

Review of Voter Turnout



**Corporate Scrutiny and Governance
Board**

April 2015

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Review of Voter Turnout

1. Summary

The review of voter turnout looks at the reasons why turnout in local elections in Derby is lower than some of the neighbouring authorities and identify possible measures that can be taken to increase turnout. The Board conducted a comprehensive survey and received evidence from range of people including young people during its investigation. The Board makes a series of recommendations which if adopted are expected to increase turnout in the city and help make politicians more accountable to the electorate.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Recommendations 1 - Council to explore ways of providing easier and more convenient access to voting

Making voting easier, more convenient and accessible and by disseminating information about electoral procedures more widely should help to increase turnout. Experience from postal votes show that giving people more time in the comfort of their homes to complete and return their ballot papers has resulted in significantly higher turnout than voting at polling stations. This is true even for wards with historically low turnouts such as Mackworth. For some disabled people postal voting is crucial in enabling them to exercise their right to vote.

The trend for people registering for postal however is going in the opposite direction as the proportion of total electorate registering for postal votes fell from 17.5% in 2012 to 16.7% in 2014

The Board therefore recommends that:

- The council explore ways to make voting more accessible (electronic register, involvement in digital democracy trials, discussions with electoral commission about pilot schemes)
- In the meantime, the council resources are deployed to encourage more people to sign up to postal votes
- Work with Derby College and University of Derby and their respective students unions to promote registration of postal votes among students
- Approach local employers to request access to workplaces to sign up people for postal votes

2.2 Recommendations 2 - More/ better engagement with the electorate to build trust

Many people vote because they feel it is their democratic right and duty. Respondents giving evidence to the review said that they want regular contact with their councillors as well as information on activities and services being delivered in their area. They also want more information about candidates and their policies during elections to inform their decisions. In effect they want more engagement with their elected representatives.

Engaging with residents through member surgeries is predominantly a reactive process and involves those people that have problem or a query.

A number of reasons were given why people don't vote including lack of trust. People said there is no point in voting as no one is interested in their opinion and that nothing ever changes.

The Board therefore recommends that:

- Members should proactively engage with the electorate particularly with those that they represent
- The council undertake a publicity campaign to increase the awareness of the role and responsibility of elected members and types of decisions they make. This could be timed to coincide with local democracy week.

2.3 Recommendation 3 - Target and engage young people early in the democratic process

It is important to engage young people early in the democratic process so that they become familiar with voting. Young people giving evidence to the Board asked that the Council use a range of measures to encourage young people to register to vote including :

- Run public information campaigns
- Undertake school visits and information displays
- place registration stalls in places frequented by young people
- Continue to promote on line registration.

Schools should be encouraged to have more focus democracy through PHSE and modern languages lessons to make young people aware about politics and explain how to vote. Support preparatory exercises like mock elections. This allows first-time voters to explore the practical workings of electoral procedures. Invite young people into the Council House to learn about politics. Members offer opportunities to young people to shadow them. The Board was informed that information provided to young people on voting and democracy by schools in the city is inconsistent. Some schools provide very good level of information whilst it is minimal at others.

The Board therefore recommends that :

- The Council commissions Voices in Action to work with the CYP Scrutiny Board and conducts a review on how schools are engaging young people in the democratic process
- Identify best practice and put forward recommendations
- The Council works with the Bite the Ballot, a national not for profit company to support outreach to young people

2.4 Recommendation 4 – Consider lowering the voting age to 16

Although this considered somewhat controversial issue, young people suggested lowering the voting age to 16. This is one way to encourage early involvement in the democratic process.

2.5 Recommendation 5 – Make greater use of social media

Council should make greater use of social media as this is particularly appropriate for engaging with young people. The Council should work with Voices in Action to determine an appropriate social media strategy.

2.6 Recommendation 6 - Encourage employers to consider giving employees time off to vote at elections

New Zealand and Canada have laws requiring employers to give their employees time off to vote. This has arguably enabled more people to take part in elections.

The Board recommends that:

- The Council should lead by example and consider offering its employees time off to vote
- Promoting this policy amongst local employers.
- Lobbying Government for change in legislation to require employees time off to vote
- Where local elections coincide with General elections, lobby Government to have a public holiday on election day

2.7 Recommendations 7-Support the change of the electoral cycle from election by thirds to all out four yearly elections

All out elections are generally recognised to provide better governance than elections by thirds. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has made an order under Local Government Act 2000 to move Rotherham Council from holding elections by thirds to all out election in 2016 and every fourth year thereafter. Sir Bob Kerslake's report in his review of the governance and organisational capabilities of Birmingham City Council has also recommends changing to four yearly elections.

Changing Derby's election by thirds to four yearly elections is not only expected to improve governance but will also save around £350,000 over four years.

3. Introduction

- 3.1 Voter turnout is considered to be a key indicator of democratic health, where low turnout indicates democracy not working as well as it should. The former Resources and Governance Board found during its review of the electoral cycle in 2012 that the turnout at Derby's local elections was lower than some of the neighbouring cities. Turnout at 2011 all out local elections in Leicester for example, were 41.1% compared with 39.2% in Derby. The turnout at 2014 local elections in Derby was even lower at 34%. This has prompted the Board to conduct a review on voter turnout in the city.
- 3.2 This review looked at the turnout for the city as whole and not on any political group. It sought to understand some of the reasons why people vote or don't vote in local elections and consider possible measures that could be taken to improve turnout.

4. How the review was conducted

- 4.1 A scoping report was considered by the Board at its October 2014 meeting which identified a range of measures for taking evidence. This included:
- Conducting a survey of Derby electorate, including asking approximately 1000 people selected randomly from the electoral register for their views on local elections
 - Seeking views of young people through the Youth Mayor and the Voices in Action group
 - Considering views of diverse communities on their participation in the electoral process through the diversity forums
 - Comparing the turnout between postal votes and voting in person at polling stations
 - Identifying actions of authorities with higher turnouts to consider what if anything they are doing differently
 - Considering the potential impact of Individual Electoral Registration on turnout.
- 4.2 The Board conducted a comprehensive survey of Derby electorate which asked respondents whether or not they voted at the 2014 local elections and to give their reasons for voting or not voting. It also asked what would encourage them to vote in the 2015 elections.
- 4.3 The survey was mailed out to 1130 people selected randomly from the electoral register. More forms were sent out in wards which had lower turnout in 2014 local elections than those with higher turnout in a sliding scale, an attempt to generate more responses from these areas.

Ward	Turnout at 2014 local elections	Number of forms mailed out
Allestree	44.3%	50
Littleover	43.3%	50
Mickleover	42.3%	50
Blagreaves	39.0%	55
Arboretum	36.0%	55
Spondon	36.0%	55
Chelleston	35.2%	55
Chaddesden	33.3%	60
Normanton	33.2%	60
Darley	32.1%	60
Alvaston	31.6%	60
Oakwood	31.2%	60
Boulton	30.9%	60
Abbey	28.1%	100
Derwent	27.5%	100
Sinfin	26.7%	100
Mackworth	26.4%	100
Total		1130

A table showing number of forms mailed to people selected randomly from the electoral register

- 4.4 People shopping in the city centre were also asked to complete the survey. This involved Board members standing adjacent to the Ram statue in East Street and asking people to complete the survey as they walked by.
- 4.5 The survey was also available for completion on line.
- 4.6 A question on the form asked respondents whether they were willing to discuss their responses in more detail in a focus group meeting. A number of people took up this offer and met with the Chair of Board and expanded on their answers.
- 4.7 Young people represented by the Voices in Action Youth Council held a brain storming session in the council chamber during the local democracy week and discussed why young people don't register or turnout to vote and what would get more them involved in the democratic process. A follow up meeting was also held with a smaller group of young people to discuss their responses in more detail.
- 4.8 Evidence was also received from members of the Council's Diversity forums who gave their perspective on the democratic processes and what could be done to increase voter turnout. Although it was not possible to hold sessions with all the diversity forums as their scheduled meetings fell outside the timetable of this review, detailed discussions were held with the Older People's Diversity Forum.

- 4.9 Members of all diversity forums were given a paper copy of the survey and also provided with a link to complete the form on line. The survey was also sent to members of local neighbourhood forums.
- 4.10 A joint press release was issued by the Chair and Vice Chair of the Board to explain the purpose of the review and to encourage people to take part in the survey.

Desk Based research

- 4.11 A desk based research was conducted which looked at the following issues:
- the difference in turnout between voting in person at a polling station and postal votes
 - Experience of some major western countries where the turnout was higher than UK
 - Review by the Digital Democracy Commission led by the Speaker of the House of Commons on digital democracy which includes recommendations for increasing voter turnout.
 - Potential impact of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) which came into effect on 10 June 2014. This involves people having to apply individually to register to vote by providing their name, qualifying address, date of birth, National Insurance number and nationality.

5. Key Findings

- 5.1 A ward profile of the turnout at Derby's local elections between 2007 and 2014 is presented in Appendix 2. It shows that although the turnout in some wards was higher than others, overall the turnout in Derby was lower than achieved by Leicester in their all out elections in 2011.

Survey

- 5.2 A total of 232 survey forms were received, although not all respondents answered every question. The returns included:
- 147 forms received from constituents selected randomly in local wards. A response rate of 13% from the 1130 mailed out
 - 25 forms completed at a city centre event
 - 60 forms completed on line
 - 174 respondents stated they voted in 2014 local elections
 - 56 respondents said they didn't vote

Categories	Yes	No
People aged 18 and over	227	3
People who feel voting in local elections is an important	193	35
People who voted in 2014 local elections	174	56
People who always vote in local elections	154	8
Previously voted in local elections	200	23
Previously voted in General elections	203	18
Planning to vote in 2015 local elections	198	15

Why people voted at 2014 local elections

- 5.3 Respondents were asked to give their reasons for voting in the 2014 local elections. The responses ranged from wanting to exercise their right to vote to wanting to make a difference.

"I value my right to vote. Many men and women fought and died to allow me this right and it is one I believe is essential to do to respect that"

"I feel it is important to use your vote if you don't vote you can't complain about the service you get because you didn't do anything to prevent / help things happen"

"Voting is power. The people in Mickleover take time to vote as a result local politicians do not reduce their public services and instead try and save money in areas where people don't vote and therefore can't vote them out of their comfortable job"

- 5.4 The responses may be put into the following categories:

Category	Number
Exercising their democratic right to vote	54
To make a difference/ hold councillors to account	26
Voice an opinion	15
Instigate a change	15
Habit/ always do	10
Civic Duty	9

Why people didn't vote in 2014 local elections

- 5.5 Fewer numbers of responses were received to this question. A selection of the reasons given for not voting in the 2014 are given below:

"No Point. No one is interested in people's opinion. They do what they want"

"Because they don't do what they say they will do. I don't believe them"

"No party worth voting for. No relevant policies. Unhappy with location of polling station"

5.6 The responses may be categorised as follows:

Category	Number
No one listens/ nothing changes/ doesn't make a difference	11
Away from home	6
No information about candidates/ didn't know who to vote for	6
Not trust in politicians	2
No postal vote	2

What would encourage people to vote

5.7 People were asked to state what would encourage them to vote at a future election. This question generated large number of responses.

"will always vote whenever possible"

"Someone who listens to people and does things for the people. More action less talking."

"Parties that actually do what they promise. An improvement of services for Normanton area. All our facilities are being taken away. It is the people in poorest areas get the worse deal so why vote as nobody actually does anything."

"To know more about candidates and policies. To have surgeries where we can raise issues & talk to our council members"

5.8 The response may be categorised as:

Category	Number
Always vote	23
More information about candidates/ policies	16
Postal vote	8
More engagement/ campaigns by candidates	8
Nothing	6
Easy access to polling stations	3

Young People

5.9 Twenty three members of the Voices in Action Youth Council attended a special event during the Local Democracy Week in October and debated why young people don't take part in local elections, don't register or turnout to vote and what would get them more involved. Of these, eight young people attended a follow up session held at the Council House to provide more detail on their comments.

- 5.10 The main reason why young people don't vote in elections is because they don't know how to. They say they have little or no information about the candidates or their policies, are confused by the language used by politicians and are generally unfamiliar with the elections process. They also don't fully understand the benefits of being engaged in the electoral processes and feel the Government is more interested in doing things for adults who are likely to vote for them. They don't trust politicians because they say they make promises which are not kept such as promises on tuition fees. Some of comments made by young people are:
- 'Young people think the government isn't interesting in issues that young people have'
- 'Young people don't know what voting means to them'
- 5.11 Young people stated that some schools did a lot more work on democracy than others. Some even held mini elections for school councils which provide good insight in politics.
- 5.12 A number of suggestions were on how to engage young people in the democratic process which may be categorised as:
- Raising awareness
 - Giving practical experience
 - Making politics relevant
- 5.13 Making young people aware of the democratic processes is considered to be a key factor in influencing them to vote. A number of practical suggestions were given on how to raise awareness. These ranged from holding group discussions in Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) classes and school assemblies, using billboards, poster and leaflets and You Tube videos to inform about policies and process.
- 5.14 Young people also suggested introducing voting in schools through school councils, creating competitions such as making videos on voting and inviting young people to observe/ take part in council meetings will get them more involved in the electoral process. Providing practical experiences will help to increase their confidence and awareness and ensure voting in elections is not alien to them when they reach the qualifying age.
- 5.15 Young people like other electors are more likely to be involved if policies and proposals are relevant to them. They want to know what is being provided for them.

Postal votes

- 5.16 The Board wished to compare turnout between people voting in person at polling stations and using postal votes. Looking at the results for 2012 and 2014 local elections for the city as a whole shows that the turnout from postal votes is around three times higher than voting in person at polling stations.

Year	Electorate	Postal votes issued	Total votes received	Turnout city wide%	Turnout Postal vote %	Turnout Polling station %	Ratio postal/ poll stn
2014	181,414	30320	61,766	34.00	65.70	23.06	2.85
2012	181,414	31724	56,204	31.00	61.60	20.21	3.05

5.17 The difference in turnout between the two methods for voting is even more pronounced at local ward levels. Turnout for postal votes in the Mackworth ward, which has the lowest turnout amongst all the wards in the city, is around four times higher than voting at polling stations.

2014 Local Elections	Electorate	Total votes	Turnout %	Postal vote Turnout %	Poll stn Turnout %	Ratio postal/ poll stn
Mackworth	10247	2702	26.40	67.50	17.24	3.91
Derwent	9939	2738	27.50	66.50	18.56	3.58
Sinfin	10007	2672	26.70	61.10	18.40	3.32
Allestree	10958	4859	44.30	69.80	30.45	2.29
Littleover	10528	4554	43.30	67.10	30.92	2.17
Mickleover	11496	4866	42.30	67.00	29.93	2.24
City Total	181414	61766	34.00	65.70	23.06	2.85

Voter turnout in 2014

5.18 The table below shows similar differentials for the top and bottom three wards in 2012. Wards with high turnout such as Allestree and Mickleover have lower differentials between postal and polling station turnout.

2012 Local Elections	Electorate	Total votes cast	Turnout %	Postal vote Turnout %	Poll stn Turnout %	Ratio postal/ poll stn
Mackworth	10247	2397	23.40	62.20	14.19	4.38
Derwent	9939	2558	25.70	65.20	16.49	3.95
Arboretum	11481	3952	34.40	61.00	17.34	3.52
Allestree	10958	4339	39.60	67.40	39.60	2.48
Mickleover	11496	4499	39.10	64.00	27.72	2.31
Blagreaves	9970	3774	37.90	64.80	26.27	2.47
City total	181414	56204	31.00	61.60	20.21	3.05

Voter turnout in 2012

5.19 The difference in turnout for postal votes between wards with highest and lowest turnout in the city is not as large as the differences for voting at polling stations. The difference in turnout for postal votes between Mackworth and Allestree is only 2.3%.

- 5.20 Looking at the turnout nationally between the two processes shows a similar picture with postal votes achieving around 2.5 times higher number of votes than voting in person at polling stations.

Postal and 'in person' turnout at English local elections 2008-2014*

	Postal voter turnout %	Polling station 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

Source: Elections in England May 2014, Election Centre, Plymouth University

Findings of the Digital Democracy Commission

- 5.21 Rapid developments in technology has given citizens more access than ever before to information through the internet, twitter and 24/7 media. However many people still seem to be more disengaged from the democratic process. The Digital Democracy Commission led by the Speaker of the House of Commons has recently published a review, 'Open Up' which seeks to improve public access to the House of Parliament. This review also devotes a significant amount of its time on elections and voting. The review suggests that the decline in turnout in recent decades is due to voter disengagement and as people feel it is not worth voting. One reason why people do not vote is that they are not registered to vote and so are unable to do so on election day. The Commission believes that information on how to vote and the new system of voter registration needs to reach those groups who are less likely to be registered, such as young people and homeless people.
- 5.22 The Commission was concerned that some people had not voted in the last election because they did not feel they knew enough about politics. Some people said that they did not know how to decide who to vote for. One young person said simply: "I don't vote because I don't understand". This response resonates with the views expressed by Voices in Action.
- 5.23 The Commission makes a number of recommendations which are relevant to this review:
- The Speaker's Commission wishes to encourage increased efforts in voter education and recommends a fresh, bold, look at the national curriculum in this regard. (Recommendation 21)
 - The Commission strongly encourages the political education bodies and charities to consider how to make available and publicise trustworthy information about candidates and their policies, including by means of voter advice applications. (Recommendation 22)

- The DDC also notes a clear indication from a range of comments received that the profile and knowledge of the Electoral Commission needs to be improved, as it is a vital source of information to voters, with a website that is an Aladdin's cave for those wishing to participate in the UK's political process. (Recommendation 23)
- The DDC recommends that the Electoral Commission should consider how best to establish a digital election 'results bank'. (Recommendation 24)
- The Commission fully endorses the draft Political and Constitutional Reform Committee recommendation that "the Government and the Electoral Commission should examine the changes which can be made to provide more and better information to voters, and should actively support the work of outside organisations working to similar goals." (Recommendation 25)

Online Voting

5.24 The Digital Democracy Commission also makes a strong argument for providing on line voting option. It states that many of the people who spoke to them did not understand why they could not vote online, particularly young people. People are used to doing their banking and other day-to-day activities online and many feel that they should also be able to vote in this way. The Commission therefore recommends:

- In 2020, secure online voting should be an option for all voters. (Recommendation 26)

Experience from elsewhere

5.25 The Election Centre based within Plymouth University conducted a review on the turnout for the 2014 local elections which coincided with European Parliament elections. Turnout of the top and bottom three authorities, shown in the table below.

Local authority	Highest turnout %	Local authority	Lowest turnout %
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

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

Overseas experience

- 5.26 Research published by IDEA International lists turnout rates between 1945 to 2001 and shows that five of the top seven countries with highest turnout have compulsory voting which includes Australia ranked 1st(94.5%) and Belgium 5th(92.5%).
- 5.27 New Zealand is ranked 13 in the list of turnouts and has an average turnout of 90.8%. Like UK, voters in New Zealand are obliged to register, but voting is not compulsory. Looking at more recent elections, the turn out in 2008 was 79.5%, 2011 was 74.2% and in 2014 it was 76.9%. One key difference from UK is that the employers are obliged to give employees time off to vote. Employees in Canada are also allowed time off to vote if they don't have three consecutive hours to cast their vote. However, the average turnout in Canada is 73.9% which is lower than UK's 75.2%.

Individual Electoral Registration

- 5.28 In June 2014, the system of registration changed to that of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). This involves each person to register individually to vote whereas previously one person in the household could register everyone living at that address. Individual electoral registration was introduced to improve accuracy of the register and help prevent fraud.

- 5.29 During the change to IER, Electoral Administrators were asked to send their full register of electors to be matched with national databases. Where electors matched, a confirmation of residency letter was sent out to residents, confirming they had no further action to take. Where the entry did not match the national database, electoral registration officers sought evidence from the electorate about their identity.
- 5.30 Moving to IER is expected to have some big impact on the numbers of people registered to vote particularly young people. This is because universities, halls of residences and other groups are no longer able to register them directly. It is estimated that this taken off around 1 million people nationally. The impact of IER on Derby is continuously improving as shown below.
- Published February 2014 Register - Total Electorate 176,807
 - Published December 2014 Register – Total Electorate 172,449, a reduction of 4,358
 - Published March 2015 Register – Total Electorate 175,214 a reduction of 1,593 in comparison to the Feb 2014 register
- 5.31 There has been considerable improvement between December and March registers. This is due to the activities of the electoral team in using additional data sets and carrying out other engagement activities such as working with University of Derby to raise awareness of IER amongst students and encouraging them to register.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Healthy democracy needs high voter turnout. Turnout in Derby's local election is low, particularly in comparison with some of the neighbouring cities. This prompted the Board to conduct an objective review and look at the factors which influence individuals to exercise their choice to vote. The review employed a range of methods including conducting surveys, holding focus groups and carrying out desk based research to gather evidence.
- 6.2 Turnout in 2014 in Derby was 34%, which is nearly 6% points lower than the highest unitary authority. Evidence suggests that it is possible to increase turnout even in local elections. However to increase the turnout in local elections the council will need to adopted recommendations put forward by the Board. Politicians of all persuasion, regardless of which party they represent will need to engage more with the local electorate, particularly young people.

Appendices

- Ward profiles
- Views of young people
- Comments from respondents to questionnaire
- Comparison of turnout at ward level between postal and polling station 2012 and 2014
- Voter turnout since 1945 – A Global Report, IDEA