

The Spinal Injuries Association's response to the 'Access to elected office' consultation

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In what capacity are you responding (please put a cross in the appropriate box)?

As an individual

On behalf of a public sector organisation

On behalf of a private sector organisation

On behalf of a voluntary sector organisation X

Other (please specify)

Note

• In addition to the completed pro-forma, you can also send other supporting information if you so wish.

General questions

Question 1: Which of these proposals or combination of proposals do you think would make the greatest impact?

Given the comparatively small budget available, the funds must be targeted where they will have the greatest impact – namely supporting those disabled people already interested in pursuing a career in politics through a dedicated, ‘Access to Work’ style fund, and raising awareness within political parties of the capabilities and benefits of selecting disabled candidates.

Question 2: Are there any barriers for disabled people running for elected positions which are not addressed by these proposals? If so, what are they? And how might they be overcome?

For Spinal Cord Injured people the biggest barrier is likely to be that of the physical environment. Accessing old buildings which barely comply with the DDA will continue to be a problem in addition to those issues directly attributed to the impairment. It is however wholly right, as discussed in the consultation document, that the fund should not subsidise political parties to meet their obligations under the Equality Act.

Question 3: Are you aware of any existing work that these proposals might build on?

Question 4: How can we best raise awareness effectively to reach/communicate with disabled people and organisations?

Given the limited resources available, the most effective use of time and money will be in addressing the issues faced by disabled people currently seeking a career in politics. It would be somewhat disingenuous to assume that disabled people are less able than their non-disabled peers to understand the machinations of political office. Disabled people are under represented in politics not for want of disabled candidates, but rather the barriers which they face as a result of their disability, such as the physical environment, their confidence or the awareness within political parties.

Question 5: What should be the key functions and support provided by the ambassadors?

As mentioned in the answer to the previous question, there are already disabled people who wish to run for election who are experiencing barriers to this ambition. Ambassadors should be focussed on addressing these barriers, predominantly through raising awareness in their own political parties.

It is not necessary at this stage for ambassadors to raise awareness of elected office amongst the general disabled community. It is imperative that this initiative prioritises those disabled people already interested in the area, beginning a self-perpetuating cycle of election success and awareness of disabled candidates.

Question 6: How can we engage with the general public, and political parties, to address the negative perceptions of electing disabled people?

Whilst it is admirable to seek to raise awareness of disabled candidates amongst the voting population, there is a raft of legislation which has been introduced over the last two decades seeking to do just that, such as the DDA and Equality Act. Given that 15 years after the DDA we are still discussing disability awareness, it is probably beyond the capability of this project to make a significant difference in this field.

This question seems to work on the supposition that disabled people standing for election and not being chosen by the electorate, but it may be truer to say that disabled candidates are not even getting as far as elections. Disabled people are often perceived as being unable to carry out tasks as competently as their non-disabled peers, a perception that is true in all walks of life. For a disabled person to stand for election they must first be selected as a candidate, and it is with political parties and their selection panels that awareness of disability, and the benefits which disabled candidates will bring to a party, must begin.

Question 7: What key skills are needed to become a local or national politician?

The key skill needed by a disabled person to become a local or national politician is confidence, as - along with the electorate and political parties - they too will have preconceptions about their disability and how others will relate to them. Confidence building for disabled candidates, getting them to realise that opinions alone and what they say, not what they look like or how they get around, is what will matter to most the voting public, will be key to getting disabled people elected.

Question 8: How can training and development best be provided and made accessible to disabled people?

The process of standing for elected office and the workings of local or national Government can be complicated, but there is no reason to suggest that the majority of disabled people are any less knowledgeable than their non-disabled peers.

Training and development should concentrate on those issues which are unique to potential disabled candidates, and that is primarily confidence. Many disabled

candidates will have preconceptions about their disability and how others will relate to them. Confidence building in getting them to realise that opinions alone and what they say, not what they look like or how they get around, is what will matter to most people and get them elected.

Question 9: What other types of support would be particularly beneficial to prospective and elected disabled candidates?

Question 10: What kind of training would offer the most effective way of promoting the capacity amongst non-disabled MPs or councillors to support disabled candidates?

Cheap training. Presumably this proposal is intended to offer disabled people the benefit of an experienced politician's knowledge, yet whilst such a need may be applicable in some instances, there is nothing to say that a disabled candidate will need any more support from other politicians as their non-disabled peers.

It is most important that the limited funds are channeled into removing barriers faced by disabled people and raising awareness where a lack of it constitutes a barrier – for instance amongst selection panels in political parties.

Question 11: Given limited resources, what criteria should be considered when deciding which potential disabled candidates should benefit from a fund?

With limited resources it is vital that the money is spent where it will have the greatest impact. It is likely that this will be in supporting those disabled people who are already seeking access to elected office. Enabling such people to enter politics will fulfill the other proposed aims of the project by creating role models, raising awareness of disability and proving that disabled candidates are equally able to carry out a career in politics.

This approach would begin a cycle of awareness which would self perpetuate as more disabled entered office. By supporting 'quick wins' the fund can expediate this process.

Question 12: At what stage should an individual be eligible for support from a fund?

A dedicated fund should only be available to somebody who could be defined as disabled under the Equality Act definition. The fund should be available from the moment an aspiring disabled politician faces barriers, which are likely to be pre-selection as a party candidate.

Question 13: How could a cash-limited fund fairly prioritise requests within any year?

Given the breadth of issues which could be faced by prospective disabled candidates, a system similar to that of the Disabled Students Allowance could be used whereby capped pots of money are allocated to different areas of support with claimants submitting purchase evidence every quarter.

Question 14: How can we determine which activities should be included for support and over what period?

Question 15: How should funds be distributed once it has been agreed that an individual will receive funding?

Given the recent scrutiny of MP's expenses, this fund must be managed carefully and transparently to ensure that it does not end up actually working against disabled candidates. It is highly probable that any payments made under this fund will be scrutinised during an election by the candidate's opposition. Understanding of disability is not readily understood by the general public, and there must be mechanisms in place to fully explain not only what the money has paid for, but also why disabled candidates require 'favourable' treatment, such as a dedicated fund, to gain equality with their peers.

For these same reasons it is equally important that the fund does not end up being abused. A scandal could trigger the end of the fund, simultaneously undoing all of the hard work that is being undertaken to improve access to elected office for disabled people.

To secure transparency, this fund should be administered by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority or similar body with the same level of scrutiny and verification.

Question 16: Are there any areas/types of expenses which the fund should not cover?

Whilst the fund should assist disabled people in overcoming barriers it is important that it is seen as a leveller, not giving disabled people an unfair advantage – ie by breaking rules or regulations which

Question 17: What types of national and local policies, guidelines and resources should political parties have in place to provide practical support and access to disabled candidates?

Whilst the head offices of a political party may be fully aware of their obligations lower party levels are not. SIA has experience of spinal cord injured people who have had difficulty gaining access to local party meetings, regional conferences and the party's own HQ buildings. A political party's obligations under the Equality Act should be made clear at all levels.

Political parties are responsible for creating equality laws and regulations, and as such it is appalling that they are failing to meet their duties under them.

Question 18: Are there any other comments you would like to make in relation to this consultation that have not already been covered by this form? If yes, please explain.