

# Local authorities

## Structures, functions and power

### Local authorities:

- take a variety of different structures but all cover a geographically defined area
- account for about a quarter of all public spending in the UK (2010-11 = £122bn)
- directly provide (or commission) a very wide range of services
- employ 2.2 million people in the UK, in around 600 occupations
- pursue a variety of social, political, economic, environmental objectives
- are creations of the parliamentary statute and can therefore be abolished, restructured and reorganised at Parliament's will.

### The different structures of local government:

Councils, even those of the same type, 'do' local government very differently with wildly varying characteristics – geographic, demographic, social, economic, geographical and political. Note, that some councils which are called 'county' are unitary and that most counties no longer have their nominal county town under their jurisdiction e.g. Nottinghamshire doesn't include Nottingham.



### For example:

- **Oxfordshire** has one county council, four smaller district councils and a city council that performs the functions of a district and a number of even smaller town and parish councils (though not every area is covered by a town or parish council). Each council is responsible for providing different services to the public.
- On the other hand Bristol just has one tier of local government – the **Bristol City Council** (a unitary authority).
- The **London Borough of Southwark** controls most of the local government functions in Southwark apart from the bits controlled by the GLA, for example, Transport for London, the London Fire Brigade and the Met Police.
- **Greater Manchester** used to have a two-tier system of local government; district councils shared power with the Greater **Manchester County Council**. The county council was abolished in 1986, and so its districts (the 10 metropolitan boroughs) effectively became unitary authority areas. However, the metropolitan county has continued to exist in law and as a geographic frame of reference, and as a ceremonial county, has a Lord Lieutenant and a High Sheriff.

	Shire areas			Metropolitan areas	London	
	unitaries	county councils	district councils	metropolitan districts	London boroughs	GLA
Education	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Highways	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Transport planning	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Passenger transport	✓	✓				✓
Social care	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Housing	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Libraries	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Leisure and recreation	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Environmental health	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Waste collection	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Waste disposal	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Planning applications	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Strategic planning	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Local taxation collection	✓		✓	✓	✓	

## The role of local government:

Historically, the principle function of councils had been that of direct service provision; but now, in some areas, the local authority is more the commissioner, regulator or facilitator of services provided locally.

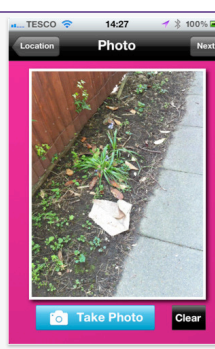
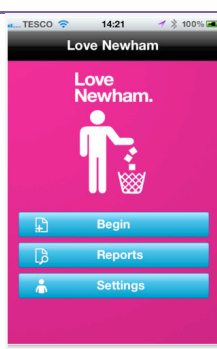
Residents interact with their local authority much more than they often realise. Local authorities provide (directly or indirectly) a huge variety of services to residents in the local community.

Council tax payers, drivers, state school students, library book borrowers, gym goers, bus users, council house tenants, pedestrians, creators of refuse and voters are among those whose lives are affected by local government services.

It can be argued these services have a larger impact on our lives than so called 'bigger' issues that make national political headlines.

The [Hansard Society](#) ranked institutions based on the perceived impact they have on our daily lives. Media came out top with 63%, followed by local councils on 50%, far ahead of Westminster Parliament (19%) and the Cabinet (5%).

Most council services are mandatory - this means councils must do them because they are under a duty to do so by law. Some mandatory services are tightly controlled by central government meaning services look the same across the country - for example, the administration of Housing Benefit or the licensing of a pub. Other services are discretionary so the council can choose to provide them but does not have to, and they can charge for them if they want to - e.g. libraries. Local authorities produce a mass of information about their services and activities through their website, council newspaper or magazine, leaflets, brochures, pamphlets and mobile apps.



**For example:**  
London Borough of Newham –  
[Love Newham App](#), [Newham Mag](#), flyers, posters, etc.



Councils organise their departments and operations in all different ways, though they are often based around the priority areas of their responsibilities.

**For example:**  
**Leicestershire County Council**

Adults and communities	Social services, home care, protecting adults, carers support, rehabilitation, care homes, supported housing, community meals, libraries, museums, record office and more.
Chief executive's department	Democratic services, councillors, council meetings, youth justice, community safety, public relations, trading standards and more.
Children and young people's service	Children and family services such as education (including special needs), child protection, youth activities, teenage pregnancy, adoption, fostering and more.
Corporate resources	Job vacancies, property services, procurement, finance, freedom of information, corporate complaints, pension services, website and more.
Environment and transport	Construction and maintenance of roads, parking, road safety, recycling campaigns, recycling/waste sites, public transport and environment.

## Westminster City Council (commissioning model)

### Westminster City Council Structure

Since October 2009 the structure of Westminster City Council has been based on a commissioning model. Commissioning is about creating a virtuous circle of identifying public need, designing a solution with the people who use our services, creating a team and budget to deliver the plan, implementing, then evaluating and reviewing. This means that our services start by focusing on the outcomes we can achieve rather than how much output we can deliver.

The chart opposite illustrates the council's structure. All units are linked to a Strategic Director who has a specific area of responsibility. These can be identified using the legend:

- Resources
- Finance and Performance
- Adult and Community Services
- Children and Young People
- Built Environment
- City Management
- Units which report directly to the Chief Executive (see overview for details)
- Councillors

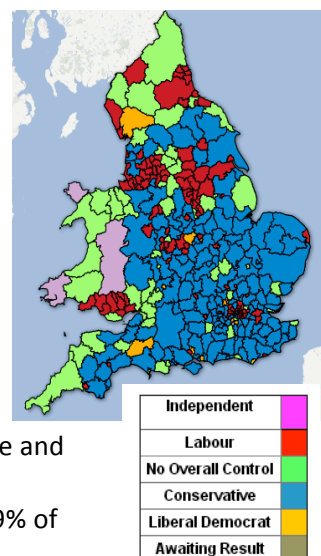
Posts A-J and 1-31 explained on the next page



## Elected members:

Local authorities are run and have their policies set by elected members (also known as councillors) who are elected by and democratically answerable to the people who live in the ward or division they represent. While they represent their communities that does not mean they necessarily reflect them:

- 68 per cent of councillors are male, the average age is 60, and 96 per cent are white.
- They spend, on average, 23 hours per week on council/political business.
- 57 per cent of councillors hold one or more positions of leading responsibility within the council and 53 per cent of all councillors receive a special responsibility allowance in addition to their basic allowance. 30 per cent do it 'full-time'.
- 88 per cent of councillors cited a desire to serve the community as their reason for wanting to become a councillor.
- 67 per cent of councillors intend to stand for re-election at the end of their term in office and 83 per cent would recommend taking on the role to others.
- In the UK there are 9004 Conservative councillors, 6164 Labour and 2236 Lib Dems. 50.9% of councils are Conservative controlled, 30% Labour and 3.2% Lib Dem.



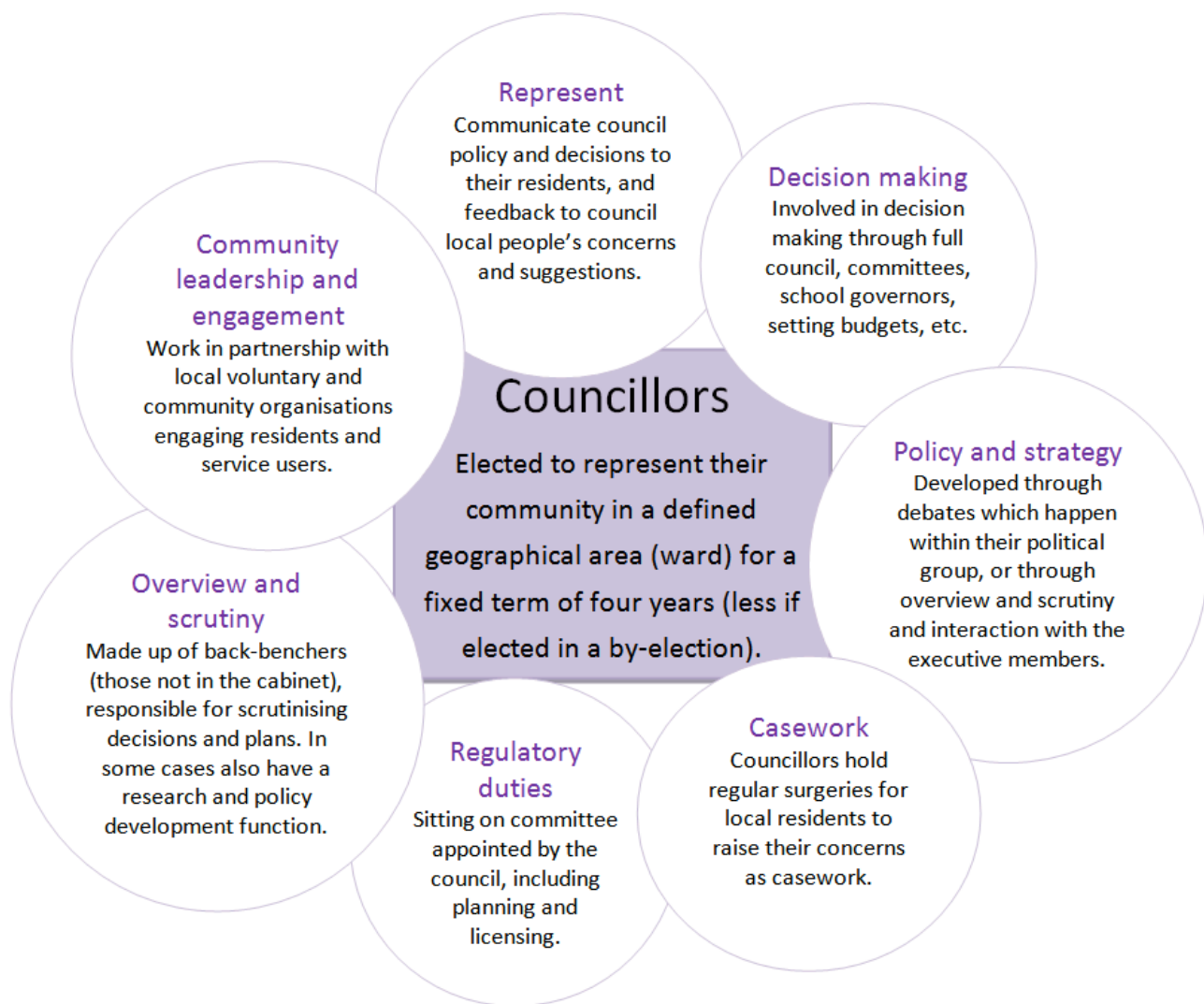
Councillors represent geographical wards, and a ward may be represented by 1, 2 or 3 councillors serving a term of four years each. County Councils and London Boroughs elect all their councillors at once, every 4 years. Metropolitan districts elect one-third of their councillors in each of the 3 years out of 4 which are not County Election years, Unitary authorities, district and town and parish councils have a choice of the two different approaches. They are all elected by the first past the post system. The role of all councillors is to represent their electors. It is also to set the overall policies, budget and direction of their council. In addition councillors may be community leaders - for example, sitting on local boards as school governors or charity trustees etc. Some councillors also hold additional responsibilities - as members of the council's executive or chairs or members of regulatory, partnership or scrutiny committees.

### For example:

A typical week for a councillor might look something like this –

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
9-5 work	9-5 work	9-5 work	9-5 work	9-5 work	AM – advice surgery	party political canvassing (door knocking, leafleting, etc)
Eve: full Council meeting at the Town Hall	Eve: scrutiny meeting or Cabinet meeting	Eve: political meeting e.g. Political Group meeting (all Councillors in that party deciding their policies) or local Party meeting (all members in local party)	Eve: meeting in the community e.g. School governors or charity trustee		PM – Community event, e.g. school fete, opening a cycle lane, visiting a community group, fun day.	

NB: Some councillors (like all politicians) therefore suffer from believing themselves to be the busiest and most important people around, which is worth remembering when organising meetings or asking them to do something.



## How are decisions made?

### **Leader and executive (or cabinet):**

Overall responsibility for the running and direction of most councils rests with the leader and executive (or cabinet) – a group of no more than ten councillors, usually drawn from the largest party, who hold particular responsibilities for areas of the council's work – for example, for housing; children and young people; finance etc. They may exercise this power individually, through delegated responsibilities from the executive, or through formal meetings of the executive, and the extent to which (or not) they work as a team or to the direction of the leader of the council varies widely.

Eleven councils have a directly-elected mayor instead of a leader, in which case the authority of the executive members is drawn from the mayor's appointment, and the mayor is more likely to be more directive in their leadership of the council. The council's policy is usually made by members of the cabinet and senior officers. Members of the cabinet also represent the council on the increasingly-important local partnership structures – for example, local enterprise partnerships, police and crime commissioner panels, health and wellbeing boards and children's trust boards.

### **Council officers:**

The day-to-day business of the council is carried out by the council's officers (often numbering in the thousands) led by the head of paid staff (more usually referred to as the council's chief executive). The council's officers are accountable through the management line to the chief executive, who has responsibility for the operational leadership of the council (as compared to the strategic leadership of the elected leader/mayor and executive). In some councils, though, officers exercise more leadership, as their specialised technical and professional knowledge is unchallenged by councillors.

### Full council:

Responsibility for the council's headline policy framework and annual budget remains with the full council (the meeting of all elected councillors on the authority), which meets several times per year. However, the local government governance changes of the 2000s mean that the role of the full council is much reduced and no longer has a significant role in the day-to-day running of the council – its major role is setting the annual budget and council tax, in February/March each year, and agreeing the policy framework of the council, including the corporate plan and other legally-required documents.

### Committees:

Across most of the UK there are no longer powerful policy-setting committees as there were prior to the 2000s reforms, as the role of chairs of policy committees has been taken by the executive members (although a small minority of councils have returned to the so-called "committee system" in recent years.)

One of the key roles for non-executive councillors (often referred to as backbenchers) is participation in scrutiny of the workings, policy and decisions of the executive. They carry out this role through meetings of the full council and as members of scrutiny committees.

These committees, which are mandatory, offer councillors the opportunity to take a more in-depth look at an area of the council's work, a partnership the council is part of or a proposal in front of the council. It is usual for the chair of a scrutiny committee to be held by an opposition member, but the committees must be politically balanced, meaning the administration's backbenchers will have a majority on each scrutiny committee. In places where the Mayor or Leader appoints their cabinet, the Chair of Scrutiny is the only role that is elected within the council.

The committee's views have to be taken in to account by the executive in their decision-making and their recommendations have to be formally responded to. However the impact of scrutiny should not be overestimated: it is widely agreed that formal scrutiny is an area of the reforms of the 2000s that has not worked as intended.

Many councillors (executive and backbench) also take roles on regulatory committees, such as the planning and licensing committees. Members of these committees are required not to consider party-political considerations in taking decisions that are quasi-judicial.

### Civic mayor or chair of council:

Many councils have a civic mayor or chair of the council. They carry out ceremonial duties and chair meetings, but can't make decisions about council business.

### Political make-up:

Party system	% in GB
Completely / predominately non- <b>partisan</b> (60% = seats held by Independents)	2%
Weak partisan (20-59% seats held by Independents)	10%
<b>Multi-party/fragmented</b> (20% seats plus held by third parties)	18%
Two party (70% or more seats held by two parties (neither has more than 60%))	24%
One-party dominant (60-75% seats held by one party)	27%
One party monopolistic (75% or more seats held by one party)	19%

The extent to which party political decisions are made varies between councils. Not all councils are run on tightly disciplined party political lines though it is fair to say the political makeup of most councils will affect the decisions made.

### Other organisations:

**The Local Government Association (LGA)** | <http://www.local.gov.uk/>

The LGA works with councils to support, promote and improve local government. They are a politically-led, cross-party organisation that works on behalf of councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government.

**The Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)** | <http://www.lgiu.org.uk/>

The LGIU is an independent think tank and membership organisation (although it is historically considered left-leaning). They conduct research and gather information about best practice on behalf of their member authorities.