The background of the entire page is a photograph of a bright blue sky filled with fluffy white clouds. The bottom half of the image shows the sky's reflection on a body of water, creating a symmetrical effect.

# **The Future of Local Councils**

**A Survey of Parish, Town and  
Community Councils in England  
and Wales**

This research is the result of a collaboration between the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and the Local Governance Research Centre (LGRC) at De Montfort University (DMU). The research was conducted by Arianna Giovannini (DMU), Steven Griggs (Staffordshire University), Alistair Jones (DMU), Steven Parker (Open University) and Jonathan Rose (DMU). It was funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund.



The research team would like to thank the many clerks who gave their time to participate in the survey and the discussions that followed. Their invaluable contribution to the delivery of the survey cannot be underestimated.

Special thanks go to Johnathan Bourne FSLCC, James Derounian, and Elisabeth Skinner MBE FSLCC for their critical questioning of the design of the survey and our emerging findings. Without the initial encouragement of Elisabeth and James, the survey might not ever have been undertaken.

Our thanks also go to Lydia Hopton PSLCC and Helen Quick for their support in getting the initial findings of the survey out to a wider audience.

Of course, the final responsibility for the arguments and recommendations presented in this report lies with the research team.

Published by the SLCC, January 2023.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** National associations across the sector should work in collaboration with national government to deliver a public information campaign on the role of local councils, targeting in particular support to widen the pool of those individuals willing to stand for election as a councillor.
- 2.** The government should offer financial support to local councils to support and ensure the holding of elections for local councillors.
- 3.** In keeping with the Civility and Respect Project, supported by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), One Voice Wales (OVW), the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and county associations, further training should be provided to local councils on the Seven Principles of Public Life. Importantly, complaints over behaviour should be advanced by the chair of the council or the council as a whole, thereby giving valuable and necessary support in such circumstances to the role and responsibilities of clerks. Monitoring officers in principal authorities require further capacity if they are to be in a position to support local councils in addressing standards issues.
- 4.** Training budgets across the sector should be increased to support the building of organisational capacity within local councils. All local councils should dedicate resources to training and skills development for councillors and for their workforce.
- 5.** Local councils should review their engagement of, and communication with, young people and different communities, evaluating the need in their area for youth councils and community forums as part of an investment in neighbourhood planning processes. As part of this review, they should evaluate their use of social media as a tool to connect and engage with communities.
- 6.** National associations should come together to establish a career path that encourages a diverse graduate entry into the profession of clerks. This career path should offer attractive contractual terms and conditions that align with other tiers of local government and public sector organisations. Mentoring schemes and leadership development programmes should target equality across the profession, particularly the equal advancement of women into the posts of clerks in larger councils.

- 7.** Supporting the work of the Local Government Association (LGA) and others, local councils and principal authorities should negotiate frameworks for collaboration between the different tiers of local government. These frameworks should be accompanied by the publication of statements of collaborative intent that establish a duty to consult local councils and/or the putting into place of local council forums between principal authorities and parish and town councils.
- 8.** Collaboration between local councils should be facilitated. The government should make funding available for the generation of 'good practice' guidance and collaborative projects between local councils.
- 9.** The 2011 Localism Act gave local councils a range of new powers. Local councils should re-evaluate their use of these powers, while central government should consider the attribution of such powers to all local councils as part of a national review of the legislation governing the sector.
- 10.** Parts of England and Wales remain unparished. Such inequalities of democratic representation risk accelerating as devolution deals bring into being new tiers and arrangements for local government across different regions and counties. To counter such risks, government should launch a national consultation on the future roles and responsibilities of local councils as part of a strategic review of the organisation of local government.

# THE FUTURE OF LOCAL COUNCILS

For many communities across England and Wales, parish, town, and community councils are the first tier of elected local government. Yet, the roles and responsibilities of these local councils, like other tiers of local government, remain poorly understood by many members of the public.<sup>1</sup> Local councils can raise their own funds. They can act as stewards of communities. They hold in trust halls and buildings, provide playgrounds and sport facilities and manage greenspaces. They deliver and support local services. And they represent and empower community voices in local planning and neighbourhood development.

The demands of austerity, climate change and Covid recovery, as well as support for localism, have heightened calls for the strengthening of the place-shaping powers of local councils. In fact, parish and town councils have increasingly taken on responsibility for community services, often in collaboration with principal authorities seeking programme improvements and efficiencies.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, this first tier of local government has become increasingly bound up with the negotiation of devolution deals, with new roles and responsibilities for local councils often viewed as a means of ensuring local democratic representation as counties and districts are restructured into large unitary authorities.<sup>3</sup>

But it remains a diverse sector. There are 10,000 local councils across England and Wales, ranging from rural parishes with budgets of a few thousand pounds to large town and city councils with budgets in the millions.<sup>4</sup> Any future reform arguably has to acknowledge or work with such diversity, and in the absence of a comprehensive evidence base of the capacities and resources at the disposal of local councils, there is a risk that programmes of reform will be clouded by prior assumptions and gaps in understanding. Indeed, writing in 1992, academics at Aston University, reflecting on the previous 30 years of local government research, underlined that ‘there have been few large-scale surveys of local councils.’<sup>5</sup> Many across the sector would argue that little has changed since.

This report aims to address such gaps in understanding by presenting the evidence of the first comprehensive survey of local councils across England and Wales for almost 30 years. The study is modelled on the survey of parish and town councils in England which was undertaken in 1991 by the Public Sector Management Research Centre at Aston University. This 1991 survey was reviewed through detailed discussions with a working group of clerks and officers from the SLCC in order to identify changes to the roles and responsibilities of local councils. As in the 1991 survey, the aim was to provide policymakers with a national picture of the activities of local councils, their leadership and conduct of council business, their engagement with communities, and their collaboration with other tiers of government and public organisations.

The data in this report was subsequently collected from a survey of 591 council clerks working in England and Wales. The survey was conducted between 23 September 2021 and 22 October 2021, with data collected online. Council clerks were invited to participate by the SLCC, with invitations being sent via email and additional reminder messages disseminated through other media. The sample represented over 10% of the SLCC membership, and approximately 7% of all local council clerks in the country. The sample aimed to be as representative of local council clerks as possible. Because we did not specifically over-recruit from Wales, the Welsh sample made up only 6.1% of respondents, which is approximately in line with the population distribution. Council clerks surveyed represented councils ranging in size from less than 100 registered voters to more than 64,000, with the most common size being 2001-4000 registered voters.

The main body of the report sets out the findings of this survey. It is divided into three overarching sections. The first section examines the local council, its councillors and its clerks, and standards in public life. The second turns to the work of the council, analysing council meetings and the functions of local councils before turning their engagement with communities and the collaborations between councils and tiers of government and other actors and public agencies. The final section examines the areas of expenditure of local councils, their staffing, and their assets. The report concludes with an assessment of emerging lessons from the survey and recommendations for change.

# THE COUNCIL AND ITS COUNCILLORS

## Council membership

In our survey, the membership of local parish and town councils in England and Wales ranged from 5 to 31 councillors. The average size of local councils was 12 councillors, whilst the most common size of council was that of 7 councillors. Over a third of councils, 38%, had between 5 and 9 seats, while approximately a third (35%) had between 10 and 14, and a little over a fifth (23%) had between 15 and 19 seats. Less than 5% of all councils had more than 20 elected members, with the majority of local councils (approximately 61%) having between 6 and 12 elected members. However, the proportion of councils having 13 or more seats has almost tripled in recent years, increasing from approximately 13% in 1991 to 36% in 2021.<sup>6</sup>

## Representative mandate

The representative mandate of local councillors has transformed in recent years. In approximately half of local councils (52%) councillors continue to be elected to represent the whole parish or council constituency. But just under a half of local councils (47%) councillors are now elected to individual wards. This proportion of councils divided electorally into separate wards has more than doubled since the 1990s, when only 19% of local councils were divided into wards in 1991.

Parish and town councils are, our survey return suggests, increasingly run on national party political grounds, with almost a quarter of all councils (23%) controlled by national parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru). Such findings stand in marked contrast to the situation at the turn of the 1990s. In 1991, 10% of councils reported that members declared party political affiliations while only 4% of councils reported being run on party political lines, although this was considerably higher in larger and more urban councils where 34% were said to be run along party lines.

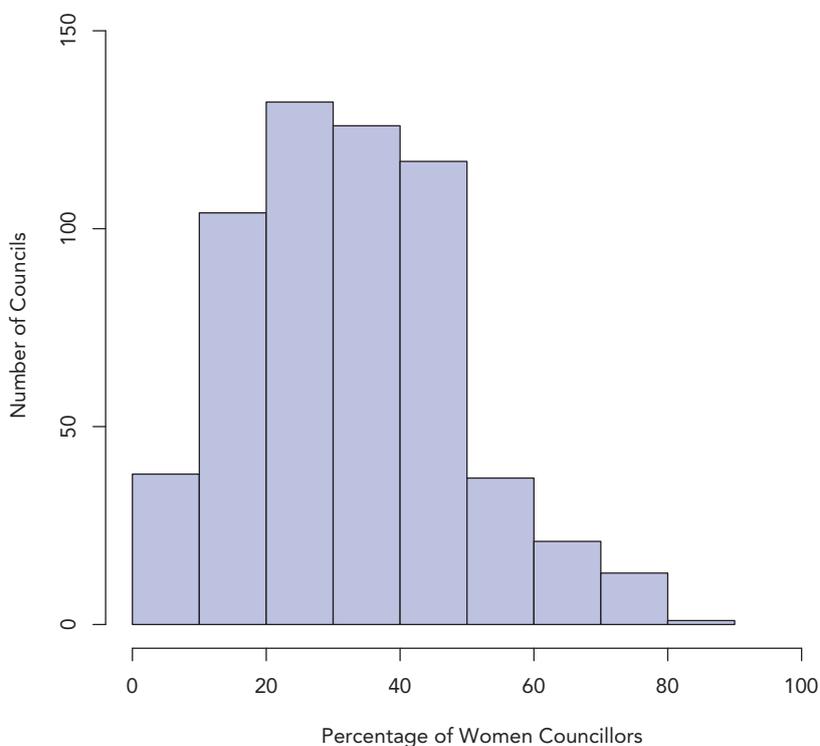
## Gender of councillors

The representation of women on public bodies influences decision-making outcomes, framing the agenda of policymaking and the engagement with different policy issues.<sup>7</sup> In 2021, women councillors represented between a quarter and a half of all elected members in approximately two-thirds (62%) of local councils.

The number of councils where women represented less than a quarter of councillors had fallen to approximately 1 in 4 or 26%; a figure that compares favourably to the gender balance of councillors in 1991 when men represented over three-quarters of councillors in almost half of all local councils. In fact, the proportion of councillors who are women across parish and town councils is comparable with other tiers of local government where 35% of councillors are women.<sup>8</sup>

However, women remain under-represented. In 2021, male councillors continued to outnumber their female counterparts in 76% or over three quarters of all local councils. Women represented three-quarters or more of councillors in less than 2% of local councils, while 2% of local councils reported no female representation on the council. In 1991, men were in the majority of all but 9% of local councils.

**Histogram of the Percentage of Women Councillors in English and Welsh Councils**

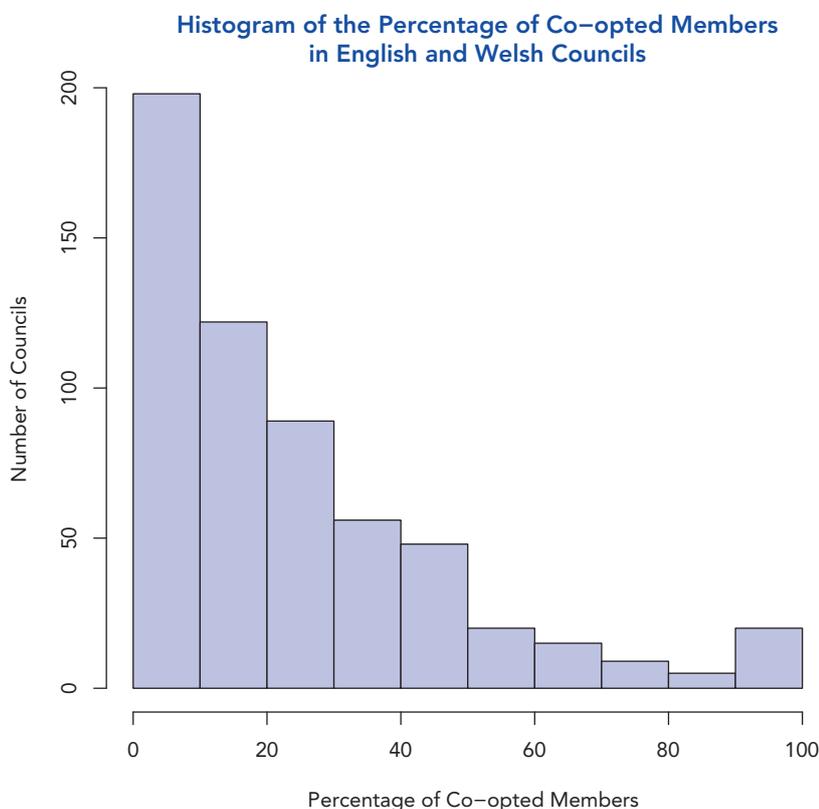


## Co-options

Co-option is where the council decides to appoint councillors to vacant positions on the council in the absence of an election. The overall level of co-option remains high and has arguably increased since 1991. In 2021, approximately three-quarters of local councils (74%) co-opted members onto their council. In 1991, the proportion of local councils engaging in any form of co-option stood at just over half, some 56%, 18 percentage points lower than levels of co-option in 2021.

The extent of co-option varies, as might be expected, from council to council. Across all councils, the average proportion of elected members reported as being co-opted onto the council was approximately a quarter (24%), while 34% of councils reported co-opting less than 10% of councillors; 37% co-opted between 10 and 30% per cent of councillors; and 29% co-opted more than 30% of councillors. However, one in seven local councils (14%) reported co-opting half or more of the elected members on their councils. Indeed, a significant proportion of all councils, approximately 6%, reported co-opting more than 70% or more of members onto their councils, with 3% of councils reporting that they co-opted all of their members without election.

Such findings tell us little of the potential rationales behind such practices, which may be down for example to a paucity of candidates coming forward, efforts to increase representation from different groups in communities, or the meeting of the time-limited needs of the council. Equally, our evidence suggests that the size of the council has little or no impact on the extent of processes of co-option.

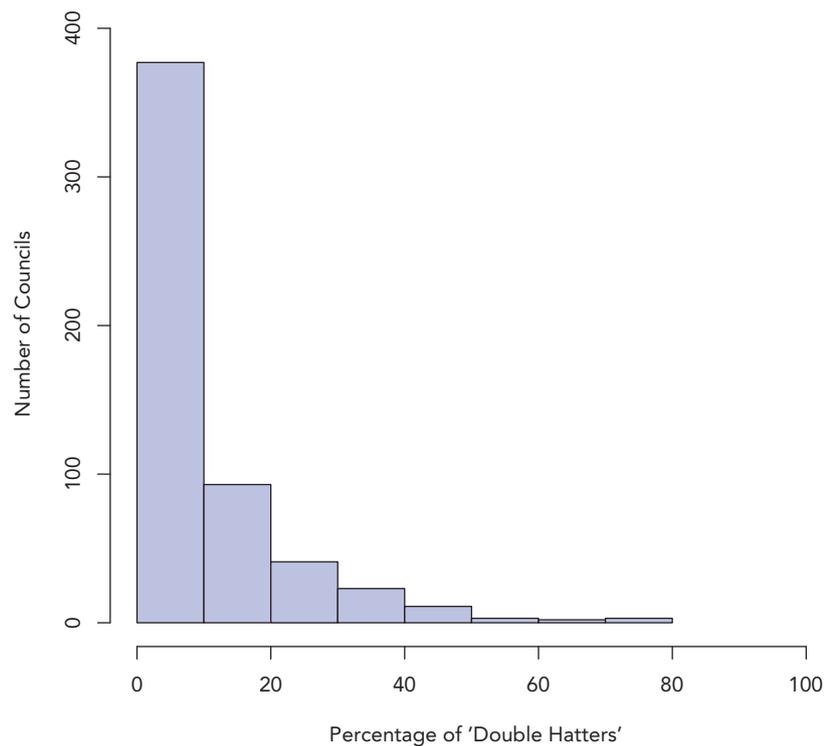


## Dual representation

Just under half of local councils (45%) had councillors who exercised a dual role, by also holding office on a district or county authority. The overall number of councils with at least one councillor with a dual role thus appears to have grown in recent years, increasing from 34% of all councils in 1991. However, in those councils reporting councillors exercising dual roles, the average proportion of so-called ‘double hatters’ on the council was 18%. It is notable that so-called ‘double hatters’ accounted for 20% or less of the councillor body in 69% of those councils with councillors exercising dual roles. Indeed, local councils where ‘double hatters’ represented 40% or more of the body of councillors were in the minority, accounting for approximately 7% of councils reporting councillors exercising dual representation. The highest proportion of ‘double hatters’ reported was 80% (although such calculations need to be considered in light of the relative size of local councils where an individual councillor can represent a fifth of councillors on the council).

Approximately 15% of all local councils had councillors with a triple representative role, holding office on local, district and county councils. In those councils where at least one councillor was exercising a triple role, the average proportion of so-called ‘triple hatters’ on the council was 9%. As such, this is rare within the council system, both in the sense that it is rare for councils to have anyone fulfilling this triple role, but also that even in councils where some people are ‘triple hatters’ it is uncommon to see other councillors doing the same. The highest proportion of ‘triple hatters’ reported on any council was less than 20%.

**Histogram of the Percentage of Members who are ‘Double Hatters’ in English and Welsh Councils**



### Length of service of chairpersons

The majority of chairs of local councils were relatively new in post. Just over a third of chairs (36%) had been in post for less than a year, while a further third (33%) had been in post between 1 to 3 years. In contrast, a quarter (25%) had been in post for between 3 to 10 years, while only 7% of chairs had been in post for over 10 years.

# THE CLERK

## Increasing numbers of women

Three quarters of clerks (74%) who responded to our survey were women, compared to 59% in 1991. The proportion of women clerks varied according to the size of local councils. In local councils with populations between 8,001 and 16,000, women represented 67% of clerks, as opposed to 54% in councils with populations of 16,001 to 32,000; 57% in councils with populations from 32,001 to 64,000; and 60% in councils with populations above 64,000. Men remain relatively over-represented across the posts of clerks in larger councils when considering the overall number of men in the role. However, it is no longer the case that in larger councils the typical clerk is a man employed full-time. In 1991, the proportion of full-time clerks increased with council size, as significantly the number of women clerks declined – only a quarter of clerks to councils with populations over 10,000 were women.

## Increasing professionalisation

One-third of all clerks (34%) worked full-time as clerks. This is a significant increase over the last 30 years – 96% of clerks were employed part-time in 1991. Some two-thirds of clerks continue to work part-time, but of those working part-time, 49% considered the role of the clerk to be their main occupation, while only 15% declared themselves to be part-time clerks working in another paid post (compared to 41% in 1991).

Councillors may take up the role of clerk to the council temporarily to cover a short-term vacancy or in an emergency. In 1991, a small minority (some 5% of clerks) reported being councillors for the council for which they were the clerk. This number had fallen to less than 1% in 2021, virtually eradicating what some might see as a potential clash of roles and responsibilities.

Approximately three quarters of clerks (76%) worked for one local council. Approximately a quarter (23%) worked for more than one council (compared to 10% in 1991). Of those clerks who worked for more than one council, approximately 69% worked for 2 councils; 18% worked for 3; 7% worked for four; and 2% for five. In 1991, 75% of clerks working for more than one council worked for one additional council.

Approximately one third of clerks (34%) held a university undergraduate degree as their highest qualification, while a fifth reported having a postgraduate qualification. In contrast, 12% claimed that their highest qualification was GCSE/O-levels, while a further fifth of clerks reported A-levels to be their highest qualification.

The proportion of clerks either having had a previous post or having another job in a professional or managerial occupation was 72% (an increase from 56% in 1991). Accordingly, the number having held or holding supervisory or clerical posts has fallen from 40% in 1991 to just below a quarter (23%) in 2021, while those having held or currently holding a skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled manual job was 2.5%. Approximately 2% of clerks had no other or previous employment.

## Training and Qualifications

About nine in ten clerks (89%) reported having had specific training for their post as clerk. This stands in marked contrast to the situation in 1991, when only approximately one third of clerks had had specific training for their role as clerk.

Roughly a quarter of all respondents (23%) reported having completed the Introduction to Local Council Administration (ILCA), whereas six in ten (59%) had completed the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CILCA). Some 10% of clerks had undertaken a sector specific higher education award.

Of those clerks who said that they had completed the ILCA programme, approximately one fifth (19%) had done so in the last 12 months, while 41% had done so more than five years ago. Similarly, of those clerks who reported having completed the CILCA programme, close to half (46%) had done so more than five years ago, compared to 15% who had completed it in the last 12 months. Of those clerks having undertaken a sector specific higher education award, a third (32%) had graduated in the last 12 months, while 39% had graduated more than 5 years ago.

Approximately 22% of clerks who worked in Wales reported having undertaken a OVW accredited award. Of those clerks, over half had completed the award in the last 1 to 2 years.

Clerks engaged in training programmes from multiple providers – with 71% reporting having undertaken day or evening courses organised by the County Association of Local Councils (CALC). Three quarters of clerks (57%) had undertaken day or evening courses organised by the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC). Over a third (16%) reported having undertaken other forms of training.

Importantly, of those clerks who stated that they had undertaken training courses delivered by CALC, approximately seven in ten had done so in the last two years: with 45% reporting having participated in training provided by CALC in the last twelve months and 24% in the last 1-2 years. However, approximately 19% or one in five of clerks who reported having completed a course provided by CALC did so between 2-5 years ago, while over one in ten (12%) last accessed such training more than 5 years ago.

Such patterns of training were more or less mirrored in the take-up of the courses and programmes offered by the SLCC. Eight out of ten clerks who had accessed SLCC training had done so in the last two years (61% in the last 12 months, 19% between 1 and 2 years ago). However, 17% of clerks who reported having accessed SLCC training programmes had done so between 2 and 5 years ago, although only 3% of clerks who reported attending SLCC courses had done so more than five years ago.

## **Training budgets**

Over eight in ten local councils (82%) reported having a training budget to support the development of staff and councillors. The average annual training budget for these councils was £1918 a year. Reflecting the diversity of the sector, the lowest reported training budget was £30 per year, while the highest was £28,000.

Strikingly, 17% of local councils had no training budget to support the development of staff and councillors.

## **Challenging demographics?**

Approximately 27% of clerks who responded to our survey were aged between 61 and 70, with around 8% aged over 70. In contrast, only 5% were aged between 31 and 40 years old, while about a fifth (21%) were aged between 41 and 50 years old. The predominant age group of clerks, representing 39% of all clerks, is that of 51 to 60 year olds.

Such evidence is perhaps not surprising given that many clerks have entered the profession after other forms of employment and careers in different sectors. However, even allowing for recent ageing of the workforce in the UK, it remains that as a professional body the demographics of clerks is not representative of the broader working population or the communities in which they work.

Importantly, our evidence also points to a significant lack of diversity across the profession. Less than 1 per cent of clerks who responded to our survey identified as being from ethnic minorities.

## STANDARDS OF PUBLIC LIFE

Eight in ten local councils explicitly introduced the Seven Principles of Public Life (also known as the Nolan Principles) as part of the induction process for councillors. In 71% of local councils, the codes of conduct were the same as those in principal authorities, any necessary amendments notwithstanding. In 59% of cases, the codes of conduct were the same as the Local Government Association's Model Councillor Code of Conduct. Over half of council clerks (58%) had had specific training on the Seven Principles of Public Life.

In the event of a potential issue with the behaviour of a councillor in their council, 89% of clerks reported that there was a named person at their principal authority who could be contacted in such an event.

However, little more than one quarter of clerks either 'strongly agreed' (7%) or 'agreed' (20%) with the statement that the principal authority's monitoring officer had the resources and time to support them in addressing standards issues in their council. In contrast, approximately 16% 'strongly disagreed', while 21% 'disagreed', with the statement.

In fact, approximately a third of clerks either 'strongly agreed' (12%) or 'agreed' (23%) with the statement that they had a good working relationship with the monitoring officer of their principal authority (compared to 10% of clerks who 'strongly disagreed' and 8% who 'disagreed'). Yet, 43% of clerks when asked did 'agree' that they would be 'happy' approaching their principal authority's monitoring officer for advice. Indeed, a further 27% 'strongly agreed' with this statement, while 7% disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed.

In the event of a formal standards complaint about the conduct of a councillor, only half of clerks (49%) expected complaints to be made by the chair of the council or the council as a whole rather than by themselves as clerk.

In the last four years, over half of local councils had experienced behavioural issues from councillors, such as bullying and disrespect towards other councillors or clerks. 11% of local councils had experienced at least one incident so serious that it prevented the council or its officers from carrying out some or all of their functions. One in five councils (19%) had experienced at least one serious incident which did not, however, prevent the council or its officers from carrying out their proper functions, while one in four councils (25%) had experienced behavioural issues which were deemed not to be serious. Just under half of local councils, 44% reported that they had not experienced any notable behavioural issues in the last four years.



## Public notification and access to meetings

Councils continue to use multiple means to publicise the date and venue of meetings. However, information technology and the internet has changed the communication tools at their disposal. While almost all councils (97%) continue to advertise meetings by displaying information on local noticeboards, the most common method used to publicise meetings in 2021 was through the local council website (98%). The practice of advertising local meetings in leaflets, council newsletters or parish magazines remained, with 34% of councils reporting using such channels to publicise meetings, a similar proportion to 1991.

Under half of local councils (48%) used social media to publicise the date and venue of meetings. However, it was common practice to use social media as part of broader communication strategies. Almost three quarters of local councils (74%) had a presence on Facebook. Use of other sites or platforms of social media was, however, less widespread. Under a third of local councils (27%) reported using Twitter, while only 13% used Instagram and 12% used YouTube. Approximately 1 in 20 local councils (4%) were present on LinkedIn and less than 1% were present on TikTok. 98% of local councils have a dedicated council webpage.

Importantly, 99% of councils reported in 2021 that they met the legal obligation of publishing agendas in advance of council meetings. In 1991 only two-thirds of councils published the agenda for meetings in advance, although this rose to 96% in councils representing over 20,000 people.

## Public participation at meetings

Public participation at meetings remained widespread. Approximately 8 in 10 councils (83%) reported that members of the public attended meetings of the full council, compared to 92% of councils in 1991.

Public attendance at meetings varied considerably according to the issue under discussion. Typically, councils reported a handful of members of the public attending meetings regularly. But councils also underlined how such numbers could expand fourfold or more when meetings addressed issues of local concern such as housing development and planning. More than one council reported 150 people or more attending individual council meetings. Yet, as noted above, there were approximately 17% of councils where members of the public did not attend meetings of the full council.

There was no clear pattern as to how the pandemic and lockdown constraints had impacted on public attendance at councils meetings: for some councils, the move to online meetings during the pandemic had increased attendance, for others it had led to falling attendance.

Over 9 in 10 councils (92%) reported that it was the practice for members of the public to speak at council meetings, leaving a significant minority of local councils (7%) where members of the public do not typically speak at council meetings. Overall, however, there has been a significant increase in members of the public speaking at meetings: in 1991 only half of councils stated that it was the practice for the public to speak at meetings of the council (although 92% did report regular attendance of the public at council meetings).

Only one in ten local councils live streamed council meetings. Of those councils who did not live stream meetings, 86% did not have the capacity to do so, while 14% had the capacity but chose not to do so.

Over three-quarters of local councils (77%) reported that the local press did not attend council meetings. In fact, as little as 3% of local councils stated that representatives from the local press attended all council meetings, while 5% said the local press attended 'most' meetings and 14% reported that representatives of the press attended a 'few' council meetings. This is a substantial fall in press attendance when compared to the findings of the 1991 survey in which 36% of local councils reported press attendance at council meetings.

## FUNCTIONS OF LOCAL COUNCILS

### Use of powers

Whatever the limitations of the Localism Act 2011, it provided (some) local councils with a general power of competence, ushering in Neighbourhood Planning, as well as the Community Right to Bid, and the Community Right to Challenge.

Over a third of local councils (38%) had used the general power of competence, although almost one fifth of councils (18%) had not used the power even though they were eligible to do so. Under half of councils (44%) remained unable to use the power because they were not eligible to do so.

Turning to the other powers of the Localism Act, only 6% of local councils reported having used the Community Right to Bid, while less than 1% had used the Community Right to Challenge. The Community Right to Bid had been, our findings suggest, used successfully and unsuccessfully to challenge proposed changes to land use and to protect local community assets such as village pubs, community centres and open spaces. It had also been used to take over the direct management of grass cutting services and play park and recreation grounds.

Finally, less than a third of local councils (31%) had completed a Neighbourhood or Place Plan. Of the local councils who reported not having completed a plan, close to a third, 32%, said that they were in the process of completing one – some 60 per cent were not.

## **By-laws**

In the last three years, only 1% of councils reported having made any by-laws. Over nine in ten councils (95%) had not exercised such powers.

## **Planning applications**

As a general rule, all local councils (98%) received information on planning applications affecting their area. However, the information received by local councils varied between councils and between applications. A third of councils (33%) reported receiving listings with only brief details of the applications, while almost half (47%) reported receiving lists and locations of applications. Only 40% of local councils received copies of planning applications themselves. Others reported receiving email notification with weblinks to online applications and planning portals.

Importantly, 96% of local councils reported that they were always consulted on planning applications in their area, with only 3% of local councils reporting that they were sometimes consulted, and less than 1% stating that they were rarely or never consulted.

Approximately half of councils (52%) made representations on planning appeals in the last twelve months (although it follows that almost half did not).

## **Enforcement and compliance**

In the last 12 months, approximately 3% of local councils had taken action to enforce their own by-laws. Local councils were only marginally more active in taking action to enforce other by-laws, with 4% stating that they had taken such action.

No local council who responded to the survey reported taking court action to enforce their by-laws. Those councils who undertook action to enforce by-laws opted to make representations or use other means. Making representations or other actions were also the preferred mode of action to enforce other by-laws with once again none of our respondents reporting having taken court action to enforce other by-laws.

Notably, approximately half of local councils (47%) had acted to ensure compliance with planning laws or planning conditions in the last 12 months. Less than 1% of local councils resorted to court action to enforce compliance with planning laws or conditions, with 40% of councils deciding to make representations and 4% pursuing other actions.

Similarly, 45% of local councils took action to maintain rights of ways in the last 12 months, with a quarter (25%) resorting to making representations and 13% pursuing other actions. Almost half of councils (45%) also ensured compliance with other regulations (for example speed limits and licensed premises), with 27% of councils making representations on such issues and 14% undertaking other actions. Taking court action was rare across all these instances of enforcement and compliance.

**Table 1: Local councils and use of powers**

(% of all councils) Taking Action to Ensure...	Yes	Types of action		
		Representation	Court action	Other
Own by-laws	3	1	0	2
Other by-laws	4	2	0	2
Planning laws or conditions	47	40	1	4
Maintain rights of way	45	25	1	13
Other regulations	45	27	1	14

## WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

### Consultation and public referendums

In the last 12 months, 6 out of 10 local councils (61%) had undertaken one or more consultation exercises or surveys with local communities. In contrast, the 1991 survey reported that 28% of local councils had held a local survey or consultation in the last 12 months.

Practices towards engagement did, however, vary across the sector, with 31% of local councils undertaking one consultation exercise or local survey; 18% undertaking two such exercises; 6% undertaking three; and 5% taking four or more. However, four out of ten councils, 39%, reported not having undertaken a single consultation exercise or local survey in the last year (although it has to be noted that these 12 months covered the Covid pandemic).



# COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT

## Across tiers of local government

Over three-quarters of local councils (77 per cent) reported collaborating or working with other tiers of local government (be it district, county or unitary authorities). Collaboration took multiple forms from the purchasing of services, joint projects and engagement in competitive funding bids, asset transfers, delivery of Section 106 agreements, and the provision of services through service level agreements with other authorities. Typically, it covered services or initiatives in the field of the public realm and green spaces from grass-cutting and verge maintenance to litter picking and public footpaths through to the management of nature reserves, the provision of play areas and public toilets. It also included collaboration around planning and neighbourhood plans, highways and traffic calming, libraries, market town initiatives, as well as leisure and recreation and the provision of youth services.

Over half of local councils (54%) collaborated or worked with other parish, town or community councils. Again, this collaboration took on multiple forms, with local councils working collectively to deliver joint neighbourhood plans, create food banks and support community bus services, as well as tackling anti-social behaviour and addressing climate change, air pollution and flooding. Collaboration was notable among respondents in areas such as youth services and the public realm (including grass cutting and grounds maintenance) where some councils had service level agreements with other councils and shared community support officers and community wardens. Importantly, there was evidence of networking among parishes and town councils, with informal sharing of information and advice, collective responses to major planning applications and joint lobbying of principal authorities.

Six out of ten of local councils (65%) reported that they had often engaged with the county council and the district council in the last 12 months, be it through being asked for information, providing information, or consulting with or lobbying these local authorities. Approximately a third of local councils (29%) reported that they had often engaged with unitary authorities.

However, notwithstanding good examples of regular engagement, over a fifth of local councils were largely disconnected from county councils. Approximately 13% claimed to be rarely engaged with their county council in the last 12 months, while 15% reported that they had had no engagement at all with the county council over the same period. Similar patterns of engagement were reported with district councils: almost a fifth of local councils (19%) stated that they had had no engagement with district councils in the last 12 months, while 6% claimed to have been rarely engaged with district authorities in the last 12 months.

Finally, almost a half of local councils (48%) had had no engagement with unitary authorities in the last 12 months.

Significantly, engagement with other local councils was also mixed. On the one hand, only 4% of local councils stated that they were had not been engaged with other councils in the last 12 months. But on the other hand, only half of local councils (55%) reported that they often engaged with other local councils in the last 12 months, while 38% claimed to be rarely engaged with other local councils.

Overall, these findings paint a mixed picture. Some local councils are actively engaged with other tiers of local government and other local councils, and yet a worryingly large number may miss crucial broader engagement.

**Table 2: Local councils and engagement across tiers of local government**

Over the last 12 months how often has your Council engaged with... (% of local councils)	Often	Rarely	Never
County Councils	65	13	15
District Councils	65	6	19
Unitary Councils	29	7	48
Other Parish, Town or Community Councils	55	38	4

## Engagement with central government, MPs and public bodies

### *Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)*

Only a small minority of local councils (4%) reported being ‘often’ engaged in the last 12 months with what was then the Ministry of Housing, Communities and MHCLG (now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities). Over half of local councils (52%) had had no contact with the central government department over the same period, with some 37% reporting being ‘rarely’ engaged with or by it.

### *Department for Finance and Local Government (Cymru/Wales)*

Similarly, only a minority of local councils in Wales (8%) reported being often engaged with the Department for Finance and Local Government over the previous 12 months. The majority (83%) stated in contrast that they were rarely engaged with the Welsh government department.

### *Members of Parliament*

Approximately a fifth of local councils (19%) had been 'often' engaged with local MPs over the last twelve months. But, equally, about a fifth of local councils (21%) had had no contact with local MPs. In fact, the majority of local councils (56%) had been only 'rarely' engaged with local MPs.

### *Members of the Senedd*

28% of local councils in Wales reported engaging 'often' with local members of the Senedd over the last 12 months. In contrast, 69% considered that they rarely engaged with members of the Senedd.

### *Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)*

The vast majority of local councils (76%) had no contact with LEPs over the last 12 months. In fact, only 2% of local councils reported being 'often' engaged with LEPs, while 12% claimed to be 'rarely' engaged with local economic partnerships over the last 12 months.

### *Public Service Boards (Cymru/Wales)*

Over half of local councils in Wales (56%) reported that they had rarely engaged with their local Public Service Board over the previous year. This contrasted with little more than 6% of respondents who stated that they were often engaged with their local Public Service Board.

### *Police*

Local councils had regular contacts with the police, with 55% of local councils claiming to have been 'often' engaged with the police over the last 12 months. Only a minority of local councils (6%) reported having had no contact with the police. Nonetheless, there remained 37% of local councils that were 'rarely' engaged with the police over the last 12 months.

### *Clinical Commissioning Groups*

Notwithstanding the ongoing pandemic at the time of data collection, levels of engagement with clinical commissioning groups stood in marked contrast to those with the police. Only 4% of local councils reported having been often engaged by clinical commissioning groups, while a quarter of local councils, 25%, that claimed to be rarely engaged with clinical commissioning groups. Approximately two-thirds of councils, 62%, had had no contact at all with clinical commissioning groups over the last 12 months.

### *Housing Associations and Public Service Providers (water, gas and electricity)*

Similarly, local councils were, on the whole, not engaged with the work of housing associations, with approximately nine in ten councils reporting that they were either 'rarely' (41%) engaged by local housing association, or not engaged at all (44%) in the last 12 months. Engagement with and by service providers (water, gas and electricity companies) was only marginally more developed, with approximately three-quarters of local councils claiming to be either 'rarely' engaged by service providers (51%) or not engaged at all (21%) in the last 12 months.

### *Local Government Boundaries Commission (LGBC)*

Some two-thirds of local councils (60%) had had no contact with the LGBC in the last 12 months, with approximately one-third (29%) being 'rarely' engaged with or by the Commission. Merely 2% of local councils reported being 'often' engaged with the Commission.

### **Membership of representative organisations**

Approximately eight out of ten local councils (77%) were members of the National Association of Local Councils. 85% were members of a County Association of Local Councils. Engagement with county associations of local councils (CALC) was higher over the last 12 months than the national association (NALC). In those councils who were members of a CALC, almost three-quarters (71%) had had a member or clerk attend a County Association conference, seminar or course in the previous year. However, this figure dropped to approximately a third where the National Association was considered, with 31% of local councils who were members of NALC having had a member or clerk attend a National Association conference, seminar or course in the last 12 months.

Almost all local councils and clerks (94%) were members of the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), although it has to be taken into account that the survey was largely publicised by the SLCC and will therefore have disproportionately drawn a sample from SLCC members. 60% of local councils and clerks who were members of the SLCC reported that a clerk or member of the council had attended SLCC conferences, seminars or courses in the last twelve months.

Three quarters of local councils in Wales were members of OVW. Of these councils, 58% reported that a clerk or member of the council had attended OVW conferences, seminars or courses in the last twelve months.

## Contact with regional and national representative organisations

### *National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs)*

Approximately a third (32%) of local councils were 'often' engaged with NALC over the last 12 months. Almost half of local councils (49%) had 'rarely' engaged with NALC, and a fifth (21%) had had no engagement with the national association. However, in contrast, 64% of local councils had had regular contact with the CALC, with approximately a quarter (24%) reporting having been 'rarely' engaged with the county association, compared to 14% who had had no contact in the last 12 months.

### *One Voice Wales (OVW)*

The majority of local councils in Wales (61%) claimed to be often engaged with OVW, either in terms of being asked for, or providing information, or consulting or lobbying.

### *Rural Community Council (RCC)*

Two thirds of local councils (70%) had had no contact with the RCC in the last 12 months, while 18% reported being 'rarely' engaged with the Council. Indeed, only 5% of local councils reported being 'often' engaged with the Council.

### *Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC)*

Over half of local councils (57%) were 'often' engaged with or by the SLCC over the last 12 months, while over a third (36%) engaged with the SLCC, albeit it 'rarely'. In fact, only 4% of councils claimed to have no engagement with the SLCC over the last 12 months. It must be noted, however, that survey returns were completed by clerks who were members of the SLCC.

## EXPENDITURE

Respondents were asked to list the three largest non-staff areas of expenditure in their council. Local councils were left to categorise funding themselves, such that certain councils acknowledged different forms of expenditure on, for example, maintenance and repair of assets, while others grouped activities together. Respondents were not asked to estimate how much funding such activities accounted for, either as a percentage of their budget or as a monetary value.

Responses revealed the diverse financial issues and experiences across local councils. Areas of expenditure identified varied from public clock maintenance, pest control and beach cleaning through to support for a police community support officer and the provision of community cafes and libraries onto to grass cutting, youth services and the delivery of a

Covid recovery fund. However, broadly speaking, spending by local councils coalesced around four functional areas: the custodianship of local community assets; the management of the public realm; support for communities; and running costs of the authority itself.

**Table 3: Local councils and areas of expenditure**

What are the three largest non-staff areas of expenditure in your Council?	Areas of expenditure	Local councils (%)
<b>Custodianship</b>	Grass cutting, trees and hedges	26
	Grounds maintenance	25
	Building maintenance	23
	General Maintenance	13
	Cemeteries and crematoriums, churchyards	9
<b>Public Realm</b>	Play areas, recreation grounds, sports facilities	28
	Green spaces, parks, reserves	11
	Street scene	10
	Highways, traffic calming, transport facilities	7
	Public toilets	6
	Streetlights and public lighting	6
	Waste, litter and dog fouling	5
	Allotments	3
<b>Community</b>	Grants and donations	20
	Events, including festivities	14
	Services (community focused)	8
	Projects	4
	Youth provision	3
	Newsletter, magazine and noticeboards	3
	Neighbourhood plan	2
<b>Running costs</b>	Office costs	11
	Insurance	8
	Loan repayments	4
	Staffing	4
	Other costs	4
	Subscriptions/memberships	3
	Legal and professional fees	3
	Rates	1

Notably a quarter of local councils reported grounds maintenance to be one of their primary spending commitments, while 23% identified building maintenance and repairs, and 13% listed general maintenance and repairs. The activities associated with such areas of spending varied, with some councils deciding to group activities under broad categories and others focusing on more specific activities. Spending on property maintenance and repairs covered a wide range of assets and resources, from town and village halls to community and conference centres onto tea rooms and listed buildings. 26% of local councils listed grass and hedge and tree cutting as one of their three largest financial commitments, while 9% listed the maintenance and running of cemeteries and crematoria and the upkeep of cemeteries as one of their biggest spending commitments.

Importantly, in terms of improvements to the public realm, over a fifth of local councils (28%) listed the upkeep and improvements to playing fields, recreational grounds and children's play areas as one of their three largest areas of expenditure. Equally, spending on green and open spaces, parks and nature reserves, was one of three largest spending areas in approximately 11% of local councils. 5% of local councils listed waste management, litter picking and dog fouling as one of their top three spending commitments in the last 12 months, while 6% listed public toilet provision, and 5% listed streetlights and public lighting.

Approximately one fifth of local councils listed grants and donations to community groups as one of their three highest areas of funding in the last 12 months. This sat alongside spending on community events and festivities as the two most reported forms of expenditure in what we have called community support. Such evidence underlines the role of local councils in offering support for the social fabric of their communities, directly supporting local groups and adding to the sense of place within these communities.

## ASSETS OF LOCAL COUNCILS

### Growing organisational assets

Local councils continue to act as stewards of extensive assets across local communities. These assets include land holdings, buildings, and facilities. Approximately seven in ten local councils (68%) own, lease, or hold on trust children's playgrounds. Nearly two-thirds (62%) provide parks and open spaces for local communities, while 60% provide recreation grounds and sport pitches. Over half (52%) make available to communities the use of allotments. And importantly, many local councils own such assets. Half of all local councils surveyed (51%) own children's playgrounds; 48% own parks and open spaces; 42% own recreation grounds and sports pitches, while over a third (37%) own local allotments and 31% own cemeteries or burial grounds.

**Table 4: Local councils and assets**

Does the council own, lease or hold on trust? (% of all councils)	Yes	Own	Lease	Trust
Council Offices/Town Hall	44	28	13	1
Village Hall/Community Centre	46	30	8	9
Sports Hall/Centre	14	9	2	2
Swimming Pool	1	<1	0	<1
Recreation Ground/Sport Pitches	60	42	10	10
Children's Playground	68	51	12	5
Skateparks/BMX	27	19	4	2
Parks/Open Spaces	62	48	11	5
Allotments	52	37	14	1
Village Green	31	23	2	2
Car/Cycle Park	28	20	4	2
Public Convenience	23	16	5	1
Cemetery/Burial Ground	36	31	1	1
War Memorial	55	41	1	5

In contrast, only 14% of local councils owned, leased or held on trust a sports hall or sports centre, while only approximately 1% provided a local swimming pool. An estimated one in ten local councils (9%) owned a sports hall or a sports centre.

### Management of land and buildings

In the last 12 months, less than 3% of local councils sold land or buildings under their management or stewardship. Only a minority of local councils either granted a licence for the use of land, granted easements over land, or granted a lease or tenancy. Similarly, a minority of councils purchased land or buildings, took on a lease or tenancy, or were given land or buildings. No council reported acquiring land or buildings by compulsory purchase order.

**Table 5: Local councils and management of land and buildings**

Do your council do any of the following in the last 12 months? (% of all local councils)	Yes
Sell land or buildings	3
Grant a licence for the use of land	15
Grant easements over land	9
Grant a lease or tenancy (land or buildings)	25
Purchase land or buildings	7
Take on a lease or tenancy (land or buildings)	13
Was it given land or buildings	8
Acquire land or buildings by compulsory purchase order	0

## STAFFING

### Growing capacity

94 % of local councils employed paid staff. This is a slight increase since 1991 when 91% of local councils employed staff, although only 7% of councils at that time employed full-time staff.

In 2021, 92% of local councils employed a clerk, with 25% of local councils also employing a deputy clerk and 31% employing administrative staff. Importantly, only 88% of councils had a paid clerk in 1991.

Equally, local councils continue to employ a variety of staff across multiple occupations. Approximately a third of local councils (32%) employed grounds staff, a quarter (25%) employed a building caretaker, 7% employed burial grounds staff, while 27% employed other staff. In many ways, this marks a clear progression from the findings of the 1991 survey when the most frequent paid posts were grounds staff, employed by only 15% of councils, and street cleaners employed by only 10% of councils.

**Table 6: Local councils and staffing**

Local councils employing...	% of all local councils	% for less than 15 hours per week	% for between 15-34 hours per week	% for more than 35 hours per week
Clerks	92	29	35	27
Deputy clerks	25	4	12	9
Administrative	31	8	19	14
Building caretaker	25	11	11	6
Burial grounds staff	7	1	1	5
Grounds staff	32	10	11	18
Other	27	15	11	10

### Reliance on unpaid staff

Only 1 in 5 councils (19%) reported having unpaid staff on a regular basis in the last 12 months. This compares to over a quarter of local councils (27%) who reported relying on volunteer workers in 1991. More importantly, reliance on unpaid staff in core functions was limited. Only 5% of local councils relied on the support of unpaid grounds staff, while 3% of councils relied on unpaid clerks, 2% relied on unpaid administrative staff and less than 1% on unpaid building caretakers and burial grounds staff. Notably, the largest category of unpaid staff supporting councils was the broad category of 'other' where 12% of councils relied on regular unpaid staff undertaking work for the council.

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Local councils as community leaders

The findings of this survey confirm the rich tapestry of town, parish and community councils that make up the first tier of local democracy in England and Wales. Indeed, our evidence underlines the multifaceted dimensions of the community leadership exercised by local councils. Local councils are connected to the communities they serve, able to identify local needs and targeting services and resources efficiently and effectively. As such, they act as place-shapers in their management and provision of the public realm and the delivery of local services. They are stewards of community assets. They identify and give voice to local needs and demands, engaging communities in neighbourhood planning, and building community identities. They award grants and donations to local groups and organisations, strengthening community networks and community resilience. In fact, outside the running costs of the council itself, spending by local councils coalesced around three functional areas of community leadership: the custodianship of local community assets; management of the public realm; and support for local communities.

**Table 7: Exercising community leadership**

Approximately a third of local councils have completed a Neighbourhood or Place Plan.
Approximately seven in ten local councils manage children's playgrounds, while six in ten manage parks and open spaces.
In the last 12 months, 6 out of 10 local councils have undertaken one or more exercises in community consultation.
Over half of local councils nominate or appoint trustees to local charities.
One in five councils listed community grants and donations as one of their top three areas of spending.
Approximately 8 in 10 councils report members of the public attending meetings of the full council.

## Growing organisational capacity

Over the last thirty years, the organisational capacity of local councils to exercise community leadership has increased. First, the role of the clerk has professionalised. One-third of all clerks now work full-time, with over half of clerks having a university-level education and almost three-quarters having experience of work in another professional or managerial occupation. Notably, nine in ten clerks reported having had specific training for their post as clerk.

Second, more councils now employ staff across a range of occupations. Nine in ten councils employ a clerk, with one in four employing a deputy clerk and one in three employing administrative staff. Three in ten councils employ grounds staff while one in four employ building caretakers. In 1991, grounds staff were employed by only approximately one in seven local councils, while one in ten employed street cleaners. Only 1 in 5 councils reported having unpaid staff on a regular basis in the last 12 months, compared to over a quarter of local councils that relied on part-time volunteer workers in 1991.

## Changes to political leadership

The political leadership of local councils is central to the democratic legitimacy of their engagements across communities. Eight out of ten councils reported all or almost all councillors regularly attend council meetings, while nine out of ten councils met six times or more in the last 12 months. Importantly, the proportion of councils having 13 or more seats has almost tripled since 1991. Women councillors represent between a quarter and a half of all councillors in approximately two-thirds of councils.

At the same time, the political leadership of local councils has further aligned with patterns of political leadership in principal authorities. On the one hand, half of elected members on local councils are now elected to individual wards within parish and town councils. On the other hand, approximately a quarter of all councils are now controlled by national parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru).

# CHALLENGES AHEAD

## **'Levelling up' powers**

Our survey suggests that the legislation governing local councils, and the powers at their disposal, requires review. The Localism Act gave local councils a general power of competence, alongside the Community Right to Bid and the Community Right to Challenge. It also ushered in neighbourhood planning. However, the take-up of these powers is at best inconsistent, while many councils, approximately a half, remain unable to use the general power of competence because they are not eligible to do so. Less than a third of local councils had completed a Neighbourhood or Place Plan.

The reasons for this inconsistent use of the powers at the disposal of local councils are no doubt complex. Neighbourhood plans, for example, can involve a considerable level of resource. Alternative powers may be able to be used instead of the general power of competence. However, it remains the case that the powers at the disposal of local councils are not evenly distributed and that the range of their powers are to be found in multiple pieces of legislation, some of which were designed to meet the demands of different historical contexts.

## **Improving collaboration across the spaces of local governance**

Our evidence suggests good examples of regular collaboration between local councils and other tiers of local government. However, it remains the case that such patterns of collaboration are not consistently found across the sector. Over a fifth of local councils were largely disconnected from county councils and district councils. Almost a half of local councils had had no engagement with unitary authorities in the last 12 months.

Similarly, engagement with central government departments, clinical commissioning groups, and local enterprise partnerships was at best sporadic. Such a mixed picture of active engagement with other tiers of local authorities and central government, and indeed public sector agencies and organisations, implies that the organisational and place-making capacities of the so-called system of local governance are not being effectively mobilised as they might.

## Engaging communities

Our evidence suggests that local councils have become increasingly pro-active in seeking the views and identifying the needs of local communities. They have the potential to further build such connections and engagements within their communities. Many councils have not put in place the ‘institutional hardware’ that embeds community engagement in the running of the council. Only 5% of local councils reported having a youth council. Over eight out of ten did not hold community or neighbourhood forums. The appropriateness of such forms of engagement needs, of course, to be decided locally.

However, our evidence also contributes to existing studies which call for alternative methods of communication by local councils, particularly the innovative use of social media as a means of engaging young people.<sup>10</sup> Almost three quarters of local councils had a presence on Facebook and its social media platform, although it was recognised that the use of other sites or platforms was less widespread. Moving forward, the challenge of engaging communities, and particularly young people, may well arguably rest on how effective local councils are in making use of such social media platforms.

## Building the capacity of local councils

Despite the professionalisation of clerks in recent years, most clerks remain part-time, with a sizeable minority clerking for more than one council and many still undertaking another job. Of those councils employing a clerk, 29% did so for less than 15 hours a week. Male clerks remain relatively over-represented in larger councils when considering the overall number of men in the profession. In larger councils, men still remain over-represented across the posts of clerks. Indeed, the demographic profile of clerks remains challenging for workforce planning across the sector. The predominate age group of clerks, at 39%, is that of 51 to 60 year olds. And, across the board, the profession lacks diversity, for less than 1% of clerks who responded to our survey were from BAME communities.

In terms of skills development, the average training budget for those local councils with a training budget was only £1918 a year. The lowest reported was £30 per year, while the highest was £28,000. Strikingly, 17% of local councils had no training budget to support the development of councillors and staff.

Notably, collaboration with other local councils is also mixed. Only half of local councils (55%) reported that they had often engaged with other local councils in the last 12 months. Over a third (38%) claimed to be rarely engaged with other local councils. In other words, the collaborative capacity of the sector as a whole remains a resource that may well be further tapped and exploited to the benefit of local communities.

## **Strengthening political leadership**

Women, our survey confirms, remain under-represented in the body of elected members across local councils. In 2021, male councillors continued to outnumber their female counterparts in over three quarters of all local councils. Such findings confirm previous studies of the socio-demographics of local councillors which have underlined the gender imbalance of those serving as elected members, as well as the under-representation of young people and those from ethnic minorities.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the democratic legitimacy of local councils remains challenged by the absence of competitive elections to seats on local councils. In 2021, approximately three-quarters of local councils (74%) co-opted at least one councillor onto their council. Once again, the reasons or drivers of practices of co-opting are complex and diverse. However, our evidence suggests that such practices have remained stable, if not increased, since 1991.

Finally, in just under half of local councils (45 %) there remains the potential for confused accountabilities from ‘double hatted’ councillors who exercise a dual representative role, holding a seat on the local council as well as one on, for example, the district or county council. Approximately one in ten local councils even reported ‘triple hatted’ elected members who held seats on three different tiers of local authority.

## **Addressing standards in public life**

Our survey suggests that the large majority of local councils endorse or advance the Nolan Principles, while codes of conduct in local councils were often aligned with those of principal authorities, demonstrating a certain consistency of practices across the system of local government. However, little more than one quarter of clerks either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the principal authority’s monitoring officer had the resources and time to support them in addressing standards issues in their council.

Importantly, in the last four years, approximately one in ten local councils had experienced at least one incident of behavioural issues from councillors so serious that it prevented the council or its officers from carrying out some or all of their functions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Local councils are characterised by their diversity. On the one hand, this diversity is one of the strengths of the sector, enabling local councils to contribute in different ways to the well-being of communities across contrasting rural and urban economic, political, and social geographies. But, on the other hand, variations in size, accompanied by differential access to financial resources and assets, arguably militates against ‘one-size-fits-all’ roles and responsibilities for local councils. As such, further harnessing the potential of local councils may well be best served by the putting in place of a revised regulatory framework of tools and instruments that enables bottom-up and multiple speed solutions to emerge within them.

With this in mind, we conclude with a call for a national dialogue over the future of local councils. This should not simply be across local councils themselves but also among the tiers of local and central government, embracing a re-consideration of how central government and principal authorities work in partnership with parishes and town councils. We seek to focus this dialogue on a programme of evidence-based strategic recommendations and commitments which we set out below. Many of these lessons and recommendations will be known to those leading and working in the sector. They have been widely acknowledged for some time by councillors and clerks engaged in the everyday running of local councils across the country. However, as our evidence suggests, implementing such recommendations requires investment, both financially and politically. It is not simply the responsibility of local councils.

- 1.** National associations across the sector should work in collaboration with national government to deliver a public information campaign on the role of local councils, targeting in particular, support to widen the pool of those individuals willing to stand for election as a councillor.
- 2.** The government should offer financial support to local councils to support and ensure the holding of elections for local councillors.
- 3.** In keeping with the Civility and Respect Project, supported by NALC, OVW, the SLCC and county associations, further training should be provided to local councils on the Seven Principles of Public Life. Importantly, complaints over behaviour should be advanced by the chair of the council or the council as a whole, thereby giving valuable and necessary support in such circumstances to the role and responsibilities of clerks. Monitoring officers in principal authorities require further capacity if they are to be in a position to support local councils in addressing standards issues.

4. Training budgets across the sector should be increased to support the building of organisational capacity within local councils. All local councils should dedicate resources to training and skills development for councillors and for their workforce.
5. Local councils should review their engagement of, and communication with, young people and different communities, evaluating the need in their area for youth councils and community forums as part of an investment in neighbourhood planning processes. As part of this review, they should evaluate their use of social media as a tool to connect and engage with communities.
6. National associations should come together to establish a career path that encourages a diverse graduate entry into the profession of clerks. This career path should offer attractive contractual terms and conditions that align with other tiers of local government and public sector organisations. Mentoring schemes and leadership development programmes should target equality across the profession, particularly the equal advancement of women into the posts of clerks in larger councils.
7. Supporting the work of the Local Government Association (LGA) and others, local councils and principal authorities should negotiate frameworks for collaboration between the different tiers of local government. These frameworks should be accompanied by the publication of statements of collaborative intent that establish a duty to consult local councils and/or the putting into place of local council forums between principal authorities and parish and town councils.
8. Collaboration between local councils should be facilitated. The government should make funding available for the generation of 'good practice' guidance and collaborative projects between local councils.
9. The 2011 Localism Act gave local councils a range of new powers. Local councils should re-evaluate their use of these powers, while central government should consider the attribution of such powers to all local councils as part of a national review of the legislation governing the sector.
10. Parts of England and Wales remain unparished. Such inequalities of democratic representation risk accelerating as devolution deals bring into being new tiers and arrangements for local government across different regions and counties. To counter such risks, the government should launch a national consultation on the future roles and responsibilities of local councils as part of a strategic review of the organisation of local government.

# NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Local Government Commission 2030 (2021) *Local by Default*, Manchester: Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE), p. 47.
- <sup>2</sup> Wills, J. (2019) *A New Geography of Local Government: The Changing Role of Town and Parish Councils in Cornwall, UK*, available at: <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/37848/A%20new%20geography%20of%20local%20government%20in%20Cornwall.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y> accessed 17 August 2022.
- <sup>3</sup> See for example Treadwell, J., Tanner, W., Stanley, L. and Krasniqi, F. (2021) *Double Devo: The Case for Empowering Neighbourhoods as well as Regions*, London: Onward.
- <sup>4</sup> Jones, A. (2020) *The Resurgence of Parish Councils Powers in England*, London: Palgrave Pivot Cham.
- <sup>5</sup> Ellwood, S., Nutley, S. Tricker, M. and Waterston, P. (1992) *Parish and Town Councils in England: A Survey*, London: HMSO, p.9.
- <sup>6</sup> Throughout the report, figures from 1991 are drawn from Ellwood, S., Nutley, S. Tricker, M. and Waterston, P. (1992) *Parish and Town Councils in England: A Survey*, London: HMSO.
- <sup>7</sup> Local Government Commission (2017) *Does Local Government Work for Women?*, Fawcett Society, LGiU and Barrow Cadbury Trust, London: Fawcett Society, p. 19.
- <sup>8</sup> Fawcett Society (2019) *Women's representation in local government "at a standstill"*, press release, 02 July, available at: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/new-fawcett-data-reveals-that-womens-representation-in-local-government-at-a-standstill> accessed 17 August 2022.
- <sup>9</sup> For an outline of the Seven Principles of Public Life, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2> accessed 17 August 2022.
- <sup>10</sup> See Willett, J. and Cruxon, J. (2019) 'Towards a Participatory Representative Democracy? UK Parish Councils and Community Engagement', *British Politics*, 14: 311-27.
- <sup>11</sup> See for example, National Association of Local Councils (2018) *Diversity in Local Councils in 2018*, London: NALC.

