



Supporting people to find out about politics

This website is first and foremost a **tool for engagement** with people you support (people with a learning disability, people with communication impairments or people with limited literacy). It is a resource to use **with** people rather than **for** people.

Politics affects us all in every area of our lives; from the food we eat, to the air we breathe; from the medication we may need, to the swimming pool we use. Politics is as much about shopping and catching the bus as it is about things like the economy, the NHS or national defence. This is why **politics is important**.

Politics is not just about elections and voting. It is about things like signing a petition, meeting your MP or writing to your local councillor as well. It is about knowing that there is a whole range of activities that people can get involved in. In fact, people you support are probably already doing some of these things.

This wide range of activities means that **everybody** can be involved. There should never be any reason to think that "Politics and getting involved is just not relevant to the people I support".

Three Sections

The Every Vote Counts! politics information is in three main sections.

One section is all about how politics affects you, one section is about how politics works, and one is about how to get involved. This will help you show someone why politics is important and how they could get involved. It is up to you to decide how you use this information.

You may not need to use everything on the website when you are supporting someone. Instead you can support someone to access just the information that is relevant to them.

For example the 'How politics affects you' section has lots of different examples of ways in which politics can affect our lives. It could be too much information to look at all of these with someone. The range of examples means that you can choose the ones that will be the most relevant to the person you are supporting and look at those. You may just want to use the stories part of this section.

The section about 'How politics works' contains some information about how the country is run and looks at things like Parliament, politicians and the Government. It could help you to explain to people about how decisions are made and who makes these decisions.

Some of the information in this section may be quite complicated for some people. You do not need to have a good understanding of how politics works to support someone to get involved and have a say, and so you may decide to skip this section altogether, or just look at bits of it.

The section about how to get involved is relevant to **everyone**. This section should be used to show people that there are lots of different ways of getting involved and having a say, and it suggests a whole range of activities that people can do.

Key Practice Issues

When carrying out research to help us produce this website we asked people to tell us about what barriers they felt there were to supporting someone to vote or get involved in politics.

The responses we received from people indicated the following three key practice areas: advocacy, capacity, and bias.

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 although not everyone has the capacity to vote; 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.

Capacity to vote

People with a learning disability have the same right to vote as anyone else. In order to vote they must be over 18 years old and must have registered to vote.

To have the capacity to vote, people need to understand that voting means choosing a Representative. They also need to be able to choose between different candidates. People do not need to understand all about politics to have the capacity to vote.

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 of people.

As long as a person understands what voting is and can choose between different candidates, then they can make their choice by whatever criteria they like. It is not up to anyone else to judge if reasons for choosing someone are valid or not.

It should not be up to one individual to decide if a person does not have the capacity to vote. The Mental Capacity Act (2005) has a code of practice which provides guidance on how to assess someone’s capacity to consent and make decisions. It can be helpful to look at this if you are unsure about how to assess someone’s capacity to vote.

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

To find out more about the Mental Capacity Act (2005) you can get contact details for the Office of the Public Guardian and the Court of Protection in the ‘links’ section of this website.

Bias and Influence

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 producing this website, a key 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.

Supporting people to get involved and have a say

With this website we want to be able to show that politics is not a separate thing that only some people are interested in, but rather that politics affects everybody.

Engaging with this process should be central to involving a person in the decision making that affects their everyday life.

We hope to show that supporting someone to have a say about what is important to them is something that we could, and should, be doing all year round and ongoing.

Getting Started

The first thing to do is to support someone to find out who their representatives are, and to make a list of these with their contact details. This is very important information which people should have alongside other key contacts, such as GPs or advocates. You can download a form for this from our 'How to get involved' section.

Community

People now recognise the importance of involving and including people in their local communities. It is not enough to simply live in a community. In fact a key part of the role of supporting others is about ensuring that they have a presence, and real connections to others, in their local community.

As you will see, many of the activities suggested in the 'How to get involved' section are great ways of involving and including people in communities. For example, a lot of the activities that people could be involved in are those of joining or setting up groups in the local community.

For some people this could be joining a self advocacy group, or for others a local action group.

Joining a group

One of the first things you need to do when supporting someone, is to find out about their interests, aspirations or concerns. It is unusual for a person to have a unique interest or concern. There is an extremely good chance that within the local or wider community there are other people with the same interests. These people may already have set up a group.

If the person you support does not have much experience with joining groups then you may need to take the lead in creating opportunities for them to try this out.

A bit of research like reading local papers, visiting libraries and local community centres or searching online, can reveal information about what local groups already exist and how new members can join. You may be surprised just how many local and wider community groups there are and the range of topics, concerns and interests they represent.

Do not forget to ask around amongst family, friends and colleagues, as there is usually someone who knows something, or can point you in the right direction.

The person you support may want to join the local branch of a political party, or become a member of a charity and be part of a larger lobbying group. Remember though that politics is not just about these more obvious groups.

The person you support may want to be part of a local group of ramblers who, as well as rambling, simply want to make sure footpaths are maintained and kept open. This is still about campaigning and having a say in the decision making process.

Likewise someone may want to join a group that is interested in local history. This is not a political activity as such, but may well involve things like lobbying the council for better access to local historical buildings or council records.

It is hard to think of an activity that does not have a political element.

When thinking about supporting someone to join a group, it is sometimes easy to assume that a new member would have to be someone who could use speech or be confident about communicating in a group, or with strangers. We can often rule people out of certain activities because of assumptions we make about them. However, it is not usually a requirement of joining a group that you need to be a vocal or confident participant. A person wanting to join a group may simply need some support to communicate with the other members.

Participating in a group could be about simply being part of it, observing what is happening and letting your presence be noticed and acknowledged. This can in itself be useful, influential and rewarding, both for the person participating and the rest of the group.

You could support someone to join a group online. There are groups, or forums, about most interests and they are usually quite straightforward to join.

Setting up a group

If there are no existing groups that match the person you support and their interests or concerns you could support them to set up a group.

For example, perhaps the person you support is worried about traffic speeding down the road they live on. You could help that person to make a leaflet about these concerns and post it through all the doors on the street inviting people to join or support an action group.

You could support that person to organise a meeting at a local hall or community centre and invite along local residents. You could ask council officials and police officers with responsibility for road safety to come along and talk at your meeting about these concerns.

You could support someone to set up a website, or forum, about their interests or concerns. It may be simpler to support someone to set up a page on existing social network websites like MySpace or Facebook.

Campaigning

Using the same example of the person concerned about speeding traffic, there are lots of other ways you could help someone to campaign about this issue. You could support that person to start a petition about the traffic and ask local people to sign it. You could support that person to write a letter to their local politicians or MP about the issue and ask others to sign it or send their own letters.

You could support that person to write to local papers or try and interest local radio and television stations in their story and campaign.

Political parties, elections and voting.

The most obvious activities to look at when talking about getting involved with politics are joining or supporting a political party and campaigning or voting in elections.

To help support someone with these activities as well as this pack, there are other resources available that you can use. For example the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) produced a booklet called Getting involved in a political party - Information for people with learning disabilities.

The DRC are now called the Equality and Human Rights Commission and you could contact them to ask for a copy of this. Their contact details are in the 'links' section of this website.

The Electoral Commission have produced a simple illustrated guide to voting for people with learning difficulties.

This can be downloaded from the toolkit on the website www.dopolitics.org.uk.

You can help someone to find out what people in some political parties are saying by supporting them to read the papers, listen to the radio, or watch the news and political programmes on the television.

It is important to avoid bias and avoid selecting what information you are supporting people to access. For example if you are supporting someone to watch a party political broadcast, you should give them the opportunity to see other broadcasts, or at least explain that other parties will have broadcasts and find out when they are on, giving people an opportunity to view them if they want to.

You could ask all the main political parties for a copy of their manifesto or other literature explaining what they think. As there are hundreds of political parties it is OK to focus on the main ones, although important to explain that there are many more. If someone is interested you could help them find out more about these.

You could help someone to access the websites of all the main political parties, or the ones they are interested in.

If there is an election due you can contact the council for a list of all the candidates standing in the election in that area. You could then support someone to find and look at literature from all of these candidates.

You could help someone to decide who they want to vote for by drawing up a list of the things that matter most to that person. You could then look at all the information you have received before an election to see what each of the candidates or political parties say

about these things. This might help someone come to a decision, however, each individual must always make up her or his own mind about who they want to vote for.

Postal and proxy voting

Someone you support may not want to go to a polling station to vote. They may not be able to go to a polling station.

You could help them to apply to the council for a postal vote. This will allow them to make their choice and vote at home.

Remember that a person's choice about who to vote for is a private matter.

They may want help with this so perhaps plan ahead about how you can do this in a way that offers someone privacy but also supports them if necessary.

For example, for someone who cannot read the names, you could look at using pictures or symbols alongside the names on the ballot paper to help illustrate who the different candidates are (**remember not to permanently mark the ballot paper, you could invalidate it!**).

A proxy vote is for someone who has not asked for a postal vote but who is prevented from going to the polling station in person, for example because they have been admitted to hospital. They can ask someone to vote for them. This obviously involves a degree of trust and it may help to get agreement from friends and family about who the 'proxy' should be.

You can contact the council to find out more about a proxy vote and how to apply for one.