

# Local Elections in England 2011

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## Summary

- Local elections were held for about 9,400 seats in 279 authorities in England. The whole council was elected in 156 authorities. In the other 123 cases a third of council seats fell vacant.
- Just over 27,000 candidates contested the elections, yielding a candidate/seat ratio of 2.9 overall. A total of 321 councillors across 256 wards were elected unopposed.
- The 2011 local elections gave over 30.2 million registered electors the opportunity to vote: a little under 80% of the total electorate in England.
- Nearly 150,000 electors (0.5% of the total) registered in the weeks leading up to the election – under the so-called '11 day rule'.
- Some 12.4 million votes were counted, making the overall turnout 42.0%. This was higher than at the same round of contests in either 2007 or 2003. It is likely that the concurrent PVS referendum stimulated some additional participation.
- The proportion of ballots that are rejected at the official count continues to be small. In 2011 it was about one in every hundred votes cast. However that is a higher figure even than at recent 'combined' elections.
- Over 4.8 million postal votes were issued -16.3% of all those with a contested election in their ward.
- In nine council areas more than 30% of the electorate had a postal vote; in another dozen fewer than 10% had a postal vote.
- More than seven in ten (72.8%) of those with a postal ballot returned it. In contrast only half that proportion (36.7%) of those electors required to vote 'in person' did so.
- The proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 5.2%.
- Rejection following a mismatch of signature and/or date of birth was more common than rejection for incomplete information, but in a third or more of cases voters returned their postal voting envelopes but failed to include either the ballot paper itself or the verification statement or both.
- About one 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 45,000 local electors (0.15% of the total electorate) appointed proxies to act on their behalf.

## Introduction

Local elections took place in 279 local authorities in England on May 5 2011 – the same day as the UK-wide referendum on the Parliamentary Voting System. The whole council was elected in 126 shire district and 30 unitary authorities. In all 36 metropolitan boroughs, 19 unitary authorities and 68 district councils a third of the seats fell vacant. There were no local elections in London, and in 13 other council areas<sup>1</sup>.

## Election results

Elections were scheduled in 6,073 wards with a total of 9,438 seats at stake. The breakdown of vacancies for the different types of authority is given in Table 1. In a small number of cases voters were asked to cast an additional ballot where a casual vacancy (that is, a by-election caused by the death or resignation of a sitting councillor) was being filled in conjunction with the due election in that ward.

**Table 1: Wards/seats falling vacant local elections 2011**

	Wards	Seats	Casual vacancies (seats)
Metropolitan boroughs	815	815	9
Unitaries –whole council	795	1,598	n/a
Unitaries –thirds	335	336	3
Districts –whole council	3,133	5,694	n/a
Districts –thirds	995	995	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,073</b>	<b>9,438</b>	<b>32</b>

The Conservatives beat Labour in terms of votes cast overall. They were also more efficient in terms of converting votes into seats, winning a greater proportion of them than either of their rivals –see Table 2. In the metropolitan boroughs Labour won nearly three-quarters of the seats with just over 50% of the votes cast; in the districts the Conservatives polled 45% of the vote and won well over half the seats. In the unitary authorities the Conservatives topped both the popular vote and the number of seats with Labour in second place.

**Table 2: Vote and Seat share local elections 2011**

	Vote (%)	Seats (%)
Conservative	37.8	54.0
Labour	31.7	26.1
Lib Dem	16.1	11.6
Green	3.6	0.8
Independent	5.6	5.7
Other	5.2	1.8

## Contestation

A total of 27,132 candidates contested seats at the 2011 local elections –an overall candidate/seat ratio of 2.9. The most competitive elections were in the

metropolitan boroughs where 4.1 candidates contested each vacancy; in the districts, by contrast, there were 2.6 candidates for each seat. Some 321 councillors (3.4% of all vacancies) across 256 wards were elected unopposed. Almost all of these cases occurred in district council areas.

## Electorate

The local elections in 2011 gave 30.2 million registered electors the opportunity to vote: a little under 80% of the total electorate in England. Nearly 150,000 electors took advantage of the so-called '11 day rule' (which was introduced by the 2006 Electoral Administration Act and allows people to register to vote until 11 working days before an election or referendum) and chose to register during the pre-election period. Local election votes were cast at some 24,900 polling stations as well as by post.

## Turnout

Across the country some 12.4 million valid local votes were cast, making the overall aggregate turnout 42.0% - see Table 3<sup>2</sup>. Taking into account those who tried to vote but had their postal vote returns rejected, the level of participation rises to 42.7%. Comparison with previous combined elections is unhelpful as in 1997, 2001 and 2005 the local elections that coincided with the general election were overwhelmingly concentrated in shire England. However it might be noted that the aggregate turnout in 2007, when almost the same wards/seats were contested as this year, was 38.1%.

In the rest of this report we use the term 'adjusted turnout' to refer to calculations based simply on the number of valid votes cast; 'minimal unadjusted turnout' to refer to calculations taking into account those whose vote was rejected at the count; and 'maximal unadjusted turnout' to refer to calculations which take into account votes rejected at the count *and* those rejected at the postal ballot verification stage. The evidence in Table 3 confirms that only a small fraction of voters try to vote but fail to do so successfully. We return to this issue later in the context of the regulations on postal voting.

**Table 3. Adjusted and unadjusted turnout at English local elections 2011**

	max unadjusted	min unadjusted	adjusted
Total	42.7	42.0	41.6
Mets	39.4	38.7	38.4
Unitaries	41.7	41.1	40.7
Districts	45.1	44.5	44.0

The higher overall level of turnout in the districts, and variations in participation between authorities of the same type, reflects the continuing broad relationship between an area's affluence/deprivation and its recorded level of turnout. This is a pattern also noted at general elections. Naturally, there are greater variations when turnout is examined at the local authority or ward level as set

out in Table 4. In the case of wards, the highest recorded turnout is at least three times higher than that of the lowest recorded turnout in each type of authority.

**Table 4. Highest and lowest aggregate adjusted % turnouts by local authority/ward 2011**

<b>Local authority</b>		<b>Highest</b>	<b>Lowest</b>
<b>Mets</b>			
Solihull		49.4	Manchester 31.8
Trafford		43.1	Knowsley 32.0
Wirral		43.0	Wigan 33.4
<b>Unitaries</b>			
West Berkshire		49.0	Stoke on Trent 31.1
Bath and North East Somerset		48.8	Hartlepool 31.4
Windsor and Maidenhead		48.0	Kingston upon Hull 32.0
<b>Districts</b>			
South Lakeland		55.1	Cannock Chase 33.1
West Dorset		54.2	Basildon 34.6
Winchester		53.8	Barrow in Furness 36.1
<b>Ward</b>			
<b>High turnouts</b>			
Mets	Solihull	St Alphege	63.3
Unitaries	Blackburn with Darwen	Bastwell	68.5
Districts	Rushcliffe	Keyworth North	71.1
<b>Low turnouts</b>			
Mets	Liverpool	Central	15.6
Unitaries	Cheshire East	Crewe South	21.1
Districts	Lancaster	University	16.1

### **Rejected ballots**

As suggested by the differences between adjusted and unadjusted turnout set out in Table 3, 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. Votes which pass this test 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 –England 2001-11**

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

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 2011 local elections more than 120,000 votes were rejected at the count –that is, 1.0% of all those counted. This is twice as high as at the local elections at the same point of the cycle in 2007, and rather higher than the rejection rate at other recent ‘combined’ elections such as the 2010 general and local elections and the 2009 European Parliament and local contests. The rejection rate in the metropolitan boroughs (0.7%) which had single member contests was lower than that in either the unitaries (0.9%) or the districts (1.1%) where multi-member vacancies were common. The more votes electors are asked to use at a given electoral event, the more the chances of a mistake being made.

The most common reason for rejection is an unclear ballot paper –‘unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty’ in the technical language. In 2011 these accounted for almost three-quarters of rejections in those cases where we have complete data. In only one case (Blackburn with Darwen 4.1%) were in excess of 3% of ballots coming to the count rejected. The Blackburn council and constituency areas also topped the list of rejected ballot papers in the local and general election counting in 2010. However, we cannot know what proportion of such rejections is the result of deliberate as opposed to accidental actions by voters or, indeed, a consequence of the policies of local election officials.

### **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 4.8 million postal votes were issued -16.3% of all those with a contested election in their ward (Table 6). Exact comparisons with previous years are impossible because of the varying electoral cycle, but it can be noted that 12.8% of local electors had a postal vote in 2007 (the previous occasion when almost all the seats being contested this year last fell vacant) and that 15.9% of electors throughout England had one at the 2010 general election. Postal voting remains most common in the metropolitan areas, 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.

**Table 6. Postal electors and local votes 2011 –overall and by type of authority**

Number of postal ballot papers issued	4,816,514	as % of electorate	16.3
Number returned	3,504,194	as % of issued	72.8
Number included 'in count'	3,320,487	as % of votes at count	26.8
Rejected or otherwise not included in count	183,707	as % of those returned	5.2

**Mets**

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	18.7 (15.7 in 2007)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	71.4 (75.3 in 2007)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	5.0 (4.3 in 2007)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	32.8 (31.7 in 2007)

**Unitaries**

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	15.5 (13.1 in 2007)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	72.8 (75.2 in 2007)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	5.7 (3.4 in 2007)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	25.9 (25.8 in 2007)

**Districts**

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	15.3 (11.9 in 2007)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	73.7 (74.8 in 2007)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	5.1 (3.4 in 2007)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	24.1 (21.7 in 2007)

In nine areas more than 30% of the electorate had a postal vote –see Table 7. These councils make a regular appearance on this list and all have conducted all postal pilots in the past. At the other extreme, there were a dozen authorities where fewer than 10% had a postal vote. Propping up this end of the table is Kingston upon Hull from the Yorkshire and The Humber region. Its presence demonstrates that council/party activity remains necessary to reinforce a culture of continuing to use postal votes even where there have been all postal elections in the past. It is also instructive to note that the proportion of electors with postal votes in Birmingham is just 9.4%. This remains by some way the lowest figure for a metropolitan borough and may reflect reaction by the local authority and voters alike to the high profile court case relating to postal vote fraud in 2004. There are even sharper variations when ward level data are examined.

**Table 7. Biggest and smallest take up of postal votes - % electorate by authority 2011****Local authority****Biggest**

Sunderland	39.5
South Tyneside	37.8
Stevenage	36.7
Newcastle upon Tyne	34.0
Telford and Wrekin	33.5

**Smallest**

Kingston upon Hull	6.3
Barrow in Furness	6.8
Halton	8.6
North Warwickshire	8.9
East Cambridgeshire	9.2

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. Nearly three in four postal electors used their vote, although this was a little lower than at the comparable local elections in 2007 –see Table 6. By contrast the turnout among those obliged to visit a polling station was barely half that level (36.7%). This phenomenon also means that postal votes form a disproportionate number of those at the count. In 2011 more than a quarter of all local votes counted (26.7%) were cast by post; in the metropolitan boroughs it was nearly a third (32.8%). 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 appears to have led to a small increase in the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count. In terms of the actual local election returns for England in 2011, the overall proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 5.2% compared with 4.0% in 2010, 4.7% in 2009, 3.6% in 2008, 3.2% in 2007, and 3.0% at the last local elections before the new regulations in 2006. Where electoral events are combined, as in many cases in 2009, 2010 and 2011, there is some evidence that the rejection rate of postal ballots is higher. For example, there were no local elections in London this year and the rate of rejection of postal ballots at the stand alone PVS referendum was 4.7%: a full percentage point *below* the overall average for England at those contests. By contrast in 2010, when London had combined local and general elections, 4.6% of postal votes were rejected – 0.8% *above* the England average.

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 8 makes clear that rejection following a mismatch of signature and/or date of birth was more common than rejection for incomplete or missing information. The latter accounts for between one in three (metropolitan boroughs) and one in five rejections; the former for between a little under half of rejections (unitary authorities) and over a third (metropolitan boroughs). In a further third or more of cases voters returned their postal voting envelopes but failed to include either the ballot paper itself or the verification statement or both. Having said that, the vast majority correctly filed their returns complete with matching signature and date of birth.

Although the pattern is not wholly dissimilar in the different types of council, these data should be seen as indicative rather than definitive. Not all

authorities were able to provide the breakdowns requested, and some reported to us that the election software used did not allow for a break down of rejections into these categories. Indeed in some cases, where for example all of a large number of rejections are listed under a single category, the figures given for the various columns look implausible. Other authorities pointed out that the joint issue of postal voting documentation for a combined election, and the lack of a specific recording category for those who decided to vote only in one electoral event, made keeping an accurate tally very difficult.

**Table 8. Reasons for rejection of postal votes at verification by % of total rejected at 2011 local elections (rounded)**

	<b>Mets</b>	<b>Unitaries</b>	<b>Districts</b>
PV statement rejected (No signature)	18	7	7
PV statement rejected (No DoB)	3	3	3
PV statement rejected (Both)	12	11	12
<b>Proportion rejected (incomplete information)</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>22</b>
PV statement mismatched signature	17	21	19
PV statement mismatched DoB	12	14	13
PV statement mismatched both	5	10	9
<b>Proportion rejected (mismatching)</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Prop rejected (ballot paper or statement missing)</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>38</b>

## Waivers

A concession granted under the terms of the EAA 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 9 shows that the proportion of postal electors granted such a waiver varied from 0.35% in the metropolitan boroughs to 0.57% in the shire districts. These summary figures are very similar in both proportion and pattern to those recorded for the 2010 general election and the 2009 European Parliament and English local elections. However, they do disguise considerable variations between counting areas. Among the districts, for example, Arun in West Sussex granted 436 waivers (about 0.4% of its electorate) while Ryedale in North Yorkshire granted just three. In the metropolitan boroughs the range was from 536 in Trafford to 29 in Knowsley.

**Table 9: Postal electors granted 'waivers' at the 2011 English local elections**

	<b>As proportion of postal electors</b>	<b>Average per local authority</b>
England	0.47	81
Mets	0.35	154
Unitaries	0.44	98
Districts	0.57	63

## Proxy votes

The introduction of postal voting on demand has had an impact on the number of electors appointing proxies, especially when there is no concurrent general election –see Table 10. This year was no different with some 45,500 local electors (0.15% of the total electorate) appointing a proxy and just 294 emergency proxies being issued across all councils with local elections.

**Table 10. Proxy voters as percentage of electorate in England 2001-2011**

2011 Loc	2010 Loc	2010 Gen	2009 Loc	2008 Loc	2007 Loc	2005 Gen	2001 Gen
0.15	0.28	0.32	0.13	0.09	0.12	0.22	0.47

## Mayors

In five local authorities there were contests for directly-elected Mayors. In four cases –Bedford, Mansfield, Middlesbrough, and Torbay– these followed the expiry of the incumbent’s term of office. In Leicester, it was an inaugural election. Turnout and the use of postal and proxy votes closely matched that at the concurrent local elections. The winning candidates in Leicester and Middlesbrough polled over 50% of first preference votes and were elected on the first count. In the other cases the Supplementary Vote (SV) system came into play. In Mansfield the eventual winner did *not* top the poll in terms of first preferences.

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<sup>1</sup> These were the unitary councils of Cornwall, Durham, Isle of Wight, Northumberland, Shropshire, and Wiltshire which currently operate according to a different electoral cycle; and those seven district councils which have elections by halves in even numbered years –Adur, Cheltenham, Fareham, Gosport, Hastings, Nuneaton and Bedworth, and Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> Councils were sometimes unable to provide a figure for the number of ballot papers issued in those wards where more than one vacancy was being contested. In such cases we have used an algorithm to estimate the number of individual voters who went to the polls, see L. Ware, G. Borisjuk, C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, A New Algorithm for Estimating Turnout, *Electoral Studies*, 25,1 2006. Adjusted (or valid vote) turnout based on an average of the turnout level in all wards with contested elections was 43.6%.