

# Disability, a citizenship issue

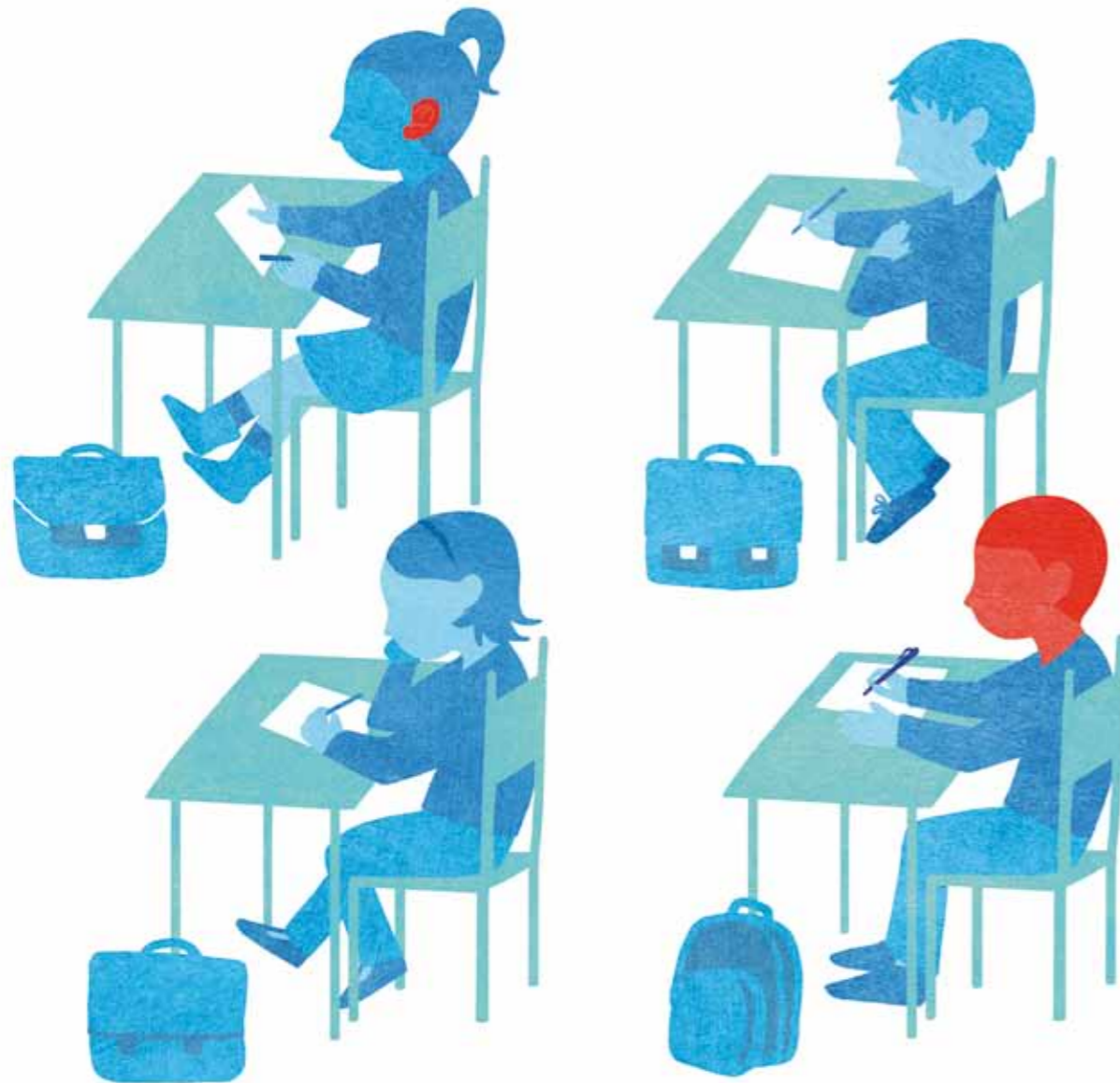


COUNCIL OF EUROPE    CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

# EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES EQUAL DIGNITY

**Council of Europe Disability**  
**Action Plan 2006-2015:**  
quality of life and full participation in society





## Disability, a citizenship issue

To ensure that people with disabilities can act in the same way as all citizens is one of the Council of Europe's many objectives in order to secure a society that fully respects human rights and diversity.

In May 2003, the 2nd European Conference of Ministers responsible for Integration Policies for People with Disabilities, held in Malaga (Spain), recommended the adoption of a Council of Europe Disability Action Plan.

In April 2006, following this recommendation, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers adopted the Disability Action Plan. The plan does not include a definition of disability, which is a matter for the national policy of each member state. However, it stipulates that the arrangements for the full and effective implementation of all human rights, as enshrined in European and other international instruments, must be applicable "without any discrimination or distinction on any ground, including disability".

This ambitious Action Plan, adopted two years before the entry into force of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is based on two premises:

- a shift from the concept of disability, which is a medical matter, to one of ability, referring to each individual's talents and aptitudes. Societies have a moral duty to reduce to a minimum the effects of disability, which forms part of human diversity;

- the legitimate assertion that people with disabilities are citizens like any other and that the authorities must facilitate, at all levels, their access to political and public life, education, training and employment, health care, social welfare, justice, information, culture and leisure.

Inclusion can become a reality only if people live in an accessible built environment and are able to take advantage of non-discriminatory means of transport and community-based services geared to their needs, and if they have access to the legal, judicial and administrative systems.

This also entails preserving access by people with disabilities to their material assets and their individual well-being. This should be guaranteed in a family setting or, where necessary, in a suitably adapted environment, with due regard for the freedom of choice and the abilities of the person with disabilities concerned.

The Council of Europe Action Plan also covers arts and sport. One of the aims of the London 2012 Paralympics was to bring down barriers and prejudice regarding people with disabilities. They also reminded everyone that disability is everyone's concern and that accidents are not something that can happen only to others. We are all at risk of one day being disabled; while medical progress has increased life expectancy, the other side of the coin is a rise in the number of incapacitating diseases.





It goes without saying that social solidarity is essential for this group of vulnerable people, by far the largest in the 47 Council of Europe member states, since approximately 15% of their 800 million inhabitants have a disability.

## An effective toolkit

One of the aims of the Council of Europe Disability Action Plan is to implement, by the end of 2015, a coherent policy based on the principles of full citizenship and as independent a life as possible. It is a genuine toolkit to improve, throughout Europe, the participation of people with disabilities in active citizenship.

The plan, available in over 30 languages, along with Braille and easy-to-read versions, sets out 41 objectives and 163 specific actions to be carried out, preferably by the end of 2015.

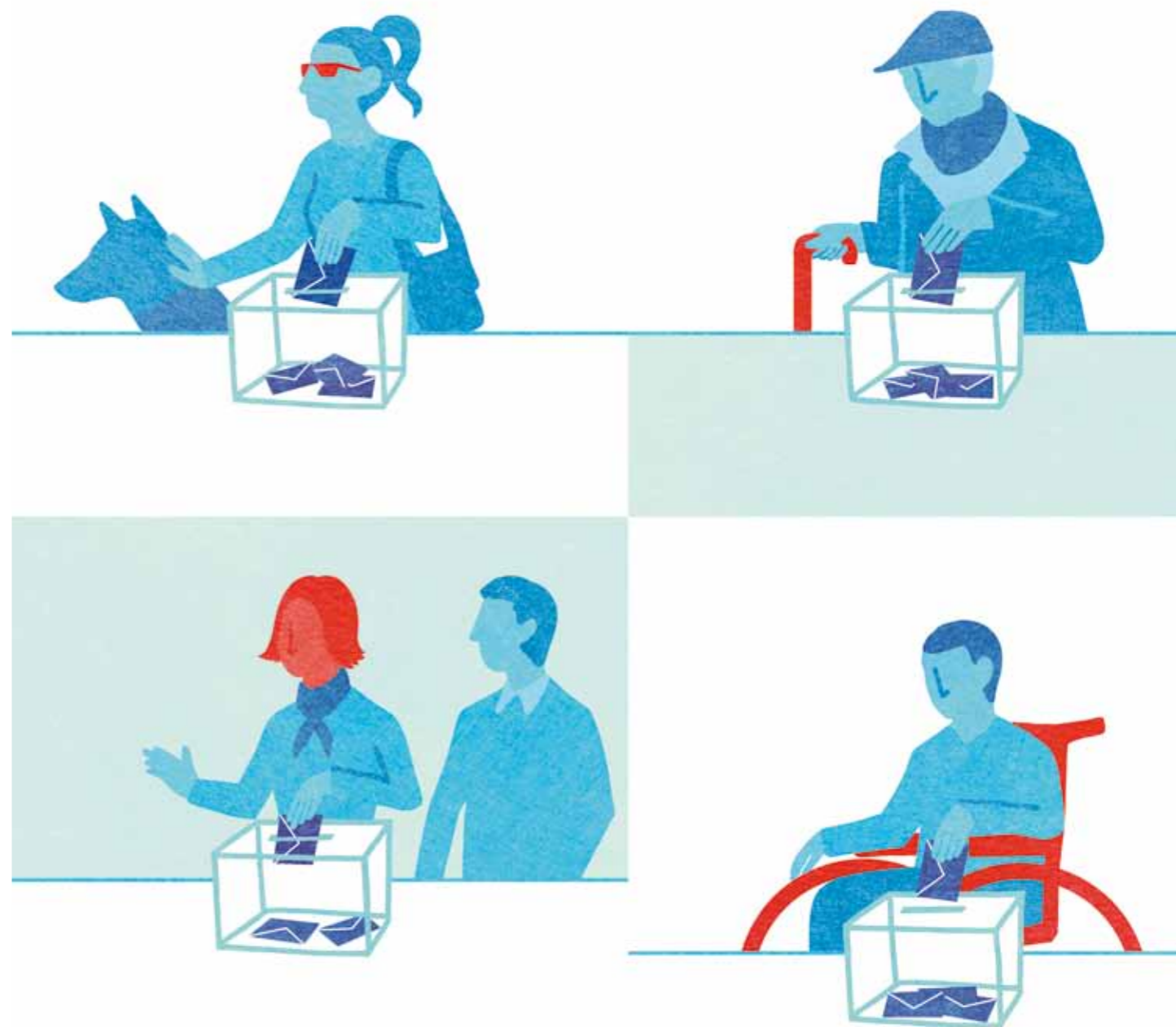
The plan is based on two Council of Europe instruments: the European Convention on Human Rights and the (Revised) European Social Charter. It has the advantage of offering a flexible framework that enables each country to adapt the way in which it is put into effect. Governments in member states implement policies which uphold the rights and freedoms of citizens with disabilities, and exchange examples of good practice with each other.

## When exercising rights can be an obstacle course

Living with a disability can often prove to be an obstacle course, which may begin with a school or polling station that are inaccessible by wheelchair, despite the significant progress that has been made in many countries.

Who will put a hemiplegic's voting paper into the ballot box? Can he or she be accompanied into the voting booth by a companion or a polling station assistant? Will someone with a visual impairment be given a voting slip in Braille? Are people with hearing difficulties able to follow the campaign addresses of the candidates? These are all questions relating to fundamental rights which still await effective answers in certain countries.

Nowhere is inclusion a foregone conclusion. Children with disabilities do not attend mainstream schools with other children, some transport companies refuse to allow a person with disabilities on board, etc. More than 10 years after we entered the 21st century, many people with disabilities are still placed under guardianship, without the right to freely manage their property or personal life. Not everyone has the same access to justice: one day a person in a wheelchair was tried outside the courtroom as the door was too narrow for the wheelchair to pass through.





## Widespread action

Today, all the various problems relating to the inclusion of people with disabilities are taken into account in all of the Council of Europe's activities and fields of action. Its experts and staff travel throughout Europe to suggest innovative ways of overcoming obstacles to inclusion.

Awareness raising by governments, civil society and the media plays a part in highlighting this requirement to promote equal opportunities for participation in civic activities.

It is essential to assist the governments of member states and local and regional authorities, and encourage them to promote the full exercise of human rights for everyone, along with a decent quality of life in society. Various Council of Europe bodies contribute to this widespread action:

- the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities draw up reports and recommendations promoting citizenship and social inclusion, addressed to governments, as represented in the Committee of Ministers;
- the Committee of Ministers adopts specific recommendations, accompanied by measures to be implemented in member states;
- the Commissioner for Human Rights regularly draws attention to instances and risks of discrimination when a person has a disability;

- the European Court of Human Rights, which monitors compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights by Council of Europe member states, severely criticises states in cases brought before it by people with disabilities relating, for example, to forced sterilisation, prohibition of marriage or legal incapacity;
- the Development Bank helps with the funding of investment projects of a social nature aimed at improving the living conditions and social integration of disadvantaged groups.

The whole of the Council of Europe works in conjunction with its various partners to help eliminate the physical and psychological barriers to the full inclusion of people with disabilities, which is a factor for social cohesion in Europe.







The Council of Europe has 47 member states, covering virtually the entire continent of Europe. It seeks to develop common democratic and legal principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other reference texts on the protection of individuals. Ever since it was founded in 1949, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Council of Europe has symbolised reconciliation.

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