

Local Government Structure Overview



October 2010

Produced by Local Government Association Analysis and Research

What does local government do?

Councils work with local partners and residents to determine and deliver on local priorities. They provide a wide range of services, either directly through their employees or by commissioning services from outside organisations. They largely work within the powers laid down under Acts of Parliament but, since the Local Government Act 2000, they also have responsibility for the economic, social and environmental 'wellbeing' of their area.

Most council services are mandatory. This means that the council must do them because they are under a duty to do so by law (e.g. to operate an alcohol licensing regime under the Licensing Act 2003). Some mandatory functions are tightly controlled by central government, resulting in a similar level of service across the country (e.g. the administration of housing benefit). Other mandatory requirements (e.g. the library function) leave councils with some discretion over the level and type of service they provide.

Some council services and functions are discretionary. These are services a council can choose to provide but does not have to. They are varied, ranging from large economic regeneration projects at one end of the scale, to the removal of wasp nests at the other.

The Local Government Act 2003 introduced a general power to charge for discretionary services provided they are not prohibited by other legislation and the council does not make a profit. Councils were already allowed to charge for some discretionary services, including arts and entertainment activities, sport and recreational facilities and some pest control services, under earlier Acts of Parliament.

Councils provide over 700 services. The following table provides a summary of their main services and responsibilities.

Principal service	Includes
Children's services	Schools – nursery, primary, secondary and special Pre-school education Youth, adult and family and community education Student support Children's and families' services – including welfare, fostering and adoption and child protection Youth centres Youth justice – secure accommodation and youth offender teams

Principal service	Includes
Highways, roads and transport	Highways – non-trunk roads and bridges Street lighting Traffic management and road safety Public transport – discounted travel schemes and local transport co-ordination Airports, harbours and toll facilities
Adult services	Services for older people including nursing, home, residential and day care and meals Services for people with a physical disability, learning disability or mental health need Asylum seekers Employment support services
Housing	Social housing Housing benefit and welfare services Homelessness Housing strategy
Cultural services	Culture and heritage, including archives and museums and galleries Recreation and sport, including facilities and sports development Open spaces – parks and playgrounds, the countryside and allotments Tourism – visitor information, marketing and tourism development Libraries and information services
Environmental services	Cemetery, cremation and mortuary services Community safety – including consumer protection, coastal protection and trading standards Environmental health – including food safety, pollution and pest control, public toilets Licensing – including alcohol, public entertainment, taxis Agricultural and fisheries services Waste collection and disposal, recycling and street cleaning
Planning and development	Building and development control Planning policy – including conservation and listed buildings Environmental initiatives Economic and community development
Protective services	Fire and rescue services Court services such as coroners
Central and other services	Local tax collection – council tax and non-domestic rates (business rates) Registration of births, deaths and marriages Elections – local and national, including registration of electors Emergency planning Local land charges

How is local government organised?

Local government today comprises 375 councils in England and Wales, with almost 21,000 elected councillors.

The structure of local government varies from area to area. In most of England, there are two tiers – county and district – with responsibility for council services split between the two tiers.

County councils cover the entire county and provide around 80 per cent of the services in these areas, including schools, social services, public transportation, highways, waste disposal and trading standards. Each district council covers a smaller area and provides more local services, including council housing, local planning, recycling and refuse collection and leisure facilities.

Many large towns and cities and some counties have just one level of local government responsible for all local services: the unitary authority.

There are five types of local authority in England. These are:

- county councils – cover the whole county;
- district councils – can be called district, borough or city councils;
- unitary authorities – can be called a council (e.g. Medway Council), a city council (e.g. Nottingham City Council) or borough council (e.g. Reading Borough Council);
- London boroughs – each of the 33 boroughs is a unitary authority, but the Greater London Authority (GLA) provides London-wide government, including special responsibility for police, fire, strategic planning and transport; and
- metropolitan districts – effectively unitary authorities, the name being a relic from past organisational arrangements. They can be called metropolitan borough or city councils.

Currently there are 27 counties split into 201 districts, and 56 unitary authorities in England. The latest round of English re-organisation became effective in April 2009. 44 local authorities were amalgamated into nine unitary authorities serving a combined population of over 3.2 million.

Wales

All 22 Welsh councils are unitary authorities providing all local government services to their local communities. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the interests of local government and promotes local democracy in Wales. The WLGA remains a constituent part of the Local Government Association (LGA), ensuring that we continue to represent the interests of Welsh local government to the UK government. For more information about Welsh local government, visit www.wlga.gov.uk.

Who does what?

The table below provides a quick guide to local authority responsibility for major services in England.

	Shire Areas			Metropolitan Areas	London	
	Unitaries	County Councils	District Councils	Metropolitan Districts	London Boroughs	GLA
Education	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Highways	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Transport planning	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Passenger transport	✓	✓		✓		✓
Social care	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Housing	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Libraries	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Leisure and recreation	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Environmental health	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Waste collection	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Waste disposal	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Planning applications	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Strategic planning	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Local taxation collection	✓		✓	✓	✓	

Local Government Group

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Facsimile 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk



**Local
Government
Group**

The Local Government Group is made up of six organisations which support, promote and improve local government.

 <p>Local Government Association</p>	 <p>Local Government Improvement and Development</p>	 <p>Local Government Employers</p>
 <p>Local Government Regulation</p>	 <p>Local Government Leadership</p>	 <p>Local Partnerships</p>