

Local Elections in England, May 2017

October 2017

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Tel: 020 7271 0500

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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 4 May 2017. 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 27 counties and seven unitary and metropolitan authorities on 4 May 2017. There were also city mayoral elections in Doncaster and North Tyneside. In just four wards and divisions were candidates elected unopposed.¹

Electorate	18.6 million
Turnout	Ballot box: 35.1% (6.5 million votes) Postal vote: 68.7% In-person: 28.8%
Rejected ballots	Ballots at the count: 0.3% Postal votes: 2.3%
Proxies appointed	22,029 (0.1% of the electorate) 641 emergency proxies

2 Electorate

2.1 The elections gave 18.6 million registered electors the opportunity to vote²; 16.4 million in county councils, 2.0 million in unitary and metropolitan authorities, and 376,295 in city mayoral elections.³

2.2 A total of 174,238 electors (0.9% of the electorate in contested wards) were added to the electoral register during the weeks leading up to the

¹ Stillington (Hambleton), Thirsk (Hambleton), Much Wenlock (Shropshire), Bulford Allington & Fiheldean (Wiltshire).

² Excluding 20,441 in four uncontested wards/divisions.

³ Doncaster held both county council and city mayor elections. Doncaster is captured under both unitary and metropolitan authorities, and city mayoral, but counted only once in the total figures.

election. As a proportion of the electorate, this was highest in Shropshire where additions represented 2.0% of the electorate in contested wards, and lowest in Norfolk, where additions represented 0.5% of the electorate in contested wards.

2.3 A total of 204,845 applications to register were received in the weeks leading up to the election. Almost a quarter (22.3%) of these was recorded as duplicates.⁴

2.4 In addition, 332,004 individuals applied to register to vote after the registration deadline. This is likely to be attributable to the announcement of the UK parliamentary general election which came after the deadline for registration for the council elections. Based on data from 155 local authorities, 1,288 individuals were recorded as trying to vote on election day despite not being registered.⁵

2.5 Votes were cast at 16,977 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)
2017	18.6 m	35.0%	35.1%	35.3%	0.4
County	16.4 m	34.8%	35.0%	35.2%	0.3
Unitary / Met	2.0 m	36.4%	36.6%	36.9%	0.5
City mayoral	376,295	31.0%	31.4%	32.0%	0.9
2013	18.4 m	30.8%	30.9%	31.2%	0.5
County	16.4 m	30.7%	30.8%	31.1%	0.4
Unitary / Met	2.0 m	31.6%	31.9%	32.3%	0.6
City mayoral	380,832	29.3%	29.6%	30.0%	0.7

⁴ Three local authorities were unable to provide information on applications. Eight were unable to provide information on duplicate applications.

⁵ 53 local authorities were not able to provide this information.

3.2 Ballot box turnout was 35.1%, which is higher than turnout at the comparable stage in the electoral cycle in 2013, but still lower than turnout at the 2009 elections (39.3%), when European Parliament elections were held on the same day.

3.3 Turnout increased across all counties, unitary and metropolitan authorities, and city mayoral elections. At a division/ward level, turnout ranged from 18.1 in Tidworth, Wiltshire to 60.1 in Hexham West, Northumberland. In five divisions/wards, turnout was less than 20%.

Table 3.2: Turnout 2013 - 2017

Ballot box turnout	2013	2017	Change (pp)
Buckinghamshire	30.3%	34.8%	4.5
Cambridgeshire	31.0%	36.2%	5.2
Cumbria	32.0%	37.2%	5.2
Derbyshire	33.3%	35.3%	2.0
Devon	33.3%	37.9%	4.5
Dorset	34.1%	38.0%	3.8
East Sussex	33.4%	37.8%	4.4
Essex	27.8%	31.1%	3.4
Gloucestershire	31.9%	37.1%	5.2
Hampshire	30.8%	36.1%	5.3
Hertfordshire	29.0%	34.1%	5.0
Kent	29.4%	32.2%	2.8
Lancashire	31.3%	35.9%	4.6
Leicestershire	30.0%	32.7%	2.7
Lincolnshire	29.4%	32.1%	2.7
Norfolk	32.3%	34.6%	2.4
North Yorkshire	31.5%	35.3%	3.8
Northamptonshire	30.9%	33.4%	2.5
Nottinghamshire	33.3%	36.8%	3.6
Oxfordshire	29.4%	38.4%	9.0
Somerset	34.5%	38.6%	4.1
Staffordshire	28.0%	31.5%	3.6
Suffolk	31.7%	35.2%	3.5
Surrey	30.0%	35.8%	5.8
Warwickshire	31.3%	36.4%	5.1

West Sussex	30.1%	34.3%	4.2
Worcestershire	30.7%	34.8%	4.1
Total counties	30.8%	35.0%	4.2
Cornwall	33.3%	39.9%	6.6
Durham	27.8%	31.3%	3.4
Isle of Wight	35.6%	38.7%	3.2
Northumberland	34.1%	40.7%	6.6
Shropshire	33.3%	36.4%	3.1
Wiltshire	34.3%	39.6%	5.3
Total unitaries/mets	31.9%	36.6%	4.7
Doncaster	27.8%	29.4%	1.6
North Tyneside	32.1%	34.3%	2.2
Total city mayorals	29.6%	31.4%	1.8

Rejected ballot papers

3.4 The proportion of ballots rejected at official counts was 0.3%. This compares with 0.5% at the 2013 local elections. The rejection rate at unitary and metropolitan elections was higher than at county elections (0.5% compared with 0.2%).

Table 3.3: Proportion of ballots rejected at the count

Counties		Unitaries / Metropolitans	
Kent	0.17%	Northumberland	0.36%
Hampshire	0.19%	Durham	0.40%
Essex	0.19%	Wiltshire	0.44%
Somerset	0.19%	Doncaster	0.45%
Derbyshire	0.19%	Isle of Wight	0.47%
Gloucestershire	0.20%	Cornwall	0.49%
West Sussex	0.20%	Shropshire	0.52%
Devon	0.22%	Total	0.45%
Surrey	0.22%		
Warwickshire	0.22%		
Worcestershire	0.22%		

Hertfordshire	0.22%
Buckinghamshire	0.22%
Cumbria	0.22%
East Sussex	0.22%
Northamptonshire	0.22%
Leicestershire	0.23%
Dorset	0.24%
Suffolk	0.24%
Nottinghamshire	0.24%
Oxfordshire	0.25%
Lancashire	0.27%
Norfolk	0.27%
Staffordshire	0.27%
North Yorkshire	0.28%
Lincolnshire	0.30%
Cambridgeshire	0.51%
Total	0.23%

3.5 In six county divisions, the rate of rejected ballots was more than 1%. Three of these were in county Cambridgeshire, where Combined Authority Mayoral elections were held on the same day. In unitary and metropolitan authorities, 32 wards had a rejection rate higher than 1%. One authority in Cornwall rejected 3.8% of ballots at the count.

3.6 The majority of rejected ballots (69.6%) were rejected due to being unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty. More than a quarter (26.5%) were rejected due to voting for more than one candidate.

Table 3.4: Reasons for rejected ballots

	No official mark	Voting more than once	Mark by which the voter could be identified	Unmarked	Rejected in part
2017					
County	1.3%	25.5%	1.6%	70.7%	0.8%
Unitary / Met	2.1%	26.4%	2.2%	68.7%	0.5%
City mayoral	0.0%	54.7%	1.8%	43.5%	0.0%
2013					
County	1.3%	22.0%	2.7%	71.4%	2.5%

Unitary / Met	2.1%	17.9%	0.9%	69.8%	0.1%
City mayoral	1.5%	21.1%	2.4%	71.1%	2.0%

4 Postal voting

4.1 The total number of postal votes issued for these elections was 3.1 million, representing 16.6% of all electors with a contested election in their division/ward. This compares with 14.9% at the 2013 local elections.

4.2 At a division/ward level, electors registered for a postal vote ranged from 2.8% in University Parks, Oxford, to 39.2% in Cramlington South East, Northumberland.

4.3 Postal voting remains more common in unitary and metropolitan authorities. 19.5% of the electorate (384,079 electors) in unitary and metropolitan authorities were issued with a postal ballot paper compared with 16.2% in county districts (2.7 million electors).

4.4 At the City Mayoral elections in Doncaster and North Tyneside, more than a quarter of electors (26.0% or 98,001 electors) had a postal vote.

Table 4.1: Highest and lowest proportions of postal voters

Fewer than 10% postal voters	
Barrow-in-Furness	7.4%
Oxford	9.4%
Epping Forest	9.5%
Higher than 25% postal voters	
Doncaster	27.0%
Rushcliffe	28.4%
Chorley	28.7%
Stevenage	34.6%

4.5 The proportion of postal voters returning their ballot papers always exceeds the turnout among 'in person' voters. This year, 68.4% postal electors used their postal vote compared with 29.1% who turned up to vote in person.⁶

⁶ 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

Table 4.2: Postal vote vs in-person turnout

	Postal vote turnout	In-person turnout
2017	68.7%	28.8%
2013	67.1%	25.0%
2009	68.7%	35.2%

4.6 Postal votes accounted for 31.7% of all votes included at the count. This compares with 31.3% in 2013 and 22.7% in 2009.

Rejected postal ballots

4.7 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.

4.8 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.

Table 4.3: Rejected postal ballots

	Rejected postal ballots as % of envelopes returned
2017	2.3%
County	2.3%
Unitary / Met	2.4%
City mayoral	3.5%
2013	3.1%
County	3.1%
Unitary / Met	3.0%
City mayoral	2.6%
2009	3.2%

know that, as mentioned, electors can return multiple postal ballots in one envelope or return envelopes without any ballots.

4.9 The total rate of rejection across elections was 2.3%, which represents a decrease from 3.1% in 2013 and 3.2% in 2009.⁷ The overall fall in levels of rejected postal votes suggests that the new policy may be having a positive impact overall.

4.10 More than half (51.6%) of rejected ballots were rejected due to mismatched information. In almost a quarter of cases (24.6% and 23.8% respectively), postal ballots were rejected due to missing information, or because voters returned their postal voting envelopes but failed to include either the ballot paper itself or the verification statement or both.

Table 4.4: Reasons for postal vote statement rejection

		2013	2017	Change (pp)
Missing information	Signature	6.8%	7.3%	0.5
	DoB	4.7%	5.4%	0.7
	Both	9.5%	11.9%	2.4
Mismatched information	Signature	24.2%	20.3%	-3.9
	DoB	20.8%	23.6%	2.8
	Both	9.5%	7.7%	-1.8
Missing forms	Ballot paper	8.5%	11.0%	2.5
	PV statement	16.0%	12.8%	-3.2

4.11 These figures are percentages of the total, small number of rejected ballots. For example, although 51.6% of rejected postal votes were rejected due to mismatched information, this represents 1.1% of covering envelopes received and 0.4% of all votes cast. The vast majority of postal voters did cast their vote correctly.

5 Proxies and waivers

5.1 A total of 22,029 electors appointed a proxy (0.1% of the electorate). This is consistent with levels in 2013 and 2009.

5.2 The number of emergency proxies issued was 641. This is more than nine times higher than in 2013, when emergency proxies were granted only on disability grounds resulting in 67 being issued. The provision has since been extended to occupation or military service.

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

⁷ As figures reported for field C19 were inconsistent, we used a calculation of field B6 minus field C18 as a surrogate for the total number of postal votes rejected. This approach is consistent with previous years.

a consistent signature could apply for a waiver to use their date of birth as their sole identifier. A total of 19,583 waivers were granted, representing 0.6% of postal electors. The proportion of postal electors granted such a waiver ranged from 0.3% in Doncaster to 1.3% in West Sussex.

6 Appendix A

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

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

6.3 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.

6.4 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.

6.5 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.

6.6 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.

6.7 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.

7 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) How many proxies were appointed for these elections?
2) How many emergency proxies were appointed for these elections?
3) How many waivers were granted for these elections?
4) How many postal votes were 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) What was the total number of polling stations used?
6) How many covering envelopes were returned on polling day before 10pm?
7) How many covering envelopes were returned on the day after polling day before 10pm?
8) Total number of new electors added to the register after the publication of the revised register (01.12.16) up to and including those added via the first interim notice of alteration (04.04.17)
9) Total number of new electors added to the register via the second and final notices of alteration (26.04.17).
10) Total number of applications to register received after the registration deadline.
11) Total number of applications received between the last date for applications to be included on the December 2016 revised register (22.11.16) and the last date for applications for the first interim notice of alteration (24.03.17)
12) Total number of duplicate applications received between the last date for applications to be included on the December 2016 revised register (22.11.16)

and the registration deadline for the first interim notice of alteration (24.03.17)

13) Total number of applications received between the day after the last date for applications for the first interim notice of alteration (25.03.17) and last date for applications for the final notice of alteration (13.04.17)

14) Total number of duplicate applications received between the day after the last date for applications for the first notice of alteration (25.03.17) and last date for applications for the final notice of alteration (13.04.17)

15) How many people tried to vote on polling day and were found not to be registered?