

# Revealed: Inside the secretive Tory election call centre

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The Conservative Party contracted a secretive call centre during the election campaign which may have broken data protection and election laws, a Channel 4 News investigation has found.

An undercover reporter working for Channel 4 News secured work at Blue Telecoms, a firm in Neath, South Wales.

In an area plagued by unemployment and low wages, the call centre hired up to a hundred people on zero-hours contracts. For weeks, they contacted thousands of potential voters in marginal seats across the UK.

The investigation has uncovered what appear to be underhand and potentially unlawful practices at the centre, in calls made on behalf of the Conservative Party. These allegations include:

- Paid canvassing on behalf of Conservative election candidates – banned under election law.
- Political cold calling to prohibited numbers
- Misleading calls claiming to be from an ‘independent market research company’ which does not apparently exist

Tonight the Conservative Party admitted it had commissioned Blue Telecoms to carry out ‘market research and direct marketing calls’ during the campaign, and insisted the calls were legal.

A Conservative spokesman said: ‘Political parties of all colours pay for market research and direct marketing calls. All the scripts supplied by the party for these calls are compliant with data protection and information law.’

But a whistleblower at the call centre told Channel 4 News they had been making potentially unlawful phone calls to voters.

## Fake ‘market research company’?

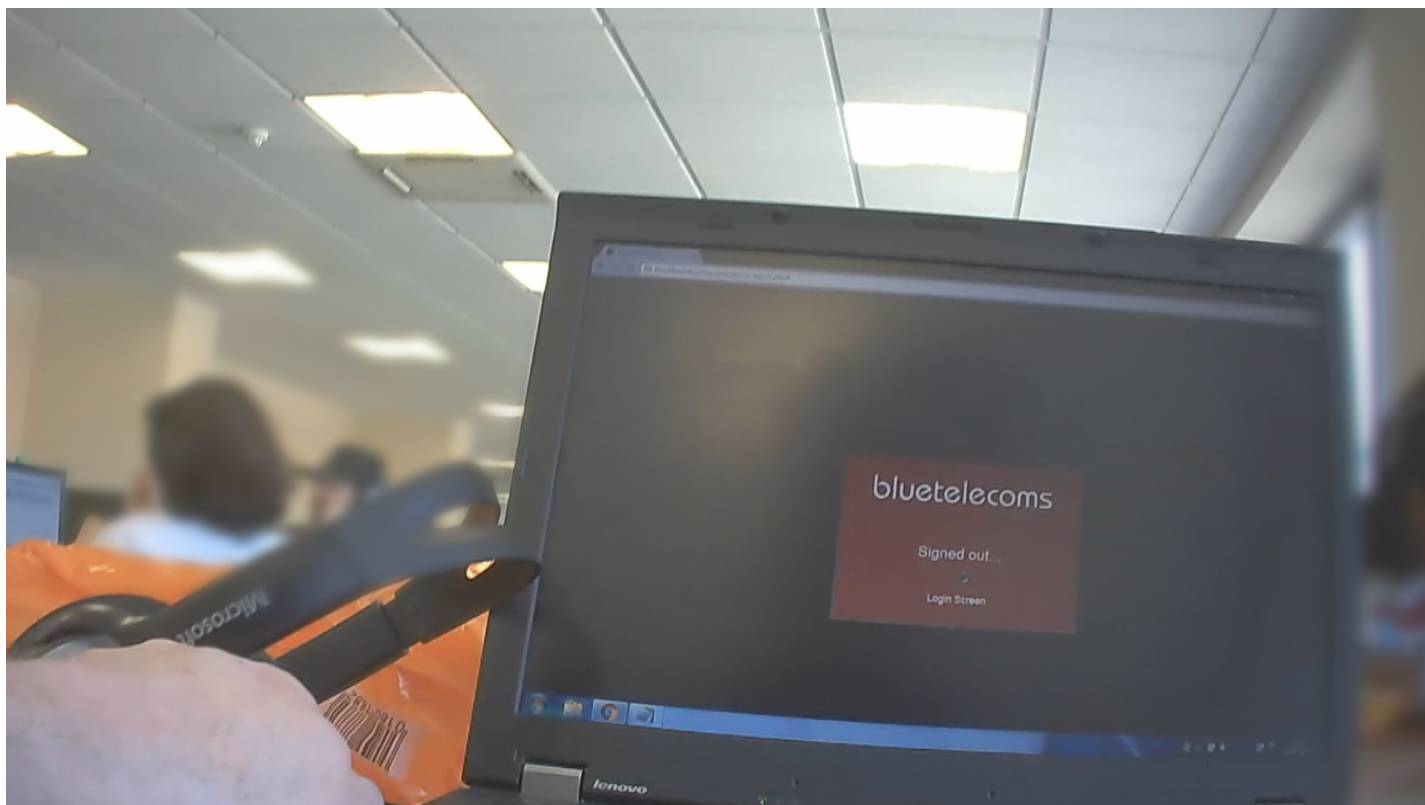
Voters contacted by the firm were asked who they intended to vote for and how they had voted in previous elections by callers claiming to be from ‘Axe Research – an independent market research company’.

However, no such company is registered in England and Wales. ‘Axe Research’ does not have a live website, address or phone number and is not listed on the data protection register.

Workers were repeatedly told not to disclose that they were working for Blue Telecoms.

Asked what Axe Research was, one supervisor told Channel 4 News: ‘It’s just the name we do these surveys under, basically. I did a Google search, nothing comes up. But as far as anyone’s concerned, yeah, we’re a legit independent market research company.’

The practice appears to be in breach of data protection rules on transparency and privacy. Guidance from the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) states that market research companies must disclose ‘who you are; what you are going to do with their information and who it will be shared with.’



A spokesperson for the ICO said they intend to ask the Conservative Party 'about the marketing campaigns conducted from this call centre' and told Channel 4 News:

'The Information Commissioner reminded campaigners from political parties of their obligations around direct marketing at the beginning of the election campaign. Where we find they haven't followed the law we will act.'

Anya Proops QC, a leading barrister in the field of data protection said:

'If you've got a situation where the company that's calling you is concealing their true identity or is misleading the person who is receiving the call, then that is obviously a problem under the privacy legislation.'

The head of Blue Telecoms, Sascha Lopez, said that any questions about Axe Research should be put to the Conservative Party.

However, the Party refused to comment directly on the calls being made by Axe Research but said: 'No data from the market research calls were recorded against individual records.'

## **Unlawful marketing calls?**

During the investigation, callers were also tasked with making direct calls 'on behalf of Theresa May and the Conservative Party'.

Voters who identified themselves as 'undecided' were then fed key Conservative Party messages. These included references to the Brexit negotiations, the danger of a hung Parliament and immigration. One survey stated:

'... It was reported in the Daily Mirror in September last year that Jeremy Corbyn is not concerned about the numbers of people coming to live in the UK and it was reported on Sky News this year that Theresa May has restated her pledge to reduce net Migration.

'Just thinking about these reports in the media and the reports that you live in a marginal constituency that may determine who is prime minister... Does that make you more likely to back Theresa May or more likely to vote for Jeremy Corbyn?'

A Channel 4 News analysis also reveals that the vast majority of calls sampled were to numbers registered on

the Telephone Preference Service (TPS).

While genuine market research is permitted, marketing calls to TPS numbers on behalf of political parties are prohibited by EU regulations and the Data Protection Act, unless the person called has specifically given the organisation their consent.

Channel 4 News showed the content of these calls to Dr Darren Lilleker, Associate Professor of Political Communication at Bournemouth University.

'This is canvassing,' he said. 'It can't be research. All the questions are loaded, a lot of them are quite rhetorical in that sense of guiding you towards one answer. It's canvassing. It replicates the sorts of scripts I've seen used on doorsteps by parties for many years.'

The head of Blue Telecoms, Sascha Lopez, said: 'All scripts supplied made it clear during the call, either at the beginning or the end, that the calls were being made on behalf of the Conservative Party. Respondents have the right for their responses to be deleted if they so wished. No data from the market research calls to TPS numbers (which regulations allow) were recorded against individual records.'

'We followed the regulations given by the TPS, ICO and Ofcom in regards to indentifying who was calling, the reason for calling, as well as operating an opt-out list.'

## **Paid canvassing for candidates?**



During election day, on the 8th of June, callers at Blue Telecoms were told that they would spend the day making calls on behalf of named Conservative parliamentary candidates in Wales.

Guidance from the Electoral Commission for candidates and agents says: 'During the campaign, you must not... pay canvassers. Canvassing means trying to persuade an elector to vote for or against a particular candidate or party'

The candidates were named during the calls and, again, floating voters were subjected to key Conservative messages.

The script for undecided voters stated:

‘Does knowing that you live in a marginal constituency that will determine who is Prime Minister for the Brexit negotiations, does that make you a lot more likely to vote for Theresa May’s Conservative candidate or a little more likely to vote for Theresa May’s Conservative candidate, or are you still unsure, or does it not make a difference.’

Meanwhile, voters who had decided to vote Conservative, but had not yet cast their ballots were warned that every vote counts and time is running out’ and encouraged to head for polling stations.

The calls appeared to be a breach of Section 111 of the Representation of the People Act which prohibits ‘payment as a canvasser for the purpose of promoting or procuring a candidate’s election’.

Barrister Anya Proops QC said paid canvassing ‘can have very, very serious consequences, even if the candidate in question doesn’t know it’s happening’.

Channel 4 News obtained evidence that at least ten key marginal seats were targeted by the call centre on election day. Calls were placed to voters in Caerphilly, Camarthen East, Ceredigion, Pontypridd, Torfaen, Newport West, Bridgend, Gower, Clywd South and Wrexham.

Again, an analysis of the calls by Channel 4 News also revealed that the vast majority – more than 80% of those sampled – were to numbers that had registered on the Telephone Preference Service.

On election day, callers were again instructed not to mention Blue Telecoms on the phone. Instead, they were told: ‘Just say you are in the Conservative Office, Cardiff, and don’t mention Blue Telecoms.’

The Neath call centre was visited by a senior Conservative Party official – both on election day itself and the day before. Channel 4 News has identified the individual as Richard Minshull, the Director of the Welsh Conservatives.



## **Sascha Lopez and Blue Telecoms**

Sascha Lopez is a failed Tory council candidate and CEO of Blue Telecoms, which receives lucrative contracts from the Conservative Party.

The Conservative Party has worked with Blue Telecoms before. In the 2015 campaign, it declared £265,205 with

the firm and spent a further £83,500 in 2016 during the Welsh Assembly elections.

This programme is also aware that Blue Telecoms carried out further calling for the Conservative Party at the 2017 local elections.

Lopez told Channel 4 News: 'The scripts and lists of who to call and when to call were given to us by CCHQ [Conservative Campaign Headquarters] in London and were not influenced by my team. However I can advise we were engaged to conduct market research and polling for the Conservative party, and at no time were we engaged to conduct any form of marketing or canvassing by the party or its candidates.'