

FINAL REPORT

Peterborough – Westminster Parliamentary By-election
6th June 2019



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24th June 2019



Westminster Parliamentary By-election – 6th June 2019

Final Report on Election Observation – Peterborough

Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across the Peterborough Westminster Parliamentary by-election – 6th June 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 4 observers registered with, and accredited by, the UK's Electoral Commission made 23 separate observations across 44 different polling stations in the Peterborough Parliamentary Constituency. This constituted approximately half of the polling stations in the area, bearing in mind some polling stations have dual arrangements for two polling districts.

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.

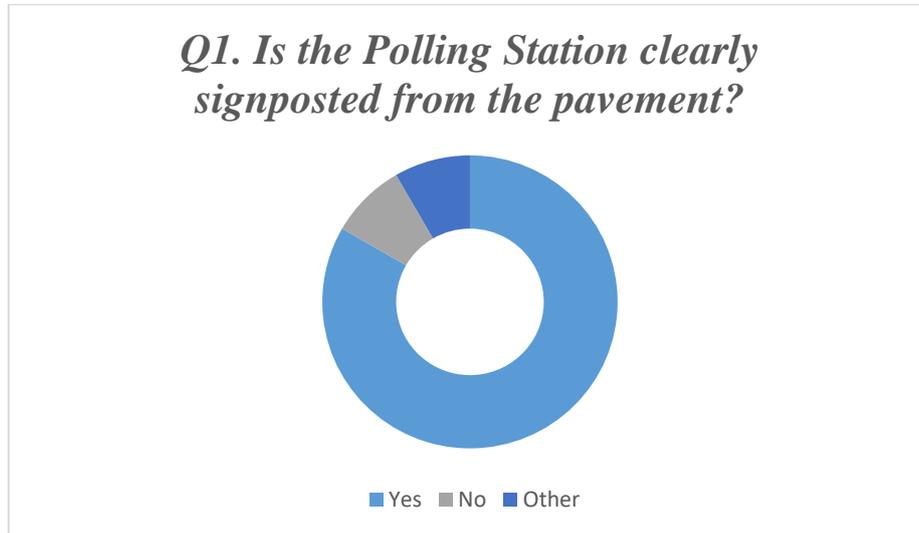
The observations generally took between thirty and forty-five minutes per polling station as the observers were asked to ensure that they attempted to see the entire process, which included staff greeting electors on arrival at the polling station.

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

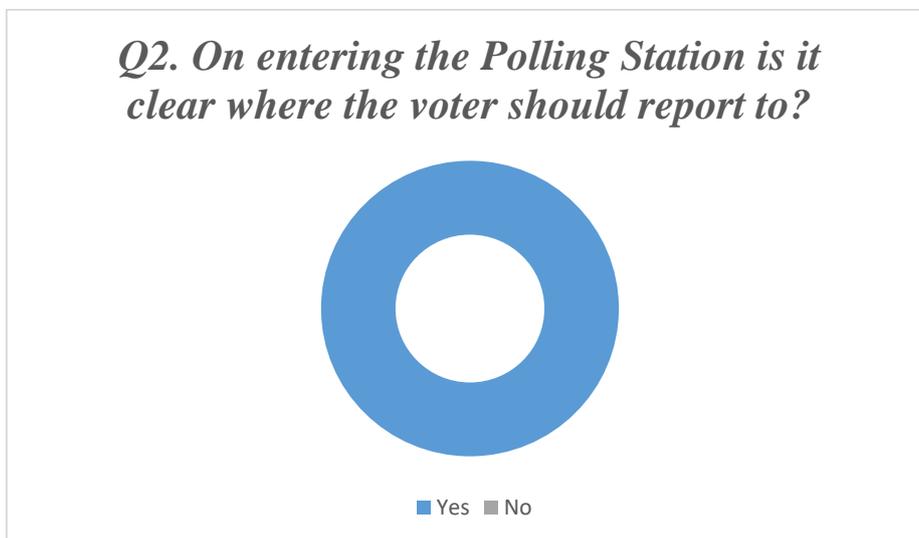
The organisation of polling stations was extremely well run across the council area. Voters could clearly see how to access voting and staff were trained to manage the process. Several supplementary procedures were in place to deal with what seemed to be anticipated challenges to the electoral process.

Results of the Observation

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

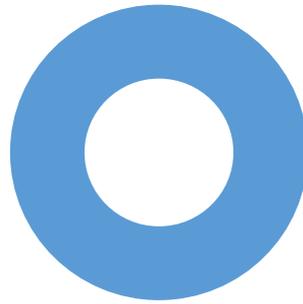


QUESTION 1: Signposting of the polling stations was generally good. Some of the polling stations were sometimes difficult to find, but generally with local knowledge it was considered that they would be easily found.



QUESTION 2: Observers identified no issues in terms of where voters should report in the polling stations. Those polling stations that had two ballot boxes did require voters to identify which half of the polling station they should attend but this was well signposted.

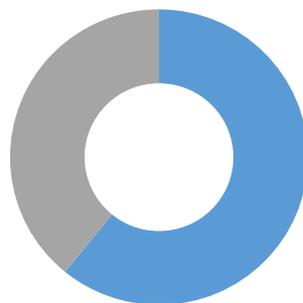
Q3. Was it clear how disabled voters would access the Polling Station?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 3: Disabled access was excellent despite some of the polling stations being places in relatively old buildings, especially in the more rural parts of the constituency.

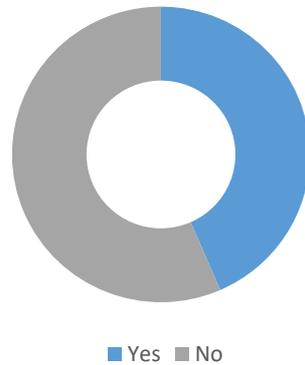
Q4. Did the polling staff ask to see your ID on arrival?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

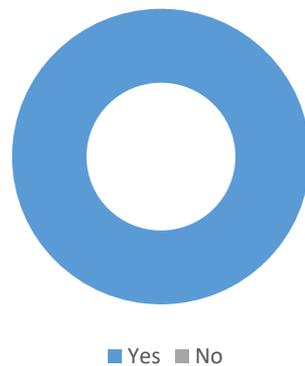
QUESTION 4: Polling staff were generally aware that an observation team might be operating across the constituency. The formal procedure for identifying and then recording that observers had visited the polling station was followed in the majority of cases.

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



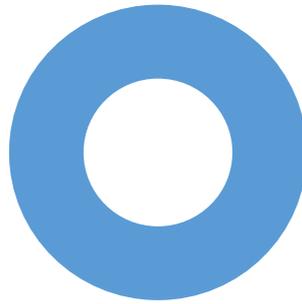
QUESTION 5: Similarly, although not to the same extent, 43% recorded these details at some point during the observation, however, this was not always at the start of the observation.

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



QUESTION 6: All of the polling stations had two members of polling staff on duty as observers arrived at the polling station. In reality, most polling stations had more staff than this statutory minimum. In addition to the official polling staff there were often police in attendance at polling stations, and the team observed a police presence on 42% of occasions. They were generally outside the polling station but on two occasions they were stationed inside the polling station itself.

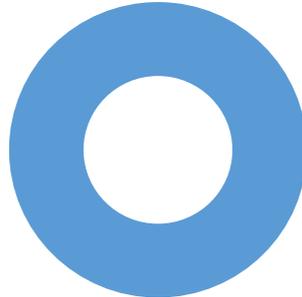
Q7. Is the Ballot Box clearly sealed with cable ties?



■ Yes ■ No

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 of the ballot boxes observed were sealed correctly.

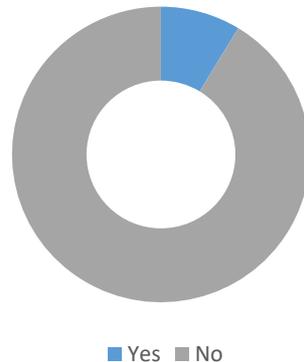
Q8. Is each polling booth equipped with an explanatory poster and a pen/pencil?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 8: All of the polling stations were properly equipped with the requisite pencil and poster. However, please see Recommendations for more information on this.

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



QUESTION 9: This question was asked primarily to elicit whether improper political activity was taking place within the polling station.¹ On two occasions observers identified literature within the polling station which was biased towards one candidate. On one occasion this was in plain sight of voters entering the station and should have been removed by polling staff.

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



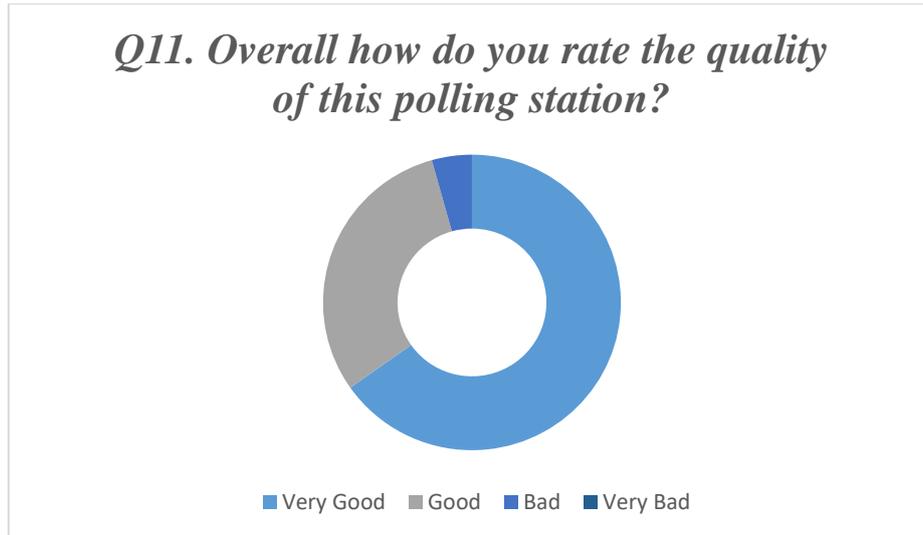
QUESTION 10: In 48% of polling stations (11 of the 23), our observer team identified so-called 'family voting'. 4% of all voters observed were directly involved in, or affected by, 'family voting'. This was predominantly family members sharing polling booths, several spouses viewing the voting intentions of their spouse, or direct collusion. On several occasions when it was observed, the presiding officer, or even the police officer, intervened. This showed their apparent preparedness for family voting.² The OSCE/ODIHR, which monitors elections within the UK, describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'.³

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.

² The 4% figure compares to 8.5% in the recent Newport West by-election.

³ <http://www.osce.org/>

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. 65% of polling stations were reported to be ‘Very Good’, 30% ‘Good’, 4% ‘Bad’, and none were ‘Very Bad’.

CONCLUSIONS

This was an excellently conducted election by the officials. Presiding officers and poll clerks were very welcoming and friendly to both voters and the observer groups, and we would like to thank all those that helped in our work. However, as our preliminary statement indicated, we continue to be concerned about ‘family voting’ in the UK as well as the emerging concern of some voters taking photographs of their ballot papers.

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 actually lower than we have seen in other elections, there continues to be a lack of awareness amongst the public that family voting should be prevented. Unlike other observations we have recently made, staff in Peterborough were habitually willing to interrupt family voting - even persistently - when voters did not understand that it constitutes a breach of the secret ballot. This constituted the best practice we have seen and would encourage other councils, and their staff, to bear this in mind. We would however note that interruption did not always happen in some polling stations. Family voting was not simply localised to a couple of polling stations, it was identified across the constituency and ‘family voting’ should be challenged in whatever circumstances it occurs.

Our observer team saw ‘family voting’ in 48% of the polling stations attended which, bearing in mind the team records all the voters who attend polling stations, means that 4% of all the voters who we observed attending polling stations were involved in, or affected by, this practice.

Photographing of Ballot Papers

We have not seen voters photographing their ballots before in the UK, save for the example of young voters sharing their first vote on social media, when it is often unknowingly a potential breach of the secret ballot.

The three cases identified in Peterborough were where an individual held their camera close to the ballot paper to take a picture of a specific line, and presumably their cross, next to the candidate they had marked. It is clearly a matter of speculation as to why a voter would do this. It is a concerning practice which presiding officers did not seem to see or intervene in despite the presence of signs to discourage photography.

Photography in polling stations is discouraged by the UK's Electoral Commission.⁴ We feel it is appropriate to comment on this as we believe that Peterborough Council could consider further actions to discourage this practice along the lines of the approach they have to 'family voting'.

Assistance to Voters

Assisting voters who are unable to vote is a normal part of polling day. This assistance is normally offered by the polling staff but can, by agreement, be offered by a family member or friend when it is recorded by staff. We saw this practice on a few occasions on polling day.

However, as well as offering data we also ask our observer teams to assess qualitative aspects of the poll and sometimes assistance seemed to be given by party associates and even tellers. On one occasion our observer team recorded:

'One teller entered the polling station with an elderly lady and walked her to the booth. We assume directing [her] how to vote as he had his rosette in his hand to show her.'

We consider it inappropriate for party tellers to be assisting voters in casting their votes. The teller had correctly removed his party rosette from his jacket, yet it was still visible to the voter and officials should be aware that entering a polling station to assist a voter is not appropriate for the role of telling.

Telling and Party Activity

Parties were very active on polling day in Peterborough and we saw a great number of tellers asking voters for their polling numbers. This is normal in a parliamentary by-election. On some occasions tellers and other party groups were found to be too close to the formal proceedings inside the polling station. Whilst we did not consider this activity to be intimidating we believe there are procedures that polling staff could take to ensure that voters have clearer access to the polling station.

⁴ <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a-journalist/resources-for-media/media-handbook-european-parliamentary-elections/voters>

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. We continue to encourage both national and local election bodies to use strategies to discourage ‘family voting’ in polling stations. We were impressed that staff had clearly received training concerning the prospect of ‘family voting’ but that this appeared not to be uniformly enacted by staff. We would encourage all staff to be aware of this challenge and act on it appropriately.

R2. Photographing of ballot papers is discouraged by the UK’s Electoral Commission and we identified it on a number of occasions. Whilst there are signs available they should be placed in each polling booth so that is even clearer to voters that they should not do this of their own or another’s ballot paper.

R3. Whilst assisting voters is a normal part of polling day we would encourage staff to ensure that only they, or a recorded family member, afford this assistance. This would prevent third parties from lending this assistance and increase the security of the process.

R4. From our recent observations of Dutch elections, we have identified a method of best practice which also seems to discourage family voting. In Rotterdam, presiding officers who assist voters in the polling booth, as to identify them as an officer and not a voter, wear coloured tabards to identify them. This allows other voters to see that they are legitimately in a polling booth with the voter lending assistance. This may be a way for Peterborough to delineate the assistance offered by staff and that offered by other voters, family members etc.