

Scottish Election 2026: What was it like to vote as a disabled person?

A Scottish Election took place on 7 May 2026. This was where people who live in Scotland were given the opportunity to choose which candidates they wanted to represent them as Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). The ability to vote in elections is important for making Scotland work as a democratic society where everyone gets a say about who makes big decisions for the country. However, the process of voting, whether at a polling station or by post, can present significant barriers for disabled people. A healthy democracy requires that everyone can participate equally, so Disability Equality Scotland asked disabled people what voting was like in 2026.

How we did this research

To investigate the accessibility of the 2026 Scottish Election, we ran three surveys for disabled people to complete. These surveys were emailed to members, other disabled people's organisations, and shared on social media platforms. Some members also received the surveys by post.

The first survey was aimed at postal voters, which we launched in April. On election day, we released additional surveys for people who voted at a polling station and those who did not vote. Respondents could choose to fill in these surveys online or by downloading a paper version. Online respondents had the option to fill in the survey with pictures and extra information, and the downloadable version was provided in the inclusive Easy Read format.

Our surveys mostly asked categorical questions, where respondents were asked to choose from a selection of answers. The numbers you will see in this document are the results from these questions. We also gave respondents the opportunity to give more details about their voting experience by asking some open-ended questions, which respondents could answer in their own words. The quotations in this document come from answers to this type of question. Our three surveys received a total of 104 responses.

Electoral inclusion in 2026: An overview

Many disabled people report positive voting experiences...

Our surveys suggest that most respondents had a positive experience of voting at this election. Across both the polling station and postal vote surveys, 7 out of 10 respondents said they had a 'very good' or 'mostly good' experience (72%), 2 out of 10 had a neutral experience (22%), and only 1 out of 10 had a 'quite bad' or 'really bad' experience (7%). Postal vote evaluations were less positive than for polling stations, but most were still positive overall.

An important aspect of democratic elections is that voters have the right to keep their choice of vote secret. Despite concerns that some disabled people might be unable to do this when getting support, our survey results indicate that most respondents felt able to keep their vote secret if they chose to. Only one respondent to our polling station survey said they were unable to keep their vote a secret. This figure was slightly higher for postal voters, at three respondents. However, it is important to note that the ability to vote in secret will depend on an individual's specific support needs and impairment.

[Research by the RNIB](#), for example, found that only 1 out of 4 of blind people felt able to vote independently and in secret in the 2024 General Election.

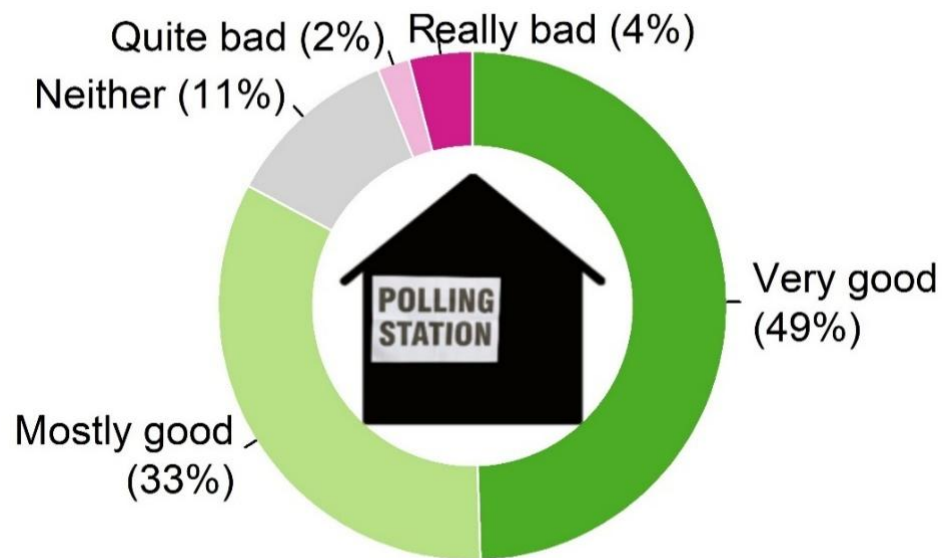
...But full democratic inclusion has not yet been achieved

While many of our survey results paint an encouraging picture of disability inclusion at the 2026 Scottish Election, it is important to remember that elections must be equal and fully inclusive of all members of society.

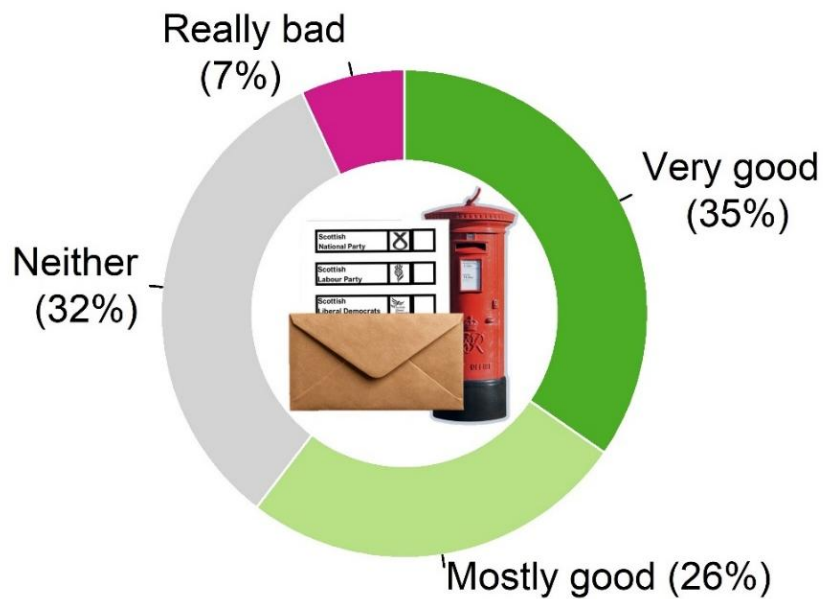
Unfortunately, our surveys suggest this has still not been achieved in 2026. We heard from disabled people who faced significant barriers to equal participation in the election, including some individuals who were unable to vote at all. We urge all those who organise Scottish elections (Returning Officers) to address these points as a matter of urgency so that democratic inclusion can be fully achieved in future Scottish elections. No disabled person should feel locked out of electoral participation in a 21st Century democracy.

Survey snapshot: Thinking about voting in this election, was it a good experience for you?

Polling station voters:



Postal voters:



Experiences of voting at a polling station

Getting to the polling station

Many voters go to a polling station on the day of the election to cast their vote. However, making the journey to a polling station can be challenging for disabled people. We therefore asked our survey respondents about their experiences of getting to their polling station.

Nearly half (49%) of respondents who voted at a polling station got there by car or taxi. Of these, around 9 out of 10 (88%) said they were able to park or get dropped off in a suitable space close to the entrance.

Most of those who walked, used a wheelchair, or cycled did not experience problems on their journey (55%). However, 4 out of 10 (40%) had to go over bumpy or uneven paving and 1 out of 10 (10%) had to cross a busy road without a crossing.

Some respondents who had trouble getting to their polling station told us:

“I live in North Edinburgh. Dropped kerbs are almost non-existent. This made my journey to the Polling Station more stressful than it ought to have been.”

“Getting to the building was problematic with parked cars blocking lowered kerbs. I had to travel a lot further than I would have if the car parking area was better policed.”

“Taxi companies honouring bookings and not cancelling my booking 1 minute before it was due, causing me to not be able to get from the train station to my polling station in time to vote.”

Worryingly, 6 out of 10 (62%) respondents who voted by post said this was because their disability or injury makes it too difficult to get to their polling

station, and 3 out of 10 (30%) respondents who did not vote said this was because they cannot get to their polling station. These results show that there is still important work to be done in making sure disabled people's needs are considered when choosing polling places. For local elections in England, the UK Government [explored some ideas for more flexible ways of voting](#).

Following this lead, it might help if disabled people had options for where to vote, allowing them to choose a place that they can travel to rather than being restricted to a single polling station that might not be reachable.

Polling station accessibility

As well as looking at the journey to the polling station, we also investigated how accessible the polling stations are for disabled people. It is positive to see that around 6 out of 10 (59%) survey respondents said it was 'very easy' to get into the building to vote, while a further 3 out of 10 (33%) said it was 'quite easy'.

Once inside the polling place, 3 out of 4 (76%) of respondents said it was 'very easy' to find where they needed to go. Only a small number of respondents (2%) said it was confusing. Over 9 out of 10 respondents said staff at the polling station were either 'very' (73%) or 'quite' (20%) helpful.

While these results paint a generally encouraging picture, it is important to note that this does not reflect the experience of every disabled person. Individual respondents who voted at a polling station in 2026 told us:

"The door was a heavy fire escape type door that opened outwards. I walk using crutches so this was tricky and no-one was there to help open the door."

"The ramp to the door doesn't give any room to open the door, which opened outwards. There was no way I could have opened the door by myself, there was no buzzer for assistance if I had been by myself. My partner struggled to open the door

while holding onto my wheelchair so I didn't end up slipping back down the slope.”

“The room in the building was not disable friendly, as either had to go upstairs or in a small lift.”

“Within the building itself, the room where the voting was, had a very narrow entrance that my chair only just fit.”

“The staff were not very helpful though they didn’t offer any guidance ... It was quite fiddly posting my ballot papers into the boxes so my partner helped me.”

It is disappointing to hear reports that some polling stations did not provide things like seating or doorbells, as these features are included the Electoral Commission’s list of [equipment to be provided as a minimum](#). The comments above were from constituents of Rutherglen and Cambuslang, Fife North East, Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire, Aberdeen Central, and Glasgow South.

Among postal voter respondents, 1 in 10 (11%) said they voted by post because their polling station is not accessible to them. This result suggests that some disabled people cannot vote in person because their polling station does not meet their accessibility needs, which falls far short of the standards of inclusion that should be met in a modern democracy.

Adjustments and equipment at polling stations

Polling stations have a duty to provide adjustments and equipment to support disabled people when voting. Around 4 out of 10 (42%) respondents who voted at a polling station told us they require adjustments or equipment to vote. Most of these (53%) said the adjustments they need are an access ramp or wheelchair-accessible voting booth. Some also reported requiring a pencil grip (16%), tactile voting device (11%), or use of assistive technology on their mobile phone (5%).

We are pleased to report that around 5 out of 6 (85%) of those who required equipment said that they received the support they needed at their polling station. This result is encouraging, but we are concerned that some voters did not get what they needed, as a healthy democracy depends on everyone being able to participate.

Respondents reported specific shortcomings in the adjustments and equipment available at their polling stations, including failures to meet the minimum standards set out by the Electoral Commission. The comments below are from people who voted in Glasgow South, Strathkelvin and Bearsden, and Edinburgh South:

“My polling station didn't have pencil grips or large print ballot papers. There was a lower voting booth but a chair was not available to help voters who can't stand for long.”

“The low level booth was actually a stand up one. A person using a wheelchair would experience difficulty with filling the voting forms ... The bins to place your completed form were on a table and again a person in a wheelchair would have to rely on someone else to place their ballot paper.”

“If I stand still for too long I faint. Standing in the booth I had to mark my ballots very quickly, so fast I'm not entirely sure I selected the correct parties. If there was a seat at the booth I could take more time and be able to think clearly.”

Recommendation:

Disability Equality Scotland urges all Returning Officers in Scotland to address these gaps in the adjustments and equipment provided at polling stations as a top priority in future elections. As a starting point, all polling stations should deliver the equipment identified as a minimum requirement by the Electoral Commission.

Experiences of postal voting

Why do disabled people vote by post?

The main alternative to voting at a polling station is to apply for a postal vote. Postal voters are sent a voting pack in advance of their elections, which they must complete and send off by a fixed date.

6 out of 10 (62%) respondents who voted by post said they prefer postal voting because their disability or injury makes it too hard to get to a polling station. Almost half (49%) said they chose a postal vote because it allows them to take their time when voting. About 1 out of 10 said they vote by post because their polling station is not accessible (11%) or they vote by post because this means they can get the support they need (16%). Respondents further told us:

“I find it eaiser (sic) because I find polling stations stressful. They feel quite cold/clinical and a bit scary. Also all the people coming and going make me feel a bit stressed. I'm dyslexic so it would be easy for me to make a mistake in that context, especially as the list MSPs are on a huge long list and there is no variation between the lines like shading.”

“I prefer not attending in person as it is overwhelming and hard to organise.”

“Can't take disabled children to polling station.”

These responses are concerning because they suggest that disabled people might feel trapped in postal voting because their polling station is inaccessible or they feel unable to access support at their polling station. However, most respondents who voted by post were happy to vote this way, with only 1 out of 10 (11%) saying they would prefer to vote at a polling station if this was possible for them. Nonetheless, polling stations should certainly take steps to

create a more inclusive atmosphere and to accommodate parents of disabled children.

Completing the postal vote process

8 out of 10 (80%) respondents to the postal voter survey said it was easy to apply for a postal vote and to return their voting pack after they had filled it in. However, we heard from others who encountered problems with these aspects of postal voting, often saying they had to rely on others for help:

“Accessing a post office or post box in this area is difficult due to post office closures and vandalised post boxes.”

“I am lucky I have my husband who could take my postal vote for me as I am a wheelchair user and post boxes are not at that height unfortunately (sic) and we don’t have local post office in town anymore.”

“It was hard getting to the post box as it is a long way from my home.”

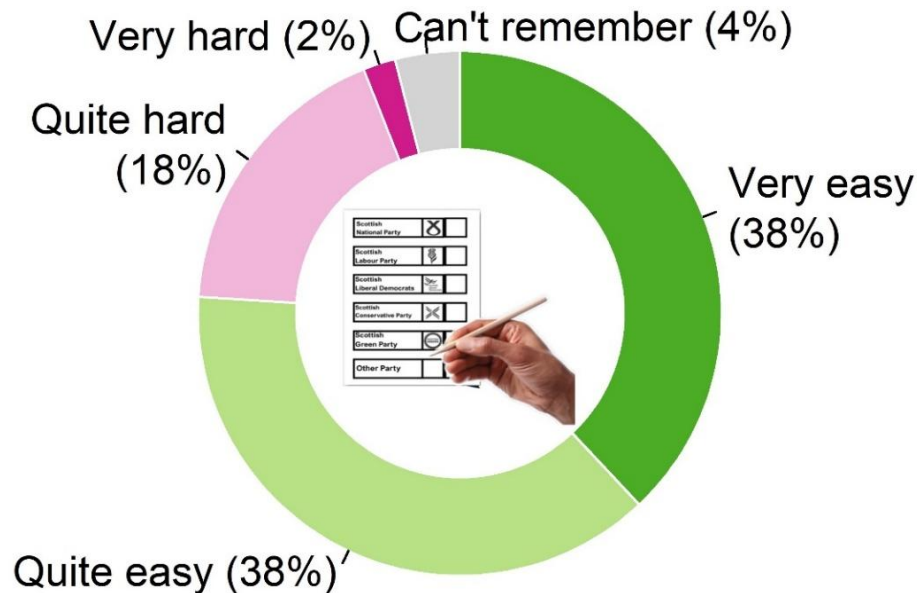
“I’m lucky that we have a printer, otherwise it would have been impossible to access the postal vote application form.”

“I had wanted to apply for a postal vote after moving house a few years ago, but I found it difficult to apply on line ... I managed to apply this time for a postal vote after being sent the paper form to apply by one of the local politicians.

“I only made the post because someone else told me when I would need to post my vote by.”

“I had to ask someone to post my vote as not mobile.”

Survey snapshot: What was it like filling in the voting pack that got sent to you?



3 out of 4 (76%) of respondents said it was easy to fill in their voting pack, which is where postal voters select their chosen candidates. This is a generally good result but, considering the importance of this step in the voting process, it is concerning that 2 out of 10 (20%) respondents had trouble at this stage. Comments from people who found completing their postal vote inaccessible included:

“The instructions that came with the pack were complicated. The 2 envelopes are too similar. It would be easy to get something wrong.”

“It was so overwhelming, so many people and my hand tremor made it really difficult to put the forms in the envelope since there was so little space.”

“I can no longer write including signing my signature. It was very difficult to arrange as they won't accept my signature stamp. I had to find someone to fill out the forms for me.”

“The different envelopes and bits of paper are overwhelming.”

Recommendation:

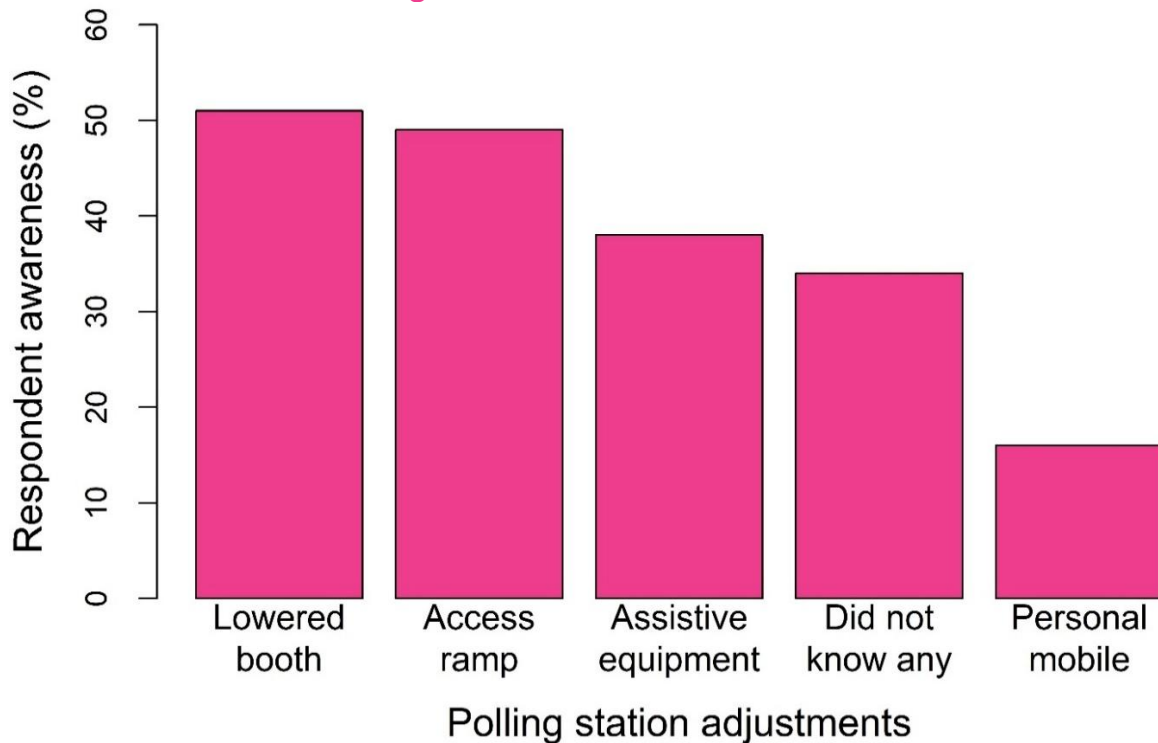
Based on these results, we recommend that the Electoral Commission conducts a review of the design of postal voting packs, consulting with disabled people to find ways of making the process of completing a postal vote as inclusive and accessible as possible.

Polling station adjustments and equipment: Awareness and publicity

Under the [Elections Act 2022](#), polling stations have a duty to provide adjustments and equipment to support disabled people when voting. However, support at polling stations is only useful if members of the public are aware that it is available. If people do not know what support they can get, they might understandably assume that voting is not accessible for them and will not participate. We wanted to find out how much people are aware of the support on offer, so all our surveys asked about a selection of adjustments and equipment that polling stations are expected to provide. We found that:

- Just over half of respondents knew that there must be a lowered voting booth (51%) and that voters can bring a service animal (52%).
- Less than half of respondents knew that polling stations should have ramps (49%), that voters can bring somebody over 18 to help (40%), or that polling stations must have equipment ready to support disabled people (38%).
- Not many respondents were aware that they can ask the person in charge of the polling station (the Presiding Officer) to help fill in their vote (22%) or that they can use assistive technology on their mobile phone (16%).
- One respondent who did not vote at all said this was because they are unable to fill in the ballot papers. This either reveals that the equipment available does not support all disabled people, or that some individuals do not vote because they are unaware of the support and equipment available (such as pencil grips or assistance from the Presiding Officer).
- Concerningly, 1 out of 3 respondents (34%) did not know about any of the adjustments and equipment the surveys asked about.

Survey snapshot: Which of these polling station adjustments did you know about before voting at this election?



Note: This chart only includes some of the adjustments we asked about.

It is disappointing to see that awareness of many of the accessibility features available at polling stations is quite low. It is important that disabled people are aware of the adjustments and equipment they can access, but these findings reveal that at best only around half of our respondents knew about specific adjustments. There is a risk that many disabled people could feel discouraged from participating in elections because they do not realise there are measures in place to support their inclusion.

Recommendation:

We call on the Scottish Government and local authorities to organise more intensive and targeted public information campaigns in future elections, encouraging participation by highlighting the full range of adjustments and equipment available to disabled voters at polling stations. Resources should be inclusively designed and make appropriate use of alternative formats like British Sign Language (BSL) and Easy Read.

Improving accessibility for future elections

While the Scottish Election was taking place, local elections were also being held in other parts of the UK. For these elections, the UK Government worked with some local authorities in England to [test more flexible ways of voting](#). In these areas, voters had the option of voting at a central hub in a busy area instead of their normal polling station or voting on days before the official election day. These are two of [four possible changes](#) the UK Government has been thinking about. We asked our survey respondents if they thought any of these possible changes might help them to participate in Scotland:

- 7 out of 10 (72%) voters who used a postal vote said they would still prefer to vote by post even if flexible voting changes were made.
- More than 1 out of 3 of all survey respondents liked the idea of being able to vote before election day (36%) or vote at any nearby polling station they choose (39%).
- Around 3 out of 10 liked the idea of voting at a central hub (28%) or mobile polling station (29%).
- One respondent commented:

“Having certain locations (say in the bigger towns of the area) being open for voting for up to a week before the polling day would massively help, and in this case would have made it possible for me to vote.”

The evidence suggests that introducing new ways of voting flexibly might be welcome for some disabled people. However, support for the possible changes never comes to close to even half of respondents. This suggests that deeper changes might be needed to have a real impact on access to elections.

Some respondents who did not vote suggested online voting as a solution to the barriers they face. Comments included:

“Why Can't disabled people voter (sic) via email? ... I'm bed bound due to MS and COPD ect. (sic) I want a say, especially when it comes to things that apply personally to me.”

“Online voting for those of us who are often housebound and don't always have someone available to post our vote.”

While privacy and security concerns might mean online voting is impossible for now, these comments nonetheless reveal an urgent need for bold and innovative action to increase access to Scottish elections. It is great that many survey respondents had a positive experience of this election, which is evidence of the hard work of Returning Officers and election staff across Scotland. But there is clearly important work still to be done to remove barriers and make sure that every individual gets to have their say in Scottish politics.



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