

Local Elections in England, May 2018

August 2018

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Tel: 020 7271 0500

Email: publications@electoralcommission.org.uk

The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. We work to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. We undertake the collection and analysis of electoral data after all elections and referendums.

1.2 This report provides analysis on participation in and the administration of the local government elections in England, held on 3 May 2018. For this, data were collected from Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers. This comprised the Form K 'Statement as to Postal Ballot Papers' and an additional data form, specified by the Commission, which included data relating to electoral registration, turnout, absent voting and rejected ballots.

1.3 Local elections were scheduled in 67 district, 17 unitary and 34 metropolitan authorities on 3 May 2018. There were also local elections in all 32 London Boroughs.

1.4 There were also city mayoral elections in Hackney, Lewisham, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Watford and combined authority mayoral elections for the Sheffield City Region in Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield. In just 3 wards were candidates elected unopposed.

Electorate	21.5 million
Turnout	Ballot box: 34.7% Postal vote: 67.0% In-person: 28.6%
Rejected ballots	Ballots at the count: 0.4% Postal votes: 2.7%
Proxies appointed	23,724 (0.1% of the electorate) 793 emergency proxies

2 Electorate

2.1 The local government elections gave 21.5 million registered electors the opportunity to vote; 5.2 million in district councils, 10.3 million in unitary and metropolitan authorities and 5.9 million in London Boroughs.

2.2 A total of 198,003 electors (0.9% of the electorate in contested wards) were added to the electoral register during the weeks leading up to the elections.

2.3 A total of 351,271 applications to register were received in the weeks leading up to the election. Almost a quarter (24%) of these was recorded as duplicates.¹

2.4 In addition, 76,036 individuals applied to register to vote after the registration deadline. 1,325 individuals were recorded as trying to vote on polling day despite not being registered.

2.5 Votes were cast at 14,381 polling stations as well as by post.

3 Turnout

3.1 The measure of turnout referred to in this report, 'ballot box turnout', includes all valid votes cast ('valid vote turnout') and votes rejected at the count. Total turnout refers to valid votes cast, votes rejected at the count and those rejected at the postal ballot verification stage before the count. Table 3.1 confirms that only a small fraction of the total votes cast are not valid.

Table 3.1: Turnout

	Electorate	Valid vote turnout	Ballot box turnout	Total turnout	Difference valid vote – total (pp)
2018	21.5 m	34.6%	34.7%	35.0%	0.4
Districts	5.2 m	34.8%	34.9%	35.2%	0.3
Unitary	2.3 m	32.8%	32.9%	33.2%	0.4
Metropolitan	8.1m	31.8%	31.9%	32.3%	0.5
London Borough	5.9m	38.9%	39.0%	39.3%	0.4

¹ 10 local authorities were unable to provide information on applications. 16 were unable to provide information on duplicate applications.

2014	22.2 m	35.5%	35.7%	36.2%	0.7
Districts	5.3 m	36.6%	36.9%	37.4%	0.5
Unitary	2.6 m	33.8%	34.0%	34.6%	0.8
Metropolitan	8.4m	33.3%	33.5%	34.1%	0.8
London Borough	5.8m	38.2%	38.5%	38.9%	0.7

3.2 Ballot box turnout was 34.7%, which is lower than the turnout at the most comparable local government elections in 2014 (35.7%).

3.3 There are variations from the overall mean turnout when turnout is examined at the local authority level. The highest turnout was observed across London boroughs and district councils, while turnout was lower across unitary and metropolitan councils. Table 3.2 shows the highest and lowest turnouts across each type of local authority. The highest turnout observed was in Richmond upon Thames where 51.4% of registered electors cast a ballot. The lowest turnout was in Hartlepool where 24.0% cast a ballot.

Table 3.2: Turnout 2018

Highest		Lowest	
Districts			
South Lakeland	47.4%	Havant	28.6%
Winchester	44.2%	Cannock Chase	27.9%
Mole Valley	43.2%	Broxbourne	27.2%
Unitary			
Wokingham	39.7%	Halton	26.3%
Swindon	39.4%	Hull	25.0%
Derby	38.7%	Hartlepool	24.0%
Metropolitan			
Trafford	43.0%	Salford	26.1%
Calderdale	40.7%	Barnsley	25.0%
Newcastle upon Tyne	38.9%	Knowsley	25.0%
London Borough			
Richmond upon Thames	51.4%	Lambeth	34.0%
Kingston upon Thames	47.3%	Southwark	33.6%
Barnet	43.8%	Barking and Dagenham	29.7%

Rejected ballot papers

3.4 The proportion of ballots rejected at official counts was 0.4 %. This compares with 0.6% at the 2014 local elections. The rejection rate at

metropolitan council elections was lower than at elections for other types of local authority (0.3% compared with 0.4%).

3.5 The majority of rejected ballots (64.9%) were rejected due to being unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty. More than a quarter (28.4%) were rejected due to voting for more candidates than allowed.

Table 3.3: Reasons for rejected ballots, 2018

	No official mark	Voting for more candidates	Mark by which the voter could be identified	Unmarked	Rejected in part
Districts	0.4%	22.3%	2.7%	74.2%	0.4%
Unitary	1.2%	30.6%	3.1%	64.6%	0.5%
Metropolitan	0.8%	28.0%	4.2%	66.1%	1.6%
London Borough	1.1%	32.6%	3.2%	57.3%	5.8%
Total	0.9%	28.4%	3.4%	64.9%	2.7%

4 Postal voting

4.1 The total number of postal votes issued for these elections was 3.6 million, representing 16.7% of all electors with a contested election in their ward. This compares with 15.8% at the 2014 local elections.

4.2 At a local authority level, electors registered for a postal vote ranged from 41.8% in Sunderland to 8.8% in Halton.

4.3 Postal voting was more common in metropolitan authorities where 18.1% of the electorate (1.5 million electors) were issued with a postal ballot paper compared with 16.6% in districts, 15.5% in London boroughs and 15.4% in unitary authorities.

Table 4.1: Highest and lowest proportions of postal voters

Highest		Lowest	
Sunderland	41.8%	Epping Forest	10.1%
Newcastle upon Tyne	36.1%	Oxford	9.4%
Stevenage	33.6%	Halton	8.8%

4.4 The proportion of postal voters returning their ballot papers always exceeds the turnout among 'in person' voters. This year, 67.0%² postal electors used their postal vote compared with 28.6% who turned up to vote in person.³

4.5 Postal votes accounted for 31.4% of all votes included at the count. This compares with 29.3% in 2014.

Rejected postal ballots

4.6 Postal voting packs (PV) require voters to provide their signature and date of birth (DOB). These identifiers are then matched against those provided at the time of application. If the signature or date of birth is missing or does not match, the postal vote is rejected and is not included at the count.

4.7 Since 2014, Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) have been required to notify electors if their postal vote has been rejected and give the reason(s) for rejection. They can also request the elector to provide an up-to-date signature.

4.8 The total rate of rejection across elections was 2.7%, which represents a decrease from 4.7% in 2014.⁴ The overall fall in levels of rejected postal votes suggests that the new policy may be having a positive impact overall.

Table 4.2: Rejected postal ballots as % of envelopes returned

	2014	2018
Overall	4.7%	2.7%
Districts	4.9%	1.9%
Unitary	4.6%	2.5%
Metropolitan	5.7%	3.2%
London Borough	4.2%	2.9%

4.9 About two-thirds (64.5%) of rejected ballots were rejected due to mismatched information. In over a quarter of cases (26.1%) postal ballots were rejected due to missing information, and about a fifth (19.4%) of rejected

² This calculation omits Blackburn with Darwen as the number of postal ballots received had not been submitted at time of writing.

³ There is no statutory field that captures the number of postal voting statements received by the Returning Officer. In practice, we use field B6, 'Number of covering envelopes received by the Returning Officer or at a polling station before the close of poll' as a surrogate but we know that, as mentioned, electors can return multiple postal ballots in one envelope or return envelopes without any ballots.

⁴ As figures reported for the postal votes rejected field were inconsistent, we used a calculation of covering envelopes received minus field postal votes included in the count as a surrogate for the total number of postal votes rejected. This approach is consistent with previous years.

postal ballots were rejected as voters failed to include either the ballot paper itself or the verification statement or both.

Table 4.4: Reasons for postal vote statement rejection

		2018
Missing information	Signature	10.0%
	DoB	6.7%
	Both	9.4%
Mismatched information	Signature	27.5%
	DoB	26.6%
	Both	10.4%
Missing forms	Ballot paper	11.1%
	PV statement	8.3%

4.10 These figures are percentages of the total, small number of rejected ballots. For example, although 64.5% of rejected postal votes were rejected due to mismatched information, this represents 1.7% of covering envelopes received and 0.5% of all votes cast. The vast majority of postal voters did cast their vote correctly.

5 Proxies and waivers

5.1 A total of 23,724 electors appointed a proxy (0.1 % of the electorate) for the local government elections. This is consistent with levels in 2014.

5.2 The number of emergency proxies issued was 793. This is higher than in 2014, 530 emergency proxies were issued.

5.3 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. A total of 18,256 waivers were granted, representing 0.5% of postal electors.

6 Mayoral elections

6.1 Together with the local government elections there were city mayoral elections in Hackney, Lewisham, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Watford. There was also a Combined Authority Mayoral Election for the Sheffield City Region in Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield. Details of turnout, rejected ballots and postal voting can be found in Table 6.1.

	Ballot box turnout	Rejected ballots	Postal Votes issued	Postal Vote turnout
Mayoral	38.2%	2.2%	15.4%	62.7%
Hackney	36.9%	1.9%	17.9%	59.3%
Lewisham	37.9%	1.3%	13.0%	61.9%
Newham	35.8%	2.4%	13.9%	59.6%
Tower Hamlets	42.0%	3.2%	16.2%	67.4%
Watford	39.3%	1.7%	18.0%	68.0%
Sheffield City Region	25.8%	1.8%	21.7%	57.0%
Barnsley	25.0%	1.5%	17.3%	62.3%
Doncaster	20.1%	1.1%	26.4%	47.7%
Rotherham	21.3%	1.3%	24.9%	51.7%
Sheffield	31.6%	2.3%	19.6%	60.3%

7 Appendix A

7.1 All information contained within this report and the accompanying dataset is based on data received from Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers.

7.2 There remain inconsistencies in the ways in which local authorities record and report information.

7.3 We continue to notice differences in the coding of information by different electoral management software. For example, customers of one electoral management software supplier consistently report a higher proportion of 'mismatching' than others.

7.4 Inconsistencies relating to the reasons for and total number of postal vote rejections on the Form K appear to result from the potential for differences in interpretation and treatment. For example, in the treatment of the numbers of covering envelopes and ballot papers returned, covering envelopes may be sent in without the A envelope or postal voting statement enclosed, while the missing document may or may not be sent in a separate covering envelope later, or multiple ballots may be returned in one envelope.

7.5 When local authorities are contacted about such anomalies they are often unable to provide revised figures or clarify why the data were coded in that way. In practice, we use a calculation of field B6 minus field C18 as a surrogate for the total number of postal votes rejected regardless of whether or not it is the same as recorded in field C19.

7.6 The different breakdown of reasons for rejection collected on the additional data form does not always match this B6 minus C18 calculation. However, the discrepancies seem less severe and the categories have the advantage of being embedded in software and of having greater 'common sense' meaning. It would seem sensible to consider replacing fields B15-17 on Form K with three other aggregated categories: rejections for mismatching; rejections for missing identifier information; rejections for absent documentation. As it is, field B15 is largely redundant given that almost all authorities now verify 100% of postal vote returns.

7.7 There is no field that captures the number of postal voting statements received by the Returning Officer or at a polling station before the close of poll. In practice, we use field B6, 'Number of covering envelopes received by the Returning Officer or at a polling station before the close of poll' as a surrogate but we know that, as mentioned, electors can return multiple postal ballots in one envelope or return envelopes without any ballots.

8 Appendix B

Form K: STATEMENT AS TO POSTAL BALLOT PAPERS
REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACTS
LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTION
Ward:
Date of Poll:
A. Issue of postal ballot papers
1. Total number of postal ballot papers issued under regulation 71
2. Total number of postal ballot papers issued under regulation 77 (spoilt and returned for cancellation), regulation 78 (lost or not received) and regulation 78A (cancelled due to change of address)
3. Total number of postal ballot papers cancelled under regulation 86A (where the first ballot paper was cancelled and retrieved)
4. Total number of postal ballot papers issued (1 to 3)
5. Total number of ballot papers cancelled under regulation 78A
B (1). Receipt of and replacement postal ballot papers
6. Number of covering envelopes received by the Returning Officer or at a polling station before the close of poll (excluding any undelivered or returned under regulation 77(1) (spoilt), regulation 78(1) (lost) and regulation 86A (cancelled ballot papers))
7. Number of covering envelopes received by the returning officer after the close of poll, excluding any returned as undelivered
8. Number of postal ballot papers returned spoilt for cancellation in time for another ballot paper to be issued
9. Number of postal ballot papers identified as lost or not received in time for another ballot paper to be issued
10. Number of ballot papers cancelled and retrieved in time for another ballot paper to be issued
11. Number of postal ballot papers returned as spoilt too late for another ballot paper to be issued
12. Number of covering envelopes returned as undelivered (up to the 25th day after the date of poll)
13. Number of covering envelopes not received by the Returning Officer (by the 25th day after the date of poll)
14. Total numbers 6 to 13 (this should be the same as that in 4 above)
B (2). Receipt of postal ballot papers – Personal Identifiers
15. Number of covering envelopes set aside for the verification of personal identifiers on postal voting statements
16. Number of postal voting statements subject to verification procedure rejected as not completed (excluding prior cancellations)

17. Number of postal voting statements rejected following verification procedures due to the personal identifiers on the postal voting statement not matching those in the personal identifiers record (excluding prior cancellations)
C. Count of postal ballot papers
18. Number of ballot papers returned by postal voters which were included in the count of ballot papers
19. Number of cases in which a covering envelope or its contents were marked "Rejected" (cancellations under regulations 77, 78, 78A and 86A are not rejections and should be included in items 2, 3, 5, 8, 9 and 10 above)
Date:
Signed: Returning Officer
Authority:

Additional data form
1) Number of proxies appointed for these elections
2) Number of emergency proxies appointed for these elections
3) Number of waivers granted for these elections
4) Number of postal votes rejected for:
a) Want of a signature
b) Want of a date of birth
c) Want of both
d) Mismatched signature
e) Mismatched DoB
f) Both mismatched
g) Ballot paper unreturned
h) Postal voting statement unreturned
5) Number of polling stations used for these elections
6) Number of postal ballot papers returned on polling day before 10pm
7) Number of postal ballot papers returned on the day after polling day before 10pm
8) Number of new electors added to the register between 01/12/17 - 26/03/18 inclusive
9) Number of new electors added to the register between 27/03/18 and 17/04/18 inclusive
10) Number of applications received after the registration deadline
11) Number of applications received between 23/11/17 and 26/03/18 inclusive
12) Number of duplicate applications received between the 23/11/17 and 26/03/18 inclusive
13) Number of applications received between 27/03/18 and 17/04/18 inclusive
14) Number of duplicate applications received between 27/03/18 and 17/04/18

inclusive

15) Number of people who tried to vote on polling day and were found not to be registered
