CENTRE FOR
MENTAL
HEALTH

A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

Barriers and facilitators to voting and registration for people with mental health difficulties

David Woodhead and Katie Yau

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Voting is a fundamental right for citizens in a democracy. However, people with mental health difficulties are one of the groups who often experience barriers to exercising their voting rights.

This study – commissioned by the Electoral Commission – explored the factors that prevent people with mental health difficulties from registering to vote or participating in elections. The research took place in February and March 2024.

While many participants believed it was important to register to vote, they often feared that the process would be too complicated or difficult; they were unsure what to do or even if they were eligible to vote. As such, the research highlights the need for targeted efforts to improve understanding about how to register to vote, and to increase awareness of the available options for voting – in person, by post, or by a proxy – to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of people with mental health difficulties.

The mental health problems faced by participants were wide-ranging; some experienced mild to moderate depression and anxiety, while others had mental health challenges that severely affected their lives and those close to them. Their mental health difficulties varied significantly from individual to individual and over time. Their consequences, however, were not dissimilar: registering to vote, getting sufficiently organised to send a postal vote, or making the effort to get to a polling station, could be challenging.

Participants described a range of psychological, practical, and personal reasons for not registering or exercising their democratic rights. Barriers included concerns about the integrity and reliability of politicians, the limited choices of who to vote for, or the process of voting. They often saw little point in registering to vote, or subsequently voting, as they thought that politicians took little notice of their needs – an issue on which they sought clarity but were seldom satisfied by the responses or reassurances they were given.

Registering to vote was a problematic process, with the most common barrier being the lack of knowledge about how to check one's registration status. Other barriers included difficulties registering because of mental health problems, and the perceived complexities of the registration process itself.

The most common reasons for not voting or registering to vote were related to the perception that politicians did not care about them or their mental health. Other reasons, such as not knowing who was standing for election or what they stood for, indicated a need for more information and engagement from political parties and candidates.

Barriers to voting at polling stations included: lack of transport which made getting there a challenge; lack of support or company which left some people feeling daunted by the task; lack of information about what the process might be which created anxiety; and negative past experiences where they felt that their needs were not understood or accommodated by people working in the polling stations.

A common barrier to voting was the requirement to show photo ID. Participants were variously unaware of what they needed to bring to the polling station or feared that they did not have the necessary documents to take with them and would be turned away.

The challenges of access extended to the environment of the polling stations, or the lack of understanding of the needs of people with neurodivergence, who expressed concern about the ways in which they were expected to behave. Efforts have been made to improve accessibility, but sometimes with unexpected results for people with mental health difficulties. One participant noted that he understood that old buildings once used as polling stations might be considered inaccessible, but under new arrangements he had to take two buses to get to a new location which created a host of challenges.

Postal voting and proxy voting, as alternatives to voting in person, were well received. Yet some participants raised concerns about the complexities of filling out papers to apply, fears of fraud should it fall into the wrong hands, and concerns about identity theft, especially in households where there was coercion and bullying.

INTRODUCTION

What stops people with mental health difficulties registering to vote? Or voting? And what can be done to help them exercise their democratic right to vote?

Researchers at Centre for Mental Health undertook research into the barriers that people with mental health problems face in registering to vote in February and March 2024.

The research was undertaken on behalf of the Electoral Commission, the independent body which oversees elections in the UK. As part of its role, the Commission works to promote public confidence in the democratic process. This work is informed by research into public attitudes towards registering to vote and voting, particularly among groups who may face additional barriers that prevent them from taking part in our democracy.

The Commission has carried out similar research projects at the same time to understand the barriers faced by Deaf people (working with the RNID), people with a learning disability (working with Mencap), and people who are eligible to vote anonymously, particularly domestic violence survivors (working with Women's Aid).

BACKGROUND

Voting is a fundamental right for citizens in a democracy. However, not all citizens have equal access to the voting process, and some face significant barriers that prevent them from registering or from casting their ballots. One of the groups that often experience difficulties in exercising their voting rights are people with mental health difficulties, who may encounter legal, administrative, social, or psychological obstacles that hinder their political participation.

There are several reasons why people with mental health difficulties may be less likely to register and vote than others. Some of these reasons are common to other disadvantaged or marginalised groups, such as lack of information, awareness, interest, or trust in the political system, or practical difficulties in accessing the polling stations or postal voting. However, some reasons are more specific to people with mental health difficulties, such as the stigma and discrimination they may face from society; the negative impact of their condition on their self-esteem, confidence, or cognitive abilities; or the legal and administrative barriers that may affect their eligibility or capacity to vote (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2024; Khwaja, 2023). In our research for this report, co-occurring barriers were also common, including physical disabilities and neurodivergence.

One of the legal and administrative barriers that people with mental health problems may face is the lack of clarity and consistency in the laws and policies that regulate their voting rights. For instance, the Mental Capacity Act 2005 states that a person lacks capacity to make a decision if they are unable to understand, retain, use or weigh the information relevant to the decision, or to communicate their decision by any means. The Electoral Commission is clear, however, that "anyone with any level or no level of mental capacity may be registered to vote" (Electoral Commission, 2024) and that "A lack of mental capacity is not a legal incapacity to vote" (Electoral Administration Act 2006; Electoral Commission, 2024). The Electoral Commission also states that decisions about whether to vote or not "must be made by the elector themselves, and not by any person on their behalf" (Electoral Commission, 2024).

Another legal and administrative barrier is the restriction of voting rights for some, not all, people who are detained under the Mental Health Act 1983. The law in England currently allows a person who is in hospital for their mental health to vote, unless they are detained following a criminal offence (Electoral Commission, 2020). However, people who are detained may not be aware of their voting rights or how to exercise them, as they may not receive adequate information or support from mental health services or the electoral authorities.

CENTRE FOR MENTAL HEALTH | A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

HOW WE DID THE RESEARCH

We took a mixed method approach – that is to say, we used a qualitative and a quantitative method – to maximise the reach of the project in a relatively short time frame. We encouraged participation in the research through our established channels and contacts in organisations across the sector, as well as through social media. To participate, we stipulated that participants had to be resident and/or eligible to vote in the UK and have a self-defined or diagnosed mental health problem.

There were two ways to get involved in our research. People with mental health difficulties completed an online questionnaire which took about three minutes to fill out. It was designed to help us better understand the barriers to voter registration and voting for people with mental health problems, and to identify their views about how the system could be improved. There was a prize draw for a high street voucher for £100. We had 123 respondents.

Table 1: Summary of the questionnaire respondents

Number of questionnaires completed	123
Mental health problems	With a formal diagnosis = 80.5% (99) No formal diagnosis = 19.5% (24)
Age range	18-71
Gender	Male = 35% (43) Female = 58.5% (72) Non-binary = 4% (5) Other = 2% (2) Prefer not to say = 0.5% (1)
Sexuality	Heterosexual = 66% (81) Lesbian = 4% (5) Gay = 6% (8) Bisexual = 14% (17) Don't know = 2% (2) Prefer not to say = 3% (3) Other = 5% (6)
Ethnicity	White, including white British = 71% (87) Black, including Black British, African and Caribbean= 6% (7) Asian, including Indian and Pakistani = 4% (8) Mixed = 11% (14) Other = 7% (6) Prefer not to say = 1% (1)

Alternatively, people could sign up to participate in online focus groups which were designed for people to share their views and experiences. Each participant received a £20 high street voucher. There were three focus groups with 39 participants in total. As far as we know, there was no crossover between the survey respondents and focus group participants.

Overall, the make-up of the participants in the focus groups broadly reflected population proportions, but this does not imply that participants were entirely representative of the wider population of people with mental health difficulties. There was an under-representation of people from Wales and Northern Ireland.

Table 2: Summary of the participants in the focus groups

Number of focus groups	3
Total number of focus group participants	39
Age range	19–72
Gender	Male = 20 Female = 16 Non-binary = 3
Sexuality	Heterosexual = 26 Lesbian = 4 Gay = 5 Bisexual = 4
Ethnicity	White, including white British = 20 Black, including Black British = 10 Asian, including Indian and Pakistani = 7 Mixed = 3
Country of residence (where known)	England = 20 Wales = 1 Scotland = 5 Northern Ireland = 1

All participants completed a consent form which informed them that we might use the data they provide in our research and subsequent communications. They could also withdraw at any time from the focus groups if they wanted to. We assured them that all data would be anonymised.

We also spoke to colleagues (3) who work in mental health voluntary sector organisations about the challenges they had seen or heard about from service users and others.

FINDINGS

Our findings from the survey, focus groups and interviews are presented under key themes.

◎ **Contextual comments** – Explores why some people do not register or vote despite wanting to engage politically. It identifies psychological, practical and personal barriers, such as mental health difficulties, discrimination and the impact of Covid-19

◎ **Mental health** – Explores how mental health difficulties affect people's participation in democracy. It shows how stigma, isolation, lack of awareness and support, and other factors hinder their access to voting rights. It also reveals how mental health difficulties intersect with other challenges such as low income and the cost-of-living crisis

◎ **Intersections and interrelations** – Describes how issues relating to discrimination, low income, homelessness and addiction can affect people's lives and social interactions as well as their ability to exercise their democratic rights

◎ **Barriers faced in registering to vote** – Reports on barriers in registering to vote, especially lack of knowledge and mental health difficulties

◎ **Trust in the system and in politicians** – Describes how some people felt ignored and distrustful of politics, and lacked information about politicians' views and proposed mental health policies

◎ **Postal voting** – Shows that some of the benefits of postal voting are convenience, time to research candidates, and having control over the process. Some of the drawbacks included complexity in registering, as well as perceived reliability, the possibility of coercion, and potential identity theft

◎ **Voting at a polling station** – Discusses positive and negative experiences of voting among people with mental health problems. It mentions physical, social and emotional barriers, as well as the issue of voter ID

◎ **Solutions proposed by participants** – Suggests addressing systemic failures, challenging stigma, coproducing opportunities to raise awareness, building staff confidence and skills, developing online voting options, offering transport and passenger assistance, learning from Covid-19 testing centres, and training polling station staff to support people with mental health difficulties to vote.

CONTEXTUAL COMMENTS

Participants believed that it was important to register to vote, to confirm their details with local authorities, and to be ready to exercise their rights when the time came. Despite this, there were participants for whom the process had become too complicated, the level of administration too detailed, and the reach of the state too great.

Participants described a combination of psychological, practical and personal reasons for not registering to vote or wishing to exercise their democratic rights. Nobody said that they lacked motivation or interest in doing so. Their desire to engage was evident – shown, for example, by their willingness to be part of the research – but there were numerous external and personal factors that got in the way.

While many of the barriers they discussed related to concerns about the political choices they were afforded and the process of voting, rather than registration itself, it was often expressed that anticipated and actual problems with the former led them to not engage with the latter. In short, they saw little point in registering to vote as they thought their needs as someone with mental health difficulties would not be a concern for elected officials and there was little purpose in voting.

As such, focusing on improvements in the process of registration would be fruitful, they said, yet there was arguably great benefit in addressing systemic failures – notably in mental health services – and broader societal problems. This included routine discrimination experienced by minoritised and racialised groups, and the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw many people still feeling isolated from their communities as their friendships fractured and health challenges grew.

MENTAL HEALTH

Participants' experiences of mental health difficulties were wide-ranging. Some reported that they lived with common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, others were living with a severe mental illness (SMI). They acknowledged that their mental health problems were rarely static, and that the impacts they had on their ability to get on with life varied significantly, from individual to individual, and over time.

In this vein, the day-to-day challenges of being anxious or moderately depressed were different to those experienced by people in the throes of a severe mental health crisis. However, according to participants, their consequences were likely to be similar: registering to vote, getting sufficiently organised to send a postal vote, or making the effort to get to a polling station were unlikely to be personal priorities or, for that matter, readily achieved.

Participants with long-term problems talked about the stigma and shame associated with their poor mental health – typified by the way people with poor mental health were portrayed in the media and the hostility of neighbours – and sometimes carried a belief that they were not part of mainstream society. Although this was never explicitly stated, this created a climate that made them feel like second-class citizens, for whom voting (like other civic rights and responsibilities) was effectively denied.

For people who found themselves detained in hospitals for long periods of time, there was a lack of awareness – and, on occasion, low confidence to ask – about whether they were entitled to register and vote during their detention. There was certainly little encouragement from staff and family to do so.

Similarly, for older people in care homes, many of whom who have mental health needs, their rights in this area are seldom discussed. Voting (whether by post or at a polling station) is rarely facilitated by busy staff with little capacity to address the additional needs or desires of residents.

INTERSECTIONS AND INTERRELATIONS

Participants' mental health difficulties were seldom experienced in isolation; nor were they the only aspect of their lives that affected their willingness and ability to exercise their democratic rights. They gave insights into the complexity of their lives and the challenges they routinely faced. Mental health difficulties interacted with, and were often exacerbated by, a range of other factors. These included:

◎ The pressures and distractions brought by having a low income in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, where meeting day-to-day costs are their primary concern

◎ The limitations associated with physical health difficulties and disabilities, where being mobile and sufficiently well can inhibit attempts to engage

◎ The exclusion and discomfort they endure as a result of their neurodivergence, including the increased likelihood of being misunderstood, bullied, or finding environments inhospitable because of sensory issues and a fear of being overwhelmed by large numbers of people

◎ The sometimes overwhelming demands of caring for family members with long-term conditions, including substance misuse, mental ill health or physical disabilities, which can be wearing and demoralising

◎ The impacts and consequences of being routinely subjected to racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination, which can reduce an individual's willingness to engage or induce fear of interacting with others in public spaces

◎ The insecurity that homelessness brought and the transience of people who relied on friends to provide a place to live – so-called 'sofa surfers' – as well as people who were forced into permanent or temporary street homelessness

◎ The destabilising impacts of compulsive behaviours, such as using substances or gambling, and the ensuing impacts on their ability to work, live in stable accommodation, or maintain ties with loved ones, friends and neighbours.

BARRIERS FACED IN REGISTERING TO VOTE

Registering to vote was described by many as a problematic process. Table 3 shows the percentage of survey respondents who agreed with various statements about the barriers in registering to vote. The most common barrier is the lack of knowledge about how to check one's registration status, which affected 57% of the respondents. The second most common barrier is the difficulty of registering due to mental health problems, which affected 42% of the respondents. The third and fourth barriers are the perceived length and difficulty of the registration process, which affected 38% and 35% of the respondents respectively. This suggests that there is a need for more information and support for potential voters who face these challenges. The issues were also explored in focus groups.

Table 3: Barriers in registering to vote

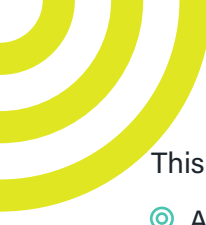| Reason	Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree
Registering takes too long	38% (43)
My experience of registering to vote has been difficult in the past	35% (39)
My mental health problems make it hard to register	42% (47)
I don't know how to check if I am already registered	57% (53)

TRUST IN THE SYSTEM AND IN POLITICIANS

The research unearthed issues relating to trust. Table 4 shows that a large proportion of respondents expressed a lack of knowledge, interest, or trust in the electoral process and the candidates. The most common reasons for not voting or registering to vote were related to the perception that politicians do not care about them or their mental health, with more than three-quarters of respondents agreeing with these statements. This suggests a high level of alienation and dissatisfaction with the political system among people with mental health difficulties.

Other reasons, such as not knowing who is standing for election or what they stand for, or not being able to decide who to vote for, indicate a need for more information and engagement from political parties and candidates.

Table 4: Views on the electoral process

Reason	Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree
I do not know who is standing for election	45% (50)
I do not know what the candidates stand for	58% (64)
I can't decide who to vote for	55% (60)
None of the parties appeal to me	63% (70)
Politicians do not care about me	78% (86)
Politicians do not care about my mental health	81% (90)

Discussions in focus groups further showed that not all the reasons for not voting were direct consequences of their mental health difficulties. Some participants in focus groups chose not to register because of broader societal and political reasons. They were concerned about the state of politics, its key institutions, and the integrity and trustworthiness of national political leaders.

This included:

- A belief that few public bodies, let alone politicians, really care about or value what people with mental health problems have to say or what they might need – highlighted, for example, by the perceived absence or slow pace of mental health reform at the time of our focus groups

- An inability to differentiate one party from another, or a paucity of candidates or parties that reflect their views and preferences

- Low trust in a system that, as far as they could tell, doesn't hold politicians to account to deliver on the promises they make or the assurances they give during election campaigns.

In the survey, 83% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they would like clarity on what each political party thinks about what should be done about mental health.

POSTAL VOTING

> "If you have a disability, like a mental health condition, you can ask for a postal vote, which means… each election, you know, they will send you… and you just… put the tick where you want it to in the privacy of your own home and then post it, so that's a big help."

In the survey, 43% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 'I do not trust postal voting', which is a worryingly high response. The related issues were discussed in greater detail in the focus groups.

In the focus groups, however, the option of postal voting was well received. It was especially good for people who felt that they could not guarantee that they would be able to get to a polling station on election day, due to a sudden episode of poor health, or myriad other challenges.

It was also noted that postal voting brings opportunities to look closely at the names of candidates and to research them on the internet first; a useful tool for checking what their views are on specific issues and what issues they have supported (or not) in the past. This brought a welcome level of control and countered any fears of being hurried or embarrassed in a polling station – very helpful when managing anxiety and depression or another mental health difficulty.

> "I didn't go out and vote last year. I was too late because the voter ID certificate came too late. It was laughable. I'd got in contact with the local authority. And I said, you know, we've got the voting next week. 'Oh, yes, it's on its way', they said, but it never came until two days after the vote polling day."

However, similar to the survey respondents, there were also a number of concerns raised in relation to postal voting:

1. The process of filling out the papers as part of casting votes was complex; it included detaching coupons, using different envelopes for portions of the paperwork, and was confusing and off-putting. As one participant noted: "politics is so confusing nowadays!"

> [On using postal votes] "you need to have some kind of degree in the sense of having to put you know, you have to put the slip into envelope A then the envelope A goes into envelope B, and then that thing gets sent off there like that."

2. There were fears that, in the context of a failing postal service, where people are routinely waiting several days for first class mail, the paperwork will arrive too late to be considered, or will never arrive at all – effectively wasting votes.

3. There was a fear expressed that postal voting might inadvertently enable bullying, and that vulnerable people with mental health difficulties could be coerced into voting for a party or a candidate against their will.

4. A small number of participants expressed concerns about identity theft. They thought that there was a risk that correspondence could be stolen, that votes could be cast without the individual's knowledge or consent, and that additional benefits associated with being registered to vote – such as accessing credit – could be misused.

VOTING AT A POLLING STATION

"At least when you go [to the polling station] and sort of put the thing in the box you know it does register."

"I don't mind going to the building as long as, as I say, it's accessible... but I don't know, it just feels more real when you actually go in and do your bit, you know."

Several focus group participants expressed pleasure in being able to vote on an election day, when so many others are doing it too, and described a feeling of connection and pride derived from taking part. They spoke about the thrill of being at the station; the act of casting their vote was often a moment of pride and pleasure at having had the opportunity to influence international, national and local decisions. However, they also identified several barriers.

Table 5: Barriers to voting at a polling station

Reason	Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree
I can't get to the polling station	43% (48)
Nobody will come with me to vote	36% (40)
I have not heard about the requirement to show photo ID	32% (36)
My experiences with voting have been difficult in the past	43% (48)

Table 5 shows the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with various statements about the barriers to voting at a polling station. The data suggests that there are several factors that discourage people from voting in person, such as lack of transportation, lack of support, lack of information, and negative past experiences.

One of the most common barriers was having difficulty getting to the polling station, which 43% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with. This could be due to physical, financial, or logistical reasons, such as distance, cost, accessibility, or availability of transportation. The same percentage of respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that their experiences with voting have been difficult in the past, which could affect their motivation and confidence to vote again. Some of the difficulties mentioned in the text include voter ID issues, physical barriers, sensory issues, and confusing instructions.

A third common barrier was not having anyone to come with them to vote, which 36% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with. This could reflect a lack of social support, trust, or encouragement for some voters, or a lack of understanding that voters are able to be accompanied, especially for those who may need assistance or guidance at the polling station.

A final common barrier reported was not having heard about the requirement to show photo ID, which 32% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed was a barrier. This suggests that some people do not have the necessary identification documents or are unaware of what they need to bring to the polling station. This could potentially exclude a significant number of voters from exercising their democratic rights.

> [On polling stations] "It's quite an alien environment to go in. And there's a lot of secrecy... you have to do things in a certain way and... you're petrified to spoil your ballot and various stuff. And I think, again, for me, that is quite complex. Number one, I tend to actually forget, you know, what I'm kind of doing. And number two, I get very much distracted. So, even if there was a kind of a separate room, where you could go in and if you had... issues or disabilities you just wanted to speak to someone and explain."

The data in Table 5 reveals some of the challenges and obstacles that prevent or deter some people from voting at a polling station. It also highlights the need for more accessible, inclusive, and informative voting systems and processes that can accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of the electorate.

Similarly, the focus groups explored live issues for the participants. Voter ID remains a contested development. One participant, who didn't have a driving license because of the medication he took and had no passport because he does not go overseas, offered his disabled bus pass, only to be told that it was not acceptable. A friend had presented their 60+ bus pass and had it accepted moments before. "What a palaver", he said, noting that it has affected his willingness to return to vote in future.

Participants also encountered a number of challenges that were, on occasion, sufficient to dissuade them from going to vote. These included physical barriers, in an unusual and sometimes frightening environment, such as:

◎ Poor acoustics in old buildings – such as church halls – which can be problematic for people with sensory issues or sensitivity to sounds, for example some neurodivergent participants

◎ The unwritten, but evident, etiquette of how to behave, including the need to be silent, and the lack of interaction with staff or others, which for a participant with complex PTSD had triggered her anxiety and caused mild panic. "It's so secret, so quiet", she said, "just like libraries used to be". Voting is a serious event, one participant noted, but that doesn't mean it has to be unfriendly or shaming

◎ There were worries about "getting it wrong... ticking the wrong box; making the wrong decision", which could lead to anxiety.

Efforts had been made to improve accessibility but sometimes with unexpected results for people with mental health difficulties. One participant noted that he understood that old buildings once used as polling stations might, quite rightly, be considered inaccessible. However, under new arrangements, he has to take two buses – with all the attendant issues of having to get on and off and engaging with strangers – to get to the new location. He said: "It can feel like walking up Everest".

> "They need to be aware that the people who come to vote have all different needs, as well as issues and so on that all of them are able-bodied in a way... mental health is something that is... hidden, you can't see it."

SOLUTIONS PROPOSED BY PARTICIPANTS

Respondents to the survey identified that they would welcome additional information about the process of registration and voting.

Table 6 shows the percentage of people with mental health difficulties who would like to receive information about various aspects of voting. The most common request was information about postal voting, which 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they would like. The least common request was information about why they should vote, which 64% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would like. Information about how to register to vote, and the benefits of doing so, were also relatively popular, with 69% of respondents expressing interest in both. The table suggests that people with mental health difficulties have a high demand for information that could help facilitate their participation in elections.

Table 6: Requests for information

I would like information about	Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree
My right to register	66% (70)
How I can register to vote	69% (73)
The benefits of registering to vote	69% (73)
Why I should vote	64% (67)
Postal voting	73% (77)

In the survey, respondents identified practical measures that would help them get to polling stations on election days. Table 7 shows the percentage of people with mental health difficulties who agreed or strongly agreed that certain kinds of help would enable them to get to the polling station and vote. The most common type of help was clear signage showing that help was available once they arrived at the polling station, followed by assurance that staff at the polling station had training in understanding the potential needs of people with mental health difficulties, and information about who can accompany them. The least common type of help was support with getting to the polling station, which still had more than half of the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it would help.

Table 7: What would help you get to the polling station?

Types of help	Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree
Support with getting to the polling station	54% (57)
Assurance that staff at the polling station had training in understanding the potential needs of people with mental health problems	69% (73)
Clear signage showing that help was available	75% (79)
Information about who can accompany them to the polling station	69% (73)

"I'm autistic and sometimes when I go to a meeting in a new place, they will send us a little video of... where to enter the building, where to find the room. So you actually get to see by video, what it's like [when you're] entering the building, you turn left and you turn right and where you turn up the steps... So to have something similar, you know, for people with audio and video, to prepare them, so they've got that situational awareness and therefore confidence before they actually go to vote."

Participants in the focus groups and interviews identified actions that could build on what is good and help break down barriers for people with mental health problems. They were united in their wish to raise awareness of issues relating to voter eligibility and for the process of voter registration to be improved, as well as taking system-wide actions to remove psychological and material barriers to voting. Actions included:

1. Working with people with mental health difficulties to coproduce targeted opportunities to increase knowledge and raise awareness – promoting the benefits of registering to vote, the requirements for voter ID, and the mechanics of voting itself. This should also include information for people without a fixed address; people who are in hospitals and care homes; people who are from commonwealth countries; and those who might be unsure about their rights.

"I was thinking also in terms of improving accessibility, you know, where people are waiting outside the polling station. There can be you know, a big infographic. You know, kind of giving people instructions and also when you get in the polling booth itself, you know, pictorial instructions... would be really helpful."

2. Building the confidence and skills of clinical and support staff in health, social, housing and employment services to encourage their service users to register to vote. Staff should address any concerns they might have, and reassure them that their voices can be heard, and their views are taken seriously.

3. Widening participation by developing options to vote safely and securely online. Many aspects of our lives – paying council tax, shopping for food, learning a new language – can be done through our phones. Participants asked why this technology could not be harnessed to exercise our democratic rights.

4. Focusing on minimising barriers to participation, promoting transport and passenger assistance, and exploring the use of navigators who can support people end-to-end.

5. Learning from Covid-19 testing centres, which were considered successful in communicating clearly with people as they arrived, providing friendly and patient support at every stage, and representing the process in clear terms by using infographics (and, on occasion, video and audio options). Participants said that designated booths for people who want more support and relief from the pressure of the moment might also be considered.

6. Making sure all staff in polling stations are adequately trained and understand the potential needs of people with mental health difficulties and (perhaps more importantly) can communicate and support them in finding their way and casting their votes. This might also include offering a moment after the voting is over and sharing a warm thank you and goodbye.

CONCLUSIONS

Some people with mental health difficulties face significant legal, administrative, social, or psychological obstacles which prevent them from exercising their voting rights.

This study revealed a lack of understanding about individuals' eligibility to vote and the process of registration, let alone the alternatives to voting in person. There was little trust in the electoral process and candidates, with over three-quarters of respondents agreeing that politicians do not care about their mental health. Other reasons for not voting included not knowing how to check your registration status (or fearing that it will be a long and difficult process), not knowing who is standing for election or what they stand for, and not being able to decide who to vote for.

To break down barriers for people with mental health difficulties, practical measures to help people get to polling stations on election days included clear signage, assurance that staff have training in understanding the potential needs of people with mental health problems, and providing information about who can accompany them to the polling station.

Clinicians and service providers also have a clear role to play in encouraging people with mental health difficulties to exercise their voting rights – simple adjustments, a conversation about the voting process, and some reassurance and support can enable people to take part.

The solutions to overcome these barriers are simple but vital. By working together, providing clear communication, training, and support, more people with mental health difficulties can be enabled to participate in democratic life.

REFERENCES

Electoral Administration Act (2006) *Section 73*. Available from: **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/22/contents** [Accessed 21 February 2025]

Electoral Commission (2020) *Can a patient in a mental health hospital register to vote?* Available from: **https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/running-electoral-registration-wales/eligibility-register-vote/what-are-residency-requirements-registration-purposes/can-a-patient-a-mental-health-hospital-register-vote** [Accessed 18 February 2025]

Electoral Commission (2024) *How does mental capacity affect the right to register to vote?* Available from: **https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/running-electoral-registration-wales/eligibility-register-vote/how-does-mental-capacity-affect-right-register-vote** [Accessed 18 February 2025]

Khwaja, M. (2023) *Having our say: Promoting voting rights for people with mental health difficulties*. Centre for Mental Health. Available from: **https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/having-our-say-promoting-voting-rights-people-mental-health-difficulties/** [Accessed 18 February 2025]

Royal College of Psychiatrists (2024) *Voting rights as a mental health patient*. Available from: **https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/improving-care/campaigning-for-better-mental-health-policy/the-2024-general-election-and-our-manifesto/a-patients-right-to-vote** [Accessed 18 February 2025]

APPENDIX
VOTING EXPERIENCE - SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. **Do you consent to taking part in this survey?**

   - Yes

   - No

2. **Your ID:** This will be unique to you and help us to use your information anonymously. To create your unique ID, please enter the following information in the box below:

   - Second letter of your first name

   - Number of siblings (if none, write X)

   - Month of birth (in numbers, for example, if you were born in August, write 08)

   - Last letter of your last name

   Example ID: a208e

Demographic information

3. **Please tell us your age**

4. **Which gender do you identify with?**

   - Male

   - Female

   - Non-binary

   - Prefer not to say

   - Other (please specify)

5. **Is your gender the same as the gender you were assigned at birth?**

   - Yes

   - No

   - Prefer not to say

6. **Which best describes your ethnicity?**

   Asian or Asian British

   - Indian

   - Pakistani

CENTRE FOR MENTAL HEALTH | A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background

Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

- Caribbean
- African
- Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background

Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background

White

- English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
- Irish
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Roma
- Any other White background

Other ethnic group

- Arab
- Any other ethnic group
- None of the above
- Prefer not to say

7. **Which best describes your sexuality?**

- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Heterosexual
- I don't know
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify)

8. **Please enter your country of residence**

Mental health condition

9. **Do you experience any mental health problems?**

    - Yes, and I have a formal diagnosis

    - Yes, but I do not have a formal diagnosis

    - No, I do not experience any mental health problems

10. **Are your day-today activities limited because of a mental health problem which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?**

    - Yes, limited a lot

    - Yes, limited a little

    - No

11. **You said that your day-to-day activities are limited because of a mental health problem. How long, in total, have your day-to-day activities been limited so far?**

    - Less than 6 months

    - 6 to 12 months

    - 2 years

    - 3 years

    - 4 years

    - 5 years or more

12. **Please tell us about the mental health problem(s) that you experience. Remember you are not required to answer any questions that you may not be comfortable with.**

Barriers to registering to vote

13. **We are interested in why people with mental health problems may not register to vote. Please read and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree to each of the following statements.** (1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree).

    - Registering to vote is complicated

    - I can't be bothered to register

    - It takes too long to register

    - I do not know if I am entitled to register

    - I do not know why I should register

    - I do not know how to register

    - I do not know that I have to register to vote in order to vote on election day

    - My experiences of registering to vote have been difficult in the past

    - My mental health problems make it hard for me to register

    - I don't know how to check if I am already registered

Reasons for not voting

14. We would like to know why people with mental health problems may not vote. Please read and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree to each of the following statements. (1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree).

- I don't know who is standing for election
- I don't know what the candidates stand for
- I can't decide who to vote for
- None of the parties are appealing to me
- Politicians don't care about me
- Politicians don't care about my mental health
- Voting doesn't change anything
- I do not know where to vote
- I cannot get to the polling station to vote
- Nobody will come with me to help me vote
- I have not heard about voting by post
- I have not heard about voting by proxy
- I have not heard of the requirement to show photo ID when voting in person
- I do not trust voting by post
- My friends do not vote
- My family does not vote
- My experiences of voting in the past have been difficult
- My mental health problems make it hard for me to vote in person
- Other reason (please specify)

Finding information on registering to vote

15. How easy or difficult would you say it was to get information on each of the following? (1 = Very easy, 2 = Easy, 3 = Neither Easy nor Difficult, 4 = Difficult, 5 = Very difficult).

- How to register to vote
- The different methods of voting available to me (in-person, postal, proxy)
- How to cast your vote in an election
- What an election was about/for
- The candidates and parties running for election
- The types of photographic ID you could use at a polling station

Helping people with mental health problems to register

16. **We would like to know what would make you more likely to register to vote. Please read and indicate the extent to which the following would help.** (1 = Help a lot, 2 = Help a little, 3 = Makes no difference, 4 = Not help much, 5 = Not help at all).

   - Information about my right to register and vote

   - Information about how I can register to vote

   - Information about the other benefits of registering to vote (e.g. being able to get credit more easily)

   - Information about why I should vote

   - Information about voter ID

   - Information about postal voting

   - Information about proxy voting

   - Information about what each political party thinks about what should be done to improve mental health

17. **Please read and indicate the extent to which the following would help you register to vote.** (1 = Help a lot, 2 = Help a little, 3 = Makes no difference, 4 = Not help much, 5 = Not help at all).

   - Having support with getting to the polling station

   - Assurance that people working in polling stations have had training on supporting electors with different needs

   - Clear signage in the polling station showing what help is available

   - Information about who can accompany me to help cast my vote

A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO VOTING AND REGISTRATION FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES

Published March 2025

Image: istockphoto.com/portfolio/SolStock