

FACTSHEET SERIES

The lowdown on local government

What is local government?

When we think about government, we often think about parliament in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff, or Belfast. But local government, often just called 'the council', develops local policies and delivers local services that are essential to our communities.

Local government can seem difficult to understand because the structure varies across the country. Still, it's important to know who is responsible for what, as councils make and carry out decisions on local services that women, in particular, rely on. And different types of 'council', or local authority, look after different things.



England

Many parts of England have two layers (often called 'tiers') of local government: the first 'tier' are **county** councils; the second 'tier' are **district, borough, or city** councils, which cover a smaller area than country councils. Each one has its own **areas of responsibility**.



County councils

Responsible for services across the whole of a county, like:

- education
- transport & highways maintenance
- fire & public safety
- social care (adult & children)
- youth & community services
- local welfare provision
- libraries



District, borough, and city councils

Usually responsible for services like:

- rubbish collection & recycling
- Council Tax collections
- housing services
- homelessness prevention
- recreation
- museums & galleries
- planning applications



In some parts of the country, there's just one 'tier' of local government providing all the local services listed above. The three main types are: **unitary authorities**, which are often in traditional county, or 'shire', areas; **London boroughs**; and **metropolitan boroughs**, normally in cities.

In London, the Greater London Authority (GLA) manages some services for the whole London region. For example, it has responsibility for fire, police, and public transport.

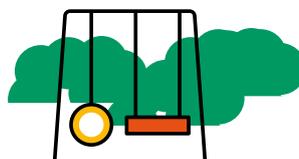
Combined authorities

In areas outside London, some councils have joined together to form Combined Authorities. That means they can deliver services across a bigger area than just one council or local authority. The main responsibilities for Combined Authorities are for economic development and transport. Greater Manchester was the first region to become a Combined Authority, and it also has responsibility for health and social care, children's services, and public health.

Parishes

Some areas also have **parish, community, and town** councils. These vary in size and level of authority, but they operate at a level below district and borough councils. They can help on a number of local issues, like providing:

- allotments
- bus shelters
- community centres
- play areas and play equipment
- grants to help local organisations



Devolved nations

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the devolved administrations are responsible for many domestic policy issues, and their Parliament/Assemblies have law-making powers for those areas.



The Scottish Government, Welsh Government, and the Northern Ireland Executive are responsible for:

- health
- education
- culture
- the environment
- transport

Local government is a devolved responsibility in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The structure of local government was simplified in all three devolved nations at various times, which means that there is generally only one layer of local government, which delivers the same services as the English councils listed below. Parishes and 'communities' also exist in Scotland, but these tend not to be so used for official local governance.

Why is local government important for women?

Women are:

1. more likely to deliver services which are provided by local authorities.

2. more likely to depend on services provided by local authorities.

3. more likely to have to fill gaps with unpaid care work when these services are cut.

In 2020, the Local Government Association **calculated** that 75% of local government employees in England and Wales were women. In England, county councils employed the greatest number of people overall, with 373,500, almost 82% of whom were women.

Services like education and social care are more likely to employ women, and to serve women. These services, as well as others, like housing, transport, youth & community services, which are also provided by local authorities, are often crucial to the daily lives and wellbeing of women and those they care for – children, families and vulnerable adults. Yet it is in social care that councils state they are having the most recruitment challenges, particularly in employing children's **social workers**.

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When services are cut, or gaps appear in provision, it is often women who fill these gaps. Women continue to do more unpaid childcare and other **care work**. This, in turn, means that women have fewer opportunities to take part in the paid workforce, or might only be able to work part-time. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME*) women and disabled women rely even more on councils to provide services which support them and their families, and for paid employment, so they are doubly **affected**.

Find out how local government budget decisions affect women by reading our factsheet: *Local Budget Basics*.

* WBG uses the term BAME whilst simultaneously acknowledging its shortcomings. WBG consistently calls for data to be disaggregated by sex/gender and specific race/ethnicity groups as well as other indices of disadvantage, including disability.

What next?

You can find the structure of local government where you live by putting your postcode into this website: <https://www.gov.uk/find-your-local-council>.

Find out more about Local Government by reading our pre-budget briefing: *Local government and gender*.

Join us for the Local Data Project to campaign for equality in your local area.