

Written Evidence submitted by Elect Her for the Representation of the People Bill Committee -

Access to Elected Office Fund

Elect Her welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee considering the Representation of the People Bill.

Elect Her is a non-partisan organisation working to increase the diversity of political representation in the UK. Through our Fix the System programme we work with elected representatives, political parties, civil society organisations, and researchers to identify structural barriers that prevent many people, particularly women and those from minoritised backgrounds, from entering and remaining in political life.

This submission focuses specifically on the importance of restoring an Access to Elected Office Fund, which previously supported disabled candidates seeking election. We bring this evidence alongside other organisations calling for the restoration, including Centenary Action, 50:50 Parliament and The Disability Policy Centre.

Financial and Accessibility Barriers to Standing for Election

Standing for elected office often involves significant personal costs. These may include travel, campaign materials, time away from employment, and childcare responsibilities. For some candidates, additional costs arise from accessibility requirements related to disability.

These costs can include assistive technology, personal assistance, communication support such as sign language interpretation, accessible transport, and other adjustments necessary to enable full participation in campaign activities and public meetings.

For disabled candidates, these additional costs can create significant barriers to participation in democratic life. Where reasonable adjustments are not available or affordable, individuals may be deterred from standing for election altogether.

Research indicates that disabled people remain underrepresented in elected office across all levels of government. According to the Fawcett Society's Sex and Power Index, disabled people are significantly underrepresented in Parliament and other elected bodies.¹

Evidence from the Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate campaign has also highlighted the challenges faced by councillors and prospective candidates with disabilities, including accessibility barriers and the additional costs associated with participating in political life.²

These barriers sit alongside wider evidence that individuals from underrepresented groups face structural challenges when entering political life. The Electoral Commission has noted that standing for election can involve significant practical and financial challenges for candidates.³

The Access to Elected Office Fund

The UK previously operated an Access to Elected Office Fund, established in 2012 to provide financial support to disabled candidates standing for election.

The fund enabled candidates to apply for support to cover costs associated with reasonable adjustments during the candidate selection and election period. These included assistive technology, personal assistance, accessible transport, and communication support.

The scheme was widely welcomed by disability organisations and demonstrated that relatively modest financial support could make a significant difference to participation. Disability rights organisations and parliamentary committees have previously recognised the importance of the fund in enabling disabled candidates to stand for election.

However, the fund has not been consistently maintained across election cycles. Periods during which the scheme has been unavailable have created uncertainty for prospective candidates and have limited the ability of disabled individuals to plan participation in political life.

Ensuring the consistent availability of the fund would provide greater certainty and support efforts to widen democratic participation.

Why the Representation of the People Bill Is an Appropriate Vehicle

The Representation of the People Bill focuses on strengthening democratic participation and improving electoral processes.

Ensuring that candidates are able to participate fully in elections is central to these objectives. Addressing accessibility barriers faced by disabled candidates directly supports the goal of widening participation.

Re-establishing an Access to Elected Office Fund would complement the Bill's wider reforms by addressing one of the practical barriers that prevents individuals from standing for election. Providing support for reasonable adjustments would help ensure that disabled candidates are not excluded from participation because of accessibility-related costs.

Case Studies: Access to Elected Office Fund

The impact of the Access to Elected Office Fund can be illustrated through practical examples of how the scheme enabled disabled candidates to participate fully in elections.

Case Study 1: Supporting a Deaf Candidate to Campaign

During the operation of the Access to Elected Office Fund, Deaf candidates were able to access financial support for British Sign Language interpretation during campaign events and public meetings.

For Deaf candidates, participation in hustings, community meetings, and party selection interviews often requires interpretation support in order to communicate effectively with voters and party members. Without financial assistance, the cost of providing interpreters throughout a campaign period can be prohibitive.

The Access to Elected Office Fund enabled candidates to access interpretation services, allowing them to participate fully in debates, campaigning activities, and public engagement. This support ensured that accessibility needs did not prevent candidates from communicating with voters or representing their communities.

Case Study 2: Supporting Candidates with Mobility Impairments

Candidates with mobility impairments have also used the Access to Elected Office Fund to cover accessibility-related transport and support costs during election campaigns.

Campaigning often involves extensive travel within a constituency, attendance at community events, and door-to-door engagement with voters. For candidates who require accessible transport or personal assistance, these activities can involve additional costs that are not experienced by other candidates.

Through the fund, candidates were able to access support for accessible transport and personal assistance, enabling them to campaign effectively and engage with voters throughout their constituency.

Without this support, the practical demands of campaigning could have made participation significantly more difficult or impossible.

Recommendation

Elect Her recommends that the Committee consider an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill that would require the Government to establish and maintain an Access to Elected Office Fund.

Such a fund should:

- provide financial assistance for accessibility-related costs incurred by candidates during the selection and election period;
- support reasonable adjustments required for participation in campaign activities;
- operate through a transparent and accessible application process;
- provide clarity and consistency for prospective candidates across election cycles.

Reinstating and maintaining the Access to Elected Office Fund would represent a practical step towards ensuring that democratic participation is genuinely accessible to all.