

Democratic Accountability and Governance PPC Sub-Committee

Local Authorities in the UK

Briefing Paper

Introduction

This paper explains the structure of local authorities in the UK including:

- England
- Scotland
- Wales
- Northern Ireland

It also provides an overview of two White Papers: '[Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People](#)' (1998) and '[Strong and Prosperous Communities](#)' (2006) which aimed to modernise local government.

Local government systems

[Local government](#) systems vary between the four nations of the UK. In England, Scotland, and Wales, councils are responsible for social care and provide some aspects of transport, housing, and education. They are also in charge of a range of neighbourhood services including libraries and waste collection.

Local government in Northern Ireland is more limited. Councils provide some neighbourhood services such as waste collection and street cleaning, but they are not responsible for education, libraries, or social care.

Structure

In **England** there are 343 local authorities and the structure of government varies between them. They cover:

- **Two-tier areas, where authorities share local government functions.** These areas are covered by county councils and district councils. There are 26 county councils, which provide social care and some aspects of transport and education. The counties are sub-divided into 192 district councils, which manage neighbourhood services like waste collection.
- **Single-tier areas, where one authority carries out all local government functions.** These areas comprise the 32 London boroughs, 36 metropolitan districts, and 55 unitary authorities.

Most local authorities in England are run by a leader and cabinet from councillors of the majority party or a coalition of parties in cases of no overall control. Other authorities use a committee system, in which decision-making is delegated to committees of councillors from all parties. Budgetary decisions in these cases must still receive the support of a majority of councillors.

Fifteen English local authorities, including those in Bristol, Liverpool, and Watford, have transferred leadership powers to executive mayors. Mayors are elected via the supplementary vote system, which allows voters to choose their first and second-preference candidates.

In **Scotland** there are 32 local authorities and they are all unitary authorities. Scottish councils are led by a council leader and cabinet as well as a provost – a ceremonial figurehead – chosen from and elected by their councillors.

In 2017, the Scottish government launched a review of local governance, exploring how to improve local democracy by increasing capacity for community decision-making and public governance. The first results were collated and published in a [report](#) in May 2019 and the review remains ongoing. The initial findings were that there is an appetite for a reinvigorated modern democracy across Scotland which addresses inequalities, including in how power and resources are shared.

In **Wales** there are 22 local authorities and are all unitary authorities led by a leader and cabinet elected by the council itself.

In **Northern Ireland** there are 11 local authorities. As in Scotland and Wales, all of Northern Ireland's councils are unitary authorities. Councils in Northern Ireland typically use a committee system of governance and are led by a chair (or mayor) chosen by the council for a one-year term.

Councillors

In **England**, councillors are elected on four-year terms to single or multi-member wards using the first past the post electoral system. Council seats are elected altogether every four years; by thirds three years out of every four; or in halves every two years.

In **Scotland**, councillors are elected to multi-member wards via single transferable vote which is a proportional voting system which allows voters to rank candidates. Councils are normally elected as a whole every four years.

In **Wales**, councillors are elected to single and multi-member wards using first past the post, and councils come up for election as a whole every four years.

In **Northern Ireland**, councillors are elected via single transferable vote to multi-member electoral areas. All councillors are elected every four years.

Funding

Councils across the UK are funded by a combination of central government grants and local taxes. The balance between these funding sources varies between central government grants, council tax, general revenue grants, business rates revenue and council reserves.

Government White Paper 'Modern Local Government: In touch with the People' (1998)

The UK Government released a White Paper, ['Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People'](#) in 1998 which summarised Labour's project to modernise local government and renew local democracy.

The White Paper highlighted what central government thought to be the major weaknesses in local government, namely: its inward looking and paternalistic culture, under developed community leadership role, weak local electoral system, public anxiety about ethical standards, inefficient and opaque decision making and poor service quality and uneven service performance. It then proposed a programme of reform that aimed to address these

weaknesses. The seven streams of reform came under three main headings: modern public services, democratic renewal and community leadership¹.

The White Paper was a precursor to the [Local Government Act 2000 Act](#), which enacted fundamental reform to how local government operated. Before the reforms, local government centred on a committee-based system.

The White Paper was critical of the Committee system:

‘Councils must have political management structures which are effective and command respect. The current committee system is confusing and inefficient, with significant decisions usually taken elsewhere. Many councillors have little influence over council decisions, yet spend a great deal of their time at council meetings. The result is that people do not know who is running their council.’

‘Only some of local government in England today matches up to the picture of the modern council. The current framework in which local government operates has not kept pace with the way people live their lives today. Councils’ political structures - centred on the committee system – are fundamentally the same as they were before women had the vote, or indeed, before the introduction of universal male suffrage. The overall framework does not provide the opportunities councils need to modernise, or the incentives for them to do so. Rather the framework is one which allows inefficiencies to continue, and can reinforce a culture where councils are inward looking, failing to put the interests of their people first.’

‘So change is needed to drive up standards overall, make best practice more widespread, and address those occasional failures. The aim is not to strangle diversity or create dull uniformity, but to make success universal throughout English local government. This is what the Government wishes to see - strong and effective councils everywhere playing their part in giving people greater opportunities and building a fairer country.’

Retaining with the Committee based system was not an option, except in small authorities which were able to continue with a committee system. The [explanatory notes](#) which accompanied the 2000 Act explained:

“The objectives of the policy underlying Part II is to deliver greater efficiency, transparency and accountability of local authorities. The new arrangements are intended to ensure that decisions can be taken more quickly and efficiency than the existing committee system, that the individuals or bodies responsible for decision making can be more readily identified by the public, and that those decision makers can be held account in public by overview and scrutiny committees”

Government White Paper ‘Strong and Prosperous Communities’ (2006)

The UK Government released a White Paper [‘Strong and Prosperous Communities’](#) in 2006 which proposed to give local authorities more freedom and powers to meet the needs of their citizens and communities.

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file:///ois.gov.soj/sojdata/SGR_HomeDirs/BoydensK/Downloads/Local_Government_Reform_in_Great_Britain.pdf

Key proposals in the local government White Paper included:

- role for councils as strategic leaders and place-shapers through stronger Local Strategic Partnerships and next-generation Local Area Agreements (LAAs) with wider scope and importance, and a duty to cooperate between councils and local partners.
- Stronger cities, strategic regions, reforming Passenger Transport Authorities and the development of Multi-Area Agreements, with greater powers over skills and spatial planning for authorities who want this.
- Stronger political leadership requiring all councils to opt for a directly-elected mayor, directly-elected executive or indirectly-elected leader for a four-year term.
- A strengthened role for front-line councillors including powers to respond to community calls for action on local issues, small budgets to deal with very local issues and greater freedom to speak up on planning and licensing issues affecting their wards.
- A wider and stronger role for scrutiny including the power to require evidence from all local service providers and a duty on them to have regard to scrutiny recommendations.
- Devolution of powers, including removing the requirement for Secretary of State's consent to bye-laws and the creation of parish councils.
- Community cohesion – encouraging Councils to put integration and cohesion at the heart of community strategies and LAAs.

The proposals aimed to build on the investment and reform made since the 'Modern Local Government: In touch with the People' White Paper in 1998.

Principal Committee and Panel Officer

April 2021