



GRŴP MYNEDIAD ARFON ACCESS GROUP
Equal Access for All ~ Hygyrchedd Cyfartal i Bawb



Secretary ~ Vin West ~ Ysgrifennydd

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Tuesday, 02 October 2007

Ann Jones AM
Chair, Equal Opps. C'ttee

Equal Access to Polling Stations

Dear Ann,

I understand that your committee is investigating equality of access to polling stations in Wales. It is our view that this is a long-neglected aspect of equal access and all the more shocking because many polling stations are in fact public and community buildings which should have been made accessible by October 2004 at the latest.

The Arfon Access Group surveyed polling stations in the Caernarfon constituency in the 1997 elections and the results shocked even us.

Gwynedd Council had at that time purchased three wheelchair-accessible polling booths which, one would have anticipated, would naturally be placed in the most accessible polling stations. Sadly (one might be forgiven for saying stupidly!) all three were found in completely inaccessible stations and were therefore a complete waste of money and opportunity.

We surveyed 37 of the 82 polling stations and found only two accessible stations (minus accessible booths).

7 of those stations however had rear or side entrances that were wheelchair accessible but **none** of these were open or signed. At every single location where this occurred the staff were asked why the accessible entrance was not open and indicated by external signage and the universal answer was: "Well, if anyone comes in and asks, we can open the door." Only one of the staff realised how silly this statement was as they said it.

We estimated that 33 of the 37 sites could be made physically accessible with very minimal work. The lack of access therefore was not due to limited funding but to limited awareness, or perhaps limited empathy.

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We fully realise that these findings are ten years old and that the deadline of October 2004 for removal of physical barriers under the '95 DDA has come and gone. Sadly however, subsequent elections have not proved to be any more accessible to disabled people that have reported back to the Group, and the emphasis in government has turned to postal ballots.

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The physical accessibility of a site however is only one aspect. We found that lighting was very poor almost everywhere and that attitudes to equal access were well intentioned but ignorant and stemmed from Medical Model thinking: the twin paradox of the unintentional and unnecessary barriers along with a willingness to 'help'.

Our hope therefore is that, along with the removal of physical barriers that we trust your committee will be calling for, should come Disability Equality Training (NOT Disability Awareness Training!) for all polling station staff.

Yours,



Vin West
Secretary

Cc: Graham Findlay

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