



GfK NOP Social Research

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Research Report:
**Powers of the National Assembly for Wales –
Referendum Question Testing**

GfK NOP Social Research, August 2010

Written by:

Michael Thompson (Director, GfK NOP Social Research)

Sioned Lewis (Senior Consultant, Arad Consulting)



Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

By the end of March 2011, a referendum will be held in Wales on whether to give the National Assembly for Wales full law-making powers. The Electoral Commission asked GfK NOP to test voter understanding of the draft question.¹ The research aimed to:

- Identify any elements of the referendum question which prove problematic for users in the context of the Commission's question assessment guidelines
- Explore reasons for these problems
- Explore possible ways of addressing these problems
- Examine public awareness of the powers of the Assembly and explore public understanding of the impact referendum outcomes will have on this

A qualitative approach involving a total of eight focus groups and 20 depth interviews, carried out across Wales, was used to test the referendum question. Both the Welsh and English language versions of the question were tested. All research was carried out between 7th and 15th July 2010. Please note that, unless otherwise stated, all findings apply to both the Welsh and English language versions of the question.

This report presents findings from the research carried out by GfK NOP; the views expressed are not those of the Electoral Commission.

1.2 Background Awareness

Respondents' knowledge of the background issues and terminology necessary for a full understanding of the referendum question was limited. Many were unfamiliar with the concept of devolution and most respondents had a limited understanding of the powers of the NAW. With the exception of a few high profile initiatives, such as free prescriptions, reduced tuition fees and free swimming, the majority were not sure which policy areas the NAW had legislative power over. Furthermore, many were not aware of the legislative mechanics of the NAW and did not know that the Assembly could gain further powers to make laws in devolved areas with the agreement of the UK Parliament.²

A minority were aware that a referendum on the powers of the Assembly was due to take place in 2011. These respondents tended to be older (35+), had previously voted in NAW elections and were more likely to follow Welsh political issues in the news. Welsh language

¹ The full question used in the research is shown on page 10.

² Young people aged 17-24 demonstrated the lowest levels of awareness, while previous NAW voters demonstrated the highest levels of awareness.



speakers had slightly higher levels of awareness of the forthcoming referendum than non-Welsh speakers.

One consequence of respondents' lack of awareness of devolution, the powers of the Assembly and the subject of the forthcoming referendum was that they came to the research with many misconceptions about what the question would be asking them. For instance, some assumed that the question was about independence for Wales or an increase in the tax raising powers of the Assembly and answered it in this way. While these misconceptions may be resolved by any campaigning and information presented to the electorate before March 2011, it was clear that the question in its current form was not challenging or resolving these misconceptions adequately.

1.3 Interpretation of the Question

Having read the referendum question, the vast majority could see that it was asking them to decide whether or not the law-making powers of the NAW should be increased. Nevertheless, most had difficulty identifying the exact nature of the increase in law-making powers proposed. A range of interpretations were provided, including the following:

- Full independence for Wales
- Tax raising powers for the NAW
- Introduction of new devolved areas
- Removal of Parliamentary approval for laws made in existing devolved areas
- An increase in law-making powers of the NAW in deprived / developing areas of Wales

Those who believed the question was asking about independence for Wales or tax raising powers for the Assembly tended to come to the question with this assumption already in mind and did not have their misconceptions challenged by the question. Those who believed the question was about introducing new devolved areas were usually confused about the use of the words '*devolved areas*' in the question and misinterpreted their meaning when reading the question. Those who thought the question was asking about increasing the Assembly's powers in deprived or developing areas of Wales did so because they misinterpreted the words '*devolved areas*', but took them to mean 'deprived' or 'developing areas'.

Those who thought the question was about the removal of Parliamentary approval for laws made in existing devolved areas came closest to an accurate understanding of the question. These respondents tended to be older (35+) NAW Voters. There was no significant difference in the proportion of English and Welsh language speakers within this category. They recognised that, at present, the NAW needed Parliamentary approval to make certain laws and that the question was asking whether the need for approval should be removed.

However, a few individuals who had a good understanding of the subject of the referendum prior to attending the research (i.e. who thought it was about the removal of Parliamentary approval for laws made in existing devolved areas) came to doubt this understanding after reading the question. In these instances, the question was not supporting or reinforcing the knowledge these individuals' had built up prior to the research. This calls into question the

suitability of the question in its current form and shows that poor awareness of devolution and the powers of the NAW was not the only reason for people misinterpreting the referendum question. The impact on understanding of the question structure, as well as individual words and phrases, also had an impact.

A) Question Structure

Most respondents believed that the existing question structure should be retained. Given the gaps in awareness of devolution and the NAW's current powers, a preamble supporting the referendum question itself (i.e. paragraph three) was required. There was a consensus that the following elements should be retained:

- A short and clear title
- An account of the current legislative arrangements
- An indication of how legislative arrangements would be affected if a Yes / No vote was given
- A short and clear question

However, a range of structural problems were identified and these include the following:

- Overall question length
- Sentence length and complexity
- Distinction between present and future scenarios

Across the sample, respondents believed the overall question was too long. When reading it, many found that they lost the gist of the question and had to read individual sections a number of times before they were able to piece together its meaning. There were frequent complaints that the question was repetitive and respondents wondered whether repeated sections could be dispensed with. For instance, the second sentence in the second paragraph of the English language question was seen as overlong and confusing. The number of clauses and the amount of recursion (embedding of a sentence within another sentence) in this sentence made it quite difficult for many people to understand.

When reading the preamble, some found it difficult to distinguish the present legislative arrangements from possible future arrangements (i.e. following the outcome of the referendum). While most understood that the first two sentences of paragraph one were describing present arrangements, some believed the third sentence was describing a possible future arrangement. Similarly, by placing information about Yes and No outcomes together in paragraph two, the question was seen to confuse a future scenario (the Yes outcome) with a description of the current arrangements (the No outcome).

Distinguishing between the present arrangements and possible future arrangement was made even more difficult for many Welsh language readers, as the words used in the third sentence of paragraph one (*'Caiff y Cynulliad ennill mwy o bwerau'*) were often unfamiliar to them.



B) Words & Phrases

English Language Question

'Devolved areas'

The most commonly misunderstood phrase in the English language question was 'devolved areas'. Because many respondents did not understand the concept of devolution and did not have a clear idea of what 'devolved areas' meant, they often interpreted this phrase as referring to geographical areas within Wales that were either deprived or developing. This led some to understand the overall question as asking about whether the NAW should have more powers over these geographical areas. This misunderstanding was compounded by the phrase being repeated five times throughout the question, which made understanding the question without knowing what this phrase meant very difficult. Some admitted that they had simply ignored the phrase and tried to guess at the overall meaning of the question without reference to it.

'If most people vote No, then the present arrangements, which transfer that law-making power bit by bit, with the agreement of Parliament each time, will continue.'

This sentence (paragraph two, sentence two) was seen as overlong and over complicated. Many got lost when reading it due to the number of clauses it contained (five in total) and did not fully grasp its meaning as a result. In addition, many did not like the way the sentence seemed to switch between formal and informal tones (for instance, '*...The present arrangements, which transfer that law-making power...*'; was seen as highly formal language, while the subsequent phrase, '*bit by bit*', was seen as very informal) and felt that this juxtaposition made the sentence difficult to read.

'Subject by subject / bit by bit'

Some found the use of '*subject by subject*' (paragraph one, sentence three) and '*bit by bit*' (paragraph two, sentence two) to describe the process of transferring law making powers from Parliament to the Assembly confusing. The slightly different wording led them to doubt whether the two sentences were describing the same process or not.

Welsh Language Question

'Meysydd sydd wedi'u datganoli' ('Devolved areas')

'*Datganoli*' was an unfamiliar word to many respondents, especially among the younger age groups. These respondents did feel able to work out the meaning of the sentence based on the contextual information provided but it was apparent that respondents were sometimes incorrectly guessing at the meaning of the word. The '*meysydd*' part of the phrase was problematic due to its unfamiliarity. This, coupled with the word '*datganoli*', caused many Welsh language readers to re-read the passage and compare it with the English version to work out its meaning.



'Caiff y Cynulliad ennill mwy o bwerau' ('The Assembly can gain further powers')

The meaning of this third sentence of paragraph one was not clear to most Welsh language readers. The word '*caiff*' was unfamiliar (paragraph one, sentence three) and this led some respondents to initially read the sentence as '*the Assembly will gain powers*', therefore confusing the present and potential future arrangements.

'bob yn damaid' (bit by bit)

This phrase was not seen as common parlance and there was a strong feeling that it could be made more intelligible to Welsh language readers.

Unfamiliar words: 'fesul'; 'i ddeddfu' and 'gwasanaethau cymdeithasol'

The words '*fesul*', '*i ddeddfu*' and '*gwasanaethau cymdeithasol*' posed problems for some respondents. Their unfamiliarity with these words meant that they had to refer to the English version to understand their meaning, leading to a far slower pace of reading.

C) Question Layout

No difficulties were reported with the question layout. All found the division of the question into a title, preamble, question and answer boxes to be easy to follow and all found the division of the page into Welsh and English versions to be appropriate.

Two interviews were carried out amongst people with visual impairments. One of these respondents had a moderate visual impairment and although he was able to read the question in its current format said that he would have preferred to use a large print version. The other respondent was profoundly blind and was not able to read the question at all. An audio version of the question would be required in order for this respondent to vote in the referendum.

In addition, the four respondents who did not speak English or Welsh as a first language would have preferred for the question to be provided in their first language. While all four could understand the question in English, they struggled with words such as 'devolved areas.'

1.4 Neutrality of the Question

On first reading, very few respondents commented that the question was leading them to give a particular answer. It was only after they were prompted to look for any leading elements that these were identified. Where leading elements were identified (on both the Welsh and English versions), these were seen to lead voters towards a Yes outcome. No elements leading voters to a No outcome were identified.

The following elements were seen as leading people to vote Yes:

- Paragraph two:
 - > Description of the Yes outcome came first, placing greater emphasis on a Yes result than a No result
 - > Description of the No outcome was somewhat hidden in the paragraph (sentence two)
 - > The Yes outcome was described in a simple and straightforward way and was easy to understand, whereas the No outcome was described in a complicated way that was more difficult to understand
 - > Wording of the Yes description gave a sense of positive change (*'...gain powers to make laws...'* / *'...ennill pwerau i ddeddfu...'*) whereas wording of the No description was more negative and gave a sense of stasis or slow, incremental change (*'...bit by bit...'* / *'...bob yn damaid ... bob tro...'*)
- Paragraph three:
 - > *'Do you agree...'* / *'Ydych chi'n cytuno...'* was seen as prompting a Yes response by implying that the question was partial (i.e. that it was really asking *'Do you agree with me...?'*)

Overall, it was apparent that barriers to understanding (e.g. the confusion around *'devolved areas'* / *'Meysydd sydd wedi'u datganoli'*) were more problematic than any of the potentially leading elements described above."

1.5 Accuracy of Response

Most respondents were able to vote in line with their intentions.³ Even those who did not understand the question on first reading stated that they had given the response they would have done had they understood it fully at the outset. This indicates that although most were able to vote in line with their intentions, many would have walked away from the research with an inaccurate perception of what the referendum was about and its possible outcomes had this not been explained.

A few respondents stated that they had not been able to answer the question in line with their intentions. These respondents initially believed that the question was asking about a larger increase in the powers of the NAW than it actually was (either independence for Wales or tax raising powers). They did not want the NAW's powers to be increased to this extent and had given a No answer. However, they did admit that if they had understood the true meaning of the question and the limitations in the powers being voted on, they would have voted Yes. It is therefore evident that the question may cause voters who are in favour of a limited increase in the powers of the NAW (in line with the referendum question) but who believe the

³ This was because many had very clear views on whether or not the NAW should have more powers or not and would have voted the same way (whether Yes or No) had the question been about independence, tax raising powers, new devolved areas or removal of Parliamentary approval in existing devolved areas.

referendum question is actually asking about a more substantial increase in powers than this to give an answer that is not in line with their intentions.

1.6 Fit with Question Assessment Guidelines

The research found that the question proved problematic for users in relation to a number of the criteria outlined in the Commission's question assessment guidelines. In particular, most respondents did not find the question easy to understand, and certain key words and phrases were found to be ambiguous.

1.7 Suggested Changes

Taking into account all aspects of the discussion above, this research suggests that the following changes would improve understanding of the referendum question:

- **Question structure**

- > Reduce overall question length (word count) where possible
- > Reduce repetition and where there is repetition, avoid inconsistencies in language used
 - On the English version, avoid inconsistent repetition between paragraph one, sentence three (*'subject by subject'*) and paragraph two, sentence two, (*'bit by bit'*)
 - On the Welsh version, reduce repetition between the end of paragraph one, sentence one and the start of sentence two (where *'meysydd sydd wedi'u datganoli'* is repeated word for word on two separate lines)
- > Reduce sentence length and complexity where possible (especially in paragraph two, sentence two)
- > Clearly separate current legislative arrangements from possible future arrangements
- > Clearly separate explanation of Yes and No outcomes (paragraph two)
- > Boldly state that the referendum question is not asking about independence for Wales or increased tax raising powers for the NAW

- **Individual words & phrases**

- > English language question
 - Clearly explain meaning of *'devolved areas'* (perhaps emphasising examples of devolved areas with bullet points) or omit this phrase
 - Simplify paragraph two, sentence two (describing the No outcome) to enhance understanding
 - Harmonise formality of language throughout the question and avoid very informal language (e.g. *'bit by bit'* in paragraph two, sentence two)
- > Welsh language question

- Clearly explain meaning of *'meysydd wedi'u datganoli'*, and consider alternatives for the word *'meysydd'*
- Re-word paragraph one, sentence three to clarify that it refers to current powers. Seek an alternative to opening the sentence with the word *'caiff'*
- Where possible use simpler, more commonly used words to replace *'i deddfu'*, *'fesul'*, *'bob yn damaid'* and *'gwasanaethau cymdeithasol'*

In addition, the following changes would improve the **neutrality** of the question:

- Clearly separate descriptions of the Yes and No outcomes so that the No description does not appear hidden in any way
- Ensure the Yes and No outcomes are described with the same level of clarity and with the same emotional tone (principally by simplifying paragraph two, sentence two)
- Reconsider use of the phrase *'Do you agree...'* / *'Ydych chi'n cytuno...'* in the question itself (paragraph three), which may appear leading; *'Should the Assembly have powers to pass laws on all subjects in the devolved areas...?'* / *'Dylai'r Cynulliad gael pwerau i ddeddfu ar yr holl bynciau yn y meysydd sydd wedi'u datganoli...?'* was seen as more neutral

In implementing these, or any other changes, the Electoral Commission should have regard to the low levels of awareness of devolution and the powers of the NAW found in this research. Taking these into account, any revisions to the question wording should bear the following considerations in mind:

- **It is extremely important that the question does not confuse voters.** Many respondents could not say what the powers of the NAW were or how this referendum would affect them. Given this, a question which articulates the choice voters have in a straightforward manner and minimises any confusion in their mind is essential.
- **The question wording must be clear and intelligible.** Many respondents were easily confused and distracted by words they could not understand such as 'devolution' and 'devolved areas'. Keeping the language of the question simple and avoiding, minimising or explaining any difficult words and phrases would help to avoid this.
- **Some explanation of the current legislative arrangements is required.** Because respondents often did not know about the powers of the NAW or the legislative relationship between the NAW and the UK Parliament, this should be made clear in the referendum question. Voters who are not familiar with the present arrangements will struggle to fully understand a question that does not explain them.
- **A clear explanation of Yes and No outcomes is needed.** A simple and coherent explanation of Yes and No outcomes is required to help voters understand the impact of their answer. This should help to overcome confusion concerning the subject of the referendum (e.g. the belief of some respondents that it is about independence or tax raising powers).



- **Emphasise what the referendum is not about.** Some respondents had a firmly entrenched belief that the referendum question was about independence for Wales or giving the Assembly tax raising powers. In order to tackle this, it may be worth explicitly stating that this is not that case and that the referendum is about extending the NAW's powers within the devolved areas.