you can contact the Electoral Commission.

To find out more about the Mental Capacity Act (2005) you can contact the Office of the Public Guardian or the Court of Protection.

