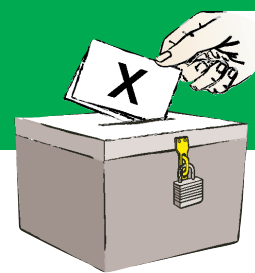


Involvement in Decision Making



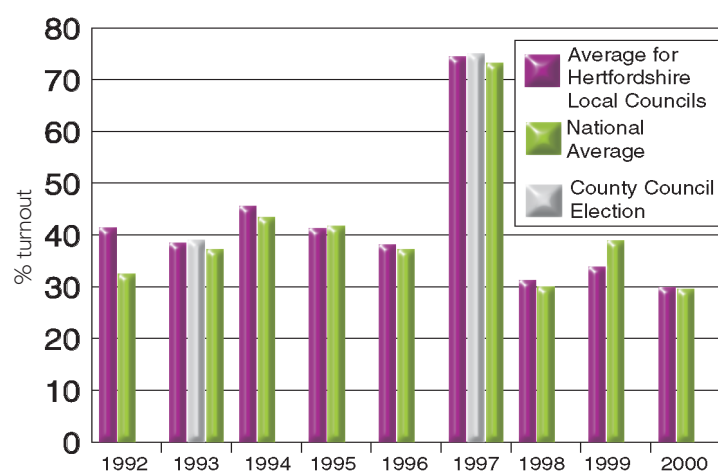
Participation in local elections is a good indicator of community involvement and citizenship. It is vital that people are aware of local government activity, which affects the areas where they live, and uses funds to which they contribute through paying taxes.

Local people can affect what happens in their communities through their vote. Policies on important factors affecting communities such as energy use, transport, building development and planning can be influenced by this vote. A low turnout suggests a lack of awareness about the activities of local government and/or a lack of conviction that voting can make a difference. High participation in local government voting would be indicative of a community fully involved in what happens in their area, and a belief that their voice counts.

INDICATOR DMI - Electoral Turnout

Over the past ten years, the level of turnout in Hertfordshire has largely mirrored what has happened at a national level.

Local Election Turnout



Source: Local Elections Handbook
Turnout figures are based on average turnout in wards which had a contested election.

1992 saw areas of exceptionally low turnout, with scarcely one in five electors voting in some authorities. Hertfordshire turnout was high at 41% compared to the national average of 32.5%. From 1993, the levels have been fairly stable, both nationally and in Hertfordshire, hovering around 40% turnout. 1997 saw general and local elections held on the same day, a situation which commonly results in higher levels of participation as more voters attend polling stations to vote for their MP.

This was followed by a particular low in 1998. Concern at this led to the production of the 'Modernising Local Government' agenda. The Modernising Local Government White Paper, July 98 included concerns that the current committee system in local government was 'confusing and inefficient' and suggested new models of political management to include a directly elected executive mayor and cabinet. Also recommended were more frequent local elections to strengthen accountability. There was a strong sense that local government needed to move from one hundred year old local election arrangements to reflect the modern world. Proposals included electronic voting, increased postal voting, mobile polling stations and voting on different days.

The new agenda seeks to provide a system where local people know who is running their council, based on 'modernising' models including:

- A directly elected executive mayor voted for by local people and a cabinet chosen from the councillors. Councils favouring a mayor will need to obtain public support through a local referendum
- A leader elected by the council, and a cabinet made up of councillors either appointed by the leader or elected by the council
- A directly elected mayor with a council manager.

In 1999, national turnout rose slightly, but the underlying trend from this point still seems to be downwards. This suggests that involvement in decision making has not improved over the period of this report, and work needs to continue both to make voting easier for local people - e.g. e-polling which is being introduced in some areas, and extended use of postal voting.

Examples of local initiatives to increase voting include:

- Three Rivers District Council is contacting new residents to the area, and promoting the availability of postal votes in addition to increasing advertising information as elections approach.
- St Albans City and District has adopted a cabinet structure of councillors and are considering piloting an e-mail voting system for the next election.
- Stevenage has introduced postal voting trials.
- Welwyn Hatfield Council is planning to move to a cabinet structure this year.

Further information sources:

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