

Local Elections in England May 2014

(including Mayoral elections)

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Summary

- Local elections were held for just over 4,200 seats in 161 authorities in England. The whole council was elected in 32 London boroughs, two unitary authorities and two district councils. In 36 metropolitan boroughs, 17 unitary authorities and 65 districts one third of the council was elected. In seven districts a half of council seats fell vacant.
- Mayoral elections were held in five local authorities.
- Almost 17,000 candidates contested the local elections, yielding a candidate/seat ratio of 4.0 overall. Just seven councillors were elected unopposed.
- The 2014 local elections gave nearly 22.2 million registered electors the opportunity to vote –about 56% of the total local government electorate.
- Some 7.91 million local election votes were counted in the ballot box, making the overall turnout 35.7%.
- The proportion of ballots that are rejected at the official count continues to be small. In 2014 it was about one in every 150 votes cast.
- Over 3.5 million postal votes were issued -15.8% of all those with a contested election in their ward. In nine council areas more than 25% of the electorate had a postal vote; in another 11 fewer than 10% did so.
- More than two thirds (69.5%) of those with a postal ballot returned it. In contrast turnout among those required to vote 'in person' was just 30.0%.
- The proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 4.7%.
- Rejection following a mismatch of signature and/or date of birth was much more common than rejection for incomplete information.
- In just under a third of these cases voters returned their postal voting envelopes but failed to include either the ballot paper itself or the verification statement or both.
- Just under a half of one percent of electors with a postal vote were granted a waiver to use their date of birth as their sole identifier.
- Nearly 22,000 local electors (0.10% of the total electorate) appointed proxies to act on their behalf.
- The turnout of both in person and postal voters at Mayoral elections was similar to that at the other contests held on the same day, but the proportion of votes rejected at the count was rather higher.

Introduction

Local elections took place in 161 local authorities in England coincident with the European Parliament elections on May 22 2014. The whole council was elected in 32 London boroughs as well as in two unitary authorities and two districts councils where boundary changes had been implemented since the previous elections. In 36 metropolitan boroughs, 17 unitary authorities and 65 districts one third of the council was elected. In seven districts a half of council seats fell vacant. In addition, there were Mayoral elections in Hackney, Lewisham, Newham and Tower Hamlets in London, and in Watford.

Contestation

Local elections were scheduled in 2,884 wards with a total of 4,219 seats at stake. Table 1 gives the breakdown of vacancies by type of authority. In addition a number of casual vacancies were contested on the same day.

Table 1: Wards/seats falling vacant local elections 2014

	Wards	Seats
London boroughs	629	1,851
Metropolitan boroughs	815	815
Unitary authorities	330	395
District councils	1,110	1,158
Total	2,884	4,219

A total of almost 17,000 candidates contested seats at the 2014 local elections –an overall candidate/seat ratio of 4.0. The most competitive elections were in the metropolitan boroughs with 4.5 candidates per vacancy; in London the ratio was 3.8:1. In just seven wards (three in the metropolitan boroughs, and two each in the unitaries and districts) were candidates elected unopposed.

Electorate

The local elections in 2014 gave nearly 22.2 million registered electors the opportunity to vote. More than 55% of the total electorate in England had an election in their area. At least 27,500 people tried to register after the closing date and some 4,500 were recorded as trying to vote on election day itself despite not being registered¹. Local election votes were cast at over 14,900 polling stations as well as by post.

Turnout

Across the country some 7.91 million local votes were counted at the ballot box, making the overall aggregate turnout 35.7%. Taking into account those who tried to vote but had their postal vote returns rejected, the level of participation rises to 36.2%. In Table 2 and subsequently we use the term

¹ Not all local authorities were able to supply this information.

'valid vote turnout' to refer to calculations based simply on the number of valid votes cast; 'ballot box turnout' to refer to calculations taking into account valid votes plus those which were considered but rejected at the count; and 'total turnout' to refer to calculations which take into account valid votes, those rejected at the count *and* those rejected at the postal ballot verification stage. Table 2 also breaks this figure down by the type of local authority. Turnout was highest in London and lowest in the metropolitan boroughs.

Table 2. Turnout at English local elections 2014

	Total turnout including rejected postal votes	Votes counted in ballot box	Valid vote turnout
Total	36.2	35.7	35.5
London bors	38.9	38.5	38.2
Met bors	34.1	33.5	33.3
Unitaries	34.6	34.0	33.8
District councils	37.4	36.9	36.6

Comparisons with the same point in the electoral cycle in 2010 are not appropriate because those local elections coincided with the general election. In Table 3, however, we do compare 2014 with the cycle before that in 2006 as well as with intervening years. Although a different range of councils has elections in each year, this year's turnout sits comfortably within the normal range and is much above that recorded in either 2012 or 2013.

Table 3. Turnout at English local elections 2007-2014*

	Total turnout	Ballot box turnout	Valid vote turnout
2014	36.2	35.7	35.5
2013	31.2	30.9	30.8
2012	31.5	31.0	30.8
2011	42.7	42.0	41.6
2009	39.7	39.3	39.1
2008	35.5	35.1	35.0
2007	38.3	38.1	37.9
2006	n/a	n/a	36.5

*Elections in 2010 are excluded because of their clash with the 2010 general election. The local elections in 2011 were held on the same day as a referendum on the parliamentary voting system.

Naturally, there are variations from the mean when turnout is examined at the local authority level as set out in Table 4. The highest turnouts were among the London boroughs and district councils; no unitary or metropolitan authority registered a turnout of 40% or more. The lowest placed councils in each category saw scarcely three in ten electors voting. Tower Hamlets topped the turnout table overall with 48.8%; Kingston upon Hull brought up the rear with 26.8%. At the level of wards, the highest recorded turnout can be three times larger than that of the lowest in each type of authority. In 48 cases did turnout at this level exceed 50%; in five cases it was less than 20%.

Table 4. Highest and lowest % 'ballot box' turnouts by local authority 2014

Local authority	Highest	Lowest	
London boroughs			
Tower Hamlets	48.8	Westminster	32.3
Richmond upon Thames	46.0	Kensington and Chelsea	30.2
Kingston upon Thames	43.1	Hounslow	28.2
Metropolitan boroughs			
Trafford	39.8	Barnsley	29.5
Bolton	38.0	Knowsley	29.3
Bradford	37.5	Wigan	27.8
Unitaries			
Wokingham	39.2	Halton	29.2
Blackburn with Darwen	38.5	Hartlepool	27.2
Plymouth	37.3	Kingston upon Hull	26.8
Districts councils			
South Lakeland	47.1	Broxbourne	32.4
Purbeck	45.1	Lincoln	30.1
Mole Valley	44.8	Cannock Chase	29.6

Rejected ballots

As suggested by the modest differences between the turnout measures set out in Table 2, only a small fraction of electors who tried to vote had their ballot papers rejected. This can happen at one of two stages. Under the provisions of the Electoral Administration Act 2006, postal voters must first meet the statutory requirements for the documentation they return by supplying personal identifiers in the form of their date of birth and signature both when they apply for a postal vote and when they return a ballot paper. Votes submitted by those whose details are deemed to match are then added at the count to those of electors who have voted in person. At this stage votes are checked against four criteria to determine their validity. The voter's intention should be clear; they should not have voted for more candidates or parties than allowed at that election; they should not mark the ballot paper in such a way that they can be personally identified; and the ballot paper itself should contain the official mark.

Table 5. Rejected ballots as % of total included at count – local England 2001-14

2001 general election	0.4
2004 European/local elections	0.8
2005 general election	0.3
2006 local election	0.6
2007 local election	0.4
2008 local election	0.4
2009 local election	0.8

2009 European Parliament election	0.7
2010 general election	0.3
2010 local election	0.6
2011 local election	1.0
2011 AV referendum	0.6
2012 local election	0.6
2013 local election	0.5
2014 local election	0.6
2014 European Parliament election	0.6

Table 5 shows the proportion of ballot papers examined at the count and subsequently rejected at a selection of recent elections in England. At the 2014 local elections almost 51,000 votes were rejected at the count –that is 0.6% of all those counted. This is in line with the long-term average for local elections. Voters in the districts were most likely (0.75%) to have their ballots rejected.

The most common reason for rejection is an unclear ballot paper –‘unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty’ in the technical language. In 2014 these accounted for more than three-quarters of rejections in those cases where we have complete data. In 27 local authorities in excess of 1% of ballots coming to the count were rejected. Burnley and Craven topped the list with a rejection rate of 2.2% each.

Postal voting –uptake and turnout

A sizeable number of electors continue to take advantage of the opportunity to apply for and cast a postal vote. At these elections some 3.5 million postal votes were issued -15.8% of all those with a contested election in their ward (Table 6). Exact comparisons with previous years are necessarily inexact because of the varying electoral cycle, but it can be noted that 15.9% of local electors had a postal vote in 2010 (the previous occasion when most of the seats being contested this year last fell vacant). Those elections did though of course coincide with a general election.

Table 6. Postal electors and local votes 2014 –overall and by type of authority

Number of postal ballot papers issued	3,501,880	as % of electorate	15.8
Number returned	2,432,272	as % of issued	69.5
Number included ‘in count’	2,318,424	as % of votes at count	29.3
Rejected or otherwise not included in count	113,848	as % of those returned	4.7

London boroughs

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	14.0 (13.6 in 2010)
% ‘Turnout’ among postal voters:	67.7 (78.0 in 2010*)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	4.9 (4.6 in 2010)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	23.5 (16.3 in 2010)

Metropolitan boroughs

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	17.5 (18.6 in 2010)
% ‘Turnout’ among postal voters:	68.9 (80.7 in 2010*)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	4.6 (4.0 in 2010)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	34.4 (23.6 in 2010)

Unitary authorities

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	14.7 (14.5 in 2010)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	70.7 (82.4 in 2010*)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	5.7 (4.3 in 2010)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	28.9 (18.7 in 2010)

District councils

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	15.5 (15.0 in 2010)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	71.5 (83.5 in 2010*)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	4.2 (3.3 in 2010)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	28.8 (18.3 in 2010)

*in 2010 the local elections coincided with the general election

Although postal voting remains most common in the metropolitan boroughs, not least because 29 out of a total of 36 such boroughs are located in the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and The Humber regions which had substantial experience of all-postal voting between 2000 and 2004, there is some evidence that the numbers have plateaued. In two council areas more than 35% of the electorate had a postal vote and in seven more over 25% did so –see Table 7. These councils make a regular appearance on this list and each has conducted all postal pilots in the past. At the other extreme, there were 11 authorities (again familiar names) where fewer than 10% of electors had a postal vote. There are, of course, even sharper variations when ward level data are examined.

Table 7. Largest and smallest take up of postal votes - % electorate by authority 2014

Local authority

Largest

Sunderland	39.7
Stevenage	35.1
South Tyneside	33.7

Smallest

Kingston upon Hull	7.6
Oxford	7.5
Halton	7.0

The proportion of postal voters returning their ballot papers always exceeds the turnout among 'in person' voters. To an extent this can be explained by the fact that applying for such a vote in the first place often indicates a higher than average level of interest in and engagement with political events. More than two in three postal electors used their vote (69.5%), although this was understandably lower than at the comparable elections in 2010 when 80.9% of postal electors participated in contests combined with a general election. By contrast the turnout among those obliged to visit a polling station was just 30.0%. Table 8 contrasts postal and 'in person' participation at recent local elections in England. Turnout at polling stations appears especially to be hit when the local elections are stand-alone events as in 2008, 2012 and 2013.

Table 8. Postal and ‘in person’ turnout at English local elections 2008-2014*

	Postal voter turnout	‘In person’ turnout
2014	69.5	30.0
2013	67.1	25.0
2012	68.0	24.2
2011	72.8	36.7
2009	68.7	35.2
2008	71.5	28.7

*Elections in 2010 are excluded because of their clash with the 2010 general election. The local elections in 2011 were held on the same day as a referendum on the parliamentary voting system. In 2009 and 2014 they coincided with European Parliament elections.

This phenomenon also means that postal votes form a disproportionate number of those at the count. In 2014 nearly three in ten of all local votes counted (29.3%) were cast by post. Indeed some argue that the success of postal voting acts to disguise a continuing problem of low electoral participation among those who choose not to take advantage of this facility.

Postal vote rejection

As outlined earlier some electors who try to vote by post are found to have completed the documentation incorrectly and their ballot papers never reach the count. The introduction of personal identifiers before the 2007 elections appears to have led to a small increase in the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count –see Table 9. This is especially the case when local elections are combined with other contests. This year’s figure of 4.7% is exactly the same as when local elections were last combined with EP ones in 2009.

Table 9. Postal vote rejection at English local elections 2006-2014*

	% returned postal voting envelopes/contents not included in the count
2014*	4.7
2013	3.1
2012	4.2
2011*	5.2
2010*	4.0
2009*	4.7
2008	3.6
2007	3.2
2006	3.0

*The local elections in 2010 were held on the same day as a general election and in 2011 they coincided with a referendum on the parliamentary voting system. In 2009 and 2014 they coincided with European Parliament elections.

In order to obtain more information on the reasons for postal vote rejection than the statutory forms allow and to try to overcome inconsistencies within and between local authorities in the recording of answers, each returning officer was asked to compile and submit additional data on the outcomes of their verification process. Table 10 makes clear that rejection following a mismatch of signature and/or date of birth was much more common than

rejection for incomplete or missing information. The former accounts for at least four in ten of all rejections in each type of local authority. This is in line with data from previous years.

In other cases of rejection, varying from 21% in the unitary authorities to 36% in the districts, electors returned their postal voting envelopes but failed to include either the ballot paper itself or the verification statement or both. The proportion doing this was higher than in both 2013 and 2012, but on a par with 2011 when local elections and the PVS referendum were combined. It is likely that some voters deliberately decide not to participate at both available electoral events. Having said that, these figures represent percentages of the small number of rejected ballots. In fact, less than 1.5% of all returned postal votes were rejected for a missing ballot or verification statement. The vast majority of postal voters did correctly file their returns complete with all necessary documents and matching signature and date of birth.

Table 10. Reasons for rejection of postal votes at verification by % of total rejected at 2014 local elections

	Lond	Met	Unit	Dist	Total
PV statement rejected (No signature)	4	7	8	6	6
PV statement rejected (No DoB)	6	4	6	5	5
PV statement rejected (Both)	7	12	11	12	10
Proportion rejected (incomplete information)	17	22	25	23	21
PV statement mismatched signature	29	18	27	18	22
PV statement mismatched DoB	19	17	17	16	17
PV statement mismatched both	8	8	9	7	8
Proportion rejected (mismatching)	56	43	54	41	48
Proportion rejected (ballot paper or statement missing)	27	35	21	36	31

Waivers

A concession granted under the terms of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 was that postal electors who either had a disability, or were illiterate, or were unable to furnish a consistent signature could apply for a waiver to use their date of birth as their sole identifier. Table 11 shows that the proportion of postal electors granted such a waiver was just under a half of one percent. There were however variations at local authority level suggesting that the grant of waivers is at least in part attributable to how far the local authority publicises the availability of this concession.

Table 11: Postal electors granted ‘waivers’ at the 2014 local elections

	As proportion of postal electors	Average per local authority
Total	0.47	103
London boroughs	0.35	88
Met boroughs	0.47	194
Unitaries	0.47	93
District councils	0.60	67

Proxy votes

The introduction of postal voting on demand has had a downward impact on the number of electors appointing proxies, especially when there is no concurrent general election –see Table 12. This year some 21,800 local electors (0.10% of the total electorate) appointing a proxy and 530 emergency proxies being issued across all councils with local elections.

Table 12. Proxy voters as percentage of electorate in England 2001-2014

2014 Loc	2013 Loc	2012 Loc	2011 Loc	2010 Loc	2010 Gen	2005 Gen	2001 Gen
0.10	0.10	0.10	0.15	0.28	0.32	0.22	0.47

Mayoral Elections

Together with the European Parliament and local contests, mayoral elections took place in the London boroughs of Hackney, Lewisham, Newham and Tower Hamlets, and in Watford. In each case the incumbent Mayor was re-elected. Details of turnout, rejected ballots, and postal voting can be found in Table 13 below.

Table 13. Mayoral elections May 2014

	% ballot box turnout	% rejected ballots	
Hackney	39.6	2.1	
Lewisham	37.2	1.4	
Newham	40.6	3.0	
Tower Hamlets	47.6	2.7	
Watford	36.0	2.4	
	%postal voters	% pv turnout	%postal ballots rejected
Hackney	18.3	67.8	8.2
Lewisham	11.6	65.3	3.5
Newham	12.1	71.2	6.4
Tower Hamlets	16.2	72.5	7.2
Watford	16.3	70.0	3.3

Although the turnout of both in person and postal voters was similar to that at the other contests held on the same day, the mayoral elections did register a somewhat higher proportion of votes rejected at the count than at either their local or EP counterparts. We have noted this phenomenon in previous years and suspect it may in part be explained by the still relative unfamiliarity of the Supplementary Vote system used to choose Mayors.