

FINAL REPORT

Newport West – Westminster Parliamentary By-election
4th April 2019



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8th May 2019



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Final Report on Election Observation – Newport West

Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across the Newport West Westminster Parliamentary by-election – 4th April 2019.
2. To advise the local council and national electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice within the UK.
3. To support the local council and national election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

Methodology

A team of 6 observers registered with, and accredited by, the UK's Electoral Commission made 45 separate observations across the 55 different polling stations in the Newport West Parliamentary Constituency. This constituted approximately 82% percent of the polling stations in the area.

Each observation was conducted in pairs to allow for objective observation following which the two observers 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.

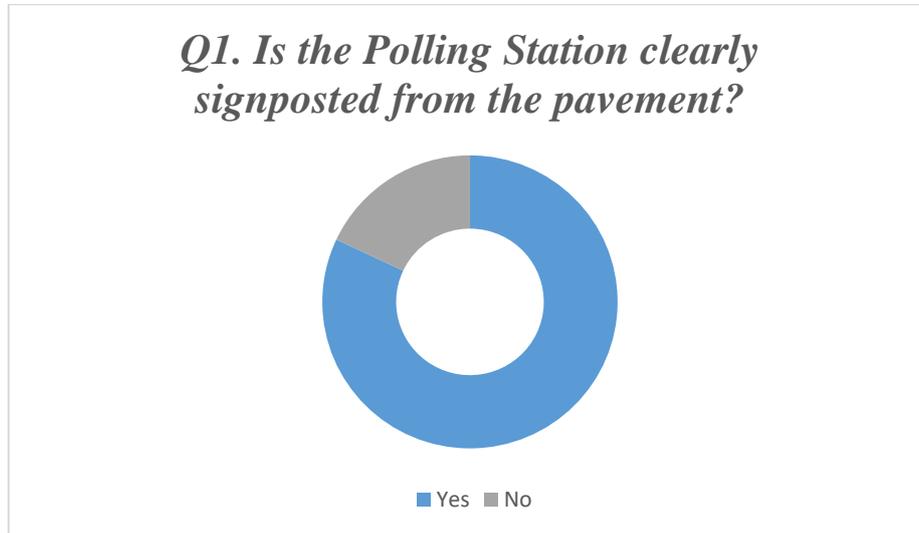
The observations generally took between thirty and forty-five minutes per polling station as the observers were asked to ensure that they attempted to see the entire process, which included staff greeting electors on arrival at the polling station.

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

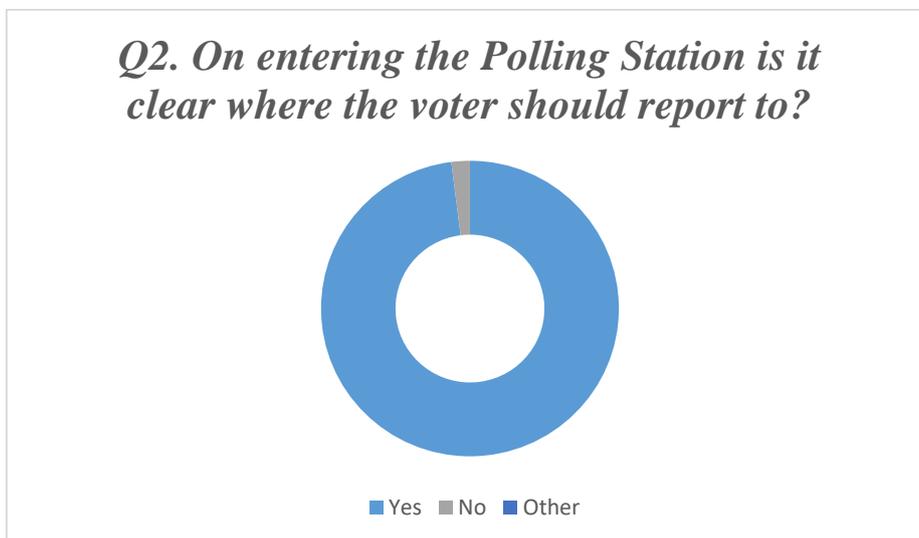
The organisation of polling stations was generally very well run across the council area, voters could clearly see how to access voting and staff were trained to manage the process.

Results of the Observation

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

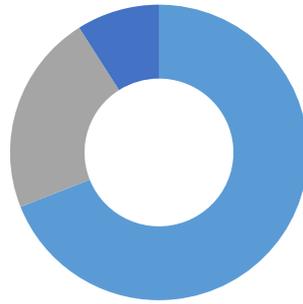


QUESTION 1: Signposting of the polling stations was generally good. Some of those polling stations placed in *portacabins* were sometimes difficult to find. Some were also weather-affected.



QUESTION 2: Observers identified 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?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 3: 69% of observations indicated that access to the polling station was clear. However, this was an area of particular concern from the observer teams who regularly found that polling stations were inaccessible to those in wheelchairs and often very difficult to access by those who had any mobility issues. This was particularly the case for those who had a portacabin as a polling station. In some cases, access was very difficult with a large step and in others access ramps had been provided but were not properly installed or maintained and thus added no benefit.



Figure 1 As can be seen from this photo access was at times very difficult for those with mobility issues

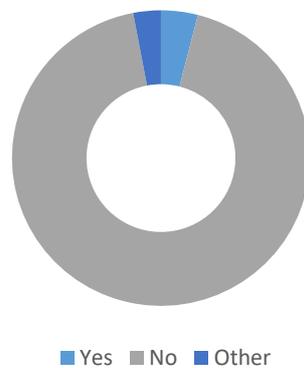
Q4. Did the polling staff ask to see your ID on arrival?



QUESTION 4: Polling staff were generally not aware 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 majority of cases.

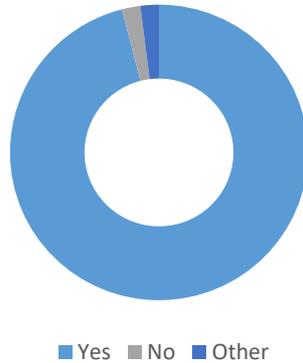
However, some awareness of the teams' observations did eventually cause some officials to check ID on arrival.

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



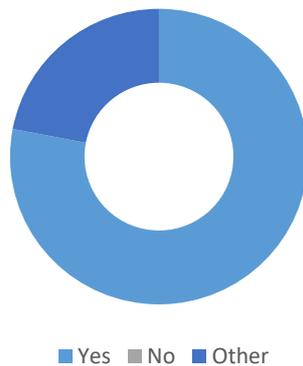
QUESTION 5: Similarly, only 4% recorded this details at some point during the observation, however, this was not always at the start of the observation. 96% of polling stations did not record attendance at all.

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



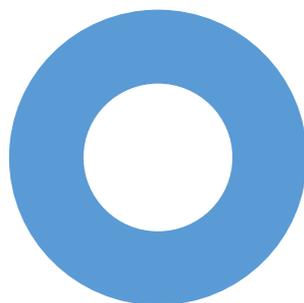
QUESTION 6: 96% of polling stations had two members of polling staff on duty as observers arrived at the polling station.

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



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 10pm, was observed. All the ballot boxes observed were sealed. However, in Newport, as in many councils now, presiding officers are expected to seal the ballot boxes with coded cable ties. In some cases, the incorrect ties were used by the staff although the boxes were sealed.

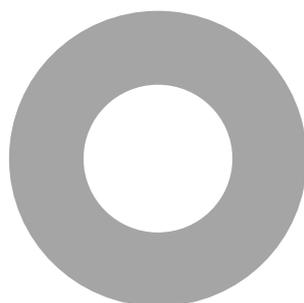
Q8. Is each polling booth equipped with an explanatory poster and a pen/pencil?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 8: All of the polling stations were not properly equipped with the requisite pencil and poster.

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

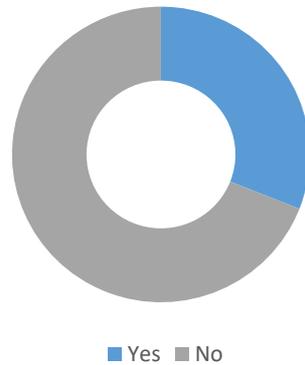


■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 9: This question was asked primarily to elicit whether improper political activity was taking place within the polling station.¹ On no occasions did observers identify literature within the polling station which was biased towards one candidate.

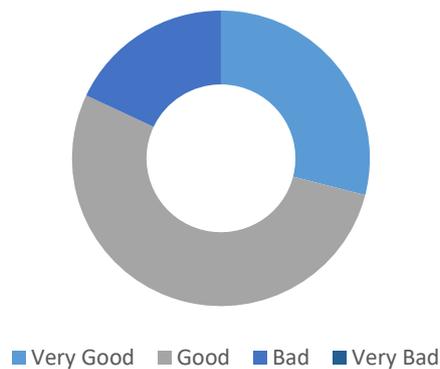
¹ This question did not just relate to literature specific to this election but observers were also asked to identify if other literature, such as MP or councillors' surgeries were on public display – advertising the names of candidates and/or parties.

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



QUESTION 10: In 31% of polling stations, our observer team identified so-called ‘family voting’. 8.5% of all voters observed were directly involved in ‘family voting’. This was predominantly family members sharing polling booths, several spouses viewing the voting intentions of their spouse or direct collusion. We observed one female voter, having shared a booth with her male companion, who informed ourselves and the polling staff she was with him ‘to make sure he votes the right way.’ No action was taken. The OSCE/ODIHR, which monitors elections within the UK, describes ‘family voting’ as an ‘unacceptable practice’.²

Q11. Overall how do you rate the quality of this polling station?



QUESTION 12: Observers were asked for an overall rating of the polling station they had attended. 29% of polling stations were reported to be ‘Very Good’, 53% ‘Good’, 18% ‘Bad’, and none were ‘Very Bad’.

² <http://www.osce.org/>

CONCLUSIONS

This was generally a well-run election. Presiding officers and poll clerks were generally very welcoming and friendly to the observer groups and we would like to thank all those that helped in our work.

Family Voting

As with several recent elections that Democracy Volunteers have observed, we continue to be concerned about the levels of ‘family voting’ at polling stations. Although the numbers were lower than we have seen in other elections there persists in being a lack of awareness amongst the public and staff alike, that family voting should be prevented and when seen it should be interrupted. On several occasions we even observed staff who observed the practice but, despite this, did not interrupt it.

Our observer team saw ‘family voting’ in 31% of the polling stations attended which, bearing in mind the team records all the voters who attend polling stations, means that 8.5% of all the voters who attended polling stations were involved in this practice.

We would recommend that officers, and the presiding officers, take time to be aware of this and intercede when they see it. Evidence, as provided by the OSCE/ODIHR, suggests that this practice most affects women voters as the secrecy of their ballot is restricted.

Election Observation

Following our initial preliminary statement, issued on April 4th, we have been in correspondence with the Returning Officer for the parliamentary by-election as well as attending a meeting with representatives of the Electoral Commission at their offices in London.

Whilst we do not blame the polling staff for a lack of awareness of the existence, and the activities, of election observers we do feel that this by-election highlights the ongoing issues about accredited observation in the UK. We are now aware that, despite having the correct accreditation as issued by the responsible body (the Electoral Commission) a combination of out-of-date information being available, and being issued, was the cause of some of the initial access issues during polling day. We would encourage councils to maintain up-to-date awareness of the rights and privileges of observers, and how they function within the electoral process. Although, we are conscious that legislation and guidance do change we are also aware that in 2018 a largescale review of election observation was conducted by the Electoral Commission, and that whilst those changes (such as the form of accreditation) have been updated, some of the guidance issued, and/or available to councils, is not as up-to-date. This created and has the potential to create difficult and challenging contexts for observers who are conducting their duties legally.

If observation is to be an accepted aspect of the UK’s electoral landscape, as agreed in law and by international obligations, it seems odd that awareness of it is so limited and even challenged.

Access Issues

Some polling stations were not suitable in the Newport West by-election. Whilst many were accessible as they are public buildings, the provision of 'portacabins' made access very difficult for those with mobility disabilities and general mobility issues.

This was generally the case in all of the portacabins which made access extremely challenging for some elderly voters who, on occasion, needed extensive assistance from friends and family and the polling staff. This was not acceptable and led to a number almost becoming injured due to the nature of the step access and poorly utilised (if they were even present) ramps for access.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. We continue to encourage both national and local election bodies to use strategies to discourage 'family voting' in polling stations. This could be done by two methods. Firstly, polling staff should receive, as part of their training, advice on how to deal with spotting and discouraging the practice. This should also be seen as a national problem which needs attention by the production of polling station signage that would help to influence those who are unaware it is unacceptable.

R2. We encourage all election bodies to be aware of the current legislation and guidance on the rights and responsibilities of election observers. We would also remind the Electoral Commission, ahead of the European Elections, that up-to-date advice should be issued to returning officers and that this should also be available to polling staff on election day.

R3. We would encourage Newport's election authorities to assess if it is possible to have more accessible polling arrangements other than the portacabins that were used in some areas during the by-election. Whilst we did not observe any accidents we believe that some of the polling stations were very difficult to access for the mobility impaired if not, in some cases, even impossible.