

# Representing Change:

Women in the  
2012 Local Elections in England

Interim Report  
May 2012



## Women in the 2012 Local Elections in England: Interim Report

### Introduction and Headlines

This paper represents an initial, interim, report on the 2012 local elections in England. It is the first of a series of three reports; the second, in June, will deal with the issues below in more detail, but with particular reference to retention issues, whilst the third, to be published later in 2012, will examine the recruitment, retirement and retention of women in local government in greater depth.

This is the sixth year in which the Centre for Women & Democracy has investigated the local elections, and overall the trend has been towards increasing women's representation in local government.

However, that increase remains painfully slow, and although 2012 has proved a better year than most, it has still not resulted in a significant jump in the numbers of women overall.

31% of candidates this year were women, and 35% of councillors elected. In previous years these two percentages have been more or less the same, and the disparity this year is caused almost entirely by the cumulative effect of Labour's positive action policy which, combined with good results, saw many women candidates in marginal seats elected.

### Where elections were held

Elections were held on 3 May 2012 for 126 English local councils, 36 metropolitan authorities, 17 unitary authorities and 73 districts.

Three types of council were involved in this year's elections:

- **Metropolitan** covering much of the north of England and the West Midlands, including cities such as Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Sheffield. They have responsibility for all the services delivered in their area, including education and social services, and group together to oversee strategic issues such as the Fire service and transport.
- **Unitaries** which are smaller towns and cities such as Bristol, Derby and Hull with responsibility for all the services in their area.
- **Districts** which are the smallest authorities and have responsibility for some services, whilst others (e.g., education) are provided by county councils.

There were no county council elections in 2012.

There are two ways in which councils hold elections;

- **Whole** in which all the council seats come up for election every four years. In a few cases this year councils which had previously held elections by thirds held whole council elections because of the redrawing of ward boundaries. Only 6 English authorities held whole council elections in 2012: Broxbourne, Daventry, Hartlepool, Rugby, Rushmoor and Swindon.
- **Thirds** in which one third of council seats come up for election each year for three years, with the fourth year 'fallow', meaning that each councillor elected serves a four year term. 120 English councils held elections by thirds this year.

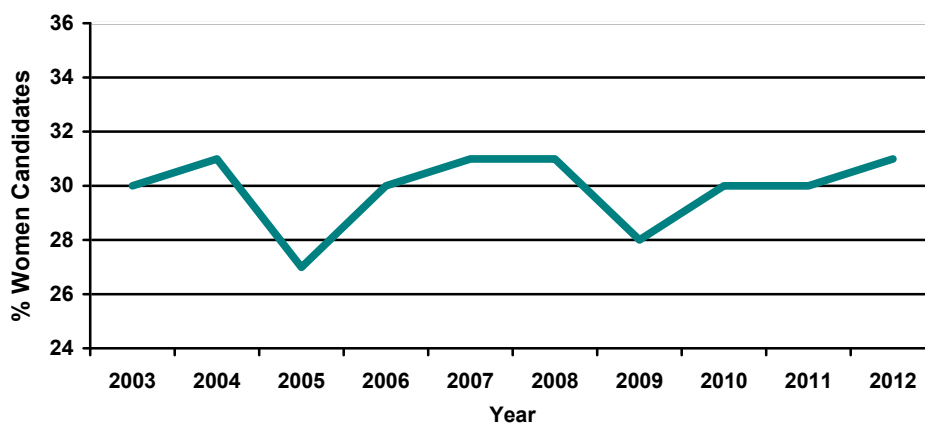
Appendix A contains a full list of all councils with elections, together with their type and the way in which their elections were held this year.

Altogether (and disregarding a small number of by-elections held concurrently), 2,350 council seats were up for election on 3 May; 815 metropolitan seats, 349 unitary seats, and 1,189 seats in the districts.

## Candidates

31% of candidates in the English local elections were women, an increase of 1% on 2011 the same as in 2008 and 2004, which are the last years in which the vast majority of these seats were contested.

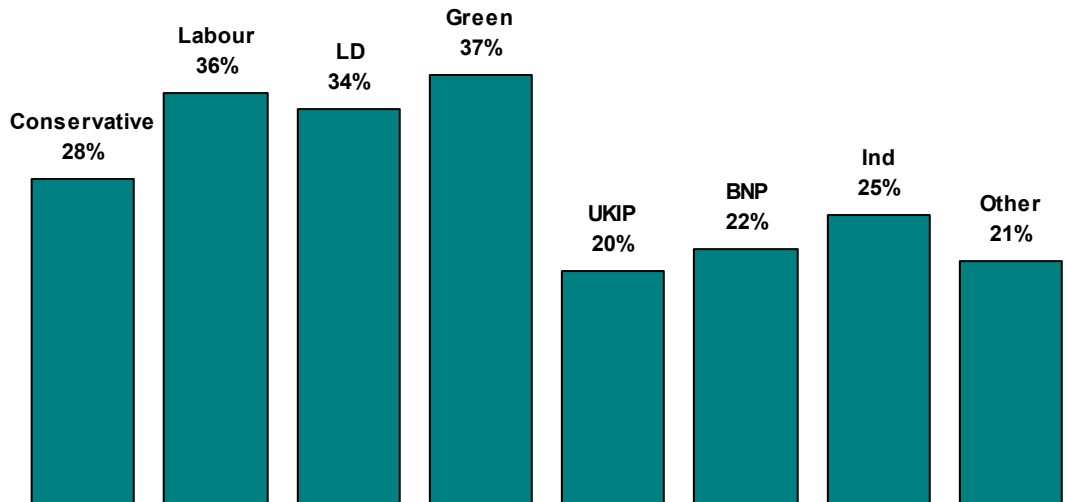
**Figure 1: % Women Candidates in English Local Elections 2004-2012**



As can be seen, overall there has been virtually no improvement in the percentage of women candidates over the last 10 years.

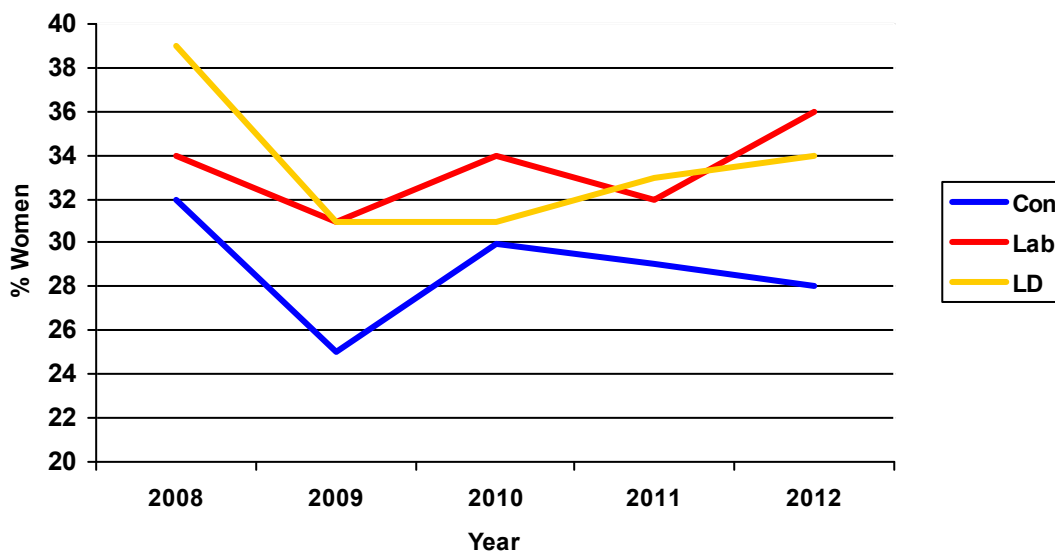
Chart 1 shows how well (or badly) each political party did in 2012 in terms of the percentage of women candidates fielded.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Women Candidates for Each Political Party 2012**



Labour's 36% is its highest level ever. The Conservative rate of women candidates is much more variable, whilst, as the graph below shows, the Liberal Democrats have fallen from previously high levels but rose slightly this year.

**Figure 3: Women Candidates for the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties 2008-2012**



In terms of the smaller parties, the Greens have maintained a generally high level of women candidates over the last 8 years, though very few are elected. UKIP's percentage of women candidates has risen since 2004. The number of BNP candidates has fallen by almost two-thirds, but the number of women has only halved, with the result that the BNP's net percentage of women candidates has risen significantly since 2004.

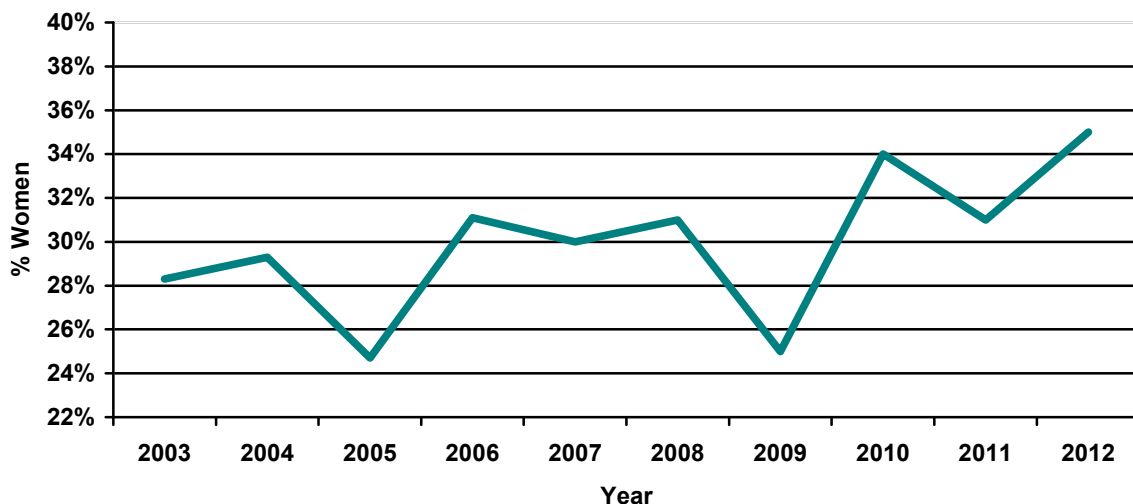
Women continue to be less likely to stand either as Independent candidates or as candidates for very small parties, although in both of these categories the level of women has risen since 2004.

Women were most likely to be candidates in the metropolitan authorities (32%) and least likely to stand in the unitaries (28%). 31% of candidates in the district authorities were women.

## Councillors Elected

35% of councillors elected on 3 May 2012 were women. This represents a record high. It should be noted, however, that for various reasons this does not necessarily result in a similar increase in the percentage of women councillors in these authorities; this is considered in more detail later in this report.

**Figure 4: Women as a percentage  
of all councillors elected 2003-2012**



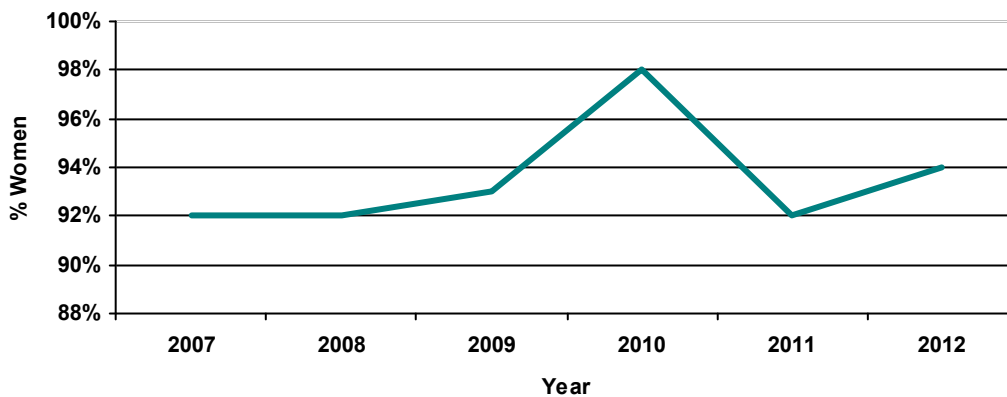
2006 and 2010 - when there were relatively high percentages of women elected - are the years in which London borough elections and metropolitan elections coincided.

2005 and 2009 - the years in which the dips are shown on the above graph - are the years which were fallow for the metropolitan authorities, and in which there were no elections in London, but in which whole council elections were held for the county councils. 2005 was

also a general election year. Based on the pattern in the graph it is likely that the percentage of women will fall again in the county elections in 2013.

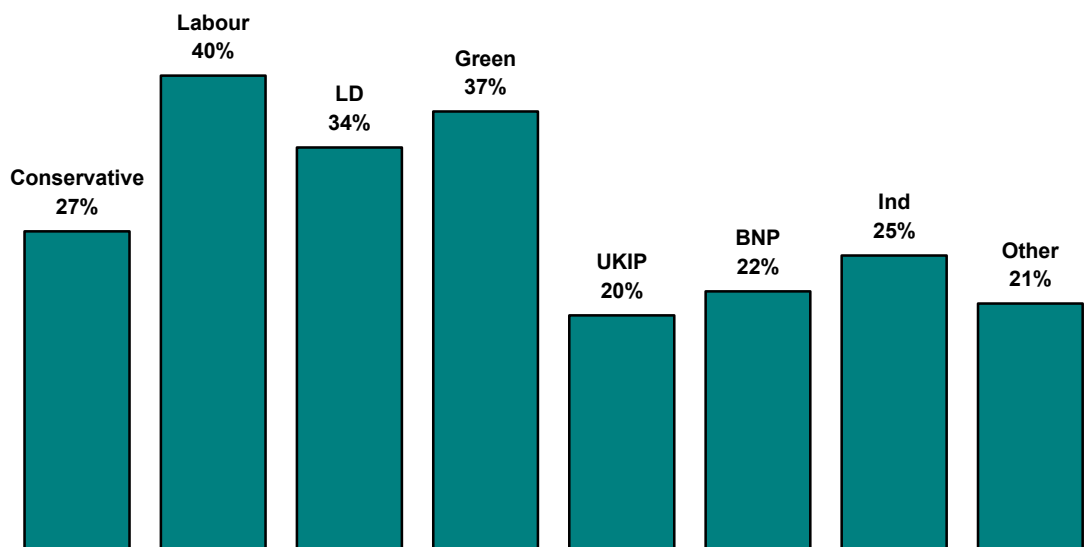
Despite predictions to the contrary, the electorate is still overwhelmingly more likely to elect candidates from one of the main three political parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat) than from smaller parties or those who stand as independents.

**Figure 5: Percentage of councillors elected who belong to the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat parties 2007-2012**



Again, the 2010 peak represents the effect of both London and metropolitan district elections occurring in the same year.

**Figure 6: Women as a percentage of Councillors elected for each political party 2012**



The principal factors at work here are:

- **Positive action:** Labour's high watermark of 40% has been in part achieved by the sustained use of positive action in winnable seats. These seats include marginal seats, and in many areas included anything which was lost in 2008, which was a bad year for Labour.
- **Marginality and electoral fortunes:** In almost all parties, women candidates are more likely to be fielded in marginal seats than in 'safe' ones, which means that they are all likely to lose women disproportionately in bad years and gain them in good. This is skewed even further by the fact that Labour's winnability criteria for the placement of women candidates concentrates women heavily in marginals, resulting in great gains in good years, but also great losses in bad. The Liberal Democrats stand a high number of women candidates, but suffered unusually high losses this year. The Green Party consistently fields the highest percentage of women candidates, but does not take effective steps to ensure that they are in winnable seats, thus producing the very wide gap between the percentage of women candidates and the percentage of women councillors.

There are also differences in how well women and their parties did in the different types of authority. Labour and Liberal Democrat women did best in the metropolitan authorities (44% and 45% respectively), and least well in the unitaries, where both hovered around the 30% mark. The Conservatives, on the other hand, did best in the district authorities (29%) and least well also in the unitaries (21%). Overall, women were least likely to be elected in unitary authorities (27%) and most likely to be elected to the metropolitan councils (40%).

It should be noted that this is an unusual pattern; in previous years the districts have done worse in terms of women elected than either the metropolitan councils or the unitaries. Whether this reflects the emergence of a new trend, or whether it is merely a blip, remains to be seen.

## Retirement and Retention

The most obvious way in which the level of women councillors can be increased is by ensuring that when incumbent councillors either retire or die, a significant proportion of them are replaced by women. This area will be the subject of a specific piece of CFWD research this year, but in general terms it is already evident that Labour's long-term use of positive action has had an impact, particularly given that, in general terms, incumbents or their successors are more likely to be elected than candidates from challenging parties.

We have already produced the raw figures for the metropolitan authorities; these show that 59% of Labour's new candidates replacing retiring incumbents were women, 21% of the

Conservatives', and 28% of Liberal Democrats'. Because these were seats Labour could have a reasonable prospect of winning regardless of their overall fortunes in the election, they were almost guaranteed an increase in the number of women councillors.

### **The net effect on Councils**

We have looked in detail at the effect of the 2012 elections on the composition of the metropolitan councils. Taking by-elections held between 2008 and 2012 into account, there has been an increase in women councillors of 3.7% to 35.3%. This represents a numerical increase of 90 women councillors.

As we have seen, women tend to do best in the metropolitan authorities, and it is therefore probable that, when the figures for the district and unitary councils are analysed, a rather lower net increase will be found.

However, it should be noted that 2008 was a very poor year for Labour, and 2012 was a very good one. Because Labour stood a relatively high percentage of women candidates any increase this year is vulnerable; unless the other political parties also do more to ensure that women stand in seats they can win in 2014 gains made in 2012 are liable to be wiped out literally overnight if Labour loses seats in that or succeeding years.

It should also be noted that, although a number of councils saw a real increase in the number of women members, a small number - Rochdale, Birmingham, Trafford, Sandwell, Salford, Kirklees and Dudley - actually saw a reduction.

### **Conclusions and Next Steps**

Overall, women did well in the 2012 elections, and the results are encouraging in terms of progressing beyond the 31% mark for women's representation.

However, this improvement remains heavily dependent upon the success of Labour's positive action policy; should the Party cease to be proactive in its placing of women candidates progress will be reversed very rapidly.

CFWD will be producing two further reports on these elections, but will, also, as part of the Counting Women In coalition, be seeking to explore with the main political parties what can be done to improve matters in the years to come.

**For further information please contact the Centre for Women & Democracy:**

website: [www.cfwd.org.uk](http://www.cfwd.org.uk)

email: [cfwd@cfwd.org.uk](mailto:cfwd@cfwd.org.uk)

tel: 0113 234 6500



## Appendix A

English local authorities with elections in 2012, showing the number of seats up for election, the type of authority, the method by which elections are held (whole council up at once, or by thirds) and women as a percentage of councillors elected on 3 May 2012.

Authority	seats to be elected	Type	Whole or Thirds	Women as % or councillors elected
Adur	14	district	thirds	28.6%
Amber Valley	15	district	thirds	6.7%
Barnsley	21	met	thirds	47.6%
Basildon	14	district	thirds	21.4%
Basingstoke & Deane	20	district	thirds	35.0%
Bassetlaw	16	district	thirds	68.8%
Birmingham	40	met	thirds	42.5%
Blackburn	22	unitary	thirds	22.7%
Bolton	20	met	thirds	30.0%
Bradford	30	met	thirds	20.0%
Brentwood	13	district	thirds	30.8%
Broxbourne	30	district	whole	23.3%
Burnley	15	district	thirds	26.7%
Bury	17	met	thirds	64.7%
Calderdale	24	met	thirds	37.5%
Cambridge	14	district	thirds	35.7%
Cannock Chase	13	district	thirds	38.5%
Carlisle	15	district	thirds	40.0%
Castle Point	13	district	thirds	23.1%
Cheltenham	20	district	thirds	30.0%
Cherwell	17	district	thirds	17.6%
Chorley	15	district	thirds	26.7%
Colchester	20	district	thirds	35.0%
Coventry	18	met	thirds	33.3%
Craven	12	district	thirds	8.3%
Daventry	36	district	whole	36.1%
Derby	17	unitary	thirds	35.3%
Doncaster	21	met	thirds	47.6%
Dudley	24	met	thirds	29.2%
Eastleigh	15	district	thirds	26.7%
Elmbridge	19	district	thirds	36.8%
Epping Forest	22	district	thirds	31.8%
Exeter	14	district	thirds	21.4%
Fareham	15	district	thirds	33.3%
Gateshead	22	met	thirds	54.5%
Gloucester	10	district	thirds	30.0%
Gosport	17	district	thirds	23.5%
Great Yarmouth	13	district	thirds	30.8%
Halton	20	unitary	thirds	35.0%
Harlow	11	district	thirds	36.4%
Harrogate	16	district	thirds	37.5%
Hart	11	district	thirds	0.0%
Hartlepool	32	unitary	whole	37.5%
Hastings	16	district	thirds	31.3%
Havant	14	district	thirds	28.6%

Authority	seats to be elected	Type	Whole or Thirds	Women as % or councillors elected
Hertsmere	13	district	thirds	38.5%
Huntingdonshire	14	district	thirds	7.1%
Hyndburn	12	district	thirds	33.3%
Ipswich	16	district	thirds	31.3%
Kingston upon Hull	20	unitary	thirds	50.0%
Kirklees	23	met	thirds	21.7%
Knowsley	21	met	thirds	23.8%
Leeds	33	met	thirds	51.5%
Lincoln	11	district	thirds	54.5%
Liverpool	30	met	thirds	36.7%
Maidstone	19	district	thirds	26.3%
Manchester	32	met	thirds	37.5%
Milton Keynes	17	unitary	thirds	41.2%
Mole Valley	13	district	thirds	53.8%
Newcastle	26	met	thirds	42.3%
Newcastle under Lyme	19	district	thirds	47.4%
North East Lincolnshire	12	unitary	thirds	25.0%
North Hertfordshire	13	district	thirds	38.5%
North Tyneside	20	met	thirds	40.0%
Norwich	12	district	thirds	50.0%
Nuneaton & Bedworth	17	district	thirds	29.4%
Oldham	20	met	thirds	40.0%
Oxford	24	district	thirds	29.2%
Pendle	16	district	thirds	31.3%
Peterborough	19	unitary	thirds	31.6%
Plymouth	19	unitary	thirds	26.3%
Portsmouth	14	unitary	thirds	21.4%
Preston	19	district	thirds	26.3%
Purbeck	8	district	thirds	62.5%
Reading	42	unitary	thirds	7.1%
Redditch	9	district	thirds	22.2%
Reigate & Banstead	17	district	thirds	17.6%
Rochdale	20	met	thirds	30.0%
Rochford	13	district	thirds	38.5%
Rossendale	12	district	thirds	66.7%
Rotherham	21	met	thirds	47.6%
Rugby	42	district	whole	38.1%
Runnymede	14	district	thirds	57.1%
Rushmoor	35	district	whole	22.9%
Salford	20	met	thirds	25.0%
Sandwell	24	met	thirds	54.2%
Sefton	22	met	thirds	45.5%
Sheffield	28	met	thirds	57.1%
Slough	6	unitary	thirds	0.0%
Solihull	17	met	thirds	41.2%
South Cambridgeshire	19	district	thirds	21.1%
South Lakeland	20	district	thirds	40.0%
South Tyneside	18	met	thirds	55.6%
Southampton	16	unitary	thirds	31.3%
Southend-on-Sea	17	unitary	thirds	11.8%
St Albans	17	district	thirds	41.2%
St Helens	16	met	thirds	31.3%
Stevenage	13	district	thirds	38.5%
Stockport	21	met	thirds	47.6%

Authority	seats to be elected	Type	Whole or Thirds	Women as % or councillors elected
Stratford upon Avon	19	district	thirds	31.6%
Stroud	18	district	thirds	38.9%
Sunderland	25	met	thirds	52.0%
Swindon	56	unitary	whole	26.8%
Tameside	19	met	thirds	47.4%
Tamworth	10	district	thirds	30.0%
Tandridge	14	district	thirds	35.7%
Three Rivers	16	district	thirds	37.5%
Thurrock	17	unitary	thirds	29.4%
Trafford	21	met	thirds	28.6%
Tunbridge Wells	16	district	thirds	18.8%
Wakefield	21	met	thirds	38.1%
Walsall	20	met	thirds	25.0%
Warrington	19	unitary	thirds	15.8%
Watford	12	district	thirds	25.0%
Welwyn Hatfield	16	district	thirds	43.8%
West Lancashire	18	district	thirds	55.6%
West Oxfordshire	17	district	thirds	29.4%
Weymouth & Portland	12	district	thirds	25.0%
Wigan	25	met	thirds	32.0%
Winchester	18	district	thirds	27.8%
Wirrall	22	met	thirds	40.9%
Woking	12	district	thirds	16.7%
Wolverhampton	19	met	thirds	36.8%
Worcester	12	district	thirds	25.0%
Worthing	13	district	thirds	38.5%
Wyre Forest	14	district	thirds	28.6%

