

# FINAL REPORT

Tower Hamlets Mayoral and Council Elections  
May 3rd 2018



Dr John Ault

16<sup>th</sup> May 2018



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# **Tower Hamlets Mayoral and Council Elections**

## **3<sup>rd</sup> May 2018**

### **Final Report on Election Observation**

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#### **Objectives**

1. To objectively observe the electoral process in Tower Hamlets.
2. To advise the local municipalities and national electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice within Tower Hamlets.
3. Support Tower Hamlets Council and national election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

#### **Methodology**

The mission deployed a series of observers to attend several aspects of the electoral process in Tower Hamlets. Before polling day a team of 2 attended the Council's briefing to presiding officers and polling clerks (17/04/18). This team subsequently held a meeting with Robert Curtis – Tower Hamlets' Head of Electoral Services - to find out what specific arrangements were being put in place before and during the election in the council's polling stations.

A team of two attended the opening of postal votes. On polling day an experienced team of 5 observers (one of whom also acted as a translator), working in two teams, attended polling stations across Tower Hamlets.

The teams attended 39 polling stations out of a possible 109. This constitutes 36% of polling stations. The team observed 764 voters attending the polls in Tower Hamlets.

All our observers were accredited by the Electoral Commission before attending any aspect of this process.

Each observation was conducted in pairs to allow for objective observation and the observers then agreed their opinions of the electoral process before submitting data.

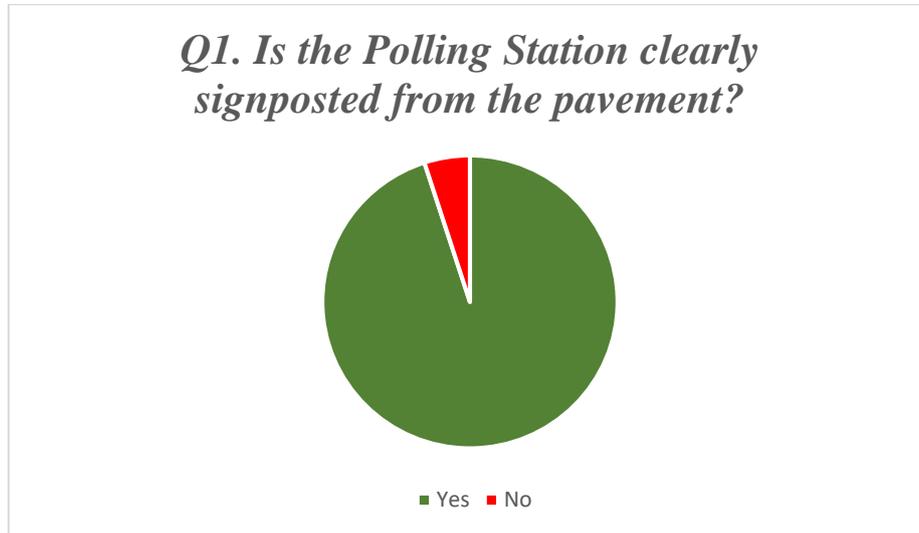
The observations generally took between thirty and forty-five minutes per polling station as the observers were asked to ensure that they attempted to see the entire process, which included staff greeting electors on arrival at the polling station. This happened on every occasion.

The organisation of polling stations was well run across the area of observation, voters could clearly see how to access voting and staff were trained to manage the process.

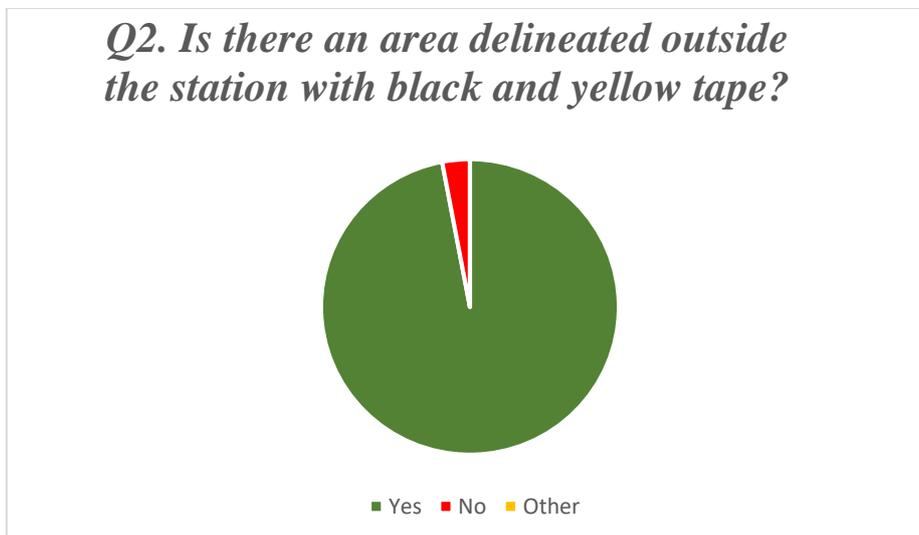
Polls were open from 7.00am to 10.00pm and the teams were asked to observe an opening as well as a closing of a polling station and tour polling stations throughout the day.

## Results of the Observation

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

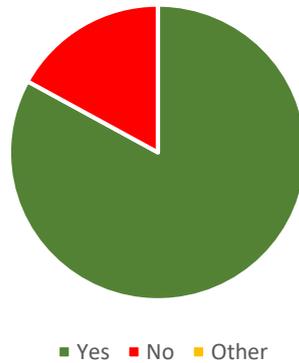


**QUESTION 1:** In 95% of cases polling stations were properly signposted from the pavement. Some had difficult access and were not easily found from available parking.



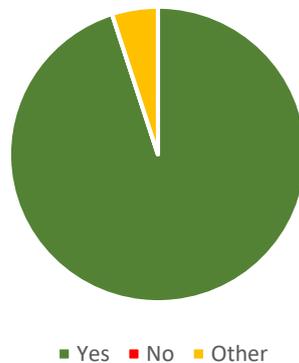
**QUESTION 2:** In Tower Hamlets polling stations had been provided with black and yellow tape to act as an 'exclusion zone' which party activists were not allowed to enter. We saw this outside all polling stations with the exception of the one at the Marriott Hotel. Although we saw this we did receive some feedback that, at times, more thought could have been put into where this was placed and also polling stations with more than one entrance were not always fully covered.

***Q2. Is there a police officer on duty outside the polling station?***



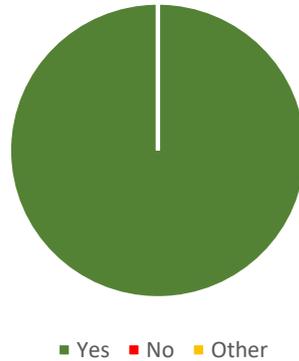
**QUESTION 3:** Tower Hamlets has previously seen some issues concerning party activity outside the polling stations. The Council had made arrangements with the Metropolitan Police to have officers available at all polling stations – generally placed outside. We saw police outside at 83% of polling stations, however we did also see officers in polling stations in some other cases.

***Q4. Was it clear how disabled voters would access the Polling Station?***



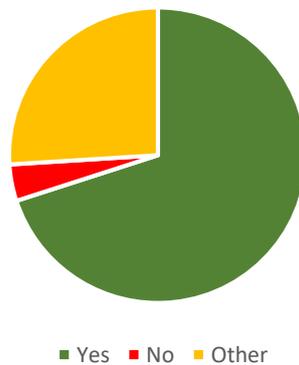
**QUESTION 4:** 95% of observations indicated that access to the polling station was clear. 5% said it was not clear. In one case the polling station could only be accessed by a flight of stairs.

***Q5. Are there two staff on duty in the polling station as you arrive?***



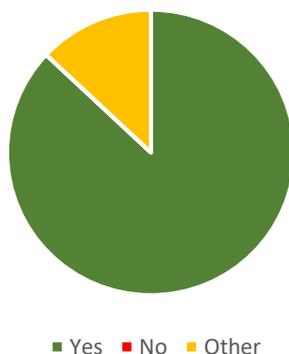
**QUESTION 5:** 98% of polling stations had the minimum of two members of polling staff on duty when observers arrived at the polling station. Indeed, nearly all polling stations had three staff able to help and guide voters through the process.

***Q6. Is the Ballot Box clearly sealed with numbered seals?***



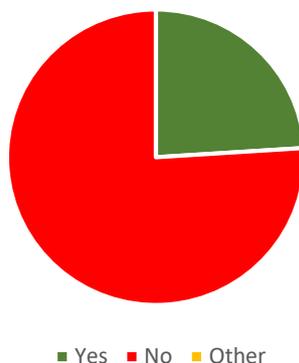
**QUESTION 6:** An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained, as such, allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7.00am and closing at 10.00pm is vitally important. Two boxes were not identifiably sealed. Other ballot boxes had sporadic sealing where not all sealed with the correct number of seals being used. Our observers recorded the seal numbers where this was the case.

*Q7. Each polling booth should be equipped with yellow wings for increased privacy?*



**QUESTION 7:** Most booths had the extra facility of the ‘privacy wings’ (please see Appendix 1). In some cases there were not sufficient numbers of these and in some cases they appeared to have fallen off.

*Q8. Are there any political leaflets in sight within the Polling Station?*



**QUESTION 8:** We observed party political leaflets in 24% of polling stations. This was often left by voters in polling booths and sometimes left in the open for voters to see. In the vast majority of cases this was acted on quickly and efficiently by polling staff to remove them.

This political activity was primarily caused by excessive party activity at polling stations. We normally include a section on ‘Tellers’ who generally take polling numbers from voters outside polling stations. However, although there was a great deal of party activity outside polling stations, this would not be defined as telling, but campaigning. In some cases our observers stated that they believed this could be intimidating to voters. Instead, on this occasion, we requested our observer teams give more qualitative feedback as part of the observation.

## **Intimidation outside Polling Stations**

As one of our observer groups said; *“This has been identified in the past as a problem in Tower Hamlets. People told us that the atmosphere was much better this time (with one person attributing it to the increased number of women involved in campaigning) but the preventative measures introduced don't seem to have solved the problem completely.*

*All polling stations in Tower Hamlets were required to have an exclusion zone around the entrance, clearly marked with black and yellow incident tape, where campaign activities and party representatives were not allowed.*

*This was well observed. Only one polling station did not have a taped-off area, and that was a polling station inside the Marriot hotel. But they varied wildly in size and effectiveness. Some were well placed, and neatly, even artistically demarcated. Others were small or oddly placed and would still have allowed party activists to cluster round the entrance. Some, like one which comprised a series of tape bows tied round the railings of a flight of steps, were distinctly random.*

*All polling stations were also required to have a police presence, and all the stations we visited had either a police officer, or a police community support officer on duty. They were friendly, and helpful to the voters, but we didn't see them take any action to prevent groups of men gathering in the street outside.*

*We visited three polling stations with a significant number of party activists in the vicinity. In one case it was around half a dozen women, PATH supporters, who were standing outside the polling station and holding up posters showing how to mark the ballot paper for PATH. They were cheerful and not intimidating.*

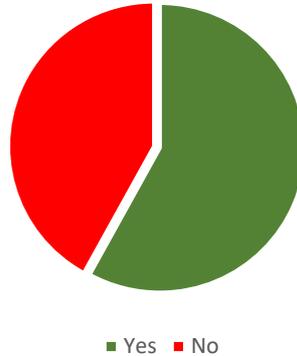
*During the evening, on the Isle of Dogs, we found a number of groups of people clustered outside a pair of polling stations. A group of elderly gentlemen were standing opposite the entrance. Were they there for any party? No, they said, they were just watching.*

*There was also a group of younger men, not wearing party badges. Plus people just standing around and chatting. Party tellers were present, but were standing some distance away. I didn't find the atmosphere intimidating, but without knowing the political dynamics of the Bengali-speaking community, it is hard to say whether any voters would find the audience off-putting.*

*The most problematic polling station was in Poplar, just off Poplar High Street, which we visited during the afternoon. There, a group of around fifteen men, not wearing any party identification, had gathered on the pavement opposite the school entrance. When asked whether they were there for any party, they said they were, but were clearly unhappy to have been asked the question. They made us feel uncomfortable. The policeman on duty stayed inside the school playground, watching them. Again, official party tellers were present, but stood at the end of the street, well away from the unidentified group.*

*All the official party tellers we met were behaving correctly. They were alone, or with one or two colleagues. They weren't taking polling numbers from voters but handing out leaflets showing how to mark the ballot paper for their party. They were polite and sometimes friendly to rival party representatives. And where unidentified groups were present the tellers kept well away from them – possibly reflecting concerns about falling foul of the new regulations.”*

***Q9. Was there evidence of 'family voting' in the polling station?***



**QUESTION 9:** In 58% of polling stations our observer teams identified so-called ‘family voting’. OSCE/ODIHR, describes ‘family voting’ as an ‘unacceptable practice’.<sup>1</sup> It occurs where, generally, husband and wife vote together. It can be normalised and women, especially, are unable to choose for themselves who they wish to cast their votes for and/or this is actually done by another individual entirely. It is a breach of the secret ballot.

We identified this in 58% of polling stations (74 separate occasions). As family voting, by definition, includes more than one person this means that we observed this 74 times in the 764 voters we observed. This means that over 19% of all the voters who we observed were either engaged in, or affected by, this practice.

We would, however, like to add that on the vast majority of cases of this were prevented, or attempts were made to prevent it. However, we believe that this constitutes an unacceptably high level of family voting in an advanced democracy and further steps should be taken to discourage and prevent it. However, this activity is generally not the fault of polling staff, in fact we commend the staff for being so active in their attempts to prevent it.

**As one of our observer teams said;**

*“Family voting is a definite concern in Tower Hamlets. At the best-run polling stations, the Presiding Officers kept an active watch for potential cases and took steps to prevent it happening. They took care to issue ballot papers to family members one at a time, and then direct them to polling booths in different parts of the room.*

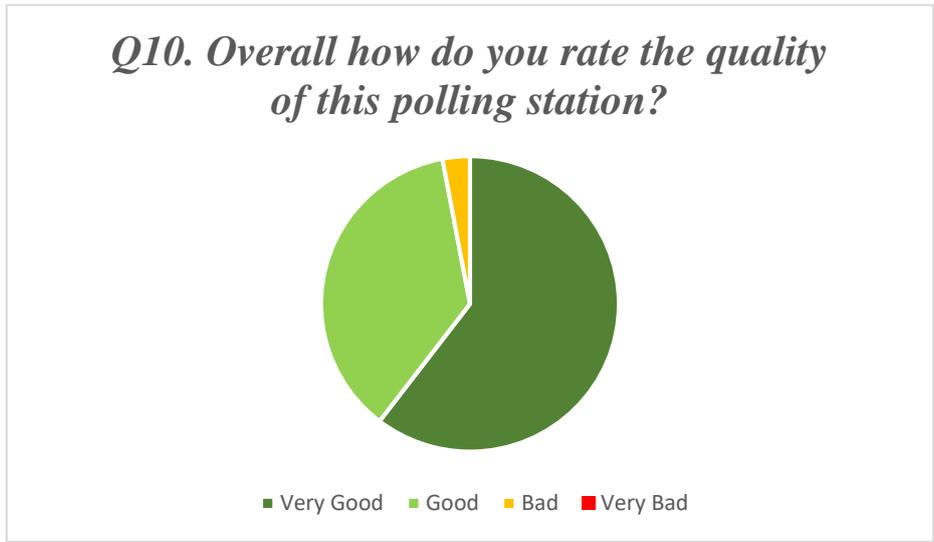
*With three members of polling staff, this meant that while two clerks checked the register and issued papers, the PO could remain vigilant for possible family voting or other problems.*

*All the observed cases of family voting took place when the PO was absent or distracted, or their attention was elsewhere.”*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.osce.org/>

*Q10. Overall how do you rate the quality of this polling station?*



**QUESTION 10:** Observers were asked for an overall rating of the polling station they had attended. 19% of polling stations were reported to be ‘Very Good’- 61%, ‘Good’- 37%, ‘Bad’ - 3%, and none were ‘Very Bad’.

Despite the specific challenges faced in Tower Hamlets the fact that we have judged 97% of polling stations to be Very Good or Good is an indication of the work being carried out by the Electoral Services Team at Tower Hamlets to run an effective polling day.

## CONCLUSIONS

We were very impressed by the standard of training for presiding officers and polling clerks offered by Tower Hamlets Council. Elections staff were fully conscious of the specific challenges faced in their Borough to the democratic process. We would like to thank them for their assistance in making sure we had access to the electoral process across the Borough and would especially like to commend Robert Curtis and his staff for the professional approach to dealing with us and the electoral process. Virtually none of the problems we identified were their fault.

We did ask about the 'Postal Vote Pilot' being undertaken in the Borough but we felt that, in reality, the capacity of a council to assess to what extent voters being asked whether they had received ballots in the Borough was difficult. There were more than 35,000 voters having a postal vote. We believed this would need to be evaluated at a very granular level to assess whether it had an effect. We look forward to the Electoral Commission's response to the pilot project in due course.

The primary problems in Tower Hamlets are actually produced by the parties and those that do not have sufficient knowledge of the importance of the secret ballot. We believe the presence of the police probably helped with any public order issues but cannot directly benefit the process in the polling station. We therefore have three recommendations:

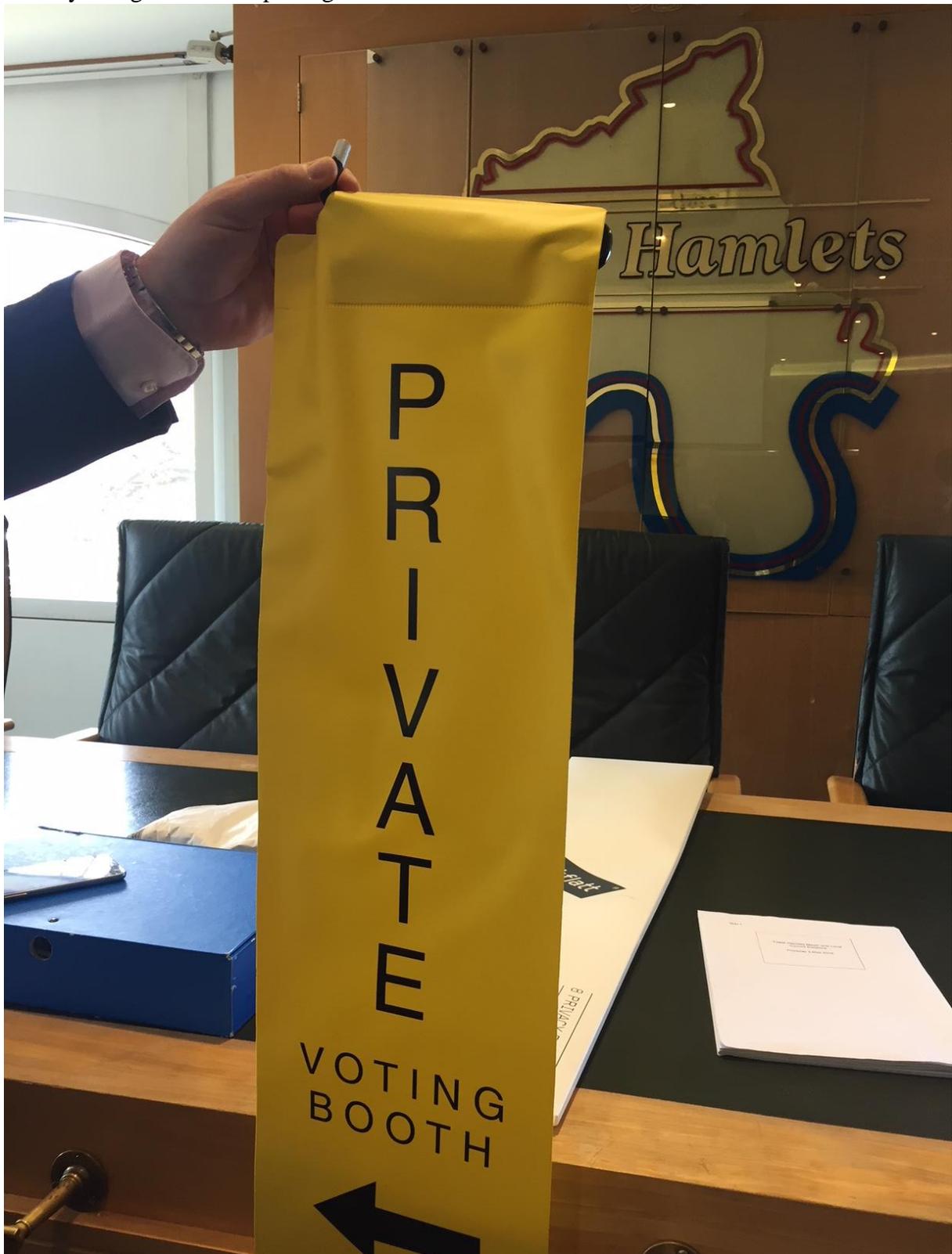
1. Ballot boxes should be sealed with the required number of ties across the Borough. This would allow for even greater public confidence in the process. We were pleased to see the numbering of the cable ties being used and feel this adds an improved degree of integrity to the electoral process.
2. The exclusion areas, which were designed to limit party activity in the immediate vicinity of polling stations, worked well. However, we believe a little more thought could be given to this and whether they should be larger. We also believe that in some cases polling stations had more than one potential entrance and thought should be given to extending them to all areas of possible access.

These exclusion areas did not prevent groups congregating across the road from polling stations and further proactive approaches should be considered to discourage the formation of crowds outside polling stations.

3. Family voting is a specific problem, on a very large scale, in Tower Hamlets. More public information should be provided to discourage this as well as staff needing to interrupt their own work to intercede when they see it. We believe specific posters should be used to demonstrate how this should be done. (See Appendix 1)

## APPENDIX 1

Privacy Wings as seen in polling stations in Tower Hamlets.



In the Netherlands voters are greeted with a number of signs explaining the correct voting procedure.

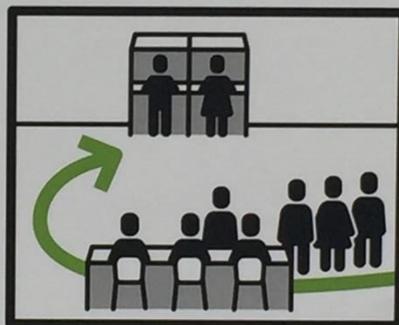


Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties

## Uw gedrag in het stemblokaal



Houd uw stempas en ID-bewijs bij de hand.



Zorg dat de stembureauleden het stemhokje kunnen zien en houd voldoende afstand tot de stemhokjes.

