

DEMOCRACY VOLUNTEERS

England Mayoral Elections
Report



Final Report on English Mayoral Elections 06/05/21

Objectives of the Observation

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across the mayoral elections before and during the election held on 6th May 2021 in Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, West of England, West Midlands, and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.
2. To advise the local councils and national electoral bodies on the results of the observation, for the improvement of electoral practice in these geographies.
3. To support local councils and national election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider legislative change and/or remedial action.
4. To provide feedback to local councils and national election bodies on the successes and shortcomings of ameliorations put in place to hold the elections safely during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Executive Summary

These elections were very well run by staff who were faced by an extraordinary situation. The Covid security put in place for the elections was impressive and generally followed the recommendations of Public Health England and the UK's Electoral Commission.

The nature of many polling places can mean that the social distancing expected was difficult to deliver at times, but elections teams used the local resources well to either combine polling stations or to manage access in as Covid-secure manner as possible.

However, observers did note that quite often Covid security seemed to take precedence over electoral regulations. Our observer teams regularly saw family voting in polling stations, where one member of a family influences or guides another on the way to cast their vote. Our teams also observed a notable number of voters being turned away because they had attended the wrong polling station, were unregistered, or had a postal vote which precluded them from voting in person.

We also note that several of our observer teams deemed polling at a significant number of polling stations to be unsuitable for disabled access this, of course, includes

wheelchair access, but also the location of polling booths and how they can be reached by voters with limited mobility.

Methodology

We also conducted in-person observations in polling stations, as well as attending several counting sessions in the days following polling day.

We observed 493 polling stations across all these seven mayoral regions. A full list of the councils observed can be seen in Appendix B. Only general conclusions about how the polls were run in localised areas can be extrapolated. We observed the following number of polling stations in each region:

- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough 35
- Greater Manchester 237
- West Midlands 33
- West of England 89
- West Yorkshire 99

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). The observations generally took between twenty and thirty 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.

Across these councils we deployed 50 observers. Because of the impacts of the pandemic, we provided online training for all observers, a follow-up seminar, and a series of online briefing sessions during the run-up to the election. On polling day observers had a dedicated helpdesk for any challenges or questions they had concerning the election.

Elections staff across the council areas observed have been sent a copy of this report, and Democracy Volunteers will offer to conduct individual meetings, if requested, to discuss individual area's data to help improve the electoral process on a local level.

The Observation Team



Dr John Ault FRSA FRGS is the Director of Democracy Volunteers and was Head of Mission for the English local elections.

John has worked in elections throughout the UK and the United States since the 1980s. He has observed on behalf of the OSCE/ODIHR in parliamentary elections as far afield as Kazakhstan and is former Chair of the UK's Electoral Reform Society.

He has served as Head of Mission on numerous elections for Democracy Volunteers, including the UK general elections in 2017 and 2019, and the Finnish presidential and Dutch elections in 2017, 2018 and 2019. He has also been a consultant on the subject of electoral and parliamentary reform in Moldova. 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.



Harry Busz is Democracy Volunteers' Head of Operations and has worked for the organisation since October 2019. He is a graduate, having gained a BSc in Human Geography at Cardiff University and an MA in International Relations from Exeter University.

He has participated in numerous domestic and international observations such as the 2019 local elections in Northern Ireland, the provincial and Water Board elections in The Netherlands, and national elections in Austria, Slovakia, Ireland, and Gibraltar. He was also the general election coordinator for the 2019 UK general election for Democracy Volunteers.

Credits

We would like to thank the councils and staff who welcomed our observers and held meetings with our team, providing information on the practical running of the election during the pandemic and the ameliorations that had been put in place to protect the safety of voters. We would also like to thank the UK's Electoral Commission for their assistance in accrediting our observers.

Funding Declaration

Democracy Volunteers observers deployed for the observations during the English local elections with the support of a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd. This was arranged by Democracy Volunteers, and this covered observers' travel and any accommodation, if appropriate at the time. This funding covered travel expenses, some accommodation, and subsistence for our volunteer observers.

Observer Training

To prepare our observers for their roles on election day, comprehensive training was given through a variety of methods. As we were unable to meet most of our new observers in person prior to the election due to the pandemic, our training was adapted and delivered through an online training platform called Teachable, with additional seminars and follow-up Q&A sessions.

Each new observer completed our 'Short Term Observer' training course, which covers a variety of topics such as what to take with you on the day, how to observe the process in an impartial manner, how to report findings and other key aspects of observation. Following this, observers were given several options on when to attend a follow up seminar with our Head of Training, Max Wheeler, where he fielded any questions, observers had about the course and presented walkthroughs of how to observe inside polling stations and how to work logistically on polling day.

Closer to polling day a shorter course was taken by observers, which focused on how to observe safely during the pandemic and how to report on voters that were excluded in polling stations. All new observers completed both courses and the seminar.

For those observers who attended counting, an additional online course was given. This course explained how to observe and report on the counting process and gave more information on how counting would be conducted under the Supplementary Voting system used for mayoral elections.

In the final deployment briefings, conducted in the days prior to the election, observers were all given an opportunity to ask any questions about the day's proceedings in Q&A sessions. This gave them the chance to gain clarity on any issues they had and how to carry out their observations to our high standards.

Covid-19 Testing

We asked all our observers to conduct a Covid-19 testing regime before and after the election. Using tests provided by the UK government, each observer was issued with lateral flow tests to take in advance of polling day and on the Sunday after. All tests for all observers were negative.

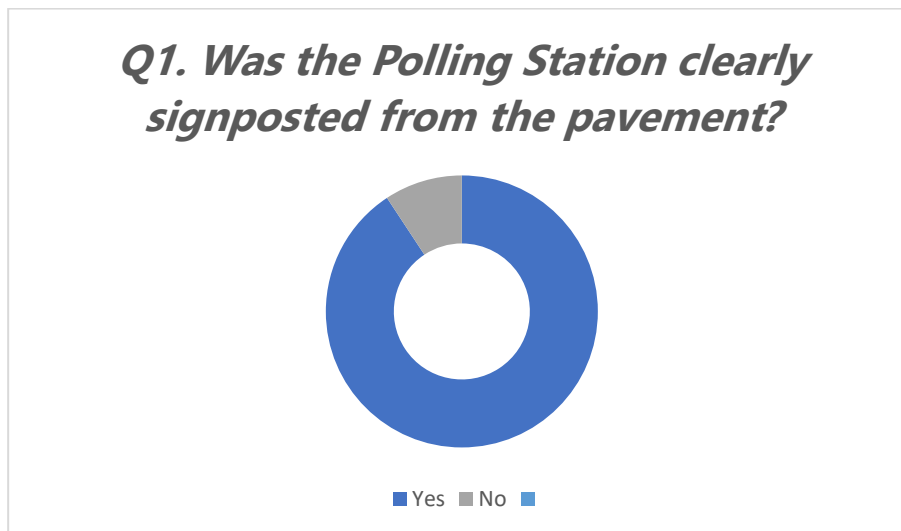
Recommendations

1. Presently, nominations require a so-called 'wet signature'. We would encourage legislators to allow nominations to be conducted digitally, as councils accepted bank transfers for deposits for the May elections. Many documents are signed digitally today, and it seems a reasonable use of modern technology to allow parties and individuals seeking election to be nominated using a digital signature sent from a known email contact.
2. Family voting, where one voter guides or oversees the vote of another person, continues to be a challenge and we recommend that staff are trained to identify it and to deal with it. We believe there is even more inhibition to interrupt this practice, at the moment, as it could require staff to physically intervene at a polling booth which could conflict with social distancing. As staff have been encouraged to stay behind their Perspex screen they have not intervened when they have seen the practice. But we also believe, because staff have been occupied with more duties than usual, that they have not identified family voting as they have not been focusing on the voters' behaviour with a more constant stream of voters.
3. Whilst information officers have been brought in specifically to advise voters presenting themselves at polling stations during the pandemic, we believe they would be an asset in all future elections to assist voters in understanding the process from the moment they arrive. This additional member of staff could also be used to help prevent cases of Family Voting and ensure votes are placed into the correct ballot box in polling stations with multiple boxes.
4. All ballot boxes should be sealed using numbered tags so that parties, observers, and the public can check these to ensure ballot box and electoral integrity.

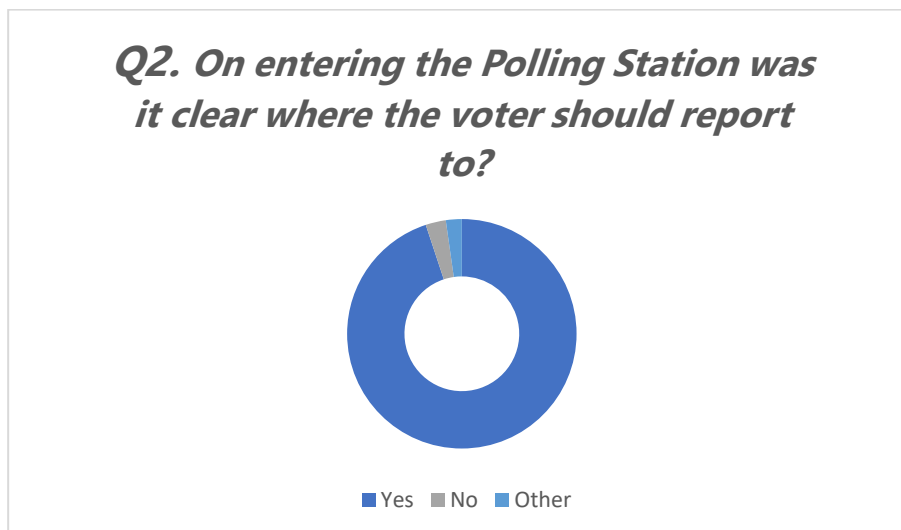
5. We would recommend that Returning Officers remind polling staff that observers are legally allowed to enter the polling place and safe mechanisms for them to do so should be in place. In some council areas designated safe areas were set out for observation, distanced from others, whereas in other councils our presence was very much questioned. In some councils, in the May elections, it was decided by councils that some polling stations were unsuitable to allow free and independent observation of polling stations. We would recommend these not be used in future as this means they are unsuitable for holding a free and fair election.
6. Voters who complete their postal vote incorrectly receive notification of this up to three months after the election. With increased use of postal votes in this election we believe there will be a significant increase in those that are disqualified due to incorrectly completed personal identifiers. We would encourage legislators to enact legislation to allow those who have not complied, and become effectively disenfranchised, to require returning officers to reissue postal votes to this group of voters to allow them, before polling day, to have their vote again.
7. Overnight counting was not used in this election, and we believe, with the necessary security in place, that council staff and counting staff found this a much more conducive working environment than potentially exceptionally long counts through the night. We would recommend that next day counting for Scottish elections should be used in future elections as well.

Results of the in-person Polling Station Observations

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

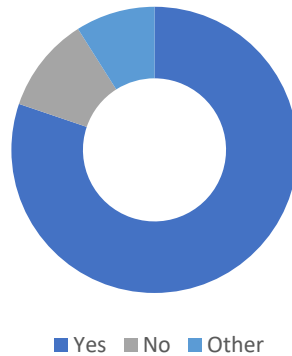


QUESTION 1: Signposting of the polling stations was generally good. However, 10% of polling stations were not seen as being clearly signposted by our observers. (N.492)



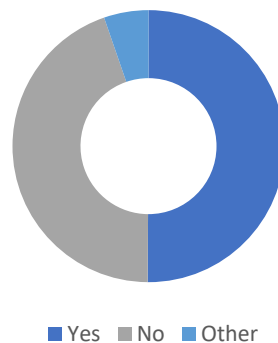
QUESTION 2: Observers identified very few issues in terms of where voters should report to inside polling stations. If there were any challenges this generally referred to polling stations where numerous ballot boxes were being deployed across larger buildings to ease access due to Covid restrictions. Invariably, there were 'information officers' in place to assist with accessing the correct part of these polling stations. (N.491)

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



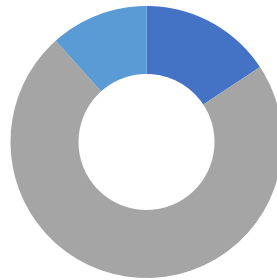
QUESTION 3: Disabled access was generally good, with 80% of polling stations being easily entered by disabled citizens. This was done through wheelchair ramps and the selection of accessible buildings. However, a larger proportion of buildings than usual did have limited access, this was partly due to poor signage or that wheelchair users were unable to follow the proscribed one-way route through the polling station required by Covid-19 measures. (N.490)

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



QUESTION 4: Polling staff did seem aware that observers would be attending on polling day. Generally, the ID provided by the Electoral Commission was not routinely checked on arrival. (N.491)

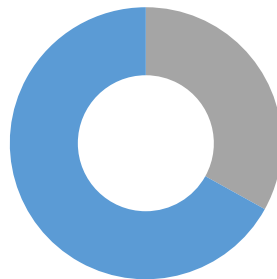
Q5. Did they record your ID number on an official form?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 5: Some councils were prepared for the process and recorded them diligently on arrival. Some councils did note names but not the official accreditation details. (N.490)

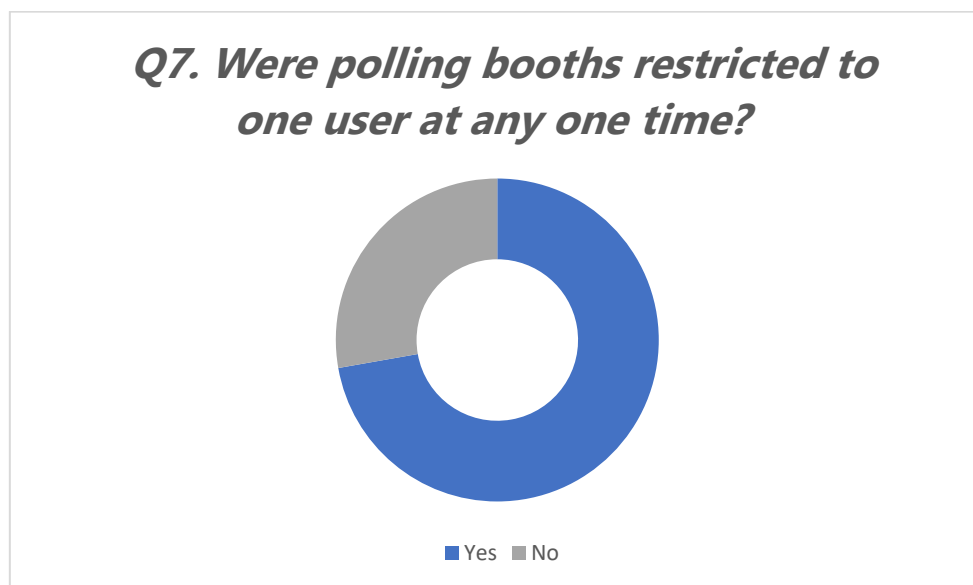
Q6. How many staff were on duty in the polling station?



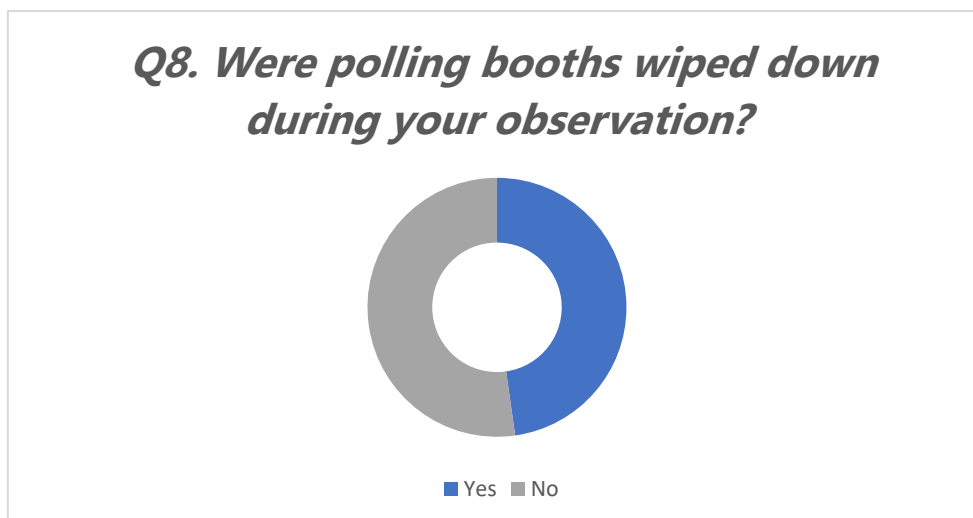
■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3

QUESTION 6: All polling stations observed had 2 (24%) or 3 or more (76%) members of staff. All polling stations had at least two members of staff when we observed the polling stations. This number generally included one presiding officer with one poll clerk at a desk, as well as an 'information officer' who informed voters of the process on entry and asked them to follow Covid procedures. If there was more than one ballot box in the polling station, they also gave guidance on which to proceed to. (N.491)

Questions about Covid ameliorations

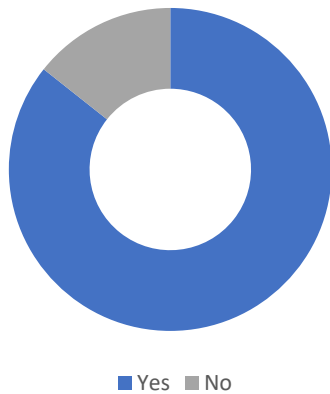


QUESTION 7: Different polling stations had differing configurations of polling booths. Some used the traditional polling booth (a cubicle) and others used the cross formed plastic pop-up versions which allow four people to vote at once. In 28% of cases polling booths were not limited to just one user at a time to be Covid compliant. (N.486)



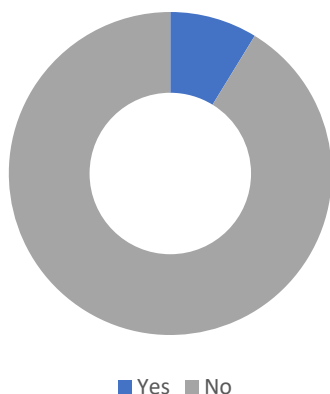
QUESTION 8: During the pandemic, the maintenance of the cleaning of polling booths is considered a high priority to avoid the transmission of the virus between voters using polling booths. Some councils had impressive innovations to clean polling booths including fog cleaning in one case. However, bearing in mind our observations are now restricted to approximately 20 to 30 minutes, we saw no cleaning at all in 52% of the polling stations we observed. In others, the cleaning was extremely diligent. (N.490)

Q9. Were plastic screens in place between voters and staff?



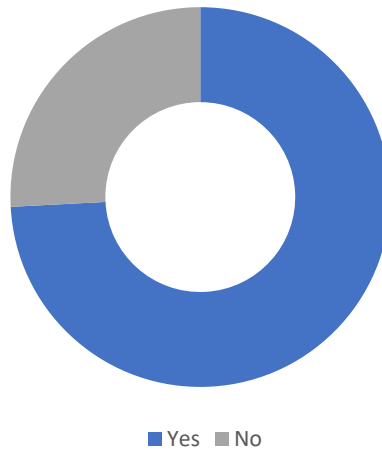
QUESTION 9: Our observer teams generally saw screens between polling staff and those voters attending the polling station. These varied from pop-up stands similar to conference banners to bespoke barriers which had been manufactured for the purpose, similar to those seen increasingly in retail contexts. However, because of the decreased sound quality, especially in larger venues, we noticed that a great deal of these barriers were often circumvented by both staff and voters so that they can hear each other when they communicate, whether when the voter is giving their name and address, or when the polling staff are explaining the voting methodology, both of which are required as part of the process of issuing a ballot paper. (N.488)

Q10. Were plastic screens in place between staff?



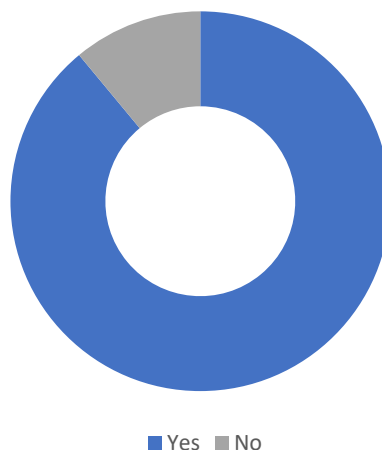
QUESTION 10: Some councils also placed barriers between staff at polling stations. (N.491)

Q11. Were the staff wearing masks?



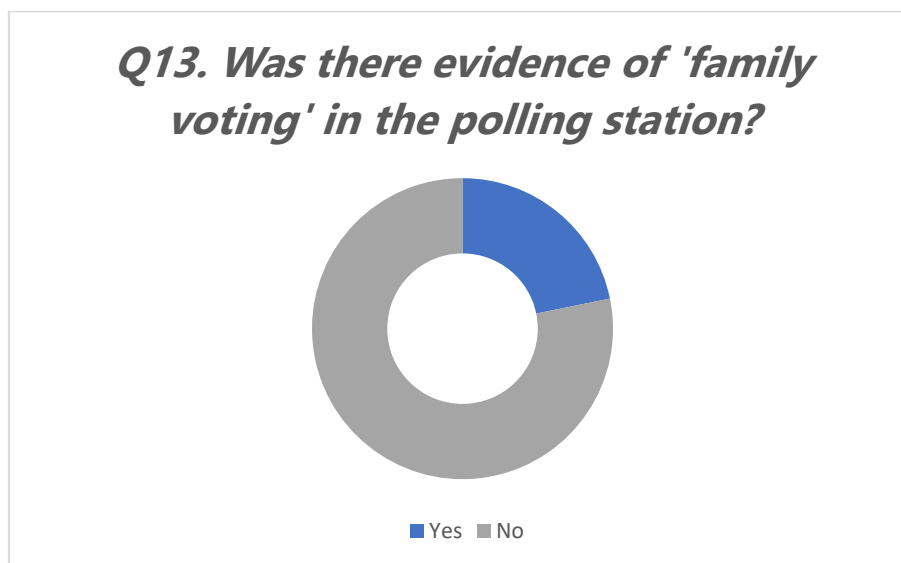
QUESTION 11: As mask wearing is becoming an increasingly accepted part of indoor interaction, such as in retail settings, we also asked our observers to assess if staff were wearing masks during their duties. We exclude any staff sitting out of the process for lunch etc. 74% of staff were wearing masks during our observations and 29% were not. NB We are aware that staff sitting at a desk whilst at work are often not formally required to wear facemasks. However, we feel in this context of a polling station, this description of the context could be arguable. (N.488)

Q12. Did any voters not wear masks?



QUESTION 12: Similarly, we asked our observers to assess if any members of the public did not wear masks, which is of course lawful if they have a medical reason to do so. We saw voters not wearing masks in 11% of polling stations. This constituted 1.7% of all the voters observed. (N.490)

Election Security



QUESTION 13: In 22% of polling stations (107 of the 491), our observer team identified so-called 'family voting'. We regularly check for family voting as part of our routine checks at polling stations and had discussed whether we would still see it bearing in mind the physical limitations caused by social distancing. We observed 4,414 voters enter a polling station of which there were 143 cases of family voting (which involves a minimum of two people). This meant that approximately 6.5% of those we observed voting were involved in family voting. Family voting occurs when one member of a family oversees the voting of another or directs them how to vote.

In these cases, we observed:

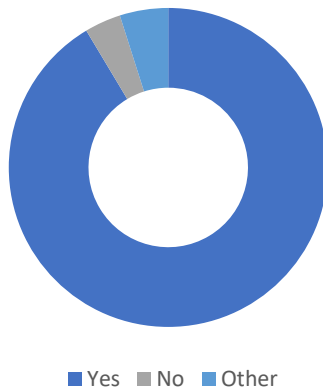
- 33 - Clear direction by one member of the family to another
- 31 - Two or more family members in the booth colluding on voting intention
- 30 - One family member overseeing how another family member was voting
- 39 - Casual oversight of another person's vote
- 27 – Other.¹

The OSCE/ODIHR describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'.² (N.520)

¹ This included several cases of voters completing another's ballot before the original voter placed it in the ballot box.

² <http://www.osce.org/>

Q14. Was the Ballot Box completely sealed?



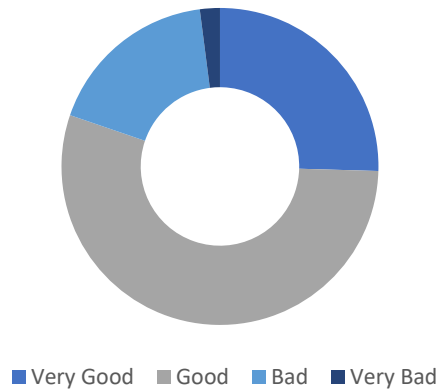
QUESTION 14: An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained as such, allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7am and closing at 10pm is an integral part of the electoral process.

In 3.7% of polling stations ballot boxes were not sealed. In another 4.9% of polling stations our observers noted they were not properly sealed. Many of these were sealed with tape. Whilst this may have been the intended method of sealing, it should be seen as being open to challenge. Boxes should be sealed by a method that is demonstrable to voters and independent observers.

Although the number of unsealed boxes observed was arguably low, this should still be worrying to voters and administrators. Ensuring ballot boxes are sealed correctly is vital to the security of the election.³ (N.489)

³ The original question was: The Ballot Box should be completely sealed with the required number of cable ties. Is it? (This can be 2 or 4 dependent on the type of ballot box. In some cases, it can also be a small plug which may not be immediately visible).

Q15. Overall how would you rate this polling station?



QUESTION 15: All but 20% of polling stations were judged to be Very Good or Good, with 87 (18%) being described as Bad, with 10 (2%) being Very Bad. (N.491)

We are often asked how we define this test. We use the same system as the OSCE/ODIHR, where our observers are asked to consider their overall view of a polling station and how it was managed. There are two aspects of the process which should be considered in this judgment; the role played by the staff, and that of the public. Family voting in a polling station is something that will lead to a negative result but, if prevented by the staff, this would not be considered negative. A ballot box being completely unsealed would lead to a 'Very Bad' rating as this is an integral part of the process of electoral integrity.

Conclusions

Staff running these elections were faced by an extraordinary situation, caused by the impacts of the pandemic. But one which had become much more normalised by the time the election was conducted and awareness of how to limit infection was generally understood and followed.

Although, as we say earlier, polling stations were well planned we believe there is a longer-term challenge for running elections. Polling stations are quite often not entirely suitable for access through a one-way route leading to many being either too small in the Covid-19 context or leading to some disabled voters being required to retrace their route through back against the one-way system required.

However, as we indicate in the executive summary, our observers noted that quite often Covid security seemed to take precedence over electoral regulations. We believe this is a concerning situation. If a polling station is in a room that is too small, or that extra support staff/observers cannot easily access, these buildings are unsuitable to be polling stations. We appreciate that some communities may not have large public buildings, which is exacerbated by the need for social distancing, however if public health considerations are likely to persist when conducting elections in the future, greater thought should be given to advance voting and other novel measures to extend access to reduce queues and improve accessibility.

Our observer teams regularly saw family voting in polling stations, where one member of a family influences or guides another on the way to cast their vote. Our teams also observed a notable number of voters being turned away because they had attended the wrong polling station, were unregistered, or had a postal vote which precluded them from voting in person.

One of the most notable issues on polling day, especially in urban areas, was the requirement for many voters to queue due to the Covid-19 requirements in place.

Appendix A – List of Interlocutors

COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE

Lord Jonathan Evans KCB DL (Chair)

THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Tom Hawthorn (Head of Electoral Policy)

Mairaid McMahon (Manager, Election Observers Programme)

THE ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATORS

Peter Stanyon (Chief Executive)

ACADEMICS

Dr Alistair Clark (Newcastle University)

Professor Roger Scully (Cardiff University)

Appendix B – List of Council Areas Observed

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

Cambridge
Peterborough

Greater Manchester

Bolton
Bury
Manchester
Oldham
Rochdale
Salford
Stockport
Tameside
Trafford
Wigan

West of England

Bath & North East Somerset
Bristol
South Gloucestershire

West Midlands

Birmingham
Dudley
Solihull
Wolverhampton

West Yorkshire

Bradford
Calderdale
Leeds
Wakefield