

Local Elections in England May 2015

(including Mayoral elections)

Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher

September 2015

Elections Centre
Plymouth University
Drake Circus
Plymouth
PL4 8AA



Summary

- Local elections were held for just over 9,200 seats in 279 authorities in England. The whole council was elected in 130 district councils and 30 unitary authorities, and in one metropolitan borough (Doncaster) following boundary changes. In 35 metropolitan boroughs, 19 unitary authorities and 64 districts one third of the council was elected.
- Mayoral elections were held in six local authorities including an inaugural election in Copeland district in Cumbria.
- More than 30,000 candidates representing some 130 parties and groups and individual Independents contested the local elections, yielding a candidate/seat ratio of 3.3 overall.
- Of the nearly 6,000 wards with elections, candidates were returned unopposed in 187.
- The 2015 local elections gave nearly 30.25 million registered electors the opportunity to vote at a contested election –more than three-quarters of the total local government electorate in England.
- Some 19.5 million local election votes were counted in the ballot box, making the overall turnout 64.6%.
- The proportion of local ballots rejected at the official count was 0.9 per cent – more than twice as high as at the general election where it was 0.35% in England. Rejection was especially prevalent where voters were able to vote for more than one candidate at a ward election.
- Over 5 million postal votes were issued -16.8% of all those with a contested election in their ward. In 13 council areas more than 25% of the electorate had a postal vote; in another five fewer than 10% did so.
- More than four fifths (84.8%) of those with a postal ballot returned it. In contrast turnout among those required to vote 'in person' was 61.2%.
- The proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 3.8% compared with 3.3% in England at the general election. Rejection for a mismatch of signature and/or date of birth was 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 over 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.
- Some 86,500 of those with local elections in their area (0.29% of the total eligible electorate) appointed proxies to act on their behalf. In addition more than 5,000 emergency proxy votes were granted.
- 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 and of postal votes disallowed was higher.

Introduction

Local elections were held for just over 9,200 seats in 279 authorities in England. The whole council was elected in 130 district councils and 30 unitary authorities, and in one metropolitan borough (Doncaster) following boundary changes. In 35 metropolitan boroughs, 19 unitary authorities and 64 districts one third of the council was elected. Mayoral elections were held in six local authorities including an inaugural election in Copeland district in Cumbria.

Contestation

Local elections were scheduled in 5,964 wards with a total of 9,237 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 2015

	Wards	Seats
Metropolitan boroughs	815	849
Unitary authorities	1,126	1,909
District councils	4,023	6,479
Total	5,964	9,237

More than 30,000 candidates representing some 130 parties and groups and individual Independents contested the local elections, yielding a candidate/seat ratio of 3.3 overall.

Of the nearly 6,000 wards with elections, candidates were returned unopposed in 187 –two in the metropolitan boroughs, eight in the unitaries and 177 in the district councils. In addition five district contests were postponed, usually following the death of a nominated candidate.

Electorate

The 2015 local elections gave nearly 30.25 million registered electors the opportunity to vote at a contested election –more than three-quarters of the total local government electorate in England. Local election votes were cast at about 25,000 polling stations as well as by post.

Turnout

Across the country some 19.54 million local votes were counted at the ballot box, making the overall aggregate ‘ballot box’ turnout 64.6%. Taking into account those who tried to vote but had their postal vote returns rejected, the level of participation rises to 65.2%. In Table 2 and subsequently we use the term ‘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 these figures down by the type of local authority. Turnout was highest across the district councils and lowest in the metropolitan boroughs.

Table 2. Turnout at English local elections 2015

	Total turnout including rejected postal votes	Votes counted in ballot box	Valid vote turnout
Total	65.2	64.6	64.0
Met bors	62.1	61.4	61.1
Unitaries	63.7	63.1	62.6
District councils	67.7	67.2	66.4

Comparisons with the same point in the electoral cycle in 2011 are not appropriate because those local elections did not coincide with a general election. In Table 3, however, we do compare 2015 with a number of previous years. Although a different range of councils has elections in each year, the influence of other electoral events in boosting local turnout is apparent. At the time of general elections local electoral participation is up to twice ‘normal’ levels; in 2009, 2011, and 2014 when other UK-wide contests were held, turnout also seems to be above the long-term local election average.

Table 3. Turnout at English local elections 2005-2015*

	Total turnout	Ballot box turnout	Valid vote turnout
2015	65.2	64.6	64.0
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
2010	63.1	62.6	62.2
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
2005	n/a	n/a	63.9

*Local elections which coincided with a general election are highlighted in bold. The local elections in 2011 were held on the same day as a referendum on the parliamentary voting system. Those in 2014 and 2009 on the same day as a European Parliament election.

Naturally, there are variations from the mean when turnout is examined at the local authority level as set out in Table 4. The highest individual turnouts were among the district councils; the lowest among unitary authorities. At the level of wards, the highest recorded turnout can be up to twice that of the lowest in each type of authority. In 56 cases turnout at this level exceeded 80%; in nine cases it was less than 40%.

Table 4. Highest and lowest % ‘ballot box’ turnouts by local authority 2015

Local authority	Highest	Lowest	
Metropolitan boroughs			
Wirral	69.1	Sandwell	56.4
Trafford	68.7	Sunderland	55.4
Sefton	67.1	Manchester	55.2
Unitaries			
Bath and North East Somerset	71.2	Kingston upon Hull	52.8
Wokingham	71.2	Stoke-on-Trent	52.8
West Berkshire	70.8	Slough	51.9
Districts councils			
St Albans	74.7	Bolsover	58.1
Broadland	74.6	Mansfield	57.9
Rushcliffe	74.3	South Staffordshre	56.8

Rejected ballots

It is not unusual for more votes to be rejected at the count when local elections coincide with other events. While there is no evidence that constituencies with coincident local elections had a higher rate of rejected ballots at the 2015 general election, a greater proportion of local votes were rejected. It may be the case that the higher overall turnout at a general election brings to the polls electors either less familiar with or less willing to participate in the local elections process or indeed simply unaware that there is a local contest. A number then either fail to complete the local ballot paper correctly or even leave it completely blank.

Indeed the most common reason for rejection is an unclear ballot paper – ‘unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty’ in the technical language. In 2015 these accounted for almost 80% of rejections in those cases for which we have complete data. Electors can also fall foul of one of the other three criteria against which a vote’s validity is checked –that they should not have voted for more candidates or parties than allowed at that election; that they should not mark the ballot paper in such a way that they can be personally identified; and that the ballot paper itself should contain the official mark.

Table 5 shows the proportion of ballot papers examined at the count and subsequently rejected at a selection of recent elections in England. In 2015, as in 2010 and 2005, local election votes were more likely to be rejected than general election ones. At the 2015 local elections more than 180,000 votes were rejected at the count –that is 0.9% of all those counted compared with just 0.35% among general election votes in England.

Councils with all out elections every four years (where electors were often able to vote for more than one candidate) were more likely to have higher rejection rates than those that hold elections annually for a third of the council (where voters were usually only able to vote for one candidate). In the metropolitan boroughs, for example, where electors are usually asked to choose a single candidate exactly in the same way as at a general election, the rejection rate was less than 0.6%. Among the unitary authorities, on the other hand, although 0.6 per cent of local ballots were rejected at the count in those councils which hold annual elections with largely single member vacancies, the rejection rate of those cast in places with whole council elections and with multiple vacancies often being filled in each ward was more than 1 per cent. A similar story is apparent among the districts where two-thirds of all councils held all out elections and the overall rate of rejection was more than 1.1 per cent.

Table 5. Rejected ballots as % of total included at count – local elections in England 2005-15*

2005 general election	0.3
2005 local election	0.6
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
2015 general election	0.3
2015 local election	0.9

*different electoral events in the same year are marked in bold.

Postal voting –uptake and turnout

A record 5 million postal votes were issued at the local elections -16.8% 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 15.8% of local electors had a postal vote in 2014, 16.3% in 2011 when most of the seats contested this year were also fought, and 15.9% in 2010 (the previous occasion on which local and general elections coincided). The demand for a postal vote appears to have plateaued in the metropolitan boroughs, but in the districts it is at least a percentage point higher than in both 2011 (15.3%) and in 2013 (14.6%) when these same council areas had county elections.

Table 6. Postal electors and local votes 2015 –overall and by type of authority

Number of postal ballot papers issued	5,088,005	as % of electorate	16.8
Number returned	4,315,810	as % of issued	84.8
Number included 'in count'	4,151,342	as % of votes at count	21.2
Rejected or otherwise not included in count	164,468	as % of those returned	3.8

Metropolitan boroughs

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	18.4 (18.7 in 2011)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	84.6 (71.4 in 2011; 80.7 in 2010*)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	4.1 (5.0 in 2011)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	24.3 (32.8 in 2011)

Unitary authorities

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	16.0 (15.5 in 2011)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	84.7 (72.8 in 2011; 82.4 in 2010*)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	4.5 (5.7 in 2011)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	20.5 (25.9 in 2011)

District councils

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	16.3 (15.3 in 2011)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	85.0 (73.7 in 2011; 83.5 in 2010*)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.3 (5.1 in 2011)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	20.0 (24.1 in 2011)

*in 2010 the local elections coincided with the general election

In six council areas more than 30% of the electorate had a postal vote and in seven others more than 25% did so –see Table 7. These councils make a regular appearance on this list and each has had experience of all postal pilots in the past. At the other extreme, there are now just five authorities (eleven in 2014) where fewer than 10% of electors had a postal vote. There are, of course, even sharper variations when ward level turnout data are examined.

Table 7. Largest and smallest take up of postal votes - % electorate by authority 2015

Local authority

Largest

Mets

Sunderland	41.6
Newcastle upon Tyne	35.3
South Tyneside	33.2

Unitaries

Telford and Wrekin	30.4
Blackpool	25.6
Stockton on Tees	23.5

Districts

Stevenage	35.2
Rushcliffe	29.5
Chorley	27.8

Smallest

Sandwell	10.4
Coventry	10.3
Birmingham	9.1

Stoke-on-Trent	9.8
Kingston upon Hull	8.9
Halton	8.1

Melton	10.6
Epping Forest	10.0
Barrow in Furness	7.9

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 four in five postal electors used their vote (84.8%) which was even higher than the 80.9% postal vote turnout at the 2010 combined general and local elections. By contrast the turnout among those obliged to visit a polling station at the 2015 local elections was 61.2%. 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 2008-2015*

	Postal voter turnout	'In person' turnout
2015	84.8	61.2
2014	69.5	30.0
2013	67.1	25.0
2012	68.0	24.2
2011	72.8	36.7
2010	80.9	59.7
2009	68.7	35.2
2008	71.5	28.7

*Local elections in 2010 and 2015 coincided with a 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 2015 a fifth of all local votes counted (21.0%) 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

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.

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 appeared initially to have led to a small increase in the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count –see Table 9. However, the average figure has now settled at about 4% - or four in 100 of all postal ballot documentation returned. This year the rejection rate was 3.8%

compared with 4.7% in 2014 and 4.0% at the previous combined local and general elections in 2010.¹

Table 9. Postal vote rejection at English local elections 2006-2015*

% returned postal voting envelopes/contents not included in the count	
2015*	3.8
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 and 2015 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 about a half of all rejections in each type of local authority. This is in line with data from previous years.

Around one third of electors returned their postal voting envelopes but failed to include either the ballot paper itself or the verification statement or both (varying from 29% in the metropolitan boroughs to 34% in the unitary authorities). The proportion doing this was higher than in both 2013 and 2012, but on a par with 2014 and 2011 when local elections were also combined with other electoral events. It is likely that some voters deliberately decide not to participate at one election or the other and therefore do not return a ballot paper. Having said that, these figures represent percentages of the small number of rejected ballots. In fact, less than 1.0% 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.

¹ Following the European Parliamentary elections in May 2014, EROs in England, Scotland and Wales were for the first time required to inform electors where the signature and/or date of birth they supplied on the postal voting statement failed to match those held on record or had simply been left blank.

Table 10. Reasons for rejection of postal votes at verification by % of total rejected at 2015 local elections

	Met	Unit	Dist	Total
PV statement rejected (No signature)	5	6	5	5
PV statement rejected (No DoB)	3	4	4	4
PV statement rejected (Both)	10	8	12	11
Proportion rejected (incomplete information)	18	18	21	20
PV statement mismatched signature	20	24	21	22
PV statement mismatched DoB	20	18	17	18
PV statement mismatched both	13	7	8	9
Proportion rejected (mismatching)	53	49	46	49
Proportion rejected (ballot paper or statement missing)	29	34	32	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 over a half of one percent. These figures are similar to those in previous years with perhaps some suggestion of a small increase in take up. At the previous comparable local elections in 2011, for example, a lower proportion of electors took advantage of the facility. 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 2015 (2011) local elections

	As proportion of postal electors		Average per local authority
Total	0.56	(2011 0.47)	101
Met boroughs	0.42	(2011 0.35)	180
Unitaries	0.51	(2011 0.44)	120
District councils	0.67	(2011 0.57)	82

Proxy votes

The introduction of postal voting on demand has had a downward impact over time on the number of electors appointing proxies, especially when there is no concurrent general election –see Table 12. This year the level of proxy voting at both general and local elections was similar to that at the combined elections in 2010. Some 86,500 of those electors with local elections in their area (0.29% of the total eligible electorate) appointed a proxy and more than 5,000 emergency proxies were issued across all councils with local elections. The latter is a tenfold increase compared with 2010 and follows a relaxation of

the rules in Great Britain regarding eligibility for an emergency proxy vote under the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013.

Table 12. Proxy voters as percentage of electorate in England 2001-2015

2015 Gen	2015 Loc	2014 Loc	2013 Loc	2012 Loc	2011 Loc
0.32	0.29	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.15
2010 Loc	2010 Gen	2005 Gen	2001 Gen		
0.28	0.32	0.22	0.47		

Mayoral Elections

Together with the general election and local contests, mayoral elections took place in Bedford, Copeland, Leicester, Mansfield, Middlesbrough, and Torbay. In Bedford, Leicester and Torbay the incumbent was re-elected; in Mansfield and Middlesbrough the Independent incumbents stood down and were succeeded by Independent and Labour candidates respectively. The inaugural mayoral election in Copeland saw an Independent elected. Details of turnout, rejected ballots, and postal voting can be found in Table 13 below.

Table 13. Mayoral elections May 2015

	% ballot box turnout	% rejected ballots	
Bedford	66.0	2.2	
Copeland	61.7	4.0	
Leicester	59.0	3.5	
Mansfield	57.9	3.3	
Middlesbrough	53.0	4.0	
Torbay	60.4	4.0	
	%postal voters	% postal vote turnout	%postal ballots rejected
Bedford	16.5	85.6	8.1
Copeland	19.2	77.4	3.7
Leicester	13.3	81.5	7.3
Mansfield	16.0	79.8	7.2
Middlesbrough	12.8	80.1	5.2
Torbay	16.4	86.4	4.6

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 general election counterparts. Between 2.2% and 4.0% of ballots were rejected at the count (3.4% average) compared to just 0.33% for the UK Parliamentary ballot papers. 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 compared with the first past the post ballot paper.²

The greater proportion of rejected postal ballots may also reflect a deliberate decision to abstain from the mayoral contest. Rejected postal votes amounted to between 4 and 8% of the total returned (6.4% average) compared with 3.3% at the general election. A third of postal vote rejections were because the ballot paper was missing compared with just 10% across Great Britain at the general election and 15% at the English local elections

² On this topic see the Electoral Commission report, *Public user testing of instructions for SV ballot papers: Summary and Recommendations*. Available at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/190518/Public-user-testing-of-SV-instructions-recommendations.pdf