

One Voice



Official Voice of the National Federation for the disability sector

Issue 8 – January 2025

MFOPD
55TH ANNIVERSARY



Credits and the President's Message:

One Voice is a magazine published by the Malta Federation of Organisations Persons with Disability (MFOPD).

As its title implies, the magazine is the official, unified voice of Malta's civil society working in the disability sector. It portrays the mission and vision of the various Organisations active in this sphere as represented by their umbrella Federation.

One Voice

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Marthese Mugliette
President MFOPD



IS “NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US” TRULY BEING ADOPTED BY ALL?

In recent years, the rallying call “Nothing About Us Without Us” has echoed strongly within the disability community worldwide. It signifies a fundamental principle: decisions impacting persons with disabilities must involve their voices at every stage. While progress has been made in the last 55 years since the establishment of MFOPD, it is time to reflect on whether this mantra is genuinely being embraced by all sectors in our society, including government entities, private institutions, and civil society organizations.

At its core, this phrase emphasizes the right to participation, empowerment, and dignity. It reminds us that people with disabilities are the experts of their own lived experiences. They are not merely beneficiaries of policies, programs, or initiatives but active contributors to shaping them. Yet, despite the widespread acceptance of this principle in rhetoric, its application often falls short.

One key challenge lies in tokenism - situations where individuals with disabilities are

invited to discussions but lack meaningful participation or decision-making power. Far too often, their inclusion serves to tick a box rather than genuinely valuing their insights. True adoption of “Nothing About Us Without Us” requires creating environments where persons with disabilities feel empowered to contribute on equal footing with others.

Another concern is representation. The disability community is incredibly diverse, encompassing a wide range of experiences, conditions, and needs. If we aim to uphold this principle, representation must be intersectional, inclusive of those from different socioeconomic, cultural, and gender backgrounds, as well as those with varying disabilities. Policies and platforms must reflect this rich diversity to avoid marginalizing certain groups within the community.

Education and awareness are also pivotal. Many decision-makers lack an adequate understanding of disability issues, which can lead to unintentional exclusion. Therefore, fostering greater awareness and sensitivity is critical to creating collaborative and inclusive systems. When

stakeholders are well-informed, the gap between rhetoric and reality begins to close.

Locally, Malta has made strides in fostering inclusivity, yet there remains room for improvement. The establishment of platforms like MFOPD demonstrates commitment, but the question remains: are all sectors fully embracing the call for co-creation and collaboration? True adherence to “Nothing About Us Without Us” demands that persons with disabilities not only have a seat at the table but also an equal say in shaping decisions.

Let us challenge ourselves as a society to move beyond slogans and make this principle a living reality. Each of us - governments, NGOs, corporations, and individuals - has a role to play. It is only by working together, with persons with disabilities leading the charge, that we can build a truly inclusive and equitable society.

This is not just a goal; it is a necessity. “Nothing About Us Without Us” is more than a phrase; it is a call to action. The question we must continually ask ourselves is: are we doing enough to answer that call?



As far as I remember, the Malta Federation of Organisations Persons with Disability (MFOPD) always had the President of Malta of the day as its Patron.

As soon as the new President of Malta was known, the Malta Federation sent its request, via the President's office, for Her Excellency to consider becoming MFOPD's new Patron following her predecessor President Emeritus George Vella. The reply was a positive one. MFOPD asked for a courtesy visit to be made possible so as for MFOPD to introduce itself and its member organisations.

The courtesy visit to Her Excellency Myriam Spiteri Debono took place on Thursday 4th July 2024. The invitation was sent to all 41 MFOPD member organisations and to its 11 individual members. The 15 member NGOs who could send a representative to attend this event were:

ADHD Malta, Arthritis & Rheumatism Association Malta, Autism Parents' Association, Be Positive Bipolar SelfHelp Group, Caritas Malta Epilepsy Association, Down Syndrome Association, Embrace Diversity, Equal Partners Foundation, Fondazzjoni Nanniet Malta, Malta Association of Supported Employment, ME, CFS & Fibromyalgia Alliance, Moviment Favur id-Drittijiet ta' Persuni b'Dizabilita', National Parents' Society of Persons with Disability, Na-



Marthese Mugliette
President MFOPD

tional Association of Pensioners and Prisms.

The meeting started off with each representative introducing him/herself and the organisation they represent. This opportunity was very much appreciated by the member organisations. Two other topics on the agenda following the introductions were Independent Living (education / employment / leisure / Personal Assistance) and 'Nothing About Us Without Us'.

Her Excellency heard with interest what each had to say on the topics and asked questions and clarifications on the subjects. Among others, the topics mentioned by the MFOPD members in attendance were the present education system, which is failing most persons with disabilities, the hurdles persons with disabilities are

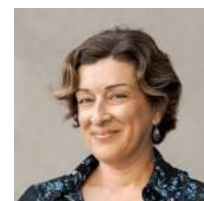
facing to find a job, the barriers persons with disabilities are facing on a daily basis throughout their lives and the lack of participation of NGOs on all that relates to the disability sector and this at all levels of the discussions.

Her Excellency gave her views and thoughts. She asked to know more about the situation of persons with disabilities in Malta and Gozo and requested us to keep her informed about all. Heartfully, she said she will do what is in her power to support MFOPD in its mission to bring about the right changes for all persons with disabilities in Malta and Gozo to have and enjoy a better life.

The meeting concluded with a group photo with Her Excellency.



SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN MALTA & GOZO TOWARDS **INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT**



Dr Lara Bezzina
(PhD, Durham)

Independent Expert
(disability, international development,
participatory research)



Introduction

Supported employment (SE) has been successfully used for decades as personalised support for people with significant disabilities to obtain and retain employment.¹ The **Association for Supported Employment Europe** (ASEE) defines supported employment as “the **provision of support to persons with disabilities or other disadvantaged groups to secure and maintain paid employment in the open labour market.**”²

1 BASE. *What is Supported Employment?* <https://www.base-uk.org/what-supported-employment>

2 ASEE. 2013. *Defining Supported Employment.* <https://a4se.eu/about-se/defining-supported-employment>

Such services are being also provided in Malta. The **current supported employment services for persons with disabilities are provided by the Lino Spiteri Foundation (LSF)**, a social purpose foundation dedicated to supporting sustainable employment of persons with disabilities. Alongside these services, people with disabilities can also benefit from pre-employment training (e.g. the Sheltered Employment Training (SET) at Jobsplus and other training offered by both Jobsplus, LSF, and **Agenzija Support**, among others.

Jobsplus also offers schemes and incentives targeted at employers and people with disabilities to promote the latter's employment in the open labour market. The Disability Quota also obliges employers who have more than 20 persons in their employment to have and maintain a minimum of a 2% quota of employees with disabilities. Employers who fail to adhere to the quota are obliged to make an annual contribution for every person with disability they should be employing. Contributions are partly used to finance the LSF.



To date, however, the rate of **employment of persons with disabilities in Malta** and Gozo continues to be **lower than that of the rest of the population**, and of persons with disabilities across the EU.³ Further, very little research has looked specifically at how SE is actually supporting persons with disabilities in seeking, obtaining and retaining employment.

It is in this context that the Malta Association of Supported Employment (MASE) commissioned Dr Lara Bezzina to conduct a study on supported employment for people with disabilities in Malta and Gozo. This research aimed to delve deeper into the supported employment scenario in Malta, with the aim of gauging:

- the type of supported employment being currently provided, how and to whom;
- whether the current supported employment services are reaching their aim in enabling persons with disabilities in accessing the open labour market; and

- whether the current supported employment services can be improved and in what manner.

The research study was conducted during 2024. It employed a qualitative approach and consisted mainly of:

- Desk research of relevant documents
- 58 Key informant interviews with people with disabilities and their caregivers (where necessary), service providers, employers, organisations of persons with disabilities, and NGOs working in the field
- 2 Validation workshops to discuss and validate the recommendations emerging from the study with all relevant stakeholders

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research as well as **invaluable inputs from interviewees themselves** the following recommendations for the improvement of the supported employment and related services and incentives in Malta and Gozo emerged:

³ Gauci, V., Callus, A-M. and Camilleri Zahra, A. (EDE). 2021. *European Semester 2020-2021 country fiche on disability equality – Malta*. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23939&langId=en>



Working with Employers and Staff

- ❖ There is scope for more **knowledge-sharing among employers and more awareness of employer success stories** / best practices to enable other employers to believe in inclusive workplaces and realising that the presence of a person with disability in a workplace is not just about including that person, but about making the whole workplace more inclusive. Such show-casing could be



done through the Malta Business Disability Forum and employers' organisations.

- ❖ This could also lead to **fostering more humane ways of working**: enabling employers to find a way to make money while being inclusive. Again, good practices from companies who are already doing this could be beneficial. These stories could also be used by the LSF in their marketing campaigns.
- ❖ **Employers and staff need to be trained** (not in a blanket approach), but **specifically on understanding the challenges the person with disability may encounter and how best to support them.**

- ❖ In supporting jobseekers with disabilities, **employers need to be made aware and supported in providing accommodations in the recruitment process, such as on-the-job interviews** rather than sending a written curriculum vitae and having a verbal interview. This is already being done by some employers, but needs to **become a more common practice**, as evidenced by the quote below. Other accommodations can also be put in

place such as ensuring that interview questions are sent to the jobseeker in advance to persons who have anxiety; there is no more than one interviewer interviewing a person with ASD.

- ❖ **Fiscal incentives and other schemes aimed at employers should also be targeted at the upward mobility of persons with disabilities**, not simply at employing them. Tax incentives should not be a fixed amount but proportionate to the salary of the employee with disability.
- ❖ Besides fiscal and other financial incentives, **employers can be encouraged through other means such as being given more points upon proving that they**



are equal opportunities employers and employ persons with disabilities in public procurement.

- ❖ **Employers need to be made aware of other schemes such as the *Work Accessibility Tax Deduction Scheme*** – managed by the CRPD Malta – enabling employers who employ a person with a disability who is registered with the Commission to make the necessary changes for their employees with disabilities. The costs eligible for tax deduction under the Scheme include those incurred for: installation / modification of physical structures of equipment; removal of architectural

and physical barriers; acquisition of devices; and work training of employees with disabilities. The maximum deduction that can be claimed is €20,000.⁴ However, very little use has been made of the scheme, denoting the need for more publicity. A similar initiative is the *Facilitating Work Life for Individuals with Disability Scheme*, managed by the Malta Enterprise,⁵ the economic development agency. Through the scheme, employers and self-employed persons can apply for a grant towards the cost of adapting / making the workplace more accessible for employees with disabilities. The aid under this scheme is awarded in the form of a grant covering 90% of incurred eligible costs, up to a maximum of €10,000.

- ❖ **Global research** – carried out with almost 6000 employees with disabilities and over 1700 executives in 28 countries – highlights a perception gap between what leaders think is happening and what employees with disabilities think is the reality. The research uncovered eight factors that strengthen inclusion and that really matter to employees. The factors include: **clear role models; employee resource groups (voluntary, employee-led groups aiming to foster a diverse and inclusive workplace); fair and transparent pay; training; freedom to innovate; and mental wellbeing policies.**⁶

4 CRPD Malta. 2021. *Work Access Tax Scheme*. <https://www.crpdmalta.org/resources/workplace-accessibility-tax-deduction-scheme>

5 <https://maltaenterprise.com>

6 Accenture. 2020. *Enabling Change. Getting to Equal 2020: Disability Inclusion*. <https://www.accenture.com/content/dam/accenture/final/a-com-migration/pdf/pdf-142/Accenture-Enabling-Change-Getting-Equal-2020-Disability-Inclusion-Report.pdf>



Increasing Inclusivity

- ❖ There is a marked need to **bring on board and meaningfully include persons with disabilities** - particularly those with lived experiences of supported employment - **and their organisations in decision-making in supported employment services**. Persons with disabilities can be part of the LSF Board and where necessary - such as when persons have profound disabilities and cannot articulate clearly their ideas - their legal guardians should make up at least 50% - and/or hold consultancy/ advisory posts, advising the Foundation on various aspects of supported employment, including the challenges / needs of people with particular types of disabilities, the best way to support service users and what accommodations can be made in a workplace, among others.
- ❖ A best practice example in this field is the **Office of Cognitive Accessibility and Easy Reading** in the Extremadura region in Spain, a public office which employs persons with intellectual disabilities, whose work is essential in identifying what cognitive barriers exist in a particular environment, and in proposing solutions to overcome these barriers.⁷

Moving beyond Segregation

- ❖ **Training needs to be on the job** rather than in sheltered environments, unless the service users have multiple and complex disabilities which make it extremely difficult for them to work in the open labour market.

⁷ Inclusion Europe. 2020. *Reasonable accommodation – My talents For diversity*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czpb3iBxWsE>

- ❖ A **cooperative or social enterprise** – where the focus would not be on making profit but on providing an inclusive workplace and creating employment opportunities for persons with disabilities could help mitigate some of the challenges mentioned throughout this report. A social cooperative – owning and managing a cafeteria, for example – could **provide both training for those who need it, and paid employment for others**. In this manner, all persons with disabilities, depending on their skillset, needs and preferences, can reach their potential and be productive through work which they enjoy, as the enterprise would be set up by persons with disabilities and their caregivers, with support from NGOs / other organisations working in the field. Setting up such an enterprise, however, is currently hampered by the lack of legislation addressing social enterprises in Malta: the **Social Enterprise Act of 2022** has not yet come into force. Meanwhile, cooperatives can make use of existing support to set off, such as TAKEOFF at the UoM, the Malta Co-Operative Federation and **Koperattivi Malta**.

Improving Effectiveness

- ❖ The LSF needs to **work more closely with caregivers** where the person with disability wants and needs their support, and the caregiver wants to be involved. Caregivers can support their child throughout the SE process in unique ways.
- ❖ **Job coaches working with people with severe mental health difficulties need to have the right background and experience** in working with such jobseekers, in order to give them the support they

require. Across the board, **job coaches in both the SET and at the LSF - which should have a standardised job description and requirements to fill such a post - need to have training on the specific disabilities of the service users they are supporting**, in order to be able to support the service users through **evidence-based approaches and more individualised approaches**.

- ❖ **Sheltered training and employment, and supported employment services should be brought under one roof**, to ensure continuity and efficiency. Furthermore, **in-house human resources at the LSF** such as OTs, social workers, psychologists and a visiting psychiatrist are necessary in order to adequately support service users.
- ❖ In a bid to reach more – and more successfully – persons with disabilities and

their caregivers, **the LSF website should be made more accessible** in terms of:

- Language: website content needs to be provided in Maltese and Easy-Read
 - Accessibility: both website and social media pages and channels need to be accessible for persons with visual and hearing impairments, as well as persons with dyslexia
 - Content: the website content could be clearer and more detailed about the type of services the LSF offers, what the job seeker can expect in the SE process, and other aspects.
- ❖ Relatedly, the **transparency and accountability of current SE services needs to be improved**. This can be done through publishing verifiable outcomes:





- who is being supporting (types of disabilities)
- how they are being supported
- the duration of support
- how people on the waiting list are prioritised
- how long people wait to find a job.

Furthermore, there needs to be a budget for **Monitoring & Evaluation** of SE services.

- ❖ **Within large companies, job coaches could be provided by the employer themselves. Where needed, employers can be financially supported in this by the funding coming from the disability quota contributions paid by employers who do not reach the quota.** Such an approach could also help mitigate the shortage of job coaches.
- ❖ The **contributions made by employers who do not meet the 2% quota** can also be put to better use in terms of supporting people with disabilities who wish to work in the open labour market, such as **using it to fund further transport services** for those who are unable to use public transport.

External Coherence

- ❖ There is a need to **strengthen the collaboration and information sharing between the education and employment** spheres to better

prepare persons with disability for work and provide the necessary support and services during the transition from formal education to employment.

- ❖ As mentioned in the beginning of the report, supported employment and employment-related services do not exist in a vacuum. If persons with disability are to be properly supported in job finding and retainment, as well as in career development, they need to be adequately supported in other areas of their lives:

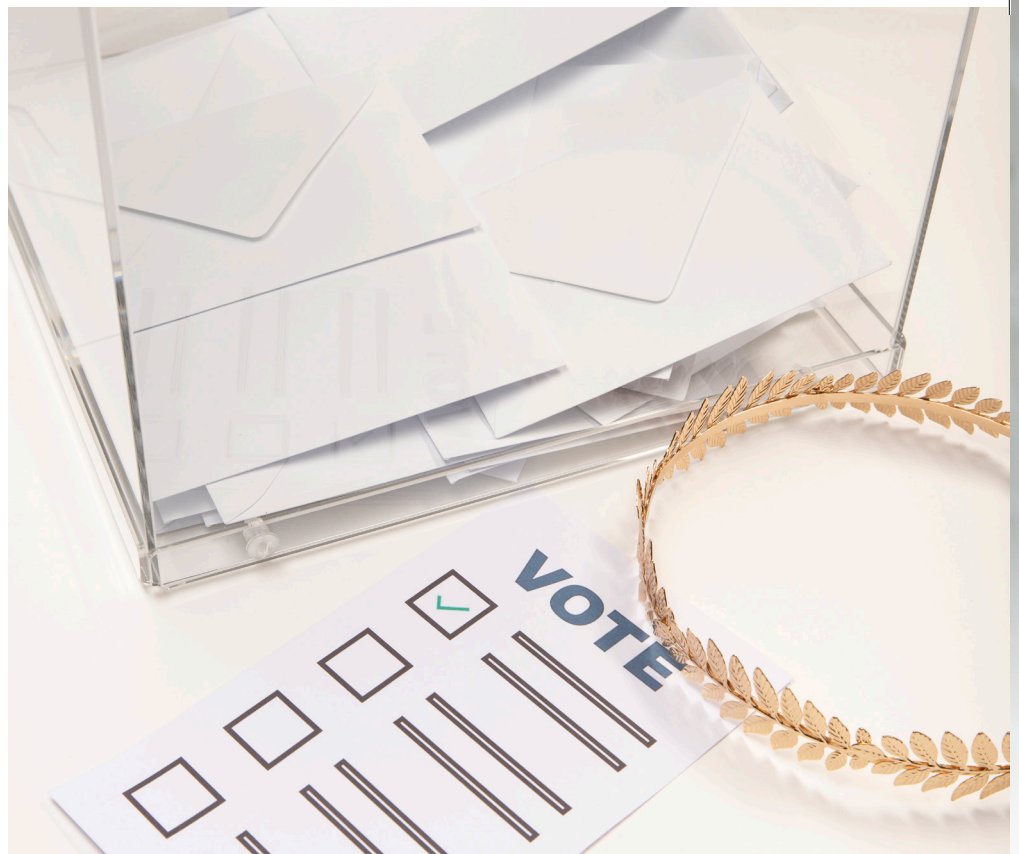
- There is an **urgent need** for the ***Protection of Adults in Situations of Vulnerability Act*** and the ***Personal Autonomy Act*** to come into force.
- **Personal assistance** for persons with disabilities – which is currently under reform – could mitigate some of the challenges persons with disabilities find in working in the open labour market, such as in using transport.
- Taking a lifelong approach in supporting a person with disability through assigning a **“key worker”**, first to the family of the child with disability, then eventually to the person with disability themselves, can help **guide and support the person in accessing the necessary and relevant services at different stages of their lives.** *Agenzija Support*’s professional support workers do similar work with persons with disabilities who do not need a social worker, thus this service could be expanded to meet the criteria laid out in this recommendation.

“

There is an urgent need for the Protection of Adults in Situations of Vulnerability Act and the Personal Autonomy Act to come into force.

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THE JUNE 2024 ELECTIONS: **EXPERIENCES OF VOTERS WITH DOWN SYNDROME**

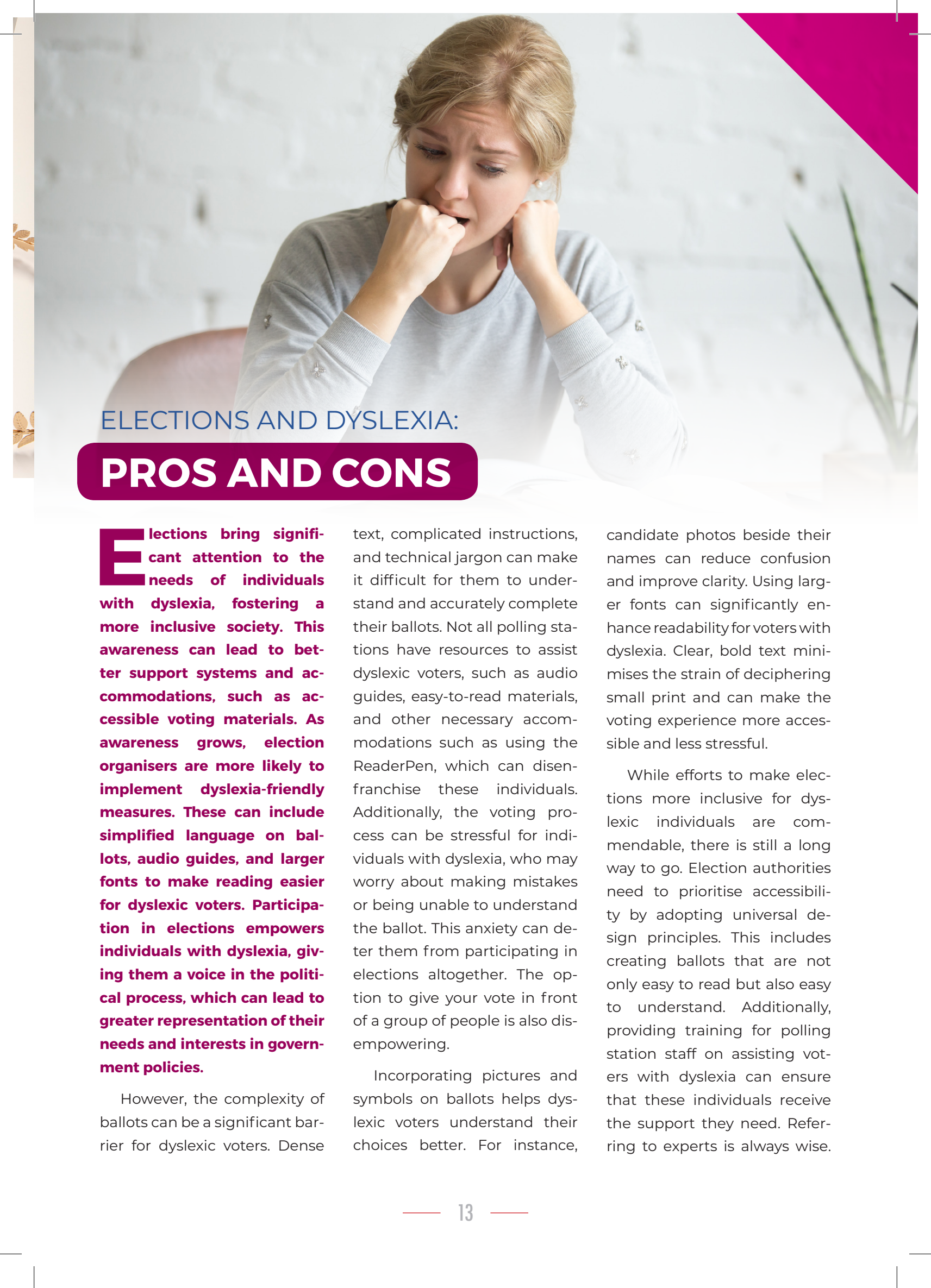
The June 2024 elections were a significant event for many citizens, including those with Down syndrome. One of the most notable positive aspects was the increased accessibility at polling stations. Many facilities were equipped with ramps, wide doorways, and clear signage, making navigation easier for those with physical and cognitive disabilities. Furthermore, accessible transportation was provided to reach the voting sites, ensuring all voters could access the polling stations.

However, there were also challenges and areas for improvement. One significant issue was the lack of adequate support in the polling stations. Some voters with Down syndrome encountered officials who were unsure how to assist them effectively, leading to confusion and exclusion. Moreover, the ballot design posed a barrier. Simplified ballots with larger and specific fonts would be more accessible for voters with Down syndrome to navigate independently, catering to various levels of cognitive ability.

Lastly, it is important to implement voter education programs tailored for people

with intellectual disabilities like Down syndrome involving also the electoral commissioners. These programs should use simple language, visual aids, and hands-on activities to explain the voting process, empowering individuals with Down syndrome. This will increase both the electoral commissioners' and the people with intellectual disability understanding, and boost their confidence in participating in the electoral process.

It is imperative to continue addressing these issues to ensure that every citizen, regardless of ability, can fully participate in the democratic process as society moves forward.



ELECTIONS AND DYSLEXIA:

PROS AND CONS

Elections bring significant attention to the needs of individuals with dyslexia, fostering a more inclusive society. This awareness can lead to better support systems and accommodations, such as accessible voting materials. As awareness grows, election organisers are more likely to implement dyslexia-friendly measures. These can include simplified language on ballots, audio guides, and larger fonts to make reading easier for dyslexic voters. Participation in elections empowers individuals with dyslexia, giving them a voice in the political process, which can lead to greater representation of their needs and interests in government policies.

However, the complexity of ballots can be a significant barrier for dyslexic voters. Dense

text, complicated instructions, and technical jargon can make it difficult for them to understand and accurately complete their ballots. Not all polling stations have resources to assist dyslexic voters, such as audio guides, easy-to-read materials, and other necessary accommodations such as using the ReaderPen, which can disenfranchise these individuals. Additionally, the voting process can be stressful for individuals with dyslexia, who may worry about making mistakes or being unable to understand the ballot. This anxiety can deter them from participating in elections altogether. The option to give your vote in front of a group of people is also disempowering.

Incorporating pictures and symbols on ballots helps dyslexic voters understand their choices better. For instance,

candidate photos beside their names can reduce confusion and improve clarity. Using larger fonts can significantly enhance readability for voters with dyslexia. Clear, bold text minimises the strain of deciphering small print and can make the voting experience more accessible and less stressful.

While efforts to make elections more inclusive for dyslexic individuals are commendable, there is still a long way to go. Election authorities need to prioritise accessibility by adopting universal design principles. This includes creating ballots that are not only easy to read but also easy to understand. Additionally, providing training for polling station staff on assisting voters with dyslexia can ensure that these individuals receive the support they need. Referring to experts is always wise.



FEEDBACK RE ELECTIONS FROM

RESIDENTIAL HOMES



DAR IL-WENS & DAR ARKA

It is up to the relatives to take the person with disability to vote. The Foundation is aware that some relatives opt not to take the persons with disability to vote and this mainly due to the lack of secrecy and also to the fact that the persons with disability never had any training and were never given any information with regards.

DAR TAL-PROVIDENZA, SIGGIEWI

Those eligible to vote and wanted to vote were taken to the polling station by family members or staff. No problems were encountered at the polling station.

The same feedback was given by the Community Residences - Zernieq at Siggiewi, Shalom at Zurrieq, Dar Pirot-

ta at B'Kara - which fall under Dar tal-Providenza.

The feedback from Akkwarell Qawra whose residents are physically disabled and which fall under Dar tal-Providenza was that the residents went on their own and asked for assistance which was given.

Autism Parents' Association

Persons on the autism spectrum, like all individuals, have the right to participate in the electoral process. However, they may face unique challenges that can affect their ability to vote. Following the MEP and local councils' elections held earlier this year, this feedback was gathered from members of the Autism Parents' Association:



1. Those persons who were supported and taught at home about the voting procedures did not encounter any problems to vote.
2. Some did not vote as they never had the training for this and according to their family cannot take an informed decision about who to vote.
3. Two persons referred that the persons who supported them from the electoral commission's end barely knew English, the language the two persons are more fluent in.
4. Some persons on the autism spectrum found

themselves in difficulty due to the surroundings....they were not used to have the doors closed behind them and this had a negative effect on them.

5. A parent referred "We tried once at home on a ballot paper and the numbers written touched the outline box. When I told him/her that he cannot touch the outline box s/he started getting frustrated. So I told him/her s/he can get help and others will do it for him/her and s/he preferred it that way".
6. "My daughter/son voted. First, we practiced the numbers with various

photocopy of ballots, since I managed to get sample ballot for her/him. S/he did her/his preferences on it, took it in with her/him and just copied her/him preference".

Since 2 elections were being held at the same time, the MEPs and the local councils', I asked for her/him to be given one ballot at a time....s/he casts her/his vote and then s/he does the second one. Otherwise it would have been a chaos for her/him.

7. "My daughter/son doesn't vote as yet but s/he was surely affected by the words used on billboards"



REPORT ELECTIONS FROM

GOZO

The experience of
DR KEVIN CUTAJAR,
a visually impaired person
with regards to:

VOTING

The point of departure remains always the unjust nature of the system in so far as visually impaired persons are concerned. I say so, because the right to vote should be free, independent and above all secret. As things stand in Malta, a visually impaired person has to disclose his or her choice to the officers in charge at the polling booth, in order to vote. Even more humiliating is the fact that such person has to take the oath that he or she is unable to vote on his or her own and hence that he or she is visually impaired.

And yet, visually impaired persons are unable to vote alone not because of their disability, but the system, which is old-fashioned and does not take into account today's facilities and the abilities of persons with disability. I remain a supporter of the need for modifications to the voting system, mainly that it is brought in line with today's reality and

that electronic voting is made available. The means to provide a safe system are there (see for example the banking system, where people even entrust all their money). The trusted friend is also an option that should be offered. Not everybody is well-versed with technology, and this could be a good option for certain people, even if not the ideal, since it does not offer full secrecy.

Political Parties and the Electoral Commission should stop playing the role of Big Brother in so far as votes are concerned. My vote does not belong to them, but to me. So, if these entities have concerns on how I am to cast the vote, they should leave it up to me and this, both where I have to use some electronic means and also where I have to choose a trusted friend. The trusted person is and should be a person of my choice and I should have the right to carry the responsibility for my choice. If the ability of certain persons with disability to carry such responsibility is questioned, mechanisms should be put in place to guarantee this.

I find other systems such

as voting with the aid of a template not good. This is so, because a visually impaired person is expected to cast the vote by writing the numbers himself or herself. The risk of writing the number unclearly and hence of invalidating the vote is too big.

CONTESTING

I also had the opportunity of experiencing the election as a candidate and on a number of times too. There is no level playing-field there. Visually impaired candidates are expected to do exactly the same things as other non-disabled candidates and with the same means, if not less means too. Presently, the visually impaired candidate must often incur into extra expenses to seek that extra help to make good for his or her impairment. This can become quite a burden.

A classic example of the unfairness of the system is the electoral campaign. A lot of running around is required (door to door, meetings, TV and radio shows etc ...) Without assistance, this running

around becomes very difficult. This adds on the natural disadvantage that the visual impairment brings along with it. Clearly, the use of the sight sometimes also gives the upper hand to he who has it. So, to compensate for all these disadvantages, after all to bring all candidates on a level playing-field, the system should offer to the visually impaired candidate financial assistance to employ an assistant of his or her choice. This should be even more so when a disabled candidate is elected to a body such as Parliament

One other suggestion is that Political Parties, before throwing a disabled candidate in the arena, should see that he or she has the right skills, training and above all assistance. Why shouldn't Parties offer assistance to their disabled candidates? Such assistance should be a right and not something that someone offers voluntarily.

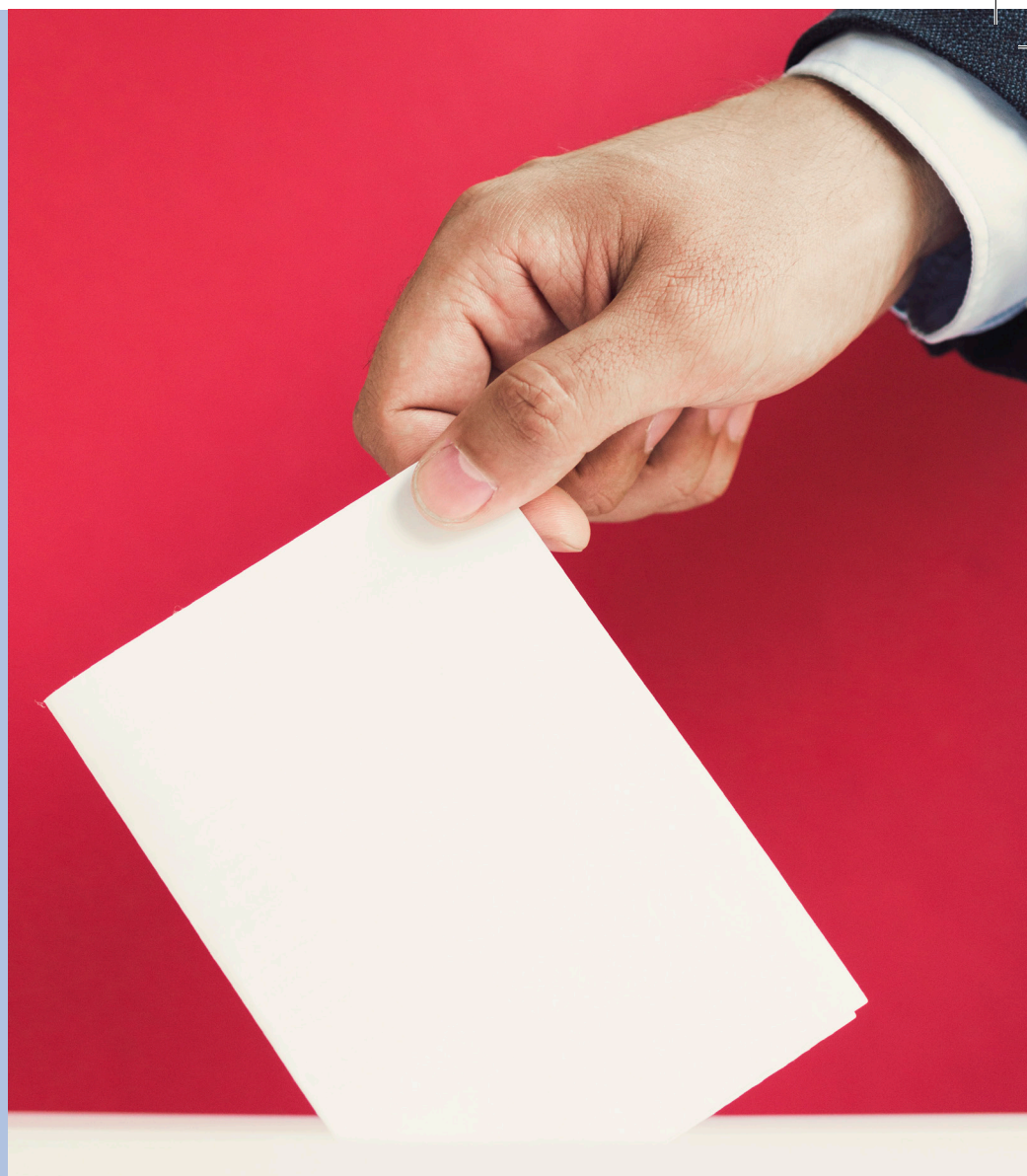
If in Malta we really want visually impaired and other disabled candidates to be successful, we must invest in financial and human resources. We cannot pretend success without investment but unfortunately, the situation at present is that there is little or no investment in disabled candidates with the natural consequence being little or no success for them. Without disabled candidates, there is little possibility that our agenda goes up high and that it is addressed.

Another experience from another visually impaired person from Gozo :

- 1) I don't like taking an oath that because I am visually impaired, I need help to vote as I cannot do so on my own.
- 2) I don't even like the fact that the room where we vote is emptied so as for me to then enter the room and for the Electoral Commission officials to vote on my behalf. My desire is to have the possibility to vote with the assistance of a person of my trust and choice; for this person to enter the room with me and votes according to what I tell him/her.
- 3) Under the present system,

I don't even like the fact that the officials of the Electoral Commission who vote on my behalf do not identify themselves. Although I am visually impaired, I wish to know who I'm talking to. Unlike other voters, I will not be in a position to read their names written on their name tags.

- 4) I also regret that in our country we still cannot vote online like is done in other countries. This should be introduced immediately. If on line voting is possible, persons such as visually impaired will be able to vote alone and in secrecy like the rest of the people. Today thanks to the technology, we can use computers and mobile phones to vote.





LET'S TALK **ACCESSIBLE** VOTING

How can we make voting more accessible for local voters with disability in Malta and Gozo? One can only answer this question if we look at the problems disabled voters face and possible solutions. I will be sharing from my own personal experience, as a disabled person, a few issues encountered by disabled voters when it comes to voting.

Written by:
Bryanna Saliba



A major issue is the lack of knowledge electoral commissioners and other officials have of how to relate and communicate with disabled people. Therefore, training addressed towards all officials involved should be conducted prior to the voting date, acquiring the necessary knowledge and making them aware of the voters' different accessible needs. Another major issue is certainly the lack of physical access to the built environment.

All buildings intended to be transformed into polling stations should be fully accessible for people with limited mobility (including elderly people). Therefore, inaccessible entrances of voting premises, corridors leading to polling stations and the polling station itself should be provided with the necessary adaptations such as, ramps and/or platform lifts. Furthermore, polling stations should be free from any obstacles and with enough space for wheelchair users to comfortably manoeuvre, allowing them to cast their vote without much effort. Yet, what is more important for many disabled voters is, acknowledging their right to vote in secrecy.

The safeguarding of disabled voters' confidentiality has now been a concern for quite a long time. Many suggest that electronic voting can be a solution in ensuring and allowing the individual to vote privately and independently. Electronic voting with adaptive software and hardware is an asset especially, for individuals with limited to no motor function, people with visual impairments and those with learning difficulties. For some people who have low vision and people

with an intellectual disability, voting ballot papers in accessible formats, such as, large print, colour coding, visual images and easy-to-read, may offer another solution. However, the most agreed method amongst the disabled community is the 'trusted friend'.

What exactly is the trusted friend method? It is assigning a trusted person of your choice to assist you while voting. This method of voting is far less complicated and carries no financial burden. There is only one problem regarding this method of voting - the political parties do not agree with this method. Surely, they have their reasons, and they may be good reasons. However, what is not being mentioned that we have many disabled people that do not vote to avoid experiencing the frustration and humiliation of voting in front of the electoral commissioners. This is our right we are talking about. The right that is being denied, the right to vote on an equal level with non-disabled voters.

We have now been waiting far too long for an alternative method of voting. We have been waiting far too long for our right to vote in secrecy, without disclosing our voting preferences. We are tired of making ourselves heard on an issue which after all is our right. It is unacceptable at a time, when the world is experiencing huge technological advancements and a solution of providing an accessible voting method has not yet been found. I hope that all those responsible will come together and resolve this issue without delay and recognise the right of safeguarding disabled voters' confidentiality.



Tribute to **DR. ADOLF RATZKA** 1943 - 2024

MARTHESE MUGLIETTE
President, MFOPD

Dr. Adolf Ratzka stands as a beacon of hope and progress in the global disability rights movement. His unwavering commitment to enhancing the lives of people with disabilities has inspired countless individuals and sparked significant societal change.

Born in 1943, Dr. Ratzka's journey as an advocate began with his own experiences of disability. After contracting polio at a young age, he faced firsthand the barriers and challenges that society often imposes on people with disabilities. Rather than being deterred, these experiences fuelled his resolve to fight for a world where everyone, regardless of ability, can live independently and with dignity.

Dr. Ratzka's academic achievements are as impressive as his advocacy. He holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences from Stockholm University, where his research focused on the socioeconomic aspects of disability. His scholarly work has provided valuable insights into the intersection of disability, economics, and social policy, furthering the understanding of how to create more inclusive communities.

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Throughout his career, Dr. Ratzka has received numerous accolades in recognition of his contributions.”

One of Dr. Ratzka's most significant contributions is the concept of Independent Living. Recognizing that true independence extends beyond mere physical mobility, he championed the idea that people with disabilities should have control over their own lives. This philosophy underpins the Independent Living movement, which emphasizes personal autonomy, self-determination, and the right to par-

ticipate fully in society.

In 1983, Dr. Ratzka founded the Independent Living Institute (ILI), a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the rights and opportunities of people with disabilities. Under his leadership, the ILI has developed numerous initiatives aimed at improving accessibility, advocating for policy changes, and providing resources for individuals to lead independent lives. The Institute's work has had a lasting impact, influencing legislation and shaping public attitudes towards disability.

Dr. Ratzka's advocacy extends beyond institutional efforts. He has been a vocal and influential presence in international forums, contributing to the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). His work has helped to enshrine the principles of accessibility, equality, and non-discrimination into international law, benefiting millions worldwide.

Throughout his career, Dr. Ratzka has received numerous accolades in recognition of his contributions. His tireless efforts have earned him the respect and admiration of peers, policymakers, and activists alike. However, his greatest legacy lies in the lives he has

touched and the doors he has opened for future generations.

Dr. Adolf Ratzka's life is a testament to the power of perseverance, compassion, and visionary leadership. His contributions have not only improved the lives of people with disabilities but have also enriched our collective humanity. As we continue to strive for a more inclusive and equitable world, we owe a debt of gratitude to pioneers like Dr. Ratzka, whose work reminds us that true progress is measured by the opportunities we create for all members of society.

At national level, Dr Ratzka was the person who incessantly helped MFOPD take, and keep its stand on Personal Assistance for persons with disabilities and make the necessary pressure to introduce a professional PA system here in Malta. He was MFOPD's strength and vision in this journey. He even gave his input to the study commissioned by MFOPD on Personal Assistance for Persons with Disabilities in Malta. MFOPD assured he received a copy of the research as from day one, his intention was to walk side by side with MFOPD to finally introduce the best PA system here in Malta. MFOPD and all persons with disabilities here in Malta and Gozo, owe Dr Ratzka a lot.



DIRECTORATE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY

The Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Employability (DLE) aims to contribute towards developing skilled, resilient, and fulfilled citizens. This aim is operationalised both through the DLE's course offering and through its Guidance

Service, which services are available to persons aged 15+. Underpinned by the National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2023-2030, the DLE's operations adopt an inclusive vision, welcoming persons of all backgrounds and abilities and striving to better reach underrepresented cohorts.



It's never too late to learn

COURSES

The course offering of the Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Employability focuses on facilitating second chance educational pathways. The essential skills courses offer literacy, numeracy, and digital skills which are essential to gain more autonomy in everyday life. Other courses aim to improve people's academic credentials, pegged from Level 1 to Level 4 of the Malta Qualifications Framework, in a range of subjects. Courses in creative expression

aim to develop people's skills in handcrafts and decorative arts. All the courses offered by the Directorate ultimately aim to develop people's skills, contributing to greater personal and professional fulfilment and opportunities. Courses are delivered at the Lifelong Learning Centre in Msida and in various locations around Malta and Gozo. Information about the Directorate's course provision, including open applications, are available through www.lifelong-learning.gov.mt. Applications are open in January and in the summer months.

GUIDANCE SERVICE

The DLE's Guidance Service supports adults with understanding their strengths, identifying their learning needs, setting their goals and making informed learning and career choices. The Guidance Service often supports people who are thinking about taking a course but are apprehensive about returning to education after a long time away; persons who are uncertain of which course to choose, or unsure whether a course is the right level for them; persons who need help with managing education alongside



Maltese version



English version

other responsibilities; and persons who wish to write their first CV or improve their current CV.

Guidance sessions involve one-to-one meetings with a guidance professional, and meetings can be held physically or online, depending on the adult's preference. The guidance professional's support is continuous depending on the adult's needs and aspirations. Appointments can be made in person or online, either by the individual or by organisations that support them. Walk-ins are also possible either to set an appointment or discuss queries and/or difficulties ad hoc. One can set an appointment by following this link <https://forms.office.com/e/KbD14at1S0>.

STAKEHOLDER LIAISON

The DLE strives to improve its services according to the changing needs of the community. Adulthood is multi-faceted and brings its complexities to which the various stakeholders must be sensitive enough to respond to these ever-changing needs.

The Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Employability, through the DLE Guidance Service, aims to take a collaborative stance with local entities who



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Develop and seek recognition for courses aimed at teaching skills for independent living and employment where gaps in the current available offer exist.

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have regular contact with prospective learners to improve its service provision and bridge any gaps for the benefit of all the adult learners. Working with organisations helps to understand the learning needs of specific cohorts with a view to inform the development of courses that meet these needs. Information meetings are also held with the entity's service users to provide information about the course offering, course objectives and enrollment requisites and how each course can support the potential learner.

Entities working with potential learners can directly refer individuals to the DLE's Guidance Service through an online referral form. While clients use the Guidance Service independently, submit-

ting a referral triggers a working relationship between the Guidance Service and the professional submitting the referral, starting with a brief meeting about the adult and maintaining communication during the entire period that the individual uses the Guidance Service.

Strategic Measure 5, within the first pillar of the Lifelong Learning Strategy 2023-2030, states that it aims to “Improve the accessibility of lifelong learning course provision to persons with chronic disabling conditions or problems” (National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2023-2030, p.17). One of the deliverables of this strategic measure is to “Develop and seek recognition for courses aimed at teaching skills for independent living and em-

ployment where gaps in the current available offer exist.” As part of the preparatory work related to exploring the needs and feasibility of developing courses that meet this deliverable, the Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Employability is seeking feedback from persons with disabilities and persons and organisations that work with persons with disabilities. To this end, we would like to invite readers to complete this online form by the barcodes and or links provided by the end of 16th March 2025.

Link to request a guidance session form:
<https://forms.office.com/r/yzhmBXUiUi>

Link to form for interest in possible courses in English: <https://forms.office.com/e/KbD14at1SO>

Link to form for interest in possible courses in Maltese: <https://forms.office.com/e/1SeBAS289y>

Borås (Sweden), Cartagena (Spain), Nuremberg (Germany) and Vienna (Austria) **FINALISTS FOR 2025 ACCESS CITY AWARD**

These cities have demonstrated best practice and highlighted their commitment to ensure accessibility to urban life for persons with disabilities, including for built environment and public spaces (such as buildings, roads or parks), public transport, facilities and services, as well as information and communication technologies.

Borås (Sweden), Cartagena (Spain), Nuremberg (Germany) and Vienna (Austria), have been selected as finalists for the 2025 Access City Award.

European Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, said: "Cities must be accessible for persons with disabilities to exercise their fundamental rights and fully participate in society just like everyone else. The European Commission supports pioneer cities that truly leave no one behind. because accessibility is a cornerstone of inclusion. It is essential for the more than 100 million EU citizens with disabilities, and it improves life for all."

This year's edition is particularly important as it marks

the 15th anniversary of the Access City Award. It has also received the highest number of applications in the last decade: 57 cities applied for the award, of which 33 candidates were pre-selected by national experts. The four finalists were then shortlisted by an EU jury. Following the spirit of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Commission will award this year a Special Mention for "Accessible Sports Infrastructure".

The 2025 Access City Award winners will be announced at an award ceremony on 29 November 2024 during the European Day of Persons with Disabilities conference, organised jointly by the European Commission and the European Disability Forum. Journalists can register to attend in person. The ceremony, starting at 9.30, will be broadcast live, with international sign interpretation, audio-description and English captioning.

Background

Accessible spaces, both physical and digital, are a crucial first step towards achieving equality. More than 100 million people in the EU have

a disability. If persons with disabilities cannot access transport, shops, parks, or websites, they cannot make their own choices and take control of their lives.

Since 2010, the Access City Award celebrates cities that make accessibility their priority. The Award is also part of the Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030 to build a Europe without barriers.

The Award is given to the city that has demonstrably improved accessibility in fundamental aspects of city living, and that has concrete plans for further improvements.

Winners of the previous awards: 2024, San Cristóbal de La Laguna (Spain); 2023, Skellefteå (Sweden); 2022, Luxembourg City (Luxembourg); 2021, Jönköping (Sweden); 2020, Warsaw (Poland); 2019, Breda (The Netherlands); 2018, Lyon (France); 2017, Chester (United Kingdom); 2016, Milan (Italy); 2015, Borås (Sweden); 2014, Gothenburg (Sweden); 2013, Berlin (Germany); 2012, Salzburg (Austria); 2011, Avila (Spain).



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