

Article

# Language in England and Wales: 2011

Using data from the 2011 Census, we take a closer look at language within England and Wales. Those who reported English (or Welsh in Wales) as their main language accounted for 92.3% of the population, except in London where proportion was much lower. Those who reported another main language accounted for 7.7% of the population, with Polish topping the list of "other" main languages. London and the West Midlands saw the highest percentage of people who could not speak English "well" or "at all".



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# 1. Key points

Over 9 in 10 people in England and Wales reported English (English or Welsh in Wales) as their main language in March 2011. However in London, this proportion was much lower. Despite almost 1 in 10 having another main language other than English or Welsh, a much smaller percentage of the total population said they could either not speak English well or not at all. Some languages were concentrated in particular areas and these are reported on.

- In March 2011 the Census showed that 49.8 million (92.3 per cent) of people aged three and over reported English (English or Welsh in Wales) as their main language.
- 4.2 million people (7.7 per cent) reported another main language. Polish was the most popular 'Other' main language with 546,000 people reporting this as their main language (1.0 per cent of the total population). London had the highest proportion with another main language (22.1 per cent).
- The local authority with the highest proportion of people with English (English or Welsh in Wales) as their main language was Redcar and Cleveland (99.3 per cent). The London Borough of Newham had the lowest proportion at 58.6 per cent.
- Three quarters (3,000) of those who reported Yiddish as their main language were in the London borough of Hackney. Half (10,800) of those who reported Pakistani Pahari (with Mirpuri and Potwari) as their main language lived in Birmingham.
- In England and Wales 726,000 people (1.3 per cent) reported that they could not speak English well and 138,000 people (0.3 per cent) reported that they could not speak English at all. London and the West Midlands saw the highest percentage of people who could not speak English well or not at all (4.1 per cent and 2.0 per cent respectively). Across local authorities, the percentage of people who could not speak English well or not at all was highest in Newham (8.7 per cent).

## 2. Animated YouTube video

A podcast explaining this story using audio commentary and graphical animations is available on the [ONS YouTube channel](#).

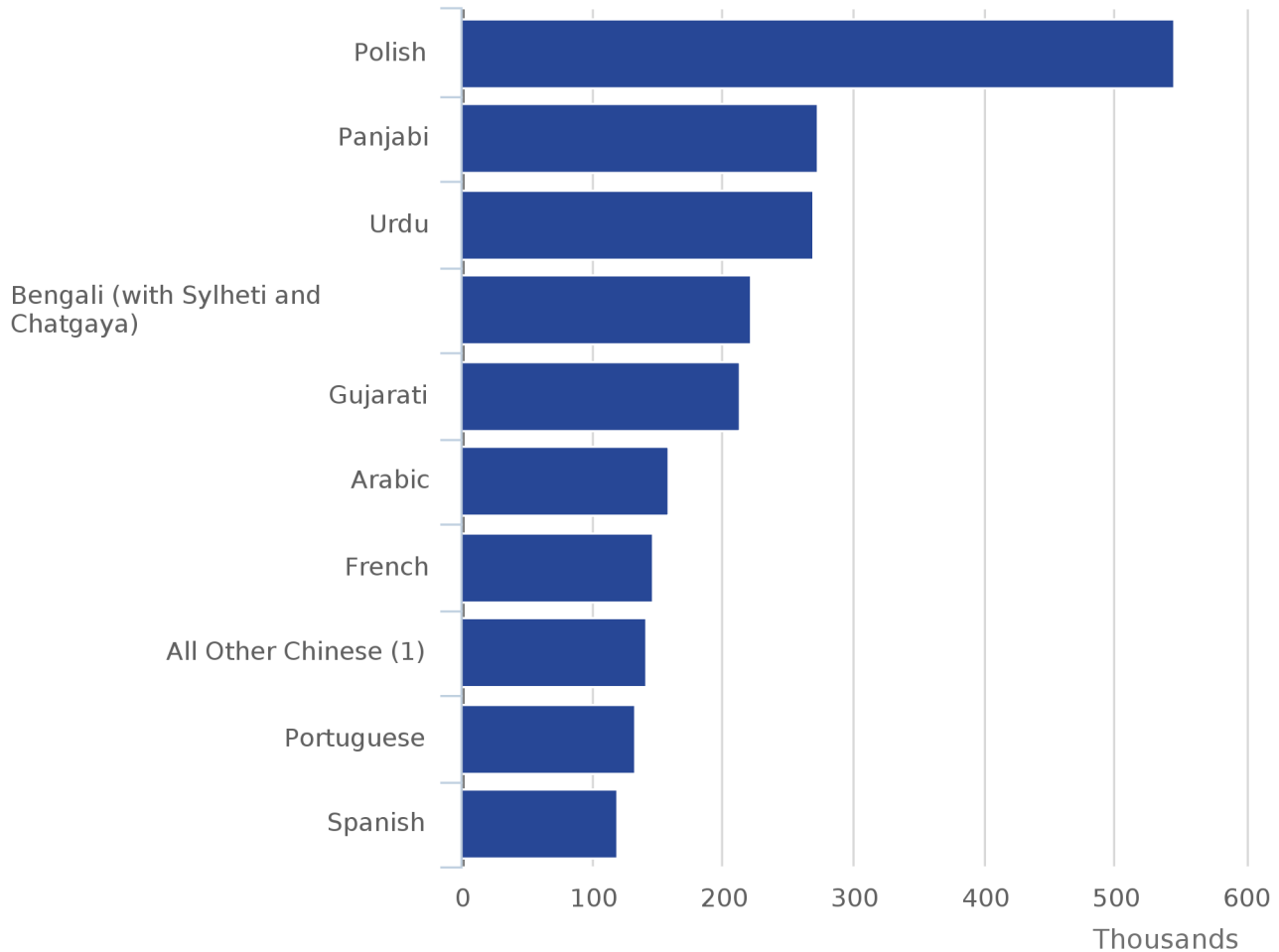
## 3. Main language in England and Wales

In the 2011 Census, 92.3 per cent of people (49.8 million) aged three and over in England and Wales reported English as their main language (English or Welsh in Wales).

The remaining 7.7 per cent of the population (4.2 million) had a main language other than English.

Polish was the most common language after English<sup>1</sup> with 546,000 people (1.0 per cent of the population) reporting it as their main language.

**Figure 1: Top ten main 'Other' languages in England and Wales, 2011**



Source: Census - Office for National Statistics

**Notes:**

1. 'All Other Chinese' is an aggregate of Chinese languages and excludes those that wrote in Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese Chinese

After Polish the next most common main languages were from South Asia, Panjabi (273,000 people) and Urdu (269,000) each with 0.5 per cent and Bengali (with Sylheti and Chatgaya, 221,000) and Gujarati (213,000) each with 0.4 per cent. This was followed by Arabic (159,000) and French (147,000) each with 0.3 per cent.

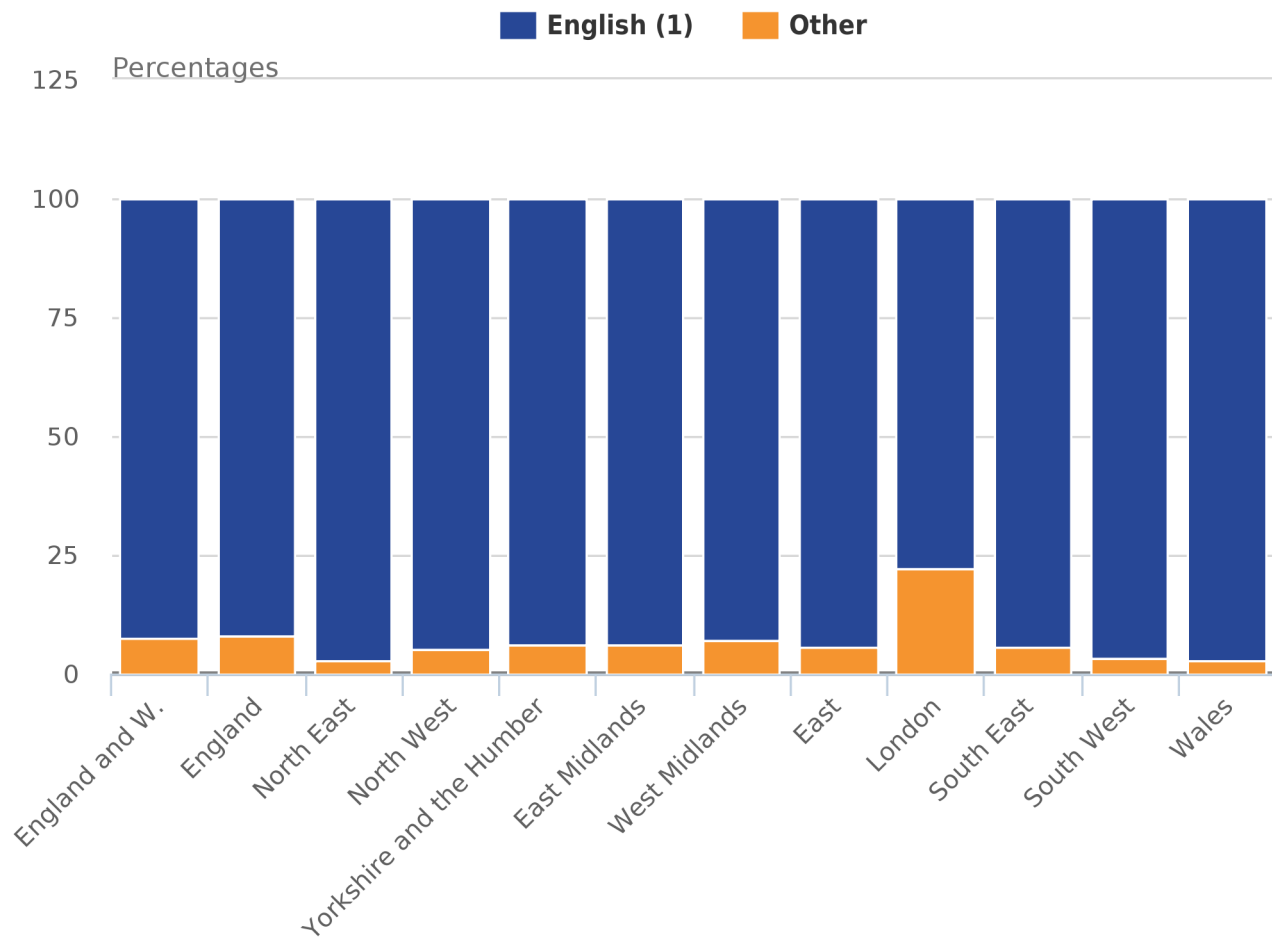
## Notes for main language in England and Wales

1. English or Welsh in Wales

## 4. Main language across English regions and Wales

Across the English regions, the highest percentage of people who reported English as their main language was in the North East at 97.2 per cent, closely followed by the South West at 96.5 per cent. In Wales 97.1 per cent of people spoke English or Welsh as their main language<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 2: Main language by English region and Wales, 2011**



Source: Census - Office for National Statistics

**Notes:**

1. English or Welsh in Wales

London had the lowest proportion of people who reported their main language as English with 77.9 per cent (just over 6 million people).

London had the highest proportion of usual residents born outside the UK and non-UK nationals ([International Migrants in England and Wales 2011](#)). London is also the most ethnically diverse ([Ethnicity and National Identity in England and Wales 2011](#)) and has the highest proportion of people affiliated with a religion other than Christian ([Religion in England and Wales 2011](#)).

Polish was the most common reported 'Other' main language in London with 1.9 per cent (148,000) of people reporting this as their main language. Bengali (with Sylheti and Chatgaya) and Gujarati followed with 1.5 per cent (114,000) and 1.3 per cent (102,000) respectively.

**Notes for main language across English regions and Wales**

1. [Further details of Welsh language](#)

## 5. Main language by local authority

In nearly two thirds of all local authorities in England and Wales 95 per cent of the population or over reported English<sup>1</sup> as a main language. Redcar and Cleveland in the North East had the highest proportion of people reporting English as their main language with 99.3 per cent, this area was also one of the least ethnically diverse ([Ethnicity and National Identity in England and Wales 2011](#)). North East Derbyshire (East Midlands), Staffordshire Moorlands (West Midlands), Caerphilly (Wales), Knowsley (North West) and South Staffordshire (West Midlands) closely followed at 99.1 per cent.

The London borough of Newham had the lowest proportion of people reporting their main language as English at 58.6 per cent. Other London boroughs, Brent (62.8 per cent), Tower Hamlets (65.8 per cent), Ealing (66.1 per cent) and Westminster (69.2 per cent), also had some of the lowest proportions where English was the main language. These areas were also shown to be some of the most ethnically diverse.

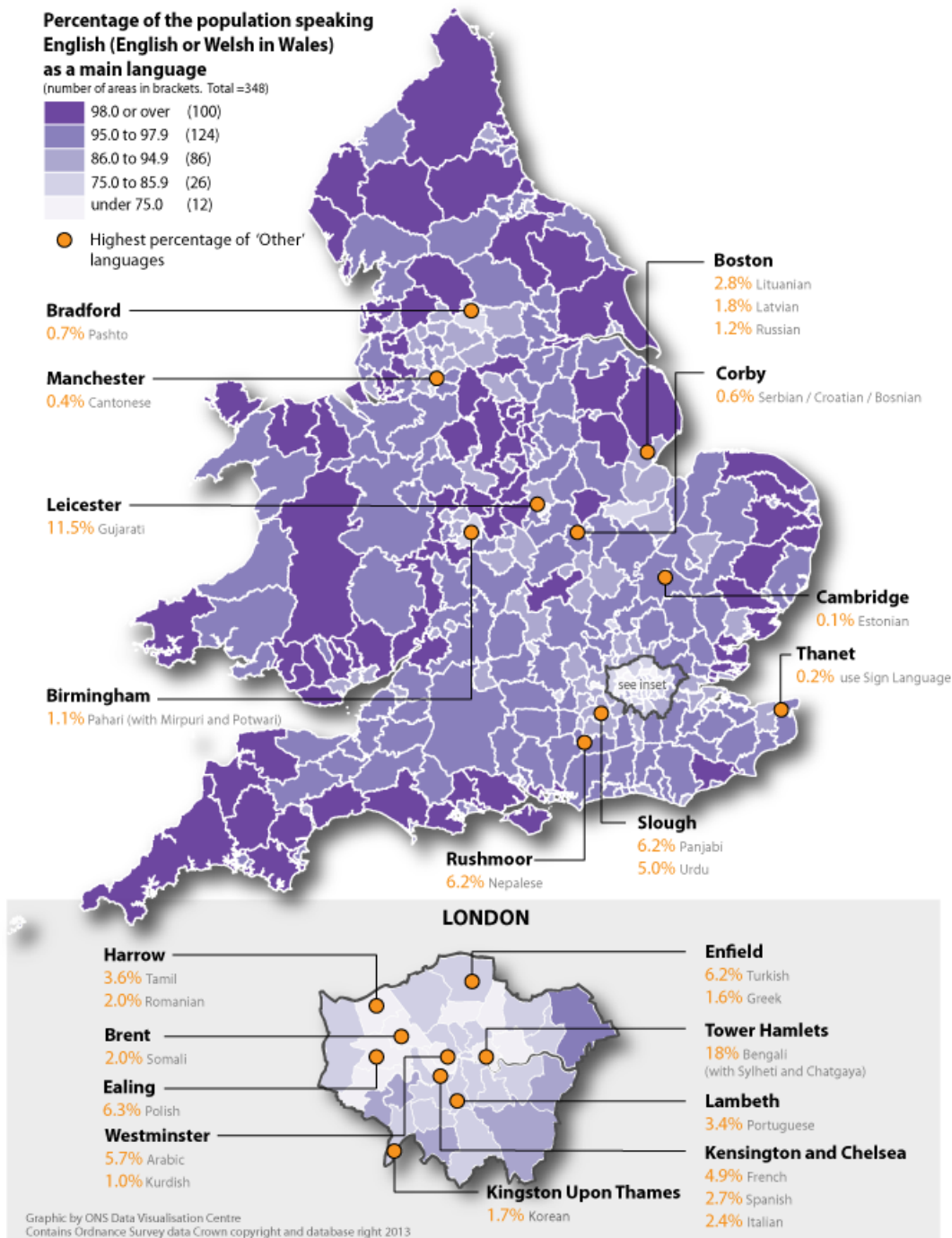
A number of London boroughs had some of the highest reported 'Other' main languages in England and Wales. Kensington and Chelsea had some of the highest proportions of people with some of the European languages including French (4.9 per cent), Spanish (2.7 per cent) and Italian (2.4 per cent). Tower Hamlets had the highest proportion of Bengali (with Sylheti and Chatgaya) at 18 per cent.

Outside London, areas such as Slough had the highest proportion of those with Panjabi (6.2 per cent) as a main language. Leicester had the highest proportion of those with Gujarati (11.5 per cent) and Boston had the highest proportion of Lithuanian (2.8 per cent).

Thanet saw the highest percentage of all people whose main language was a sign language at 0.2 per cent. There are different types of sign language, and Thanet also had the highest proportion for British Sign Language at 0.1 per cent.

In Wales, those reporting English or Welsh as their main language was highest in Caerphilly with 99.1 per cent and lowest in Cardiff at 91.7 per cent.

# Map 1: Language in England and Wales, 2011



Source: Census - Office for National Statistics

## Notes for main language by local authority

1. English or Welsh in Wales

## 6. Concentration of languages across local authorities

Some 'Other' main languages were found to be concentrated in different local authorities. Cornish had the highest level of concentration. Just over 8 in 10 (500) people who reported Cornish as their main language lived in Cornwall. Three quarters (3,000) of those who reported Yiddish as their main language lived in the London borough of Hackney and half (10,800) of those who reported Pakistani Pahari (with Mirpuri and Potwari) lived in Birmingham. Around a quarter (1,500) of those who reported Hebrew resided in Barnet and almost a quarter (300) of those who reported Krio resided in Southwark. Of those who reported Oceanic/Australian (any) as a main language, almost 1 in 5 (300) lived in Wiltshire.

**Table 1: Concentration of different languages by local authority, 2011**

Language	Local Authority			England and Wales
	Name	Number	Percentage	Number
Cornish	Cornwall	500	83.3	600
Yiddish	Hackney	3,000	75.1	4,000
Pakistani Pahari (with Mirpuri and potwari)	Birmingham	10,800	49.5	21,900
Hebrew	Barnet	1,500	24.8	6,200
Krio	Southwark	300	23.9	1,200
Bengali (with Sylheti and Chatgaya)	Tower Hamlets	43,500	19.7	221,400
Turkish	Enfield	18,400	18.5	99,400
Korean	Kingston Upon Thames	2,600	17.2	15,200
Gujarati	Leicester	36,300	17.1	213,100
Oceanic/Australian language (any)	Wiltshire	300	16.7	1,800

Source: Office for National Statistics

## 7. Welsh language

In the 2011 Census form the main language question in Wales asked respondents whether they spoke English or Welsh as their main language, however, it did not allow them to record which of English or Welsh was their main language.

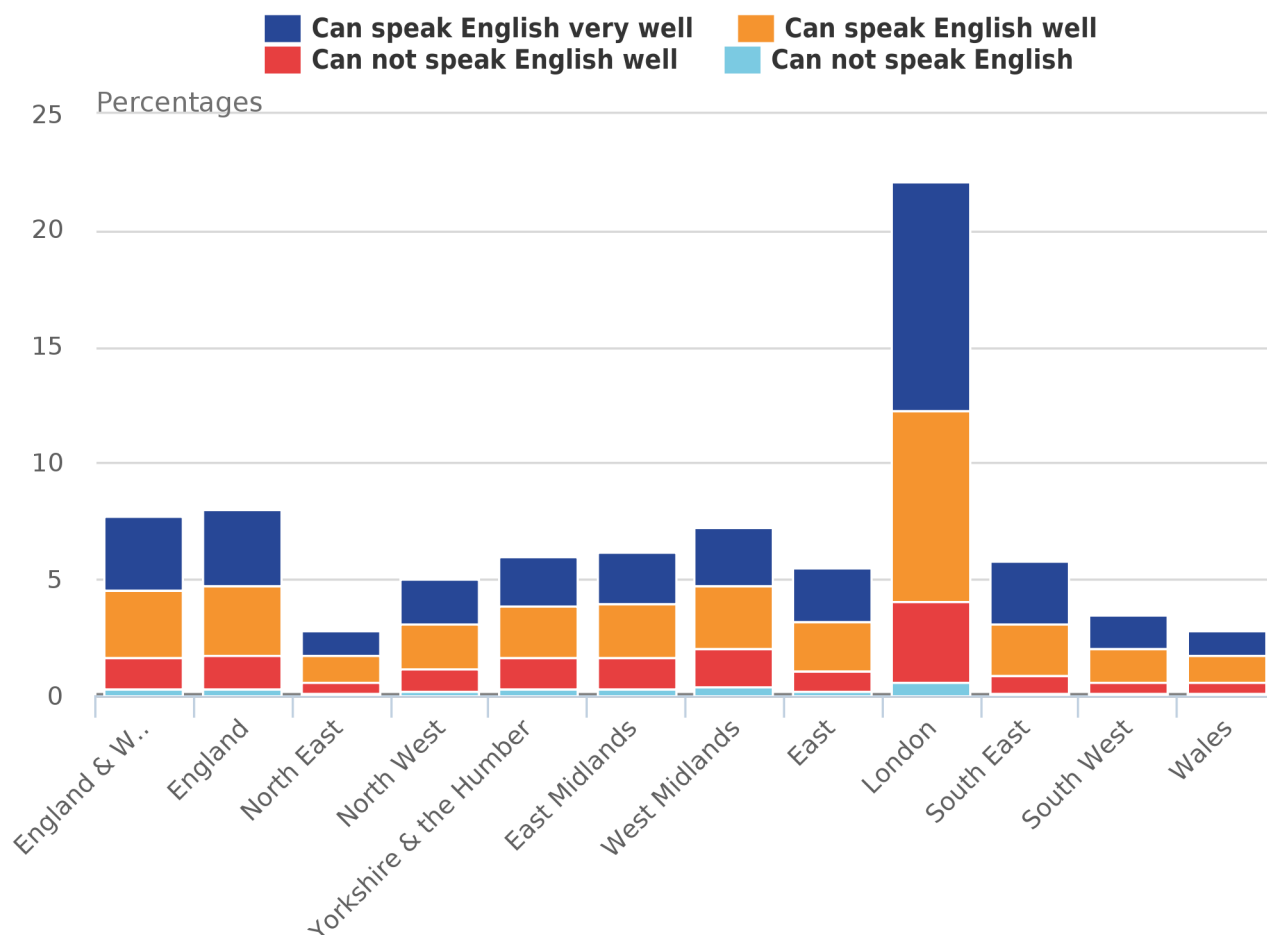
A question on Welsh language skills was also asked on the 2011 Census form in Wales. The question asked was 'Can you understand, speak, read or write Welsh?' - answered by ticking one or more of five boxes (one for each category and one for 'None of these') in any combination.

In 2011, 19 per cent of people aged three and over in Wales were able to speak Welsh (562,000). 14.6 per cent of the population in Wales were able to speak, read and write Welsh. Nearly three quarters of the population in Wales had no Welsh language skills.

## 8. Proficiency in English

People who reported a main language other than English<sup>1</sup> were asked how well they spoke English. While 7.7 per cent of the population (4.2 million) of England and Wales had a main language other than English, only 1.3 per cent (726,000) of the population reported that they could not speak English well and 0.3 per cent (138,000) reported that they could not speak English at all<sup>2</sup>. The proportions were highest in London with nearly 4.1 per cent of the population (320,000 people) unable to speak English well or not at all followed by 2.0 per cent in the West Midlands. The North East had the lowest proportion of people who were unable to speak English well or not at all.

**Figure 3: Proficiency in English, English regions and Wales, 2011**



Source: Census - Office for National Statistics

### Notes for proficiency in English

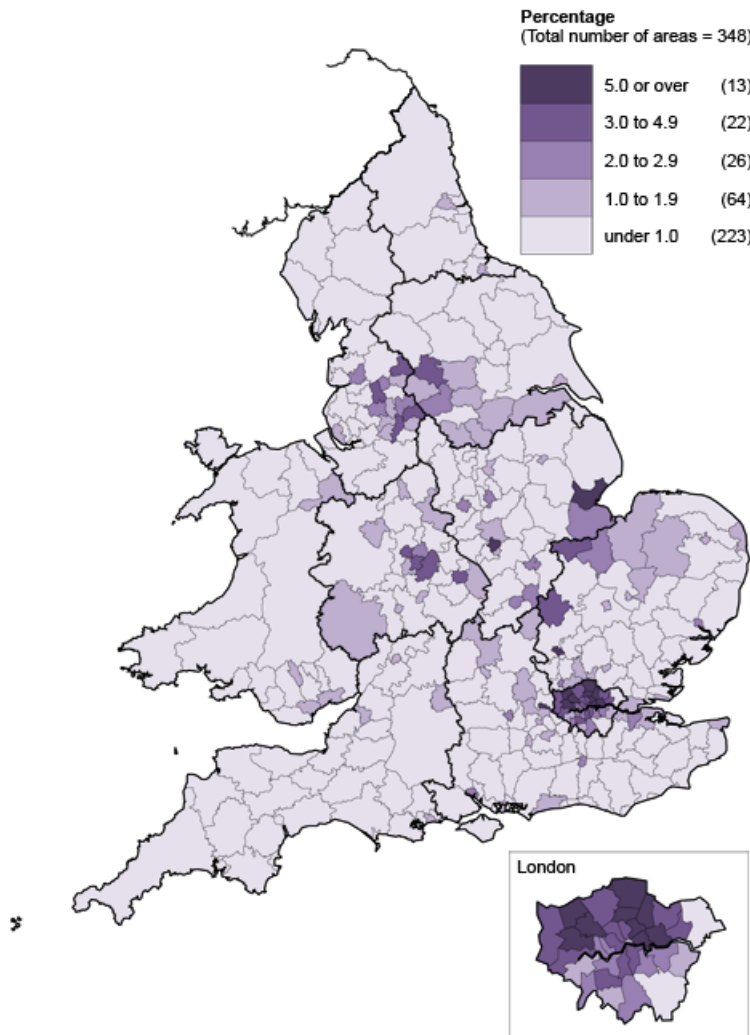
1. English or Welsh in Wales
2. English language proficiency has been calculated as a percentage of the population aged three and over.



## 9. Proficiency in English by local authority

In nine out of ten local authorities the proportion of the population who were unable to speak English well or not at all was less than 3 per cent. The London Boroughs had high proportions of people who 'cannot speak English well' or 'not at all'. Newham had the highest proportion of those who 'cannot speak English well' and 'not at all' (8.7 per cent)<sup>1</sup>. Brent and Tower Hamlets closely followed, each with 8.0 per cent. Outside of London, Leicester had the highest proportion of people who could 'not speak English well' or 'not at all' (7.5 per cent).

**Map 2: English not spoken well and not at all by local or unitary authority, 2011**



Source: Space-Time Research Pty Ltd.  
Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2013

Source: Census - Office for National Statistics

### Notes for proficiency in English by local authority

1. English language proficiency has been calculated as a percentage of the population aged three and over.

## 10. Measuring language

A question on main language and proficiency in speaking English was asked for the first time in the 2011 census. The question captured information through a tick-box on those who reported their main language as English (or English or Welsh in Wales). A write-in option captured languages other than English, this included Sign Languages. Those that selected the option for another language were asked a follow-up question on proficiency of English spoken. Respondents were asked how well they could speak English and could select one of the four tick boxes, 'How well can you speak English?' 'very well', 'well', 'not well', and 'not at all'.

Language is an important defining characteristic of people's identity. Information from this question can be used with data collected from other identity questions such as ethnic group, national identity and religion to provide a detailed picture of England and Wales in 2011. The data also helps local authorities to target, deliver and facilitate the provision of public services, for example, to help identify the need for translation and the interpretation for providing English language lessons. ONS decided that meeting this need was essential for any language question.

Future releases of 2011 Census data will include multivariate tables (two or more variables for example, ethnic group by main language). This will enable more detailed analyses of the population's characteristics to be published.

## 11. Comparability with other sources

A similar question on language is asked on the Labour Force Survey (LFS). This survey showed that in 2012, 92.2 per cent of the population in England and Wales had English (English and Welsh in Wales) as their 'first language at home'. This figure has been steadily declining since 2003 (when the question was first asked) when it was 95.0 per cent showing a decrease of 2.8 percentage points overall.

This is broadly consistent with the 2011 Census, however, there should be caution when comparing the Census due to methodological differences - the LFS is a sample survey and asks a question on the 'first language at home' (every three years) and not 'What is your main language'.

## 12. More Census analysis

[Census Analysis landing page](#)

## 13. Background notes

1. This publication follows the [2011 Census Population and Household Estimates for England and Wales](#). The census provides estimates of the characteristics of all people and households in England and Wales on census night. These are produced for a variety of users including government, local and unitary authorities, business and communities. The census provides population statistics from a national to local level. This bulletin discusses the results at national and regional level.
2. 2001 Census data are available via the [Neighbourhood Statistics](#) website. Relevant table numbers are provided in all download files within this publication.
3. Interactive [data visualisations](#) developed by ONS are also available to aid interpretation of the results.
4. Future releases from the 2011 Census will include more detail in cross tabulations, and tabulations at other geographies. These include wards, health areas, parliamentary constituencies, postcode sectors and national parks. [Population and household estimates](#) are already available at these geographies. Further information on future releases is available online in the [2011 Census Prospectus](#).

5. ONS has ensured that the data collected meet users' needs via an extensive [2011 Census outputs consultation](#) process in order to ensure that the 2011 Census outputs will be of increased use in the planning of housing, education, health and transport services in future years.
6. Any reference to local authorities includes both local and unitary authorities.
7. Figures in this publication may not sum due to rounding.
8. ONS is responsible for carrying out the census in England and Wales. Simultaneous but separate censuses took place in Scotland and Northern Ireland. These were run by the National Records of Scotland (NRS) and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) respectively.
9. A person's place of usual residence is in most cases the address at which they stay the majority of the time. For many people this will be their permanent or family home. If a member of the services did not have a permanent or family address at which they are usually resident, they were recorded as usually resident at their base address.
10. All key terms used in this publication, such as resident are explained in the [2011 Census glossary](#). Information on the [2011 Census Geography Products for England and Wales](#) is also available.
11. All census population estimates were extensively quality assured, using other national and local sources of information for comparison and review by a series of quality assurance panels. An extensive range of [quality assurance, evaluation and methodology papers](#) were published alongside the first release in July 2012 and have been updated in this release, including a [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) document \(152.8 Kb Pdf\)](#) .
12. The 2011 Census achieved its overall target response rate of 94 per cent of the usually resident population of England and Wales, and over 80 per cent in all local and unitary authorities. The population estimate for England and Wales of 56.1 million is estimated with 95 per cent confidence to be accurate to within +/- 85,000 (0.15 per cent).
13. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available by visiting [www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html](http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html) or from the Media Relations Office email: [media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk)