

# INTERIM REPORT

Stoke-on-Trent Central – Westminster Parliamentary  
By-election 23rd February 2017



Dr John Ault

23<sup>rd</sup> February 2017



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# **Westminster Parliamentary By-election – February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2017**

## **Interim Report on Election Observation – Stoke-on-Trent Central**

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### **Objectives**

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across the Stoke-on-Trent Central parliamentary constituency (Westminster) on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2017.
2. To advise the local councils (Stoke-on-Trent) and national electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice within the UK.
3. Support local councils and national election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

### **Methodology**

A team of 3 observers, registered with the UK's Electoral Commission, made 29 separate observations in 23 different polling stations across the Stoke-on-Trent Parliamentary constituency.

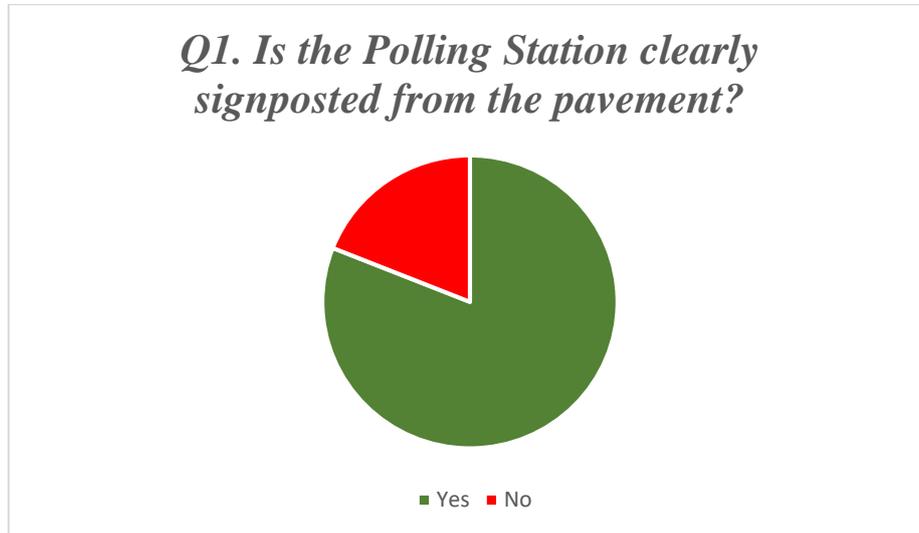
Each observation team was split into pairs to allow for objective observation and they then agreed their opinions of the electoral process before submitting data to the central team. The survey was conducted online so data was collected, and could be checked, live.

The observations generally took between fifteen and thirty minutes per polling station as the observers were asked to ensure that they attempted to see the entire process, which included staff greeting electors on arrival at the polling station.

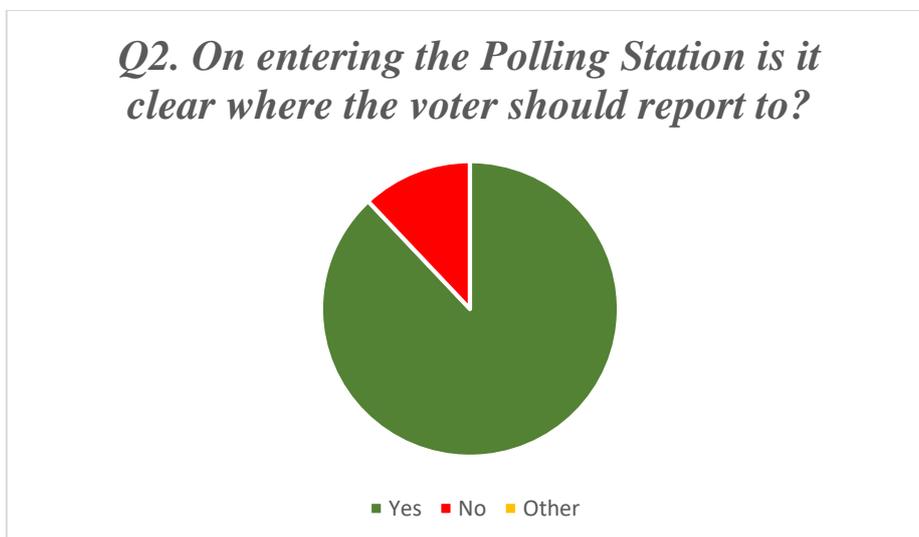
Each team of observers was contacted throughout the day by the central team to ensure that observation was as uniform as possible.

## Results of the Observation

The observers answered the following questions in order as they progressed with each observation at each polling station:

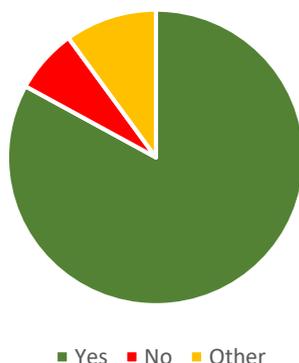


**QUESTION 1:** Only 81% of polling stations were visible from the roadside. Some of the signage had been removed due to the inclement weather.



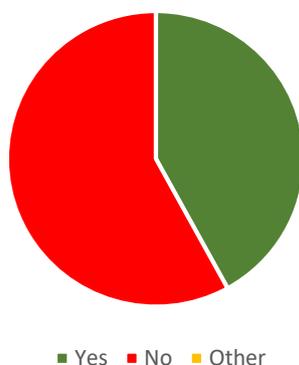
**QUESTION 2:** Observers equally identified that there were some issues in terms of where voters should report in the polling stations.

***Q3. Was it clear how disabled voters would access the Polling Station?***



**QUESTION 3:** 83% of observations indicated that access to the polling station was clear, whilst 7% indicated that access was not. Another 10% suggested that some aspects of the polling station (such as the designated polling booth for wheelchair users) was inadequate. These problems focused on step-free access which was not always available.

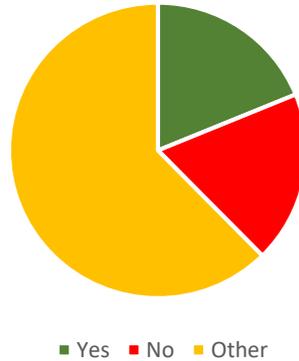
***Q4. Did the polling staff ask to see your ID on arrival?***



**QUESTION 4:** Polling staff seemed to be unaware that an observation team might be operating across the constituency, the formal procedure for identifying, and then recording, that observers had visited the polling station was not followed in the vast majority of cases.

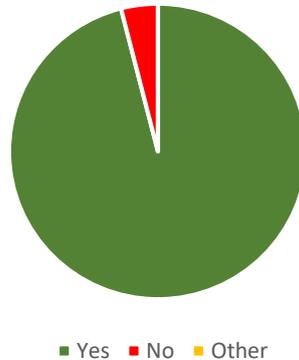
Only 42% of observers had their credentials checked on arrival at the polling station. However, only 58% did not check the ID of observers on arrival at the desk in the polling station.

*Q5. Did the staff record your ID number on a form?*



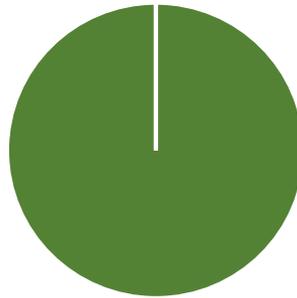
**QUESTION 5:** Similarly, we asked observers to note if the polling staff took a note of the ID that the observer was wearing. In each case this was an Electoral Commission badge which was numbered. Only 19% of polling stations recorded the ID details on arrival of the observers another 62% did at some point but not on arrival. 19% of polling stations did not record attendance at all.

*Q6. Are there two staff on duty in the polling station as you arrive?*



**QUESTION 6:** All but one polling station had two members of polling staff on duty when observers arrived at the polling station.

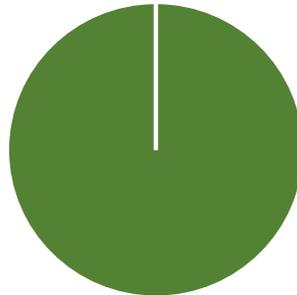
***Q7. Is the Ballot Box clearly sealed with cable ties?***



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

**QUESTION 7:** An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained as such allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7am and closing at. All the ballot boxes observed were sealed.

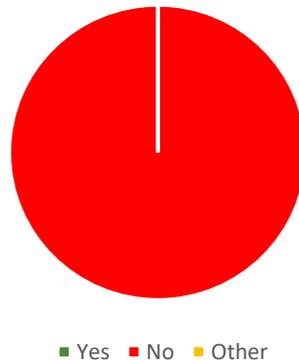
***Q8. Is each polling booth equipped with an explanatory poster and a pen/pencil?***



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

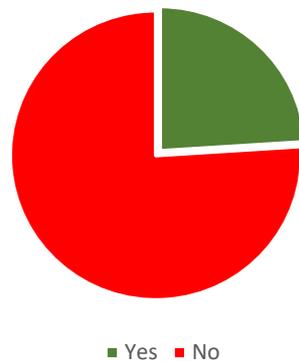
**QUESTION 8:** All the polling stations were properly equipped with the requisite pencil and poster.

***Q9. Are there any political leaflets in sight within the Polling Station?***



**QUESTION 9:** This question was asked primarily to illicit whether improper political activity was taking place within the polling station.<sup>1</sup> On no occasions did observers identify literature within the polling station that could arguably have been biased towards one candidate.

***Q10. Was there evidence of 'family voting' in the polling station?***



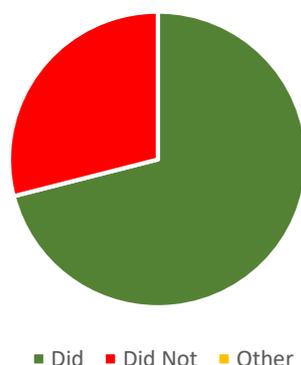
**QUESTION 10:** In 24% of cases, our observer team identified so-called 'family voting'. OSCE/ODIHR, which monitors elections within the UK, describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'.<sup>2</sup> It occurs where husband and wife voting together is normalised and women, especially, are unable to choose for themselves who they wish to cast their votes for and/or this is actually done by another individual entirely. This is a relatively high percentage by the standards of our 2016 observations.

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<sup>1</sup> This question did not just relate to literature specific to this election but observers were also asked to identify if other literature, such as MP or councillors' surgeries were on public display – advertising the names of candidates and/or parties.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.osce.org/>

*Q11. What percentage of voters did not have their polling card with them?*



**QUESTION 11:**

In 2017, with the planned pilot projects for the ‘Pickles Report’ likely to take place in 2018, we are evaluating the numbers of voters who attend the polling stations with, or without, their polling card. Although not a formal form of ID the card is also not a requirement to vote but is clearly evidence that the voter can provide to the polling staff that they are the registered voter and that they are eligible to vote.

In Stoke-on-Trent Central, 71% of the electorate attended with their polling card and 29% did not.

**INTERIM CONCLUSIONS**

Access to voting was clear and despite the nature of the weather throughout polling day officials dealt well with the process. However, an awareness of the nature of observation, and even the existence of observers, seemed entirely new and the process by which they should deal with observers seemed unclear. This was particularly the case on two occasions when staff seemed unaware that observers even have a role in the electoral process and the team were initially barred from entering the polling station. Only after the staff had contacted the council’s electoral office were the fully accredited observers afforded access.

Some other questions concerning telling and party activities on the day will be released in the final report on the by-election. These, and other finalised results, will be released within a four-week period following the by-election.