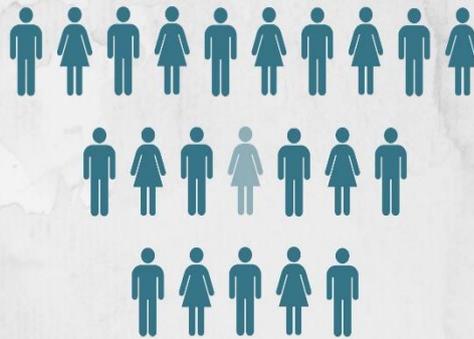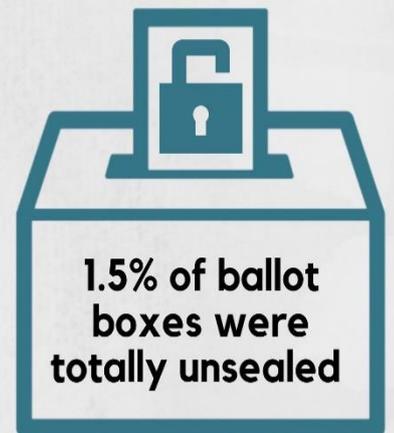# FINAL REPORT

United Kingdom General Election 12th December 2019

More than 1 in 6 polling stations were not fully accessible to disabled voters

4% of voters could not vote in secret

1.5% of ballot boxes were totally unsealed

Dr John Ault and Harry Busz

30th January 2020

Democracy Volunteers

UK General Election – December 12th 2019
Final Report on Election Observation

Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.
2. To advise the local councils and national electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice within the UK.
3. 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.

Methodology

198 observers registered by Democracy Volunteers with the Electoral Commission, as well as three observers who directly accredited themselves with the Commission, made up in teams of 2, made 1,042 separate observations of polling stations across the United Kingdom. We observed polling operations in 121 of the UK's 650 parliamentary constituencies.

Figure 1 - Global distribution of observer group

Teams were deployed to all 9 of the English regions as well as in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Observers came from around the world, including most member states of the European Union and many member states of the OSCE. Observers came from 40 countries from 5 continents. This international group increased the ranks of Democracy Volunteers to produce the largest electoral observation of polling stations in UK electoral history. The

observers were 52% male and 48% female. The team was supported by a core team of 8 experts and Long Term observers. 75% of all the observers are resident in the UK and came from our pool of UK observers. All observers were given training, a briefing, and an election day handbook ahead of deployment.

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 to the central team. The survey was conducted online so data was collected, and could be checked, live by the core team.

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.

We were assisted in recruitment of observers by colleagues at AEGEE. Figure 1 shows the breadth of the geographic spread of the observer group.

Area of the Observation (by Region/Nation)

Eastern: Cambridge, Ipswich, Norwich North, Norwich South. (4)

East Midlands: Broxtowe, Erewash, Grantham & Stamford, Northampton North, Northampton South, Nottingham North, Nottingham South, Nottingham East, Rushcliffe. (9)

London: Kensington, Cities of London & Westminster, Bethnal Green & Bow, Poplar & Limehouse, Westminster North, Putney, Finchley and Golders Green, Battersea, Vauxhall, Chipping Barnet, Hendon, Islington North, Feltham and Heston, Islington South & Finsbury, Ilford South, Chingford and Woodford Green, (Walthamstow and Leyton & Wanstead, Count Only) (16/18)

North East: North West Durham, City of Durham, Middlesbrough, Stockton North, Sedgefield, Bishop Auckland. (6)

North West: Crewe & Nantwich, Bolton West, Bolton North East, Bolton South East, Tatton, Warrington North, Warrington South, Eddisbury, Westmorland & Lonsdale, Bury North, Bury South, Liverpool Wavertree, Liverpool Riverside, Liverpool Walton, Liverpool West Derby, Manchester Central, Manchester Gorton, Salford and Eccles, St Helens South & Whiston, Rochdale, Garston and Halewood, Weaver Vale, City of Chester. (22)

South East: Beaconsfield, Gillingham & Rainham, Canterbury, North Thanet, South Thanet, Dover, Oxford West and Abingdon, Milton Keynes North, Milton Keynes South, Isle of Wight Aldershot, South West Surrey, Surrey Heath, Guildford, Watford, Woking, Wokingham, Windsor, Esher and Walton, Tunbridge Wells, Maidstone & The Weald. (21)

South West: St Ives, Camborne & Redruth, Truro & Falmouth, South Swindon, North Swindon, Devizes and North Wiltshire. (7)

West Midlands: Solihull, Birmingham Selly Oak, West Worcestershire, Meriden, Birmingham Yardley, Kenilworth & Southam, Redditch, Warwick & Leamington, Coventry South, Coventry North East, Coventry North West. (11)

Yorkshire and the Humber: Calder Valley, Morley and Outwood, Colne Valley, Leeds Central, Leeds North West, Leeds West, Leeds East, Pudsey. (8)

Northern Ireland: North Down, East Belfast, South Belfast. (3)

Scotland: North East Fife, Stirling, Glasgow South West, Glasgow Central, Ochil and South Perthshire, Dunfermline & West Fife. (6)

Wales: Arfon, Aberconwy, Cardiff Central, Cardiff North, Cardiff South & Penarth, Cardiff West, Vale of Glamorgan, Ynys Mon/Anglesey. (8)
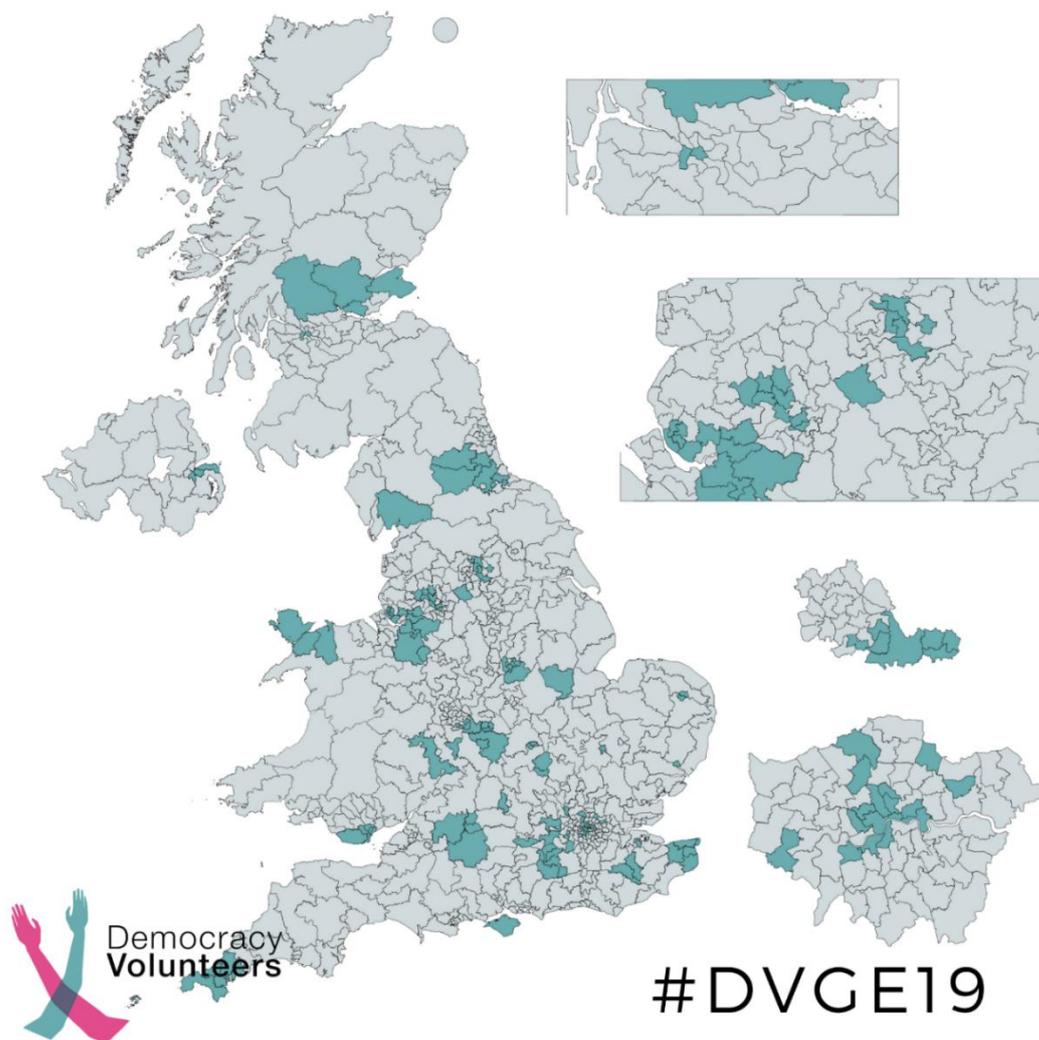

Figure 2 Area of the UK General Election Observation

The Core Team

Dr John Ault FRSA FRGS (United Kingdom) was the Head of Mission for the UK 2019 Parliamentary elections and is the Executive Director of Democracy Volunteers.

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 a former chair of the UK's Electoral Reform Society. He has also previously been elected to local government in the UK as well as being appointed to the South West Regional Assembly.

He has observed numerous elections for Democracy Volunteers including the Norwegian parliamentary elections, the UK general election in 2017, 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. He specialises in elections and campaigns and has published a number of books on the subject, including his doctoral thesis on electoral campaigning.

Alex Ollington FRSA (United Kingdom) was Deputy Head of the UK 2019 Parliamentary elections observation and is Head of Operations for Democracy Volunteers.

In his role at Democracy Volunteers, he plans all aspects of the observation including the advanced work on observer deployment. He is also one of the directors of the organisation.

He received both his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the University of Exeter studying International Relations. He has observed elections for the National Assembly for Wales in 2016, the UK General Election in 2017, as well as the Finnish Presidential election in 2018 among other international and domestic observations.

He coordinated with the International Elections Study Centre in May 2018 to facilitate the attendance of a team of Russian observers from the civil society organisation GOLOS at the English local elections.

Alex has previously worked with veterans at the Royal Hospital Chelsea as part of the fundraising and communications department finding funding for future projects as well as a researcher for a number of organisations including the universities of Harvard and Bristol.

Harry Busz (United Kingdom) was the logistics and deployment specialist for the 2019 election and is Democracy Volunteers' full-time Election Coordinator. He is a recent graduate, having gained a BSc in Human Geography at Cardiff University and an MA in International Relations from Exeter University. He has participated in multiple domestic and international observations such as the 2019 UK local elections in Northern Ireland, the provincial and Water Board elections in The Netherlands, the recent UK parliamentary by-elections in Peterborough and Newport and the recent national elections in Austria, as well as being general election coordinator for the recent Gibraltar general election. During his time at university, he wrote his undergraduate dissertation on voter behaviour in the 2016 EU referendum in the South Wales Valleys after choosing to study both political and electoral geographies.

He coordinated with the International Elections Study Centre in December 2019 to facilitate the attendance of a team of Russian observers from the civil society organisation GOLOS at the English local elections.

Kim Kippen (Canada) was an Elections Expert on the core team for the UK Parliamentary election. She is an Electoral Operations specialist, with over twenty years working in domestic election administration and on international observation missions. She has previously observed with Democracy Volunteers in Finland for the 2019 parliamentary elections, assessing electoral integrity and administration.

Her electoral experience includes a wide variety of operational roles with Canadian election management bodies, as well as field management positions. She has taken part in many election observation missions, both international and domestic, specialising in electoral administration, legal frameworks, electoral systems, voting processes, and out-of-country voting.

Nicole MacRae (Canada) was an Election Expert on the core team for the UK parliamentary election. She is an election professional who has worked in the field and operations for various Canadian federal and provincial election management bodies for the past decade.

She has participated in several international observations and out-of-country voting both at home and abroad. She has experience with such topics as voting processes, technology, legal framework and administrative risks. Her current interests include voting modernisation and leveraging technology at the polls.

Max Wheeler (United Kingdom) is the Training Manager for Democracy volunteers, he is also a founding member of the organisation and has been conducting domestic observations since 2013. This year Max organised the training for observers from the UK and overseas and managed the observation teams for London and the South East on election day. This training took place in London, Birmingham and Glasgow. Democracy Volunteers provided online training for the first time this year, via videos and webinars.

Funding Declaration

Credits

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[1] See Recommendations.

Introduction

With the extremely short timescale for Democracy Volunteers to organise a largescale observation of the UK's electoral process we decided to focus on observing a minimum of 100 parliamentary seats, with 200 observers and experts deployed to observe the process on polling day. These were deployed, in many cases, in their local area and were supplemented by a group of international experts and observers. This group was supplemented by a team of 5 election experts from the UK and Canada and supported in their work by 4 LTOs, who also attended postal vote opening sessions in a number of London Boroughs ahead of polling day.

A number of long term volunteers arranged recruitment and training events across the country and this was managed by the core team, which met in London to plan the deployment of the 200 observers.

The seats observed were selected on a number of bases: proximity to observers, geographical spread across the UK (ensuring each region and nation was included in the sample), as well as marginality, in some cases, as well as some seats that were highly contested, or high profile, where candidates were especially notable or we were aware of some previous issues over electoral challenges.

Some of the issues that Democracy Volunteers have identified, and previously presented to the Electoral Commission and other electoral authorities, as being challenges to the electoral process, consistently get reported by our observers on the ground. These, on polling day, fall into two specific categories: those caused by lapses or failures in the administration of the election, which can lead to voters' trust in the process being eroded; the other being activities conducted by voters, and sometimes party workers, in and around polling stations that make the election less credible and arguably open to challenge. An example of the first would be unsealed ballot boxes, of which our team saw 15 on polling day, and the latter the increased prevalence of voters using their phones whilst in polling stations, whether to conduct conversations or for photography, but especially when we see two or more voters enter a polling booth together to vote in concert. These challenges persist despite our reports to local and national election officials. Whilst individually these challenges might seem ephemeral we believe there should be concern about the apparently increased erosion of the UK's electoral infrastructure and the capacity of some voters to stay within the defined rules in and around the polling station.

Some of our recommendations also try to share best practice between returning officers, who remain, as one of the curiosities of the UK's electoral landscape, responsible for the election personally, leading to potentially hundreds of independent ways to conduct the same election across 650 parliamentary constituencies.

One significant discovery in this election, which we believe may be associated partly with the short notice for the election and consequent movement of some polling stations from their normal sites, is the negative impact on disabled voters accessing polling stations. Whilst we regularly identify polling stations that are not fully accessible in this election we saw a distinct increase in those that were not compliant.

Electoral Administration

Our electoral experts met with several election administration and academic interlocutors in the days leading up to polling day. In every instance, interlocutors were very accommodating, transparent and professional. Notwithstanding the issues noted below, all interlocutors expressed confidence in the ability of election administrators to successfully deliver the election. The guidance of the Electoral Commission and the support of the Association of Election Administrators was also noted. The core team would like to thank them for their assistance at a very busy time in the election cycle.

During the interviews, several common themes about UK election administration emerged:

- Election timing challenges
- Voter registration issues
- Postal and Proxy voting application issues
- Election modernization and changing stakeholder expectations

Election timing

One of the most frequently mentioned challenges was the timing of the election. Following a higher than usual number of elections over the past few years, the December 12th election was called on short notice, with polling day falling during the Christmas festivities period. Interlocutors expressed concern that the administrative capacity of electoral services was under significant pressure, as a result of this 'perfect storm' of election timing stressors.[2]
It had been nearly a century since a general election had been held in December and interlocutors described the unique risks associated with managing unpredictable winter weather, including the possibility of very cold temperatures, polling day snowfall and flooding.[3] The provision of additional lighting, heaters, blankets, backup generators, road grit and salt for polling locations were just a few of the winter contingency plans and additional costs described by interlocutors.

With polling day so close to the Christmas holiday season, some interlocutors noted issues securing polling places and counting centres due to pre-booked holiday events. In the weeks

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[2] This is the third election held in 2019 (with previous local and European elections), and the third general election held in the last four years: https://www.bbc.com/news/education-50317690.
[3] The previous December election was on December 6, 1923.

leading up to polling day, there was heated public debate in the media about the potential cancellation of nativity plays and the loss of poll locations normally held in schools and church halls. The BBC reported that election officers expressed "extreme disappointment" over the education secretary's position that school nativity plays should not be cancelled to accommodate polls. The Association of Election Administrators noted that "arranging a December election at short notice is already challenging enough" without the loss of poll locations that had already been booked.[4]

The proximity to the holiday season was also noted as a likely cause for higher than normal poll worker drop-out rates. In one case, approximately 30% of poll workers had dropped out and training had to be extended later into the election calendar than usual. There was also concern that the number of standby workers would not be sufficient, given the dropout trend.

Although the possibility of a December election had been in the news, it was not a certainty and election administrators had very little notice and significantly less time to prepare than usual. One interlocutor noted that preparations that would normally take place over many months were now compressed into a few weeks. In addition, when the election call came, the regularly scheduled annual canvas had not yet been completed.

Many interlocutors emphasised that the unusually high number of recent elections, coupled with the current challenges of a winter/Christmas 'snap' election, had resulted in an unsustainable, cumulative strain on the administrative processes and the administrators themselves.

Voter registration

All interlocutors commented on the challenge of managing voter registrations during the election period. In addition to the interruption of the annual canvas (noted above), administrators universally commented on the high number of registrations, many of which were duplicates. The administrative burden of finding duplicates and correcting the list – a largely time-consuming, manual process - was frequently noted. The sheer volume of these duplicate registrations required significant administrative resources. In one case, 12,000 registrations occurred on a single day and approximately 50% of the registrations were duplicates in some instances. It was explained that, in the absence of an online registration confirmation tool, most voters choose to (re)register to ensure they are on the voters list. Conversely, many voters who are not registered and then are turned away at the polls assumed that they were on the list because they paid Council Tax. In both examples, voters are either not aware of the registration process or not able to easily determine if they are on the list. Several interlocutors described the variety of methods used to contact electors regarding

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[4] "Nativity play school polling stations row deepens": https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-50331447.

registrations, but the short timelines and sheer volume of communications are challenging to manage with existing resources.

Postal and Proxy applications

Some interlocutors indicated that there was an increase in postal and proxy voting applications, compared to previous elections. It was reported that, as in other elections, many voters were surprised or frustrated by the short timelines for processing these applications. The most common voter complaints were not receiving their postal ballot packages in time or missing the application deadline for postal or proxy voting. Several of our observers and core team members observed the opening of the postal votes in several election offices. Overall, it was found to be orderly, professional and transparent. The administrators were accommodating, and the processing was clear. All administrative interlocutors felt confident that the process was running smoothly and on schedule, despite the increase in applications.

Modernisation, communications and voter expectations

It was noted by several interlocutors that a newly emerging challenge is the change in voter expectations, vis-à-vis modernisation and electronic communication channels. Whilst outbound email communications are regularly leveraged by election administrators, there is a concern that the sheer volume of incoming responses and queries can become overwhelming.

While there is an increasing public expectation of rapid, "24/7" communications, many offices lack the electronic tools or human resources to respond to such high volumes of email queries.

In one example, 2,400 emails were received on a Sunday. Several interlocutors commented that they had had success using "Gov.UK Notify", the government's digital communications platform, and plan to expand using it in future.[5]

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[5] https://www.notifications.service.gov.uk/features.

Results of the Polling Day Observation

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

Q1. Is the Polling Station clearly signposted from the pavement?

No 9%
Yes 91%

Legend:
- Yes
- No
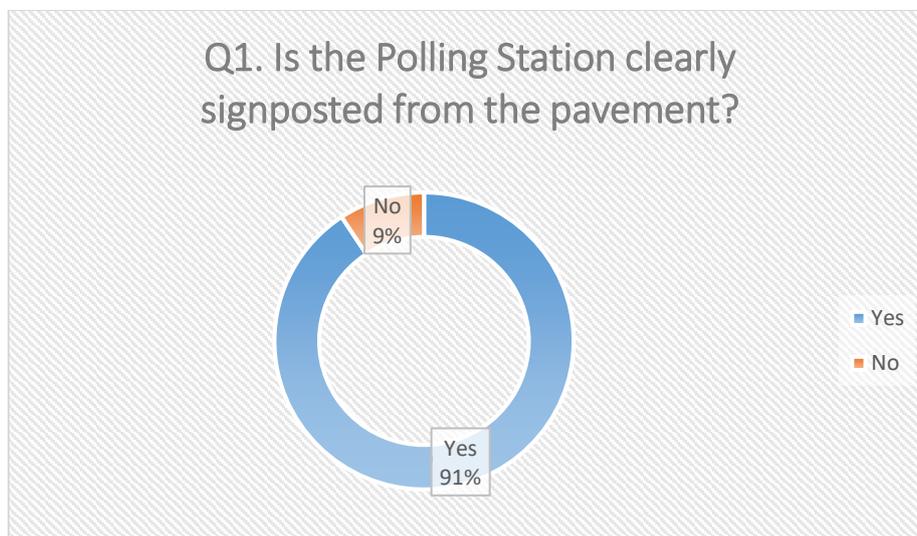
QUESTION 1: In 91% of cases polling stations were properly signposted from the pavement. However, bearing in mind the elect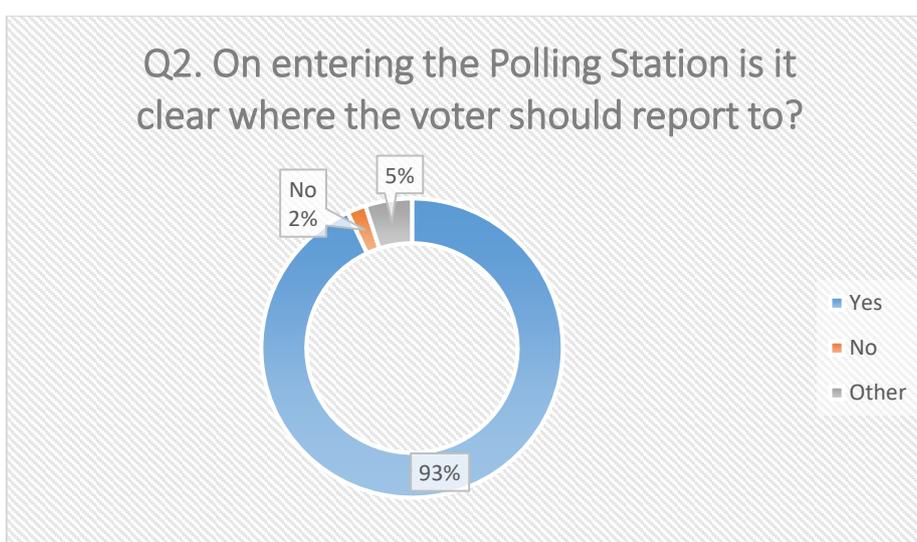ion was conducted in mid-December numerous comments from our observers reflected the nature of the timing of the election. These comments reflected the dark morning/evening but also those signs that were damaged during the day due to poor weather conditions. Notably some observers commented positively on permanent signage that was clearly in use for multiple elections. (Sample size 1000).

Q2. On entering the Polling Station is it clear where the voter should report to?

No 2%
5%
93%

Legend:
- Yes
- No
- Other

QUESTION 2: In 93% of cases, observers did not identify problems with where voters should report. Any problems that did arise were either in unfamiliar polling stations, especially those identified in public houses. However, in polling stations with multiple ballot boxes some observers did report voter confusion which led to voters presenting themselves at the wrong desk. (Sample size 998).

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

4.5%   13%

82.5%

- Yes
- No
- Other
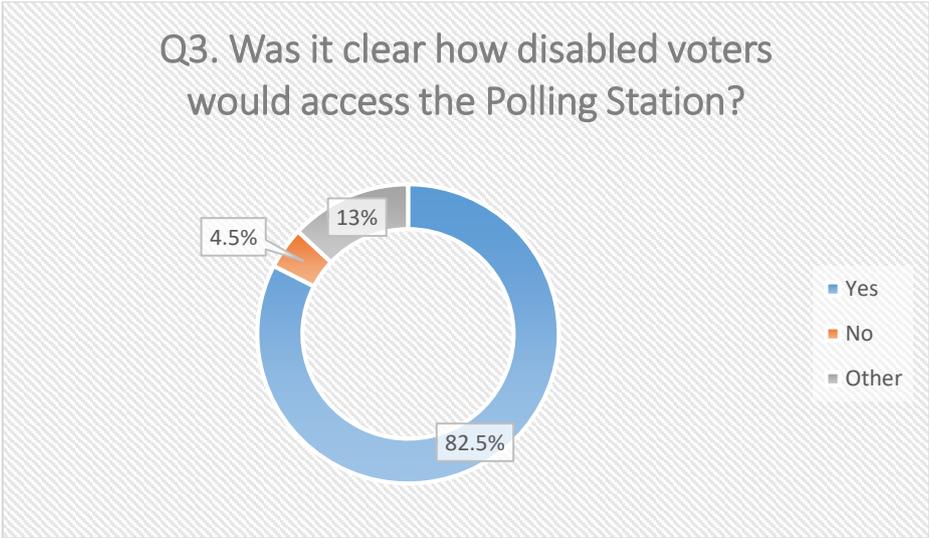
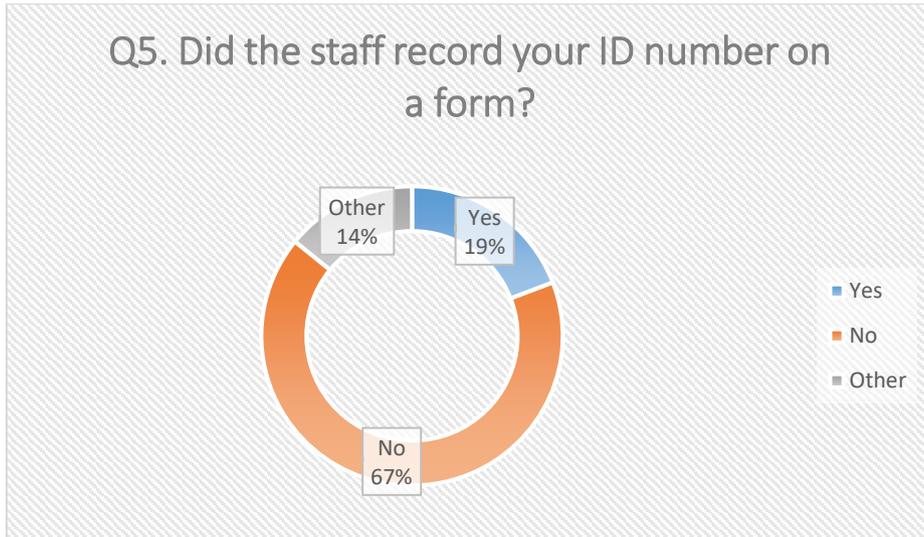**QUESTION 3:** 82.5% of observations indicated that disabled access to the polling station was clear. However, 17.5% of polling stations were either inaccessible to some disabled voters or those, especially those with mobility issues, would find it extremely difficult, if unaided, to access the polling stations. In some cases, this was administrative error where a lower polling booth was unavailable or had been poorly placed. However, the majority of those reports indicating that disabled access was impossible concerned the nature of the building being inaccessible and/or not retrofitted for disabled access. (Sample size 998).

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

5%

44%   51%

- Yes
- No
- Other
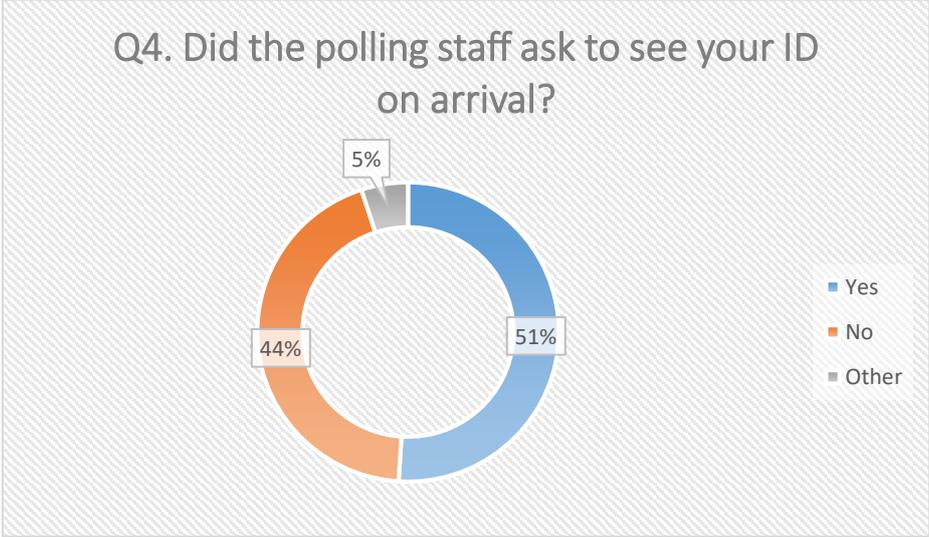
QUESTION 4: Polling staff seemed generally unaware that observation teams might be operating across the country. Despite the recent increase in registrations for accreditation, the formal procedure for identifying, and then recording, that observers had visited the polling station was not followed in the vast majority of cases.

In 51% of cases observers had their credentials checked on arrival at the polling station. However, 49% did not check the ID of observers on arrival at the desk in the polling station. (Sample size 997).

Q5. Did the staff record your ID number on a form?

Other 14%
Yes 19%
No 67%

Legend: Yes, No, Other

QUESTION 5: Similarly, we asked observers to note if the polling staff took a note of the ID that the observer was wearing. In each case this was an Electoral Commission badge which was numbered. Only 19% of polling stations recorded the ID details of the observers. Meanwhile, 67% of polling stations did not record attendance at all. (Sample size 998).

Q6. Are there two staff on duty in the polling station as you arrive?

Staff count	Number
0	0
1	1
2	349
3	460
4	99
5	12
6+	56
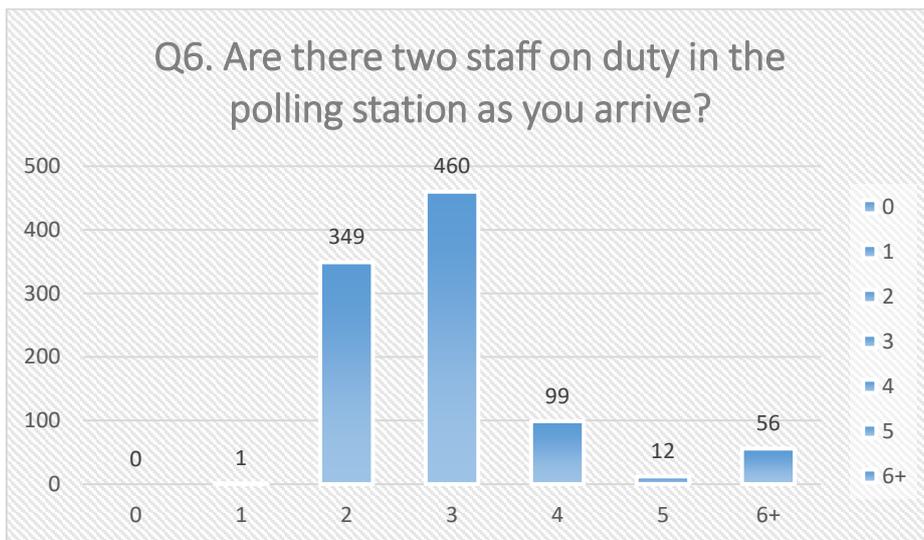
QUESTION 6: All but one polling station had the legally required minimum number of two staff on duty when our observer teams arrived at polling stations. The average number of staff per polling station (bearing in mind some are multiple ballot box stations) was 2.9.[6] There were 2926 staff on duty during our observations, of which 1845 (63%) were women (Sample size 984).

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[6] Some of these were multiple polling stations where staff were still deployed in 2s per ballot box.

Q7. Is the Ballot Box clearly sealed with cable ties?

No 2%
Other 9%
Yes 89%

- Yes
- No
- Other
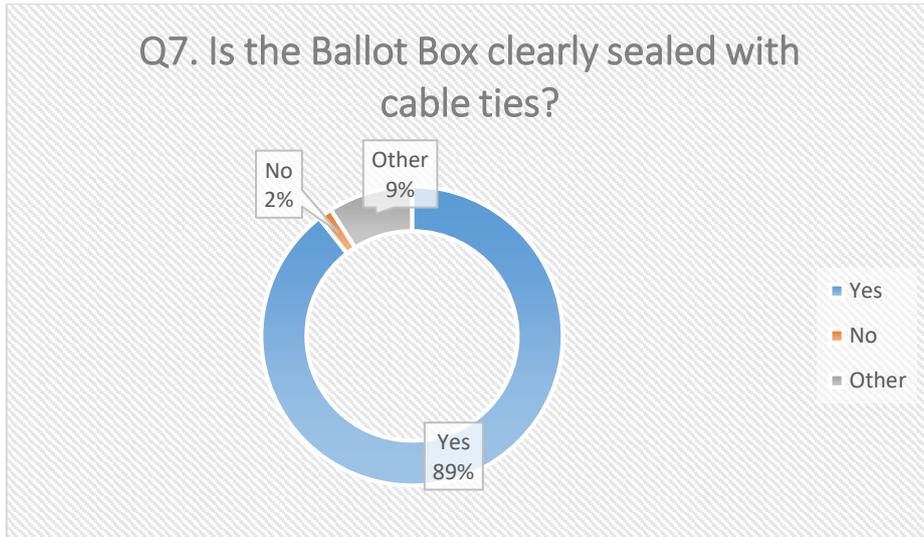
QUESTION 7: An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained as such, allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7am and closing at 10pm is an integral part of the electoral process. 89% the ballot boxes were visibly sealed. 10% of ballot boxes were sealed but with fewer than the require number of cable ties, or were sealed later than the 7am opening time. 1.5% of ballot boxes (15) were unsealed and accessible to interference. (Sample size 983).

Q8. Is each polling booth equipped with an explanatory poster and a pen/pencil?

No 2%
Other 3%
Yes 95%

- Yes
- No
- Other
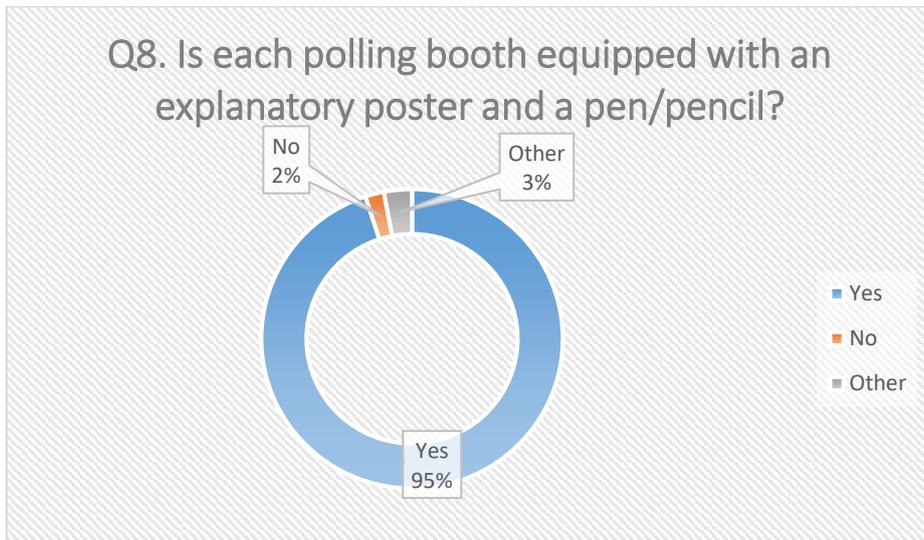
QUESTION 8: 95% of polling stations were properly equipped with the requisite pencil and poster. (Sample size 983).

Q9. Are there any political leaflets in sight within the Polling Station?

Yes 3%

No 97%

- Yes
- No
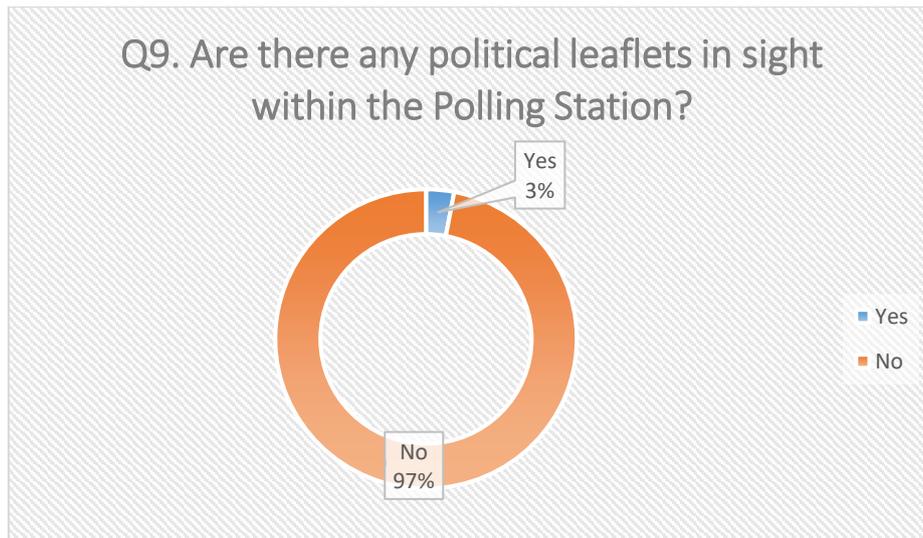
QUESTION 9: This question was asked primarily to elicit whether improper political activity was taking place within the polling station.[7] 3% of polling stations were found to contain political leaflets while 97% did not. (Sample size 983).

Q10. Was there evidence of 'family voting' in the polling station?

Yes 27%

No 73%

- Yes
- No
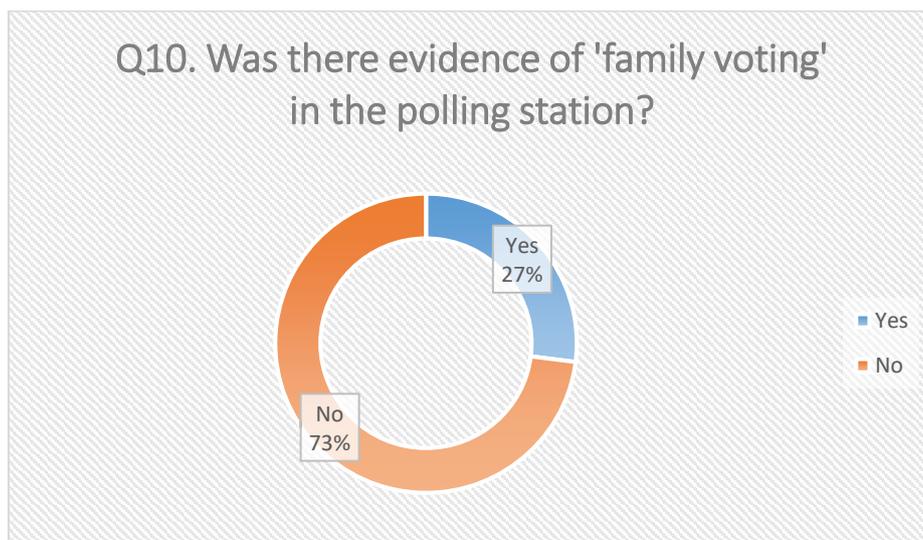
QUESTION 10: In 27% of polling stations our observer team identified at least one case of so-called 'family voting'. OSCE/ODIHR, the international organisation responsible for overseeing elections within the UK, describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'.[8] It occurs where husband and wife or other family members voting together is 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. We identified 450 separate cases of family voting in 268 of the 983 polling stations observed in this sample. This meant that 900 people out of the 25,989 observed were affected, or involved in, family voting, some 3.5% of all those voting. (Sample size 983).

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[7] This question did not just relate to literature specific to this election but observers were also asked to identify if other literature, such as MP or councillors' surgeries were on public display – advertising the names of candidates and/or parties.

[8] http://www.osce.org/

Q11. How many cases of family voting did you see?
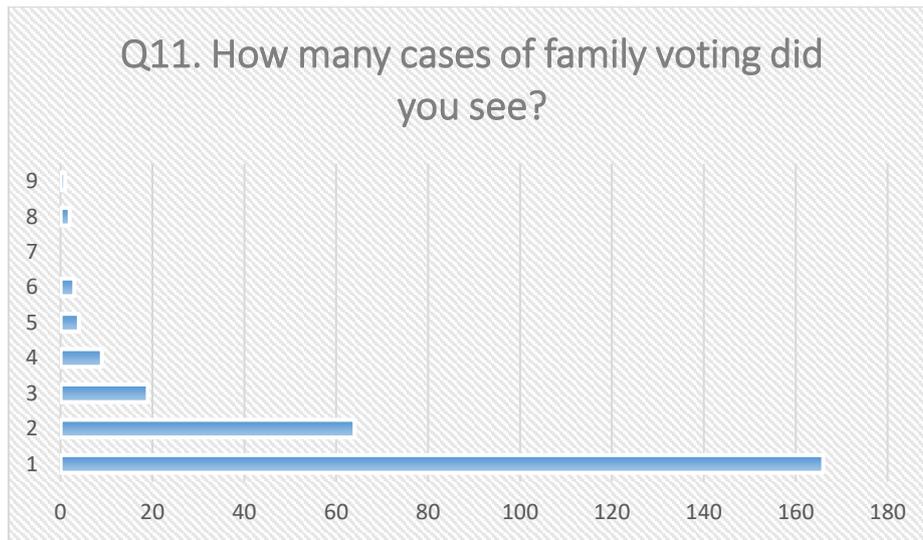
QUESTION 11: Observers were asked to count the number of family voting occurrences in each polling station. On 166 occasions there was one occurrence of family voting, on 64 2, on 19 3, 9 4, 5 4, 6 3, 8 occurrences 2, and 9 on one occasion. (Sample size 268).

Q12. What form did this family voting take?
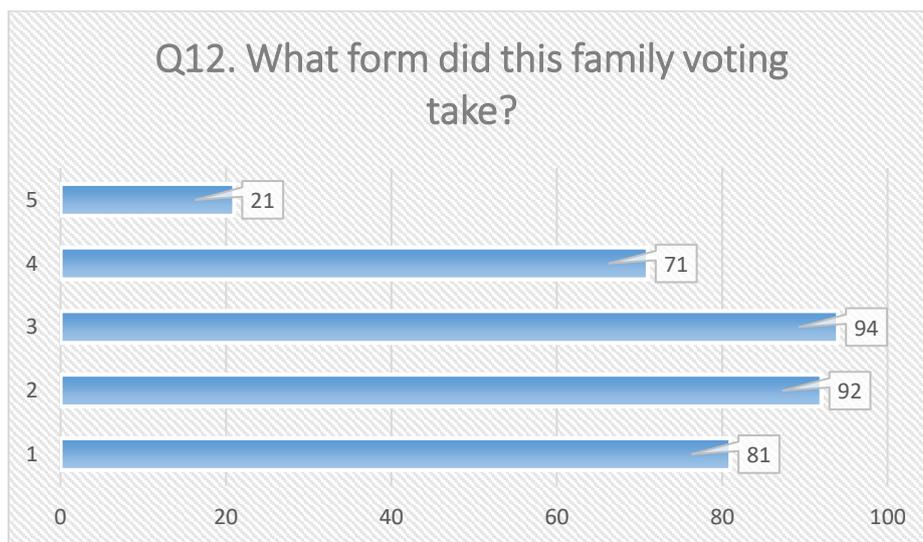
QUESTION 12: We then asked observers to identify what form this 'family voting' took, they were: *Clear direction by one member of the family to another* (Marked 1 on graph 12), *Two or more family members in the same booth colluding on voting intention* (2), *One family member overseeing how another family member was voting* (3), *Casual oversight of another person's vote* (4), *Other* (5). There were 81 cases of clear direction, 92 cases of collusion, 94 cases of oversight, 71 cases of casual oversight and 21 cases that did not fit any of these pre-determined variants of family voting, such as discussion.

It should be noted that some staff do interrupt or attempt to interrupt this breach of the secret ballot but this is not consistent across the country and not even from one polling station to the next in a council area. (Sample size 268).

Q13. Overall how do you rate the quality of this polling station?

Bad
7%

Very Bad
1%

Very Good
52%

Good
40%

- Very Good
- Good
- Bad
- Very Bad
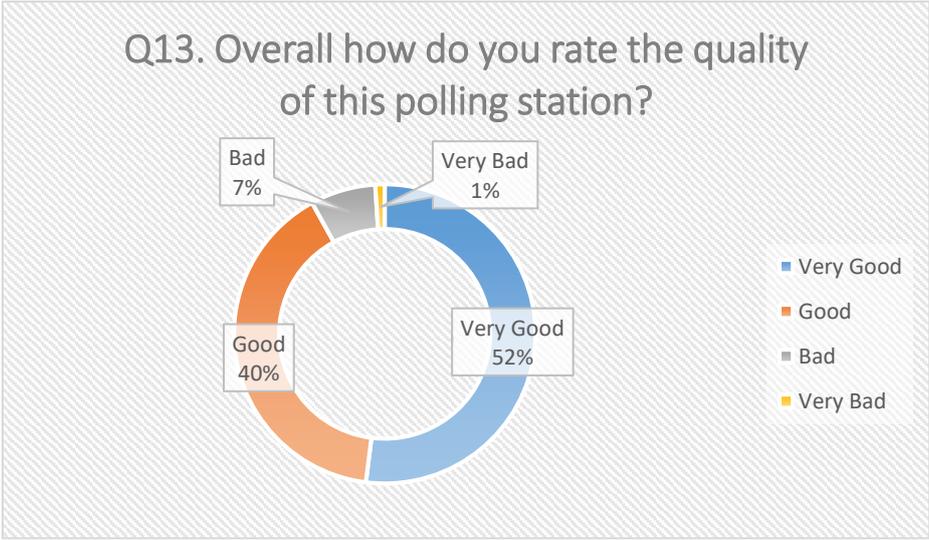
QUESTION 13: Observers were asked for an overall rating of the polling station they had attended. 52% of polling stations were reported to be 'Very Good', 40% 'Good', 7% 'Bad', and 1% 'Very Bad'. This is a slight improvement on 2017 based on our previous observation.

Conclusions

Despite the election being conducted in winter and with very short notice, it was, in the main, conducted well. However, as was identified by the core team's meetings with interlocutors, as well as polling day findings, we do believe that there are some substantial ongoing issues with the conduct of UK elections that need improvement.

There are several areas in which we have key recommendations for the improvement of UK elections, and several where the improvement of the training for presiding officers and poll clerks would deliver a better election day experience and improve the credibility of the electoral process overall.

These recommendations focus around the areas which were observed, or which became apparent during our meetings with interlocutors. They are: Postal Voting; Voter Registration; Snap Elections; Modernisation and Voter Expectations; Signage; Voter Presentation at polling stations; Disabled Access; Observer ID checks and Recording of Observers; Staff on Duty; Sealing of Ballot Boxes; Political literature; 'Family Voting', and Mobile Phones/Cameras.

Recommendations

Postal Voting

Based on our observations and discussions with interlocutors, many voters appeared to misunderstand the process for registration, application and return of postal votes. Tight election timelines compound this problem. This results in votes never arriving in time with the council or even with the voter if overseas. This was especially challenging during a period of higher than average postal activity. In previous general elections a notable number of postal ballots were never counted as they are adjudged to be incorrectly completed.

> **R1** We recommend a review of the postal voting processes, instructions and public education campaigns to support better outcomes for postal voters.

Voter Registration

Large numbers of duplicate voter registrations during the election put a heavy strain on already busy election offices. In many cases, it was noted that voters did not, or could not, check online to see if they were already registered.

> **R2** We recommend that user-friendly, online registration 'look-up' websites ("am I on the voters list?") be readily accessible to voters.

Snap Elections

Many critical election administration tasks take many months of planning and work in an attempt to ensure smooth and successful elections. When snap elections are called, these tasks must be compressed into weeks, rather than months. The sustained stress this puts on election administration is a very real risk to ensuring successful elections.

> **R3** We recommend that an extended writ period be considered for snap elections, to allow administrators sufficient time to deliver the best possible elections.

Modernisation and voter expectations

Several interlocutors highlighted the rapidly increasing volume of electronic voter enquiries and expectations of rapid responses. During the election period, the sheer volume of voter emails often strained existing resources. Many interlocutors highlighted their recent success leveraging the government Notify communication tool.

> **R4** We recommend that this communication resource be further developed and explored by administration stakeholders, creating opportunities to share experiences and best practices.

Signage

The signing of polling stations, whilst generally maintained to a good standard and regularly checked by staff, is invariably paper-based and open to the elements and can be easily damaged or destroyed, especially in an election in mid-December. This can lead to even poorer signposting of polling stations and the required disabled access, which can be different in the same polling stations. Some councils have invested in more permanent signage, such as A-frames and we would encourage councils to invest in Polling Station signage and disabled access signage (which will be reused).

> **R5** We recommend that local returning officers compare the costs of a long term investment in more permanent signage rather than ordering new paper signage for each election.

Voter Arrival at Polling Stations

Many polling stations are now combined so that voters are presented with the possibility of attending one of several polling stations in the same building. Normally this is where two ballot boxes, for two separate polling districts, have been placed in the same polling station due to proximity. When there is more than one ballot box this can lead to confusion and consequent queuing as a result.

R6 We recommend that those polling stations where two or more ballot boxes are in operation should automatically be required to have a member of staff responsible for 'triaging' voters on arrival. This will allow for simpler access for voters.

Disabled Access

We are increasingly concerned that disabled access is one of the primary problems we identify during polling day. Following recent legal decisions concerning how blind and partially sighted voters have limited, if any, access to a secret ballot, we welcome the review that Electoral Commission is conducting concerning disabled access. However, we are also aware that legislation is already in place that should make this the current custom and practice. We believe it is unacceptable that 1 in 6 polling stations is either unsuitable for disabled voters or challenging.

R7 Each council (returning officer) should physically review all polling stations in advance of each election and report any issues concerning disabled access formally. These should be put in the public domain, whether on the council's website or on the polling card issued to each voter telling them any issues concerning disabled access.

R8 We believe that the challenges caused to some disabled voters could be alleviated by introducing a form of 'advanced voting' or 'home voting' where either voters can attend a central polling station for their district/council area and vote in advance of the election, in the knowledge that this building is accessible, or they should offer the chance to be pre-registered as needing a 'home vote' and the ballot box, and the necessary equipment to vote, would be taken around to these voters on polling day. We recommend the Government should legislate to introduce 'advanced voting' and 'home voting' as options for disabled voters.

The role of observers, observer ID checks and recording of observers

Over the past few years more and more individuals and groups have sought to become registered as accredited observers for elections. Because of the high profile nature of recent elections this might be associated with this interest but we also believe that, as election observation becomes more normalised as part of the electoral landscape, this aspect of elections should be recognised by both those that accredit them, the Electoral Commission, and those that receive them, election day officials.

Whilst not directly associated with our observation we are aware that despite the OSCE/ODIHR deploying a Needs Assessment Mission to the UK ahead of the 2019 general election, which recommended that an Expert Mission be deployed no such mission was deployed because of financial and staffing limitations. This means that the formal international stakeholder, which the Electoral Commission responds to, had no oversight of the election, no recommendations to provide and none which the Electoral Commission is required to implement or the Government to legislate for. As such we recommend that the Electoral Commission, and other

bodies responsible for the oversight and conduct of elections understand the increasing importance of domestic election observation to improve elections independently.

> **R9** We recommend that the Electoral Commission holds regular feedback sessions with observer groups to discuss and prioritise those areas where it can influence electoral authorities to improve elections locally.

> **R10** Following the 2018 review of election observation in the UK and increased number of those seeking accreditation, the Electoral Commission should invest greater resources, when applicable, in ensuring the process works effectively and securely.

> **R11** All observers should have their ID checked on arrival at polling stations and this should be recorded officially. This would allow for any dispute to be properly logged as rarely are records of observers kept accurately, meaning there is little evidence of their attendance or the timing thereof.

Staff on Duty

Whilst many polling stations do have the required number of polling staff available to conduct the election within the legal framework we do believe that some challenges are faced by staff during busy times which prevents them from keeping a close eye on all aspects of polling.

> **R12** We recommend in large, busy or multiple polling stations that a minimum of three staff be on duty, one of whom is responsible for greeting voters, checking polling booths and preventing voters from activities outside the legal framework (see family voting recommendations).

Sealing of Ballot Boxes

When drafting the recommendations, we have found it difficult to make any on this aspect of polling day, as it is mandatory that a ballot box is sealed at 7am by the presiding officer and not unsealed until delivered to the central count after 10pm. Whilst there is no suggestion that any foul play took place in the fifteen instances where boxes were unsealed, this failure is something that should be improved. Any such failure in other instances would be considered to undermine the integrity of the election. Making a recommendation that a ballot box is sealed is therefore pointless but we would make some recommendations on how this is reported and how the seal can be made clear to voters. In the case of some ballot boxes, because of their design, it is not possible for the voter, or election observer, to assess if a box is in fact sealed.

> **R13** If, on arrival at the central count a ballot box is discovered to be incorrectly sealed or unsealed this should be immediately made known to election agents and candidates so that they are aware of this problem.

R14 This box should then be verified and checked by the returning officer to check that no foul play has occurred, and those observing should be told the turnout for that one box, so it can be checked against the final result.

R15 In 2017, we recommended that coded cable ties should be introduced as the norm by returning officers so that these coded ties are those placed on the ballot box at the opening of poll and removed at the closure of poll. These numbers should be displayed clearly and recorded clearly for the public, parties and observers to check independently.

R16 Party agents should be issued with these codes so that they can independently check that codes issued to each polling station match those that are delivered to the count after 10pm.

Political Literature

Our observer teams regularly encounter political material in polling stations. This can take a number of forms ranging from literature issued to voters on entering the polling stations by political parties to signage that advertises local MPs or councillors' surgeries which are often held in the same buildings as voting.

R17 As part of polling day setup we would recommend that presiding officers are reminded that political activity, even in the form of surgery advertising, is to be discouraged. Any permanent signage should be covered during polling day. [9]

Family Voting

Family voting continues to be biggest challenge to polling day integrity. Whilst other aspects of the polling process can be ameliorated by staff ensuring equipment is secure, many presiding officers either do not see family voting occurrences as they are busy dealing with other voters in the queue, or they see the offence but do not interrupt the activity, as they should. Family voting occurs when two people enter a polling booth together, collude or oversee the casting of another's vote. It is a clear violation of the secret ballot and something which is an offence. However, it persists in being either overlooked or dismissed as being acceptable. We have observed some areas where there are active attempts to reduce this activity by stationing staff, even police, to prevent it.

Family voting is often also asserted as happening in specific communities but the evidence of our observation is that it happens across communities and geographies but is disproportionately men guiding/overseeing women how to vote, though this is by no means the only form it takes.

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[9] This recommendation was recently adopted by the Dutch Government for public buildings.

R18 As part of presiding officer training before polling day, polling staff should be trained on how to spot family voting and their responsibility to prevent it.

R19 Signage should be produced, and possibly piloted, similar to that for cameras and phones in polling stations to show that using the same polling booth is illegal. (see Appendix B).

Mobile Phones and Cameras

Despite most polling stations displaying signage that mobile phones should not be used whilst in the polling station we observed several occasions on polling day when voters would either take calls whilst in the polling station or even, on two occasions, be on calls on arrival and continue their conversations throughout their entire time in the polling station. These two occasions were not prevented by the polling staff.

We have also seen further evidence of voters taking photos of their ballot papers. Whilst on several occasions this was a selfie from a first time voter, in some cases, as we have reported on before, this was of voters taking a photo of their ballot whilst in the booth. In some cases, presiding officers interceded, in others they did not.

R20 Signage should be more prominent that telephones should not be used whilst in polling stations.

R21 Signage should be developed to discourage the use of phone cameras in polling stations.

Appendix A – List of Interlocutors

Electoral Administration

Association of Electoral Administrators
Peter Stanyon (Chief Executive)

Harrogate Borough Council
Laura Jolly (Elections Manager)

London Borough of Brent
Melanie Adams (Electoral Registration and Services Manager)

London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Rob Curtis (Head of Electoral Services)

London Borough of Waltham Forest
Karen Honeyball (Electoral Services Manager)
Ian Buckle (Head of Electoral & Democratic Services)

Spelthorne Borough Council
Roberto Tambini (Chief Executive)
Jayne McEwan (Electoral Services Manager)

UK Electoral Commission
Tom Hawthorn (Head of Policy)

Academia
Toby S. James (Professor of Politics and Public Policy, University of East Anglia)

Democracy Organisations

Electoral Reform Society
Jess Garland

Westminster Foundation for Democracy
Tanja Hollstein

Other Organisations[10]

The Committee of Standards in Public Life
Lord Jonathan Evans KCB DL

IPSOS/Mori
James Allen

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[10] These were speakers who attended our briefing event at the RSA in London on Wednesday 11th December.

Appendix B – Dutch Ministry of the Interior Polling Station Poster (Section)