

# Local authority elections in England briefing



**Updated March 2021**  
**by Meg Read**

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## Context

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This summer, many of the 343 councils in England are holding elections. If your council, or local authority, is holding elections in May, you'll have the opportunity to vote to elect councillors.

Councillors oversee the work of your local authority, and act as a bridge between the council and their ward – the geographical area they represent. The powers your councillors have will vary depending on the type of council you have – can either have one or two tiers of local government, meaning come election day you may be electing two sets of councillors for both tiers.

## What am I voting for?

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### Types of council

#### Single-Tiered

Unitary authorities (57)	In unitary authorities, the council provides all services and facilities in the area. All councils in Scotland and Wales, and some in England, are unitary authorities. This is generally large towns, cities or small counties.
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Metropolitan district councils (36)	Metropolitan district councils are responsible for the same areas as unitary authorities – all local services and facilities. They cover the six largest urban areas in England outside of London.
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#### Two-Tiered

County councils (25)	The higher level in a two-tier system, county councils are responsible for strategic decisions and the provision of most services and facilities across a larger area such as schools and learning, libraries, roads and social services.
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District councils (188)	The lower tier in a two-tier system, district councils are responsible for more localised services such as rubbish collection, recycling, housing and planning applications.
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### Powers

Councils, and councillors, have responsibility over a wide range of services, such as setting the rates of Council Tax, which impacts the services provided in your area.

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These include:

- Education
- Transport
- Planning
- Fire and public safety
- Social care
- Libraries
- Waste management
- Trading standards
- Rubbish collection
- Recycling
- Council Tax collections
- Housing
- Planning applications

Wards, the areas councillors represent, are far smaller than the constituencies represented by MPs, so your vote is particularly powerful and the candidates are likely to understand your local community well. Like MPs, councillors respond to residents' issues and do casework, so you may develop a close relationship with your local councillors, or come to them for support and help in the future. Primarily, their role is to represent their ward and the community within it, so as Churches, they are an important bridge to local decision making a port of call for issues or priorities. As community leaders, you may well see a lot of them, and it is important to not underestimate the role they have in shaping a vision for the area they represent.

### **How does the voting work?**

All councillors in England and Wales are elected by First Past the Post, the same system used at the General Election. As each ward has a number of councillors, multiple councillors can be elected in the same election. This means that you have as many votes as there are vacancies, and place your ballot by putting crosses next to the

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councillors you would like to elect. The candidates with the most votes will then be elected to the vacant seats.

Councillors serve a four-year term and may not all be elected at the same time, depending on the area in which you live. Some councils in England hold their elections by thirds or halves, which means that a third of the councillors are elected each year (with a year off) or half are elected every other year respectively. However, some areas do elect all councillors every four years at the same time.

### **What are the big issues in this election?**

Priority issues for your local authority elections will differ community to community. For example, are schools struggling in your area? Do you always have problems with bin collections? Are transport links unreliable in your area?

Here are some general topics you might want to think about ahead of the elections.

## **Climate Crisis**

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Whilst local government action is largely dependent on funding and the way powers are devolved, there are ways in which local authorities can prioritise climate action. For example, these could include:

### **Making net-zero commitments**

Your local council could commit to a net-zero target and establish implementation plans.

### **Transport**

Effective, carbon neutral and safe public transport systems could play a key role in a just and green recovery locally. Local councils can prioritise decarbonisation efforts. Councils can also play a key role in supporting the transition to electric vehicle use.

### **Housing**

Prioritising and supporting housing developments that are future focussed, creating accessible housing for everyone, and developing retrofitting schemes which create good work.

## **Social Care**

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Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, we've seen both the importance of social care provision, and the immense pressures these services face. Local authorities have responsibility for the health and social care of their residents. Since 2018 they have begun to develop Integrated Care systems whereby partnerships are formed with the NHS and other care providers to meet the needs of local people. As councillors can play a part in the creation of these partnerships which dictate the care and support available in your local area, social care is a key priority for this election. Some areas you may wish to consider are:

### **Funding**

Councils have the power to raise council tax levels which can be used to support social care funding, and commission services that dictate how social care provisions will be allocated and provided.

### **Strategic planning**

As highlighted during the pandemic, local authorities often have to make strategic decisions regarding how their area will respond to crisis and changes in need. Through Integrated Care systems, local authorities work with other partnerships to provide services for local people.

### **Children and Young People's social care**

As well as public health centred social care, Local Authorities also control Children and Young People's social care, which faces a growing mental health crisis, and the repercussions of the pandemic and its lockdowns.

## **Housing**

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Local authorities have significant control over the housing stock in their areas, and on policy relating to homelessness. You might want to think about:

### **Social and affordable housing**

Councils are responsible for the development of social and affordable housing in their area – including the standards of the housing and how affordable it is.

### **Private rented sector**

Councils have powers regarding landlords, and upholding standards for accommodation such as the removal of cladding or fire safety.

### **Homelessness**

Your local council can choose how to support those sleeping rough or experiencing homelessness.

## Local services

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As councils control, fund and manage many local amenities and services, you might want to think about which local services are a priority in your area. These might include:

- rubbish collection
- leisure centres and parks
- libraries
- youth services like youth clubs.

## Poverty and Inequality

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Poverty and inequality were already huge problems before the pandemic. At the start of 2020 14.5 million people were experiencing poverty, 4.5 million of them children. The experience of poverty had become more difficult – with 2.5 million people experiencing destitution, the most extreme form of poverty, an increase of 35% from two years previously. The pandemic pressed down on the inequalities already present in society and made them much more challenging for many people.

MPs, who are not up for election, make most of the decisions around benefits (although in Scotland around 15% of that budget is devolved to MSPs) and minimum wages. English Local Authorities, however, can make huge differences to family's budgets, people's opportunities and importantly in humanising the experience of living with a low income.

### Council Tax

Council Tax rates are set by Local Authorities. There are schemes to reduce Council Tax for families on low income that are set by individual Local Authorities in England. As Council Tax is one of the most regressive taxes – levied without reference to ability to pay – these reduction schemes are very important. They vary greatly from exempting low-income families completely, through insisting on at least a 30% payment regardless of circumstances, to demanding full payment of Council Tax if the family lives in a higher-than-average value property.

### **Additional Support**

English Local Authorities can choose to have a fund to offer limited cash help in times of crisis. Many don't, and many of those that do offer only benefits in kind.

### **Wider support**

If you have no money to spend there are often few opportunities to meet and share in community life. Local Government has a key role to play in ensuring that there are places where people can socialise and be part of the community which are available to all, including those with limited means. Access to shared non-commercial spaces, such as libraries, leisure centres, playgrounds has reduced as local authorities have sought to cut budgets. Some sections of society can afford to buy these services from the private sector, but many cannot.

## Questions for your councillors

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Whilst priority issues will vary area to area, here are some questions you might want to ask the candidates standing for election.

- 1. Climate Crisis:** What measures will you take to ensure structural decisions are in line with our net-zero carbon targets?
- 2. Social Care:** How are you going to ensure our area's voice is heard in the new Integrated Care System?
- 3. Housing:** What will you do to ensure everyone in this ward has a safe and secure home?
- 4. Local services:** Which of our local services would you say is most in need of support and investment? What will you do to improve this service?
- 5. Youth Support:** How will you ensure that our area is the best place for our young people to grow up?
- 6. Poverty:** How do you plan to include people living in poverty in your decision-making processes?

## Contact

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We would like to know how this guidance was useful and what should be added or changed for future publications.

If you have questions, suggestions or comments please write to:

Joint Public Issues Team [enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk)

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