

# DEMOCRACY VOLUNTEERS

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY  
ELECTIONS 2022  
Final Report



Democracy  
**Volunteers**  
the election observers



**Our mission is to improve the quality of democratic elections, by advising those who legislate for, administer and oversee elections, to enhance them for the benefit of voters.**

We aim to do this by attending elections and empirically reporting our findings in an accessible way through statistical analysis and interlocutor meetings to support this objective. We do this through a strong methodology, based on the international standards for election observation as set out by OSCE/ODIHR and others.

We maintain strict impartiality and require our observers to abide by international standards, as well as the relevant local legal framework, when acting as our observers.

**We aim to report on our observations in a constructive and encouraging way to benefit the delivery of democracy and to benefit the electorate as a whole.**



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**democracyvolunteers.org**

# Northern Ireland Assembly Elections

## 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022

### Final Report on Election Observation

#### Objectives

1. To objectively observe the election process in Northern Ireland.
2. To advise election officials on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice.
3. To support election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

#### Executive Summary

Democracy Volunteers deployed 32 observers across Northern Ireland on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022. These observers formed teams of two and attended 436 of the 1345 polling places (32.4%). Observers spent between 30 minutes and 60 minutes at each polling venue observing the process and then completed one or more surveys for each polling venue, dependant on the number of polling stations.

Our teams identified extremely high levels of attempted family voting<sup>1</sup> which was infrequently challenged or prevented by the polling staff.

Those subjected to family voting (i.e. not having a secret ballot) were invariably women (65%) and those causing family voting were often men (52%). We observed family voting in 42% of polling stations (279 individual cases of family voting).

We believe that some of this family voting may be caused by several factors around the length of time voters stay in a polling booth (as they don't simply have to mark an 'X' under the STV voting system), but also because the ranking process and length of the ballot can lead to some lengthy deliberations, which can lead to familiar consultation.

We also believe that clearer definitions of a polling station's curtilage would benefit parties, their representatives, and voters, and that staff are trained on understanding the role and rights of independent election observers.

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<sup>1</sup> The OSCE/ODIHR, the international body which monitors elections in the UK, describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'. It is a breach of the long-standing concept and practice of a secret ballot where one person directs, coerces, or colludes in the casting of another's vote.

## Democracy Volunteers

Democracy Volunteers is a non-partisan, domestic election observation organisation, committed to improving the security and accessibility of elections in the UK and abroad. Our mission is to improve the quality of democratic elections, by advising those who legislate for, administer, and oversee elections, to enhance them for the benefit of voters.

We aim to do this by attending elections and empirically reporting our findings in an accessible way through statistical analysis and the undertaking of interlocutor meetings to support this objective. We do this through a strong methodology, based on the international standards for election observation as set out by OSCE/ODIHR<sup>2</sup> and others. We are a member of the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM) and abide by GNDEM's Declaration of Global Principles for Non-partisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organisations and the accompanying Code of Conduct<sup>3</sup>.

We maintain strict impartiality and require our observers to abide by UK and international standards, as well as the relevant local legal framework, when acting as our observers. All of our observers, who observe in the UK, are officially accredited with the UK's Electoral Commission and undergo a thorough interview and training process to ensure they are able to accurately and impartially record and report data from polling stations and counting venues. None of our observers are members of political parties and are not politically active.

We aim to report on our observations in a constructive and encouraging way to benefit the delivery of democracy and to benefit the electorate. Since we were formed in 2016, we have observed dozens of elections across the UK and internationally, including General Elections, referenda, by-elections, council elections and devolved parliamentary/assembly elections. Our reports have been used as the basis for trials of various methodologies and equipment at various elections and our data is regularly cited in The Houses of Parliament and used in debates nationally, as well as informing local council training for election officials, whilst informing the public on the conduct of electoral events.

## Funding

Democracy Volunteers observers deployed for the observations during the Northern Ireland Assembly elections received the support of a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd as well as some small donations from those observing. This was arranged by Democracy Volunteers, and this funding covered travel expenses, some accommodation, and subsistence for our volunteer observers.

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<sup>2</sup> OSCE (2003) Handbook for Domestic Election Observers

<sup>3</sup> GNDEM (2022) Declaration of Global Principles for Non-partisan Election Observation & Monitoring by Citizen Organisations Available at: <https://gndem.org/declaration-of-global-principles/>

## Observer Team



**Dr John Ault FRSA FRGS (United Kingdom)** was the Head of Mission for the Northern Ireland Election Observation Mission and is the Executive Director of Democracy Volunteers.

John has worked in elections throughout the UK, Europe, and the United States since the 1980s. He has observed on behalf of the OSCE/ODIHR and the UK Parliament's CPA in parliamentary elections as wide-ranging as Kazakhstan and the Isle of Man. He is also a former chair of the UK's Electoral Reform Society and has been elected to local government in the UK and the UK's South-West Regional Assembly.

He has observed numerous elections for Democracy Volunteers, including Swedish and Norwegian parliamentary elections, the UK general elections in 2017 and 2019, the Finnish presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018 and 2019 as well as Dutch elections in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2022. He has also been an academic consultant about electoral and parliamentary reform in Moldova. He is also an electoral expert for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

He is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter and has previously lectured at Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Manchester. He specialises in elections and campaigns and has published several books on the subject, including his doctoral thesis on electoral campaigning.



**Harry Busz FRSA (United Kingdom)** is Democracy Volunteers' fulltime Head of Operations. He was Deputy Head of Mission for the deployment in Northern Ireland.

Harry is a graduate in Human Geography at Cardiff University and an MA in International Relations from Exeter University and is currently researching for his PhD in Politics at Newcastle University. His research focuses on electoral integrity and the role of international, regional, and domestic observer groups in improving electoral practices across the OSCE region.

He has participated in multiple domestic and international observations such as the 2019 local elections in Northern Ireland, the provincial and Water Board elections in The Netherlands, national elections in Austria, as well as being election coordinator for the 2020 USA general election and 2019 UK general election, and Ireland's 2020 general election.

In addition to the Head of Mission and Head of Operations, eight additional observers acted as Short-Term Observers (STOs) for the duration of polling day. The observers selected for this deployment include many of the organisation's most experienced observers, all of which were fully trained and briefed on data collection and the observation role prior to polling day in Northern Ireland.

## Credits

We would like to thank the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland, the Elections Office for Northern Ireland and the staff who welcomed our observers and those who held meetings with our team. In addition, we would like to thank the interlocutors who engaged with our observation and the information they supplied us with. We would also like to thank the UK's Electoral Commission for their assistance in accrediting our observers.

## Methodology

Democracy Volunteers observations follow internationally accepted practices and standards for election observation across the OCSE region<sup>4,5</sup>, taking into account issues before and after polling day, in addition to our findings in polling stations and count venues. Before the deployment of Short-Term Observers on polling day and subsequent days of counting, interlocutor meetings were held with a range of actors, such as political parties<sup>6</sup> and elections staff (See Appendix).

Prior to polling day, all observers had been fully trained in how to act as a Short-Term Observer at these elections. This training included an online training course, produced by our Head of Operations and Head of Training, and included several lessons on the different types of data they would need to collect, how to act impartially, the purpose of observation, and many more topics<sup>7</sup>. Each observer who did not have extensive experience observing UK elections with Democracy Volunteers then attended a training seminar with our Head of Training, Max Wheeler, where he fielded any questions that observers had about the course and presented walkthroughs of how to observe inside polling stations and how to work logistically on polling day. A pre-deployment briefing was held before the deployment, where local factors were discussed, and final preparations were made.

Each observation was conducted with two observers to allow for objective observation, and the observers agreed their opinions of the electoral process before submitting data to the central team (This is generally called the four eyes method and the internationally accepted standard for election observation). All data recorded was verified by these two individuals. In total, our observer teams observed in 436 of the 1345 polling stations in Northern Ireland. Each team spent around 30-60 minutes in each polling station to observe the whole process of voting inside polling stations.

Observers did not interfere with the operation of polling stations or impede any voters or staff from fulfilling their jobs throughout the day. Following observations, an online survey was used to report findings back to the core team. These surveys were filled in collaboratively, outside the polling station, to ensure both observers agreed on the observations made.

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<sup>4</sup> OSCE (2003) Handbook for Domestic Election Observers

<sup>5</sup> GNDEM (2022) Declaration of Global Principles for Non-partisan Election Observation & Monitoring by Citizen Organisations Available at: <https://gndem.org/declaration-of-global-principles/>

<sup>6</sup> Please note that all political parties and candidates were offered a meeting with our team before polling day, though some did not to take up this offer.

<sup>7</sup> For those observers who attended counting, an additional online course was given.

Following polling day, teams of observers were deployed to observe the counting process on Friday and Saturday respectively. During these observations, the whole process of verification, secure storage of ballot boxes, the counting process and adjudication of doubtful ballot papers was observed. A Democracy Volunteers dedicated helpdesk was available to all observers if they had any challenges or questions concerning the election.

Finally, the team convened following polling day to discuss the observations they had made and their overall impressions of the conduct of the election. This meeting lasted for around an hour and a half and observers were encouraged to share any issues they had observed, whilst referring to their notes from the day. This meeting allowed the team to discuss a number of issues, which cannot always be fully outlined in the online survey on polling day.

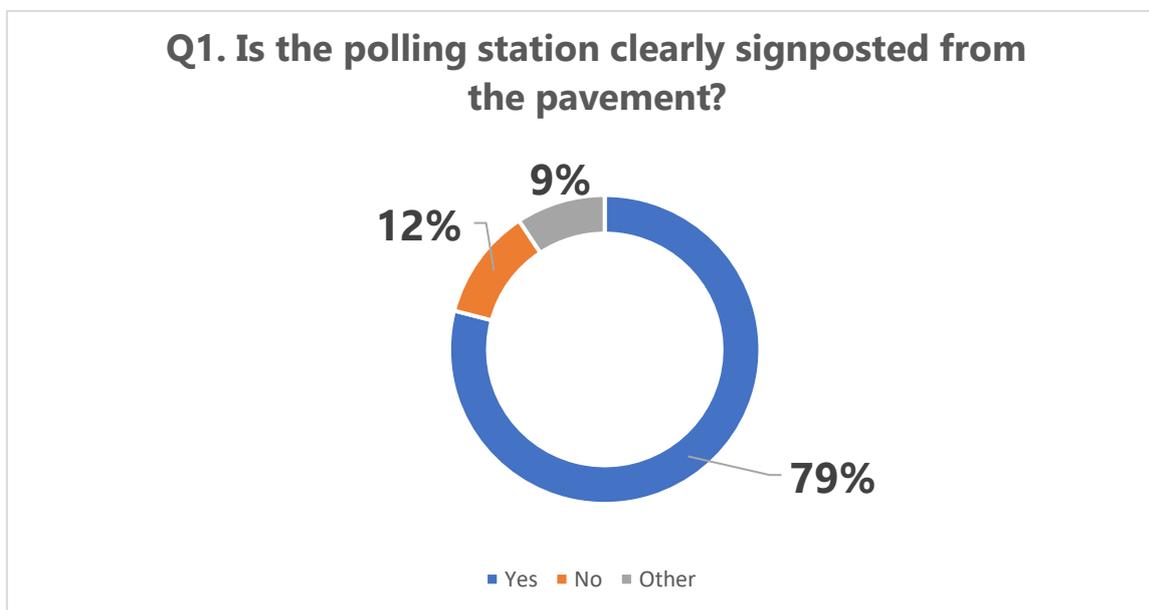
Elections staff working in the Elections Office for Northern Ireland have been sent a copy of this report, and Democracy Volunteers will offer to conduct follow up meetings, if requested, to discuss individual challenges to help improve the electoral process.

In total we attended the following number of polling stations in each constituency:

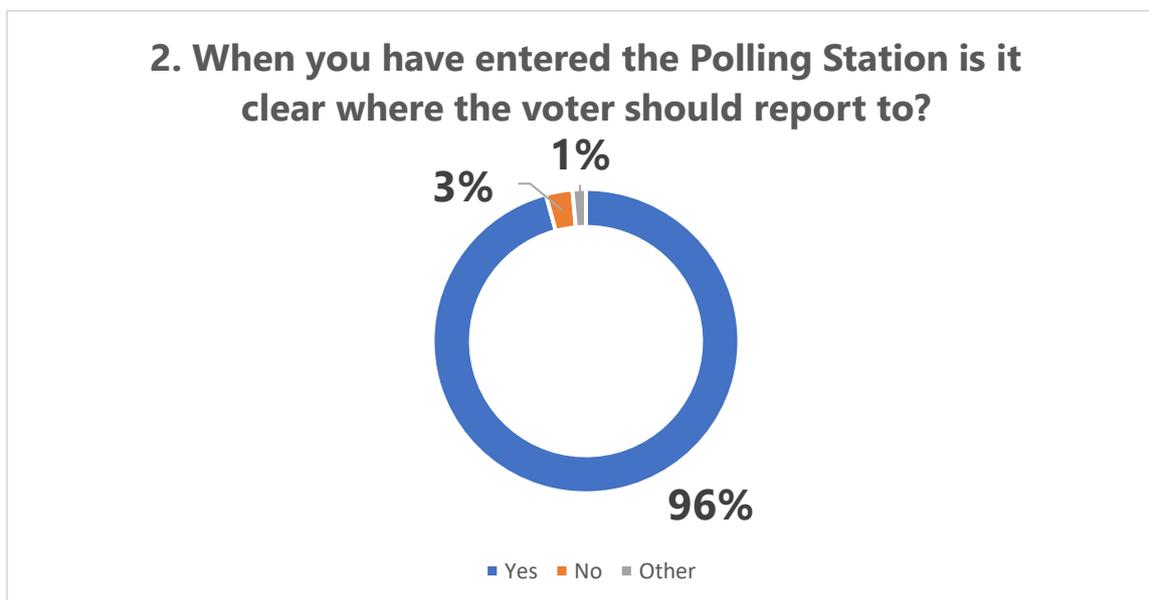
• Belfast East	39
• Belfast North	11
• Belfast South	30
• Belfast West	11
• East Antrim	23
• East Londonderry	16
• Fermanagh & South Tyrone	17
• Foyle	15
• Lagan Valley	39
• Mid Ulster	21
• Newry & Armagh	6
• North Antrim	30
• North Down	46
• South Antrim	36
• South Down	17
• Strangford	35
• Upper Bann	22
• West Tyrone	22
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>436</b>

## Results of the Observation

The observers answered the following questions as they progressed with their observations at each polling station:

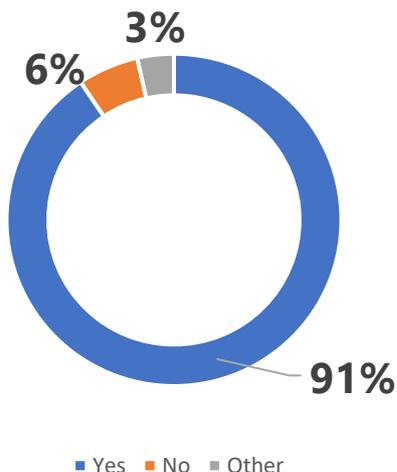


**QUESTION 1:** Signposting of the polling stations was generally good, however 54 of the stations observed were not clearly signposted and another 43 were poorly signposted. In addition to signage, some polling stations had other members of the public, tellers, and campaigners outside which made the stations identifiable. (N.420)



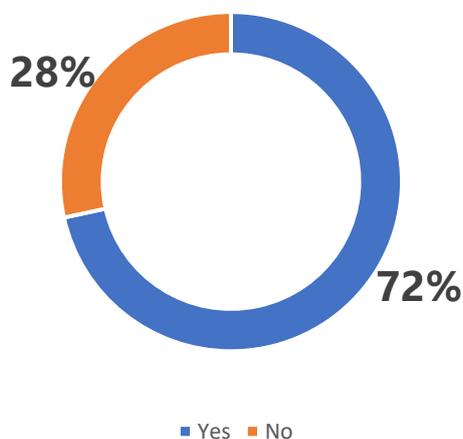
**QUESTION 2:** Observers identified several polling stations in which it was not clear where the voter should report to. For most polling stations, clearly visible desks and signage was used to direct voters. Generally, any confusion was due to numerous polling stations being located within one central venue. (N.426)

### 3. Having entered the polling station was it clear how disabled voters would access the Station?



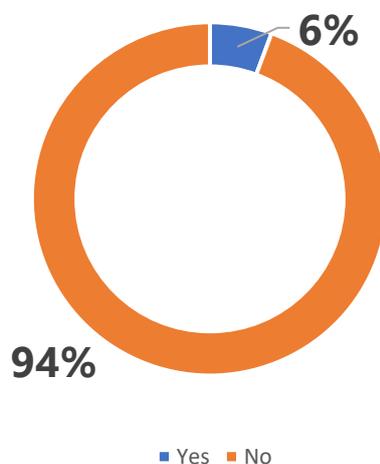
**QUESTION 3:** Disabled access was very good in 91% of the polling stations observed. Some observers did note that step-free access was not always available, or easy to use, at a very small number of polling stations. We even witnessed some complaints over access for the disabled and elderly. Some teams recommended a seating area for those required to queue to vote. (N.425)

### 4. Did the polling staff ask you who you are on arrival?



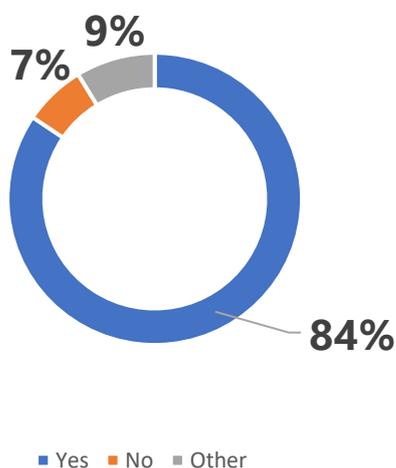
**QUESTION 4:** Polling staff were generally unaware that the observation team would be operating across Northern Ireland on polling day. Some of our teams had difficulties accessing polling stations and were usually welcomed in a friendly manner. In almost three quarters of the polling stations observed, staff asked to see observers official Electoral Commission issued ID badge on arrival. The details on these were recorded on 41% of occasions. (N.426)

### 5. Was there any queuing at the polling station whilst you were in attendance?



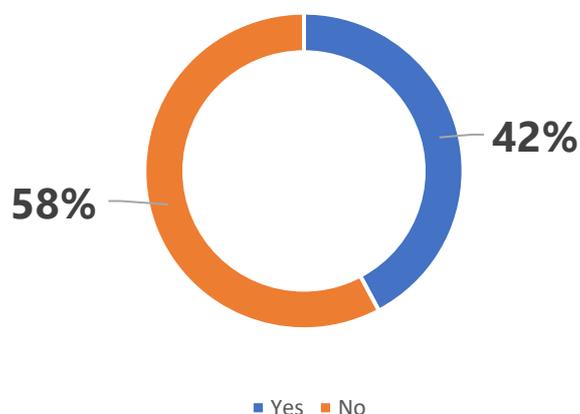
**Question 5:** We saw voters queuing at 6% of the polling stations we observed. These queues were often short (under 10 electors) and were generally well managed. (N.426)

### 6. Is the ballot box completely sealed with numbered cable ties?



**QUESTION 6:** Our observers found that 84% of ballot boxes were correctly sealed at this election. Our observer team identified a high number of ballot boxes that were either not sealed correctly, leaving access possible to the inside, or not being secured with the required number of seals, namely just one seal, giving some access to the ballot box. (N.424)

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



**QUESTION 7:** Family voting was observed in 42% of polling stations. When compared with other elections our organisation has observed this is a high percentage. The OSCE/ODIHR, the international body which monitors elections in the UK, describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'<sup>8</sup>. It is a breach of the long-standing concept and practice of a secret ballot.

However, although many cases of Family Voting did occur, many went unchallenged by the staff.

Democracy Volunteers now ranks the types of family voting that takes place by three types: 'clear direction', 'collusion' or 'general oversight'. The largest category of Family Voting at these elections was 'collusion' where two or more voters work together in the same booth to complete their ballots.

- Collusion 47.7%
- General Oversight 26.2%
- Clear direction 21.1%
- Other 5%

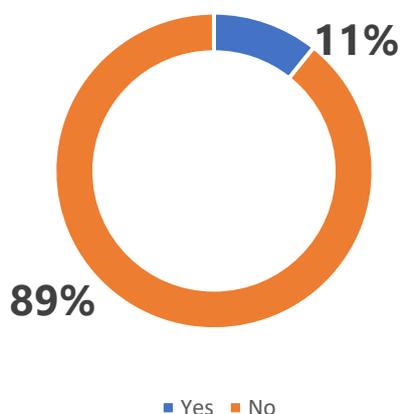
In total 7%<sup>9</sup>, of all the voters we observed voting at this election were either causing, or were affected by, Family Voting. 65% of those being affected by Family Voting were women. 52% of those causing family voting were men. (N.424)

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.osce.org/>

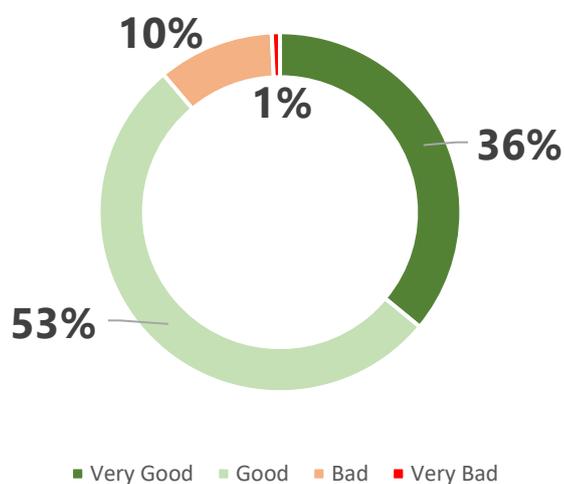
<sup>9</sup> Accurate to 1 decimal place.

### 8. During your time in the polling station did you see any voters excluded or turned away?



**QUESTION 8:** In 11% of polling stations our observers saw voters being turned away. There were two primary reasons for this. The main being voters not having the correct form of photo ID<sup>10</sup> or that the voter had attended the wrong polling station. Some were not on the electoral register. (N.418)

### 9. How would you rate this polling station?



**QUESTION 9:** Observers were asked to give an overall rating for each polling station they attended. 36% of polling stations were reported as being 'Very Good', 53% were 'Good' and 10% of polling stations were reported as being 'Bad' with 1% being 'Very Bad'. (N.414)

<sup>10</sup> Photographic ID is required to vote in Northern Ireland.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1 – Family Voting**

Family voting, where one or more voters directs, guides, or oversees the vote of another person, continues to be a challenge. Staff seemed unwilling to intervene in family voting even when they clearly saw it taking place.

At elections where we observe more polling staff members, particularly abroad, Family Voting is far more likely to be prevented. This is because staff have more resources to do so, and we recommend that this should be done across Northern Ireland and the whole of the UK. Voters could also be made more aware of the issue of family voting, for example, by having posters for national secrecy of the ballot campaigns.

### **Recommendation 2 – Voter Education on the Voting System**

Although primarily reported verbally, we have some evidence to suggest that voters need a stronger understanding of the STV voting system and how they can navigate their way through it. Sometimes, it appears that ‘Family Voting’ occurs when a voter seeks guidance from a partner or family member, not to collude on the party of choice, as such, but to simply remember the ranking they wish to have.

We believe this issue could be improved if greater emphasis was placed on explaining the voting system through public information campaigns and signage in polling stations.

### **Recommendation 3 – Defining the Curtilage of the Polling Station**

Whilst in most cases the curtilage of the polling station can be obvious (a school gate etc.), some were the matter for discussion between the presiding officer and party representatives. This focused on where tellers (or more accurately party campaigners) were able to stand and handout their literature, usually in the form of a sample ballot paper, explaining how to rank their candidates. This is clearly an acceptable campaign activity, but something which should take place outside the grounds of a polling station.

In some cases, this led to campaigners being stationed at the entrance to a car park and the voters being able to avoid interaction with them by simply driving past. In other cases, voters were required to walk past a phalanx of party activists on their way to the front door of polling stations.

We would recommend that polling station presiding officers mark out the curtilage of the polling station physically before polling begins.

### **Recommendation 4 – Observers and their rights within the process**

Whilst observers are still relatively rare in the UK at elections our team attended over 30% of all polling stations. There appears to be little awareness amongst polling staff about the required credentials to be an observer and the response to allowing access to authorised observers ranges from welcoming to barring access. A simple addition to presiding officer training would remove the potential misunderstanding of the role of election observers and their rights and responsibilities within polling stations.

## **Appendix – List of Interlocutors**

### **THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION**

Tom Hawthorn (Head of Electoral Policy)

Cahir Hughes (Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland)

Melanie Davidson (Head of Support & Improvement)

### **POLITICAL PARTIES**

The team also held meetings with several Northern Ireland politicians as part of our work under Chatham House Rules.

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