

Local Government Series**Volume 2****HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENT WORKS**

Local authorities are made up of elected councillors, each of whom represents a particular geographical locality within the overall area covered by the council. These councillors work with local people and organisations to agree and deliver on local priorities. In doing so, they need to balance the needs and interests of residents, voters, their political parties and the council as a whole.

Councillors are elected by eligible voters living within the area that they seek to represent. Within a county council and some unitary authorities, these areas are called 'divisions'. For all other local authorities, they are called 'wards'. Such divisions and wards are represented by between one and three councillors, depending on the type of council.

The total number of councillors for each local authority also varies, depending on the size of the area it covers and the number of local people living within that area.

Elections and electoral cycles

Councillors are elected for a fixed term of four years. If a councillor resigns or dies, a by-election is held in the relevant division or ward. The newly-elected councillor then represents that division or ward until the next scheduled election. In a year when a council election is held, it usually takes place on the first Thursday in May.

Like parliamentary elections, elections to local authorities in England are held using the first-past-the-post system, with the candidate(s) gaining the highest number of votes in each ward or division being elected. So in a ward represented by just one councillor, the candidate with the highest number of votes is elected. But in a ward represented by three councillors, for example, the three candidates with the highest numbers of votes will gain a seat on the council.

Different local authorities operate different electoral cycles. In some local authorities, the whole council is subject to election (or re-election) every four years. In others, half of the council seats are

put up for election every two years. And in others, one third of council seats are subject to election every year, with no election in the fourth year. Either way, each councillor holds their seat for a four-year period, at which point they may stand for re-election.

While it might appear that local authority elections are of limited interest outside that authority's area – or, indeed, even *within* that area – they are often watched closely at a national level, as they can help to determine the mood of the electorate, especially in the run-up to parliamentary elections.

Party politics

While councillors do not have to belong to or to represent a political party, many choose to do so. And so, just like our national parliament, local authorities can be intensely party political.

The Conservative and Labour parties currently dominate local government in England, though the smaller scale and more local nature of council elections means that it can be easier for candidates representing smaller parties – and, indeed, independent candidates – to get elected.

At the time of writing, the number of local authority seats held by the different parties is as follows:

	Number of seats	% of total
Conservative	7,310	41.4
Labour	5,530	31.3
Liberal Democrats	2,460	14.0
Green	368	2.1
Other *	1,852	10.5
Vacant	127	0.7
	17,647	100.0

* Includes smaller parties and independents

Table 1: Number of seats held in principal local authorities in England, by party

Source: Open Council Data UK

The number of seats won by each party usually determines which party then has control of the council. If a particular party wins a majority of seats, then it can take control without reliance on any other party.

If a party wins more seats than any other party, though, but does not have an overall majority, then the council is under ‘no overall control’. In such cases, the party with the greatest number of seats can seek to govern within a coalition of other party groups. Or it can try to govern as a minority administration, relying on councillors from other parties to support it in making decisions.

Independent councillors frequently form a group with other independents, or with councillors from smaller parties, to give themselves more power in the decision-making process. Indeed, in some cases, these independent groups are the governing ‘party’ within councils, either on their own or as part of a coalition.

The number of local authorities controlled by the different parties, either outright or within a coalition, is currently as follows:

	Number of councils	% of total
Conservative	169	49.3
Labour	112	32.6
Liberal Democrats	37	10.8
Green	1	0.3
Independent	24	7.0
	343	100.0

Table 2: Number of councils controlled by different political parties

Source: Open Council Data UK

The Conservatives control many of the county councils, which are mostly in rural areas, as well as a significant proportion of district councils. Labour, on the other hand, holds power in many unitary authorities, which are predominantly urban, as well as in metropolitan borough councils and the London borough councils.

Electoral turnout

While the main thing that people tend to be interested in after an election is which candidate received the most votes, the proportion of eligible voters who actually cast their vote – known as electoral turnout – is also important.

A high turnout is a sign of a good level of engagement in the political process, whether this is because of a particularly compelling candidate, a strong campaign, a hot local topic or a big battle between parties at national level. A low turnout, on the other hand, means that the election campaign failed to capture people's attention sufficiently for them to take the time to cast their vote.

People are more likely to vote in general elections than they are in local ones. Taking 2017 as an example, the turnout at the UK Parliamentary general election, held in June, had an overall turnout of 69%. The English local council elections in May, however, had a much lower turnout, at just over 35%. Only one in three eligible voters took the opportunity to vote for their local councillor.

When local elections take place on the same day as a general election, however, turnout is usually much higher, as people voting in the general election tend to cast their vote in the local election, too. In 2015, for example, when local and general elections were both held in May, turnout for the local elections rose to 65%.

Why people don't vote

These average turnout figures disguise, though, a high level of variation across different parts of the country. While in some council wards and divisions more than 60% of voters can be relied on to cast their vote in local elections (even when there is no general election on the same day), in others fewer than 20% of eligible voters can be expected to do the same.

And low turnout is not just about geography. According to the Electoral Commission, those aged over 55 are significantly more likely to vote in local elections than those aged 18 to 34.

The main reasons given by people who did not vote in elections are usually that they were not registered to vote, that they were too busy, or that they were away from home on polling day. With

local elections, however, another common reason for not voting is that people were not aware that there was an election. This is especially common among younger voters.

And even when people knew there was an election on, they did not always know very much about what it was and why it was taking place. In the 2017 English local elections, for example, the Electoral Commission found that fewer than half of voters were able to name correctly the local authority to which they were electing representatives.

Local councillors

There are over seventeen thousand elected local councillors in England. Two thirds of them are male and one third are female. Their average age is sixty years old, though around one in eight are aged under 45 (and some are significantly younger). And they are overwhelmingly white, with only 4% from black, Asian or minority ethnic communities.

Being a councillor is not a full-time paid job, even though it may often feel like one. Nearly 45% of councillors are also in full- or part-time employment or are self-employed. A further 47%, though, are retired. Over 58% of councillors have a degree or equivalent qualification. And two thirds hold other voluntary or unpaid positions, such as school governor roles.

Local authority councillors are, however, eligible for a small allowance, which increases if they take on specific roles and responsibilities. The level of this allowance is set by each individual local authority. At my local council, for example, councillors may claim a basic allowance of just over £8,000 a year, with the expectation that they will devote 24.5 hours a week to their councillor duties. Town and parish councillors, on the other hand, receive no such allowances.

How local authorities make decisions

The ways in which local authorities make decisions can vary considerably from council to council. At a national level, we have a legislative body – the Houses of Parliament – that makes laws. And we have an executive body – the government – that makes decisions about running the country, within the confines of those laws. Local authorities did not traditionally have this distinction between the executive and the legislature, as power was vested in the council as a whole. This has, however, all changed in recent years.

Legislation sets out a series of definitive governance models that local authorities can use to make decisions. Firstly, they can have a leader – elected by the Council – with a ‘cabinet’ executive, made up of councillors from the party (or parties) in control of the council. Secondly, they can have a directly-elected Mayor (i.e. elected by the local electorate) with a ‘cabinet’ executive. Or thirdly, they can adopt a ‘committee’ system, whereby decisions are made by committees of councillors or by the full council as a whole.

Most councils have adopted a ‘leader and cabinet’ system. A small number of local authorities have, however, opted to establish the post of directly-elected mayor, though some of these have since reverted to the leader and cabinet model. A small but growing number of councils is, though, moving over to a committee system, which tends to promote collective decision making and to allow all councillors to have a say in what the council does.

How decisions are implemented

While it is the elected councillors who make policy decisions about, for example, what the council will do in response to local issues, councillors leave the implementation of their decisions to the council’s officers, who are paid employees.

In England, more than one million people work within local authorities. These include teachers, planners, social workers, librarians, and refuse collection operatives, as well as accountants, legal officers, property managers, human resources advisors and information technology specialists.

Just as local authorities have certain statutory functions, some of their officers also have statutory responsibilities. For example, each local authority’s chief financial officer (known, incidentally, as a ‘Section 151 Officer’, as Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 demands that councils appoint one) is responsible for ensuring effective stewardship of public money.

Like any large organisation, local authorities have a formal organisational structure, with a senior management team (usually headed by a Chief Executive) and individual teams responsible for different functions or services. Some of these teams will focus on delivering services to local people and businesses, while others will help to keep things working within the local authority itself.