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Local government facts and figures: England

Fun facts about local government

- Isles of Scilly Council is the [smallest local authority](#) by population with 2,100 people as of 2021.
- Kent County Council is the [largest local authority](#) by population with 1,578,500 people as of 2021.
- The [most changeable council](#) is probably London Borough of Merton. Since 1964 control has passed between Labour, the Conservatives and no overall control several times. It is currently under Labour control.

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How does local government work?



Local councils are made up of councillors (also called elected members) who are voted for by the public in local elections. They are supported by permanent council staff (called officers).

Councillors

Councillors are elected to represent people in a defined geographical area for a fixed term of four years, unless elected at a by-election in which case the time will be shorter. Councillors have to balance the needs and interests of residents, voters, political parties and the councils.

Councillors decide on the overall direction of policy. Council officers then implement these policy initiatives and are responsible for delivering services on a daily basis.

- **Full Council** – The full council is made up of all elected councillors, usually belonging to a range of different political parties. The full council debates and decides upon policy based on reports from the committees.
- **Committees** – Councillors on committees monitor and review the council's performance and decision-making process in order to ensure it is accountable to the public. Information is provided to the committees by council officers. In councils without a cabinet (see below), power is exercised by the committees, made up of councillors in proportion to their party's representation on the full council.
- **Cabinet** – A cabinet is like the government of the council, usually formed by the political party that has most elected representatives in full council. It is the only group which is allowed to make decisions on certain areas of policy without the approval of the full council. Each cabinet member usually looks over a specific area, e.g. environment, housing, adult social care, children's services or culture. Between 2000 and 2011, most councils were required to have a 'Leader and Cabinet' model rather than a committee system. However, since the Localism Act 2011 allowed them to, some councils have switched back to a committee system.
- **Leader or Elected Mayor** – The political leader of a council is responsible for the overall performance of the council – as well as its strategic direction and its relationship with central government. The leader is elected by the rest of the council, and in the cabinet system the leader then appoints the cabinet members. The leader often sits on the Local Enterprise Partnership board. Elected mayors perform the same role, but are directly elected by the residents, rather than other councillors. (N.B. Elected mayors are different to unelected or lord mayors, whose jobs are largely ceremonial and don't hold any powers).

Officers

Permanent staff perform many of the duties of the council. Lots of local authorities have a Chief Executive Officer, who oversees the management of the council. Underneath the Chief Executive, there will usually be a number of directorates or departments, e.g. finance, corporate services, children's and adults' services, housing etc.

How many councils are there?

In some areas of England, local government is divided between a county council (upper-tier) and a district council (lower tier), which are responsible for different services. In other areas, there is a single unitary authority instead.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there are only unitary, single-tier councils.

There are 318 **principal** (unitary, upper and second-tier) councils in England, including 21 county councils, 164 district councils, 131 unitaries and 2 Sui Generis authorities.

England – there are 318 councils in England.

- 21 County Councils (upper-tier)
- 164 District Councils (lower-tier)
- 32 London Boroughs (unitary)
- 36 Metropolitan Boroughs (unitary)
- 63 Unitary authorities (unitary)
- 2 Sui Generis authorities – City of London Corporation and Isles of Scilly (unitary)

Wales – 22 Unitary authorities

Scotland – 32 Unitary authorities

Northern Ireland – 11 Unitary authorities

There are around 11,930 [local councils in the UK, including town, parish, community, neighbourhood and village councils](#).

How many councillors are there?

There are roughly 17,000 councillors in England.



Demographic data on councillors is hard to find as it is not regularly or officially collected. The most recent data comes from the [LGA 2022 Census of Local Authority Councillors](#) which shows that:

- 40% of councillors were retired, and 32% were in full- or part-time employment;
- 61% of councillors held other voluntary or unpaid positions, such as school governorships;
- 64% of councillors held a degree or equivalent qualification; only 4% did not hold any qualification;
- 59% of councillors were male, and 41% female;
- The average age of councillors in 2022 was 60 years; 16% were aged under-45 and 42% were aged 65 or over;
- 92% described their ethnic background as white;
- 84% described their sexual orientation as heterosexual or straight;
- 16% had a long-term health problem or disability which limited their daily activities;
- 46% of councillors had a responsibility as a carer, most commonly looking after a child.

How is local government structured?

The structure of local government varies from area to area, and region to region.

England

In most of England, there are two tiers – county and district – with responsibility for services split between the two tiers. County councils cover the entire county area and provide around 80 per cent of the services. Within the county, there are several district councils which cover a smaller area and provide more local services.

However London, other metropolitan areas and some parts of shire England operate under a single-tier council structure.

In total there are five possible types of local authority in England. These are:

1. County councils – cover the whole county and provide 80% of services in these areas, including children's services and adult social care.
2. District councils – cover a smaller area within a county, providing more local services (such as housing, local planning, waste and leisure but not children's services or adult social care); can be called district, borough or city council.
3. Unitary authorities – just one level of local government responsible for all local services, can be called a council (e.g. Medway Council), a city council (e.g. Nottingham City Council) or borough council (e.g. Reading Borough Council).
4. London boroughs – each of the 32 boroughs is a unitary authority.
5. Metropolitan districts – effectively unitary authorities, the name being a relic from past organisational arrangements. They can be called metropolitan borough or city councils.

Combined authorities

Since the establishment of Greater Manchester in 2011, groups of councils have formed combined authorities in some areas of England. These combined authorities receive additional powers and funding from central government. They are particularly important for transport and economic policy across the regions in which they are based. There are currently 10 combined authorities in England;

1. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough– **Mayor Dr Nik Johnson**
2. Greater Manchester Combined Authority– **Mayor Andy Burnham**
3. Liverpool City Region– **Mayor Steve Rotherham**
4. North of Tyne Combined Authority – **Mayor Jamie Driscoll**
5. South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority – **Mayor Oliver Coppard**
6. Tees Valley Combined Authority– **Mayor Ben Houchen**
7. West Midlands Combined Authority– **Mayor Andy Street**

8. West of England Combined Authority – **Mayor Dan Norris**

9. North East Combined Authority– **No directly elected mayor**

10. West Yorkshire Combined Authority– **Mayor Tracy Brabin**

Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

All of Wales' 22 authorities, Scotland's 32 authorities and Northern Ireland's 11 authorities are unitary – they operate a single-tier local government system.

Town, parish and community councils

In some parts of England, Wales and Scotland there is another layer of local government below these councils called parish (England), town (England) or community (Wales and Scotland) councils. These are responsible for services such as management of town and village centres, litter, verges, cemeteries, parks, ponds, allotments, war memorials and community halls. Scotland's community councils have fewer powers than their counterparts in England and Wales.

There are around 10,000 such councils in England, 730 in Wales and 1200 in Scotland. There are none in Northern Ireland.

Source: [House of Commons Library](#).

What is local government responsible for?

Councils are responsible for a very wide range of services, many of which are statutory (i.e. they are legally required to fulfil them).

These include:

- Education, for example, providing schools, transport to get children to school and providing opportunities for adult learning;
- Housing, such as finding accommodation for people in need and maintaining social housing;
- Social Services, for example, caring for and protecting children, older people and disabled people;
- Highways and transport, including maintaining roads and managing traffic flow;

- Waste management, including collecting rubbish and recycling;
- Leisure and cultural services, for example, providing libraries, leisure services and arts venues;
- Consumer protection, such as enforcing trading standards and licensing taxis;
- Environmental health and services, for example, making sure that the food provided in pubs and restaurants is safe to eat, and controlling pollution locally;
- Planning, including managing local development and making sure buildings are safe;
- Economic development, for example, attracting new businesses and encouraging tourism;
- Emergency planning for things like floods or terrorist attacks.

The range of services is broadly similar across England, [Wales](#) and [Scotland](#) but in [Northern Ireland](#) councils have a more limited scope.

In England, the responsibilities are divided up between the district and county council in two-tier areas and extra duties may be discharged by combined authorities in places which have one.

What is local government responsible for?

	Unitaries	County Councils	District Councils	Metropolitan Districts	London Boroughs	GLA
Education	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Highways	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Transport planning	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Passenger transport	✓	✓				✓
Social care	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Housing	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Libraries	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Leisure and recreation	✓		✓	✓	✓	

	Unitaries	County Councils	District Councils	Metropolitan Districts	London Boroughs	GLA
Environmental health	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Waste collection	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Waste disposal	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Planning applications	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Strategic planning	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Local tax collection	✓		✓	✓	✓	

What is the overall political control of councils?



As of the 2022 local elections, the Conservatives have the most councillors in England (42%), followed by Labour (31%) and the Liberal Democrats (15%).

Source: [Institute for Government](#)

Who pays for local government?

Local government accounts for almost a quarter of all public expenditure in England.

Local government in England is funded through:

- grants from central government (about 52%) made up mainly of redistributed business rates, including the Revenue Support Grant and the Public Health grant;
- and locally raised funding (about 48%) which includes council tax (charged to local people), retained local business rates income, and other sources such as car parks, parking permits, rents and the hire of sports facilities.

Local authority spending can be divided into revenue expenditure and capital expenditure. On the whole, revenue expenditure is financed through a balance of central government grant, retained non-domestic (business) rates and the locally raised council tax. Capital expenditure is principally financed through central government grants, borrowing and capital receipts. (See [Local Government Finance Statistics 2022](#).)

The devolved nations have their own financial settlements and structures – [find out more here](#).

How much do councils spend?

Revenue Expenditure

Central government describes [revenue expenditure](#) (PDF document) as “mainly for meeting employee costs, such as the salaries of staff; procurement costs, transport, fuel and building maintenance; levies paid to other local authorities which provide a service (for example, a metropolitan district pays a waste disposal authority); payment of awards/benefits on behalf of central government (for example, mandatory rent allowances) and recharges to other accounts.”

Total revenue expenditure for all English local authorities in 2021-22: **£110.3bn**

Capital expenditure

Central government describes [capital expenditure](#) as “mainly for buying, constructing or improving physical assets such as buildings – schools, houses, libraries, museums, police and fire stations etc.; land – for development, roads, playing fields etc.; and vehicles, plant and machinery – including street lighting, road signs etc.”

Total capital expenditure for all English local authorities in 2020-21: **£24.65bn**

This information is taken from the Government's [Local government financial statistics England 2022](#). The devolved nations have their own financial settlements and structures – [find out more here](#).

What is the turnover for local government?

Core Spending Power (CSP) is a measure of local government funding introduced in the Local Government Finance Settlement 2016/17. It is calculated as the maximum available to councils through all sources of funding.

[Core Spending Power for English councils in 2022-23](#) is £54.104bn, increasing from £51.257bn in 2021-22. At September 2021 there were 24,987,468 dwellings in England, which means that core spending power per dwelling was £2,165 in 2021-22, increasing from £2,016 in 2021-22.

The devolved nations have their own financial settlements and structures – [find out more here](#).