

Local government

get involved by getting elected!

This guide was written by Rachel Coxcoon, Our Bright Future Steering Group member. Rachel is a local politician in her own right, and works on Climate Emergency Support for local councils

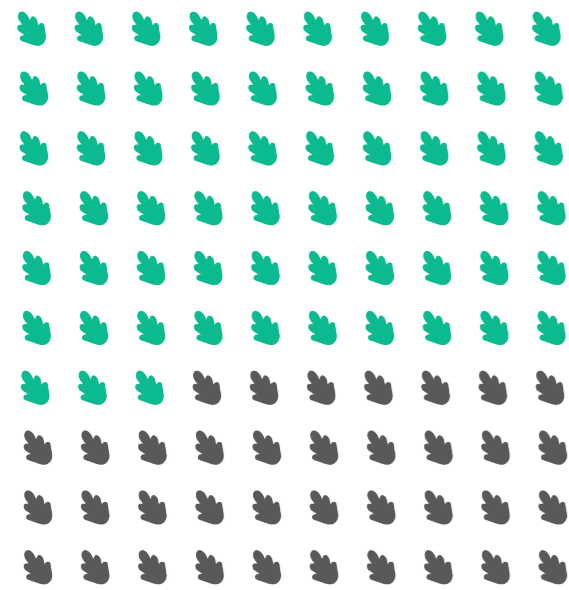


SO YOU WANT TO GET INVOLVED IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

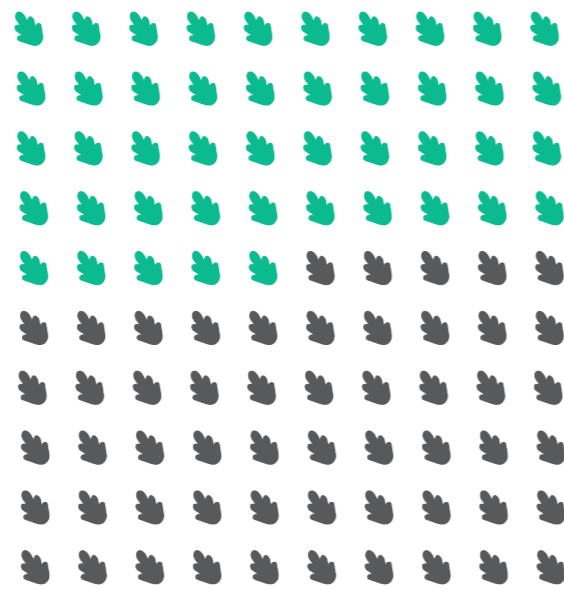
And so you [should](#).

Local government has a poor reputation for diversity.

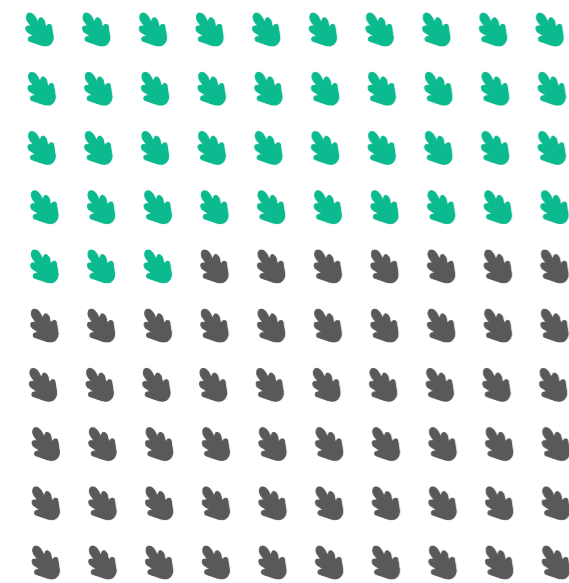
A Local Government Association report from 2018 showed that, in England:



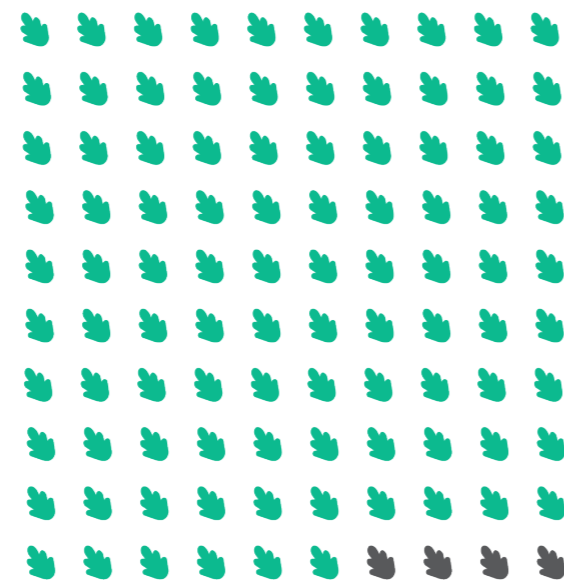
63% MALE



45% RETIRED



43% 65+
and the average age was 59



96% WHITE

At the civil parish level, the lack of diversity was even more telling. The **average age** of parish and town councillors was **61**, and the proportion of councillors aged between **18-25** was only **1%**. For comparison, **10.4% of the national population** are in this age bracket, so **young people are underrepresented** at parish and town council level by a **factor of 10!**

Why are there so few young councillors?

On the whole, many young people are simply not aware that these opportunities exist for them. Most young people don't realise that they are **legally able to run for public office at 18**, and often, by the time they are reaching their late 20's, time is tight. People start to work longer hours, are commuting or might have started families of their own, meaning less time to devote to public service. Young people are often more transient – they may be away at university some or all of the time, or move through a series of jobs in different places. **The net result is that local government is dominated by retired people who are settled in a local area.**



Why is it important that there are more young councillors?

When we are not direct users of a service in that moment, how can we comment fairly on it? For **councillors in their 60s**, their experience of affordable housing, schools, nursery and play provision for example, might be **outdated**. It is **less likely to be of immediate concern** to them, alongside other aspects of daily life. This means that those **viewpoints will get less airtime** in council meetings than the issues that affect older people, such as the provision of care home places, accessible shops and so on.

They are also **less likely to be concerned** in general about certain issues that young people feel more strongly about or connected to, like the climate crisis. Indeed, they are more likely to be part of the system that perpetuates some of the problems. It may be a crass generalisation, but if you've spent all your life aspiring to own a Range Rover, and are now a 60-year old Range Rover owner, you're not that likely to be promoting car-free town centres and a massive increase in cycling and walking infrastructure!



What does local government even do?

There have been many attempts to reform or streamline local government over the last 200 years, and each one seems to have left the job half done. Devolution created differences in the four UK nations, but in summary, Northern Ireland has only one layer of local government, whereas some parts of England have three.



Confused?

Let's break it down, starting with [England](#)...

Most rural parts of England have what is called a 'three tier' structure of government.

The biggest unit in a three-tier area is a county council, for example Gloucestershire. Inside that county will be around four to six 'District councils'. And within each district council area, there will be a large number of 'civil parishes'. In the eyes of the law, all civil parishes are called 'parishes', but if you live in a very large village or a small market town, you'll find that your local parish council is referred to as 'The Town Council'.

Still confused?



Don't worry, pretty much [everyone](#) is! Here's a bit more information...

Three tier local government

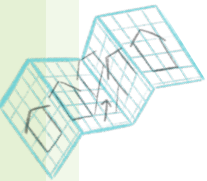
County Council

Responsible for — education, social services (including old folks homes), libraries, public transport, most main roads, trading standards, waste disposal.



District Councils (4-7 in each county)

Responsible for waste collection, housing, the planning system (i.e. what gets built where, which is decided via the 'Local Plan'), leisure, some local roads, environmental health (e.g. noise pollution, flytipping), council tax collection, business rates collection, some benefits payments.



NAMING — sometimes, the district council's full name will actually include the word 'District', but sometimes they will instead be called 'Borough Council', or even a 'City Council' (e.g. Waverly Borough Council in the county of Surrey, or Lancaster City Council, in the county of Lancashire).



Civil Parishes (50-200 in each district)

Responsible for: local facilities like allotments, cemeteries, green spaces, playparks, bus shelters, public seating, public toilets, village halls. Sometimes also some footpaths, street lighting and large areas of towns or villages belong to the parish council, e.g. the market place itself. Civil parishes can also make a '[Neighbourhood Plan](#)', which is like a small scale '[Local Plan](#)'.



There is no requirement in law for a part of England to have a parish council. Some small villages and hamlets only have a '[Parish Meeting](#)', which meets [once a year](#).

Most urban parts of England are not parished at all.



NAMING — don't confuse '[civil parish](#)' with '[church parish](#)'. They are not the same. The parish councils that exist today were established by the '[Parish Councils Act 1894](#)', which took local decision making away from churches and put it in the hands of elected local people.

Some civil parishes are called '[Town Councils](#)'. These tend to be the bigger ones, but their powers in law are the same as the tiniest parish. Some civil parishes are even called City Councils! this is a title that was awarded way back in history, by '[Royal Charter](#)'. Again, it makes little difference to their actual powers.

In some parts of England, and Wales, local government is arranged on a 'two-tier' system. The District councils and county councils are combined to make 'Unitary councils'.

Unitary Councils

Responsible for – **All the services** that would be provided by a **County Council** in a three-tier system, **plus** all the services that would be provided by the **district councils** too. **The district councils do not exist in a unitary area.**

Thus unitary councils provide: education, social services (including old folks homes), libraries, public transport, most main roads, trading standards, waste disposal, as well as waste collection, housing, the planning system (i.e. what gets built where, which is decided via the 'Local Plan'), leisure, some local roads, environmental health (e.g. noise pollution, flytipping), council tax collection, business rates collection, some benefits payments.

NAMING – unitary councils tend to have a name that is just relate to the former county council that they replaced. E.g. 'Wiltshire Council', 'Cornwall Council'. Sometimes, when a **large county is 'unitarised'**, the **big urban area becomes one unitary council**, and the remaining **rural area becomes a separate unitary**. This is what happened to Wiltshire (Swindon became a separate council), and to Dorset (where Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole became a single urban unitary, and the rural area became 'Dorset Council').

In the **north of England**, **unitary councils** tend to be called '**Metropolitan Borough Councils**'. Many south unitary councils are younger, having been formed since the mid 1990's. Most northern 'Metropolitan councils' were formed in the 1970's.

London is a special case. There are **26 councils** they're called '**London Boroughs**'. They have the powers of a unitary, but there is also a bigger body called the Greater London Authority that takes on some strategic planning and transport roles, which sits above them all. **London is almost entirely unparished.**

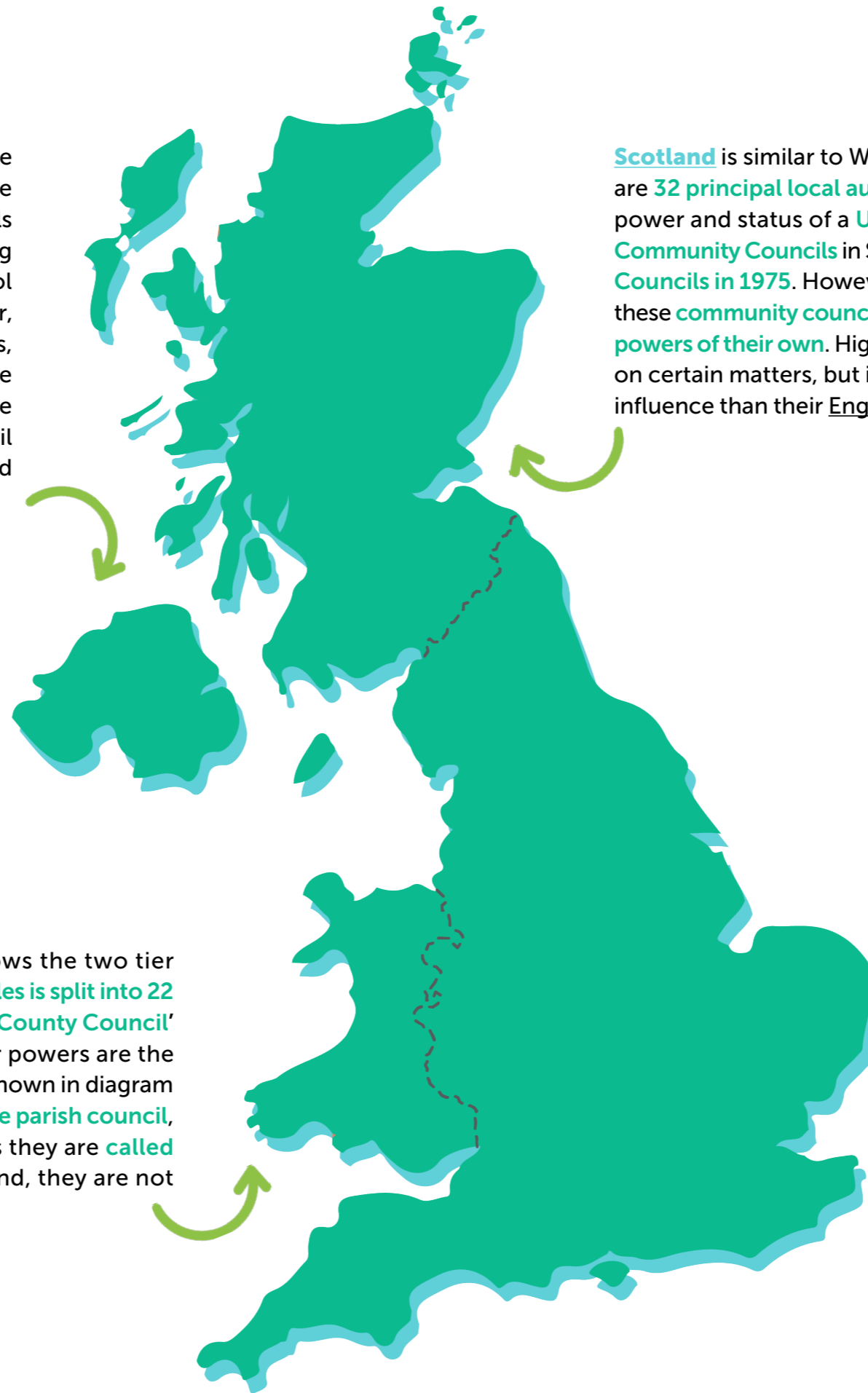


Civil Parishes (as many as 500 in a rural unitary council, and as few as zero in a large urban area).

Responsible for: local facilities like allotments, cemeteries, green spaces, playparks, bus shelters, public seating, public toilets, village halls. Sometimes also some footpaths, street lighting and large areas of towns or villages belong to the parish council, e.g. the market place itself. Civil parishes can also make a '**Neighbourhood Plan**', which is like a small scale '**Local Plan**'.



Northern Ireland is **different to the rest of the UK**. There are **11 'District Councils'**. As with District Councils in the three-tier areas of England, Northern Irish District Councils have responsibility for planning, waste and recycling services, leisure and community services, building control and local economic and cultural development. However, there is **no County Council level above them**. All highways, house building, education and health and social care functions are dealt with at the national level, along with the collection of business rates. There is no equivalent of civil parish, or community councils at all in Northern Ireland, and so this very local level of government is **entirely** absent.



Scotland is similar to Wales at the highest level. There are **32 principal local authorities**, all of which have the power and status of a **Unitary Council**. There are also **Community Councils** in Scotland, which **replaced Parish Councils in 1975**. However, the **major difference** is that these **community councils in Scotland do not have legal powers of their own**. Higher councils must consult them on certain matters, but in most respects they have **less** influence than their **English and Welsh** counterparts.

In **Wales**, the country entirely follows the two tier model shown on pages 8-9. All of **Wales is split into 22 councils** which either have the title '**County Council**' or '**County Borough Council**'. Their powers are the same as an English Unitary council, shown in diagram 2. Wales also has the **equivalent of the parish council**, with the same powers, but in Wales they are **called 'Community Councils'**. As in England, they are not always found in urban areas.



[What do I do if I want to stand for election?](#)

There are [elections](#) in a range of county councils, district councils and parish councils on **6 May 2021**. You can find out if your local councils are up for election by checking [here](#).

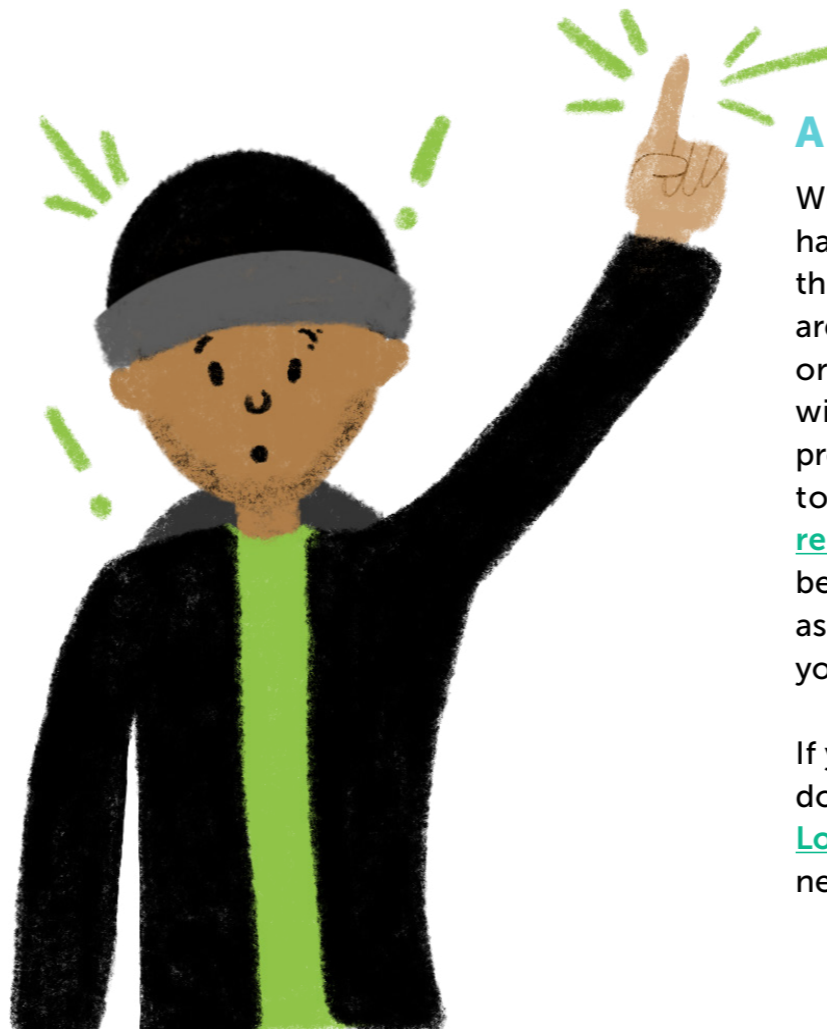
It's likely that, for district, county and unitary elections, you will be entering the race for this year's elections very late indeed. Many [local parties](#) will have started campaigning months ago, and will probably have their candidates chosen already. You could, of course, run as an [independent candidate](#), but with only 11 weeks to go in the election cycle, you would have a lot of work to do to bring yourself to the attention of people across a whole ward or county division. You also need an [election agent](#), to help keep track of the literature you produce and any money you spend (even if it's only £10 for a packet of paper). This might be a lot to take on for your first attempt at local politics.

[Parish and Town councils](#) (called [Community Councils](#) in Wales), however, are a very different proposition. They are often called the '[first tier](#)' of local government, because they are [closest to the communities that they serve](#). For a young person in England or Wales who is interested in a more sustainable future, [parish and town councils are an excellent place for your first foray into local politics and decision making](#), for several reasons.

- They tend to have [control over quite a bit of local green infrastructure](#) (parks, verges, cemeteries etc). These are excellent places to try different management regimes, like wildflower planting, leaving mowing until after seeding, community orchards, and tree planting.
- They tend to have a [good local 'brand'](#), often accompanied by a website and newsletter, but they don't always use these assets in the best way. Most people in a community know about the town or parish council, but don't really understand what it does. You can capitalise on this level of recognition by getting onto your local council and developing projects that play to your strengths; such as communicating ways to take action on the climate emergency. [As a young person, your familiarity with social media is likely to be a breath of fresh air, and something the council would really like help with.](#)
- English Parishes and Welsh Community Councils have [some planning powers](#) of their own – [district and unitary councils have to consult them](#) on every planning application, and on the Local Plan. You can [help shape these responses](#) by asking for more sustainability features in new development. You could also work on things like '[village design guides](#)', which indicate to developers [what sort of things are needed locally](#), and even help write a [Neighbourhood Plan](#), which could give more detail on sustainable planning for your area.

- [English parishes and Welsh Community Councils also have 'precept-raising powers'](#). This means that a [small part of the Council Tax payment](#) from every house in your community goes back to the [Parish/Community council](#). Many parishes do everything they can to avoid raising the precept, but there can be good reasons to do so. Perhaps you can drive forward a local consultation on raising the precept to ring-fence money for local environmental projects, like active travel, tree planting etc?
- Local councils tend to be [less overtly 'political'](#) than districts, unitaries and counties. If you want to run for your [parish council](#), it's not at all unusual to just be an [independent candidate](#). [You don't have to 'badge' yourself](#) as 'Green', 'Labour' etc, so you don't have to jump through hoops to join a political party or become an approved candidate for them. [You just stand as you, for what you believe in.](#) In some bigger town councils, there are political groupings, but even there, it's not unusual for people to stand as independents as well.
- Most importantly of all, parish and town councils currently suffer massively from a 'democratic deficit'. In the [May 2015](#) elections, [only 20% of English parishes](#) contested their vacancies!

If, for example, a council has eight seats for councillors and fewer than eight people put their names forward for nomination, they are duly elected, without competition. In many cases, councillors have stepped down or retired between elections, and nobody has come forward to fill their place. Many local councils thus carry several vacancies almost all the time. Your chances of getting elected at this level are therefore much higher than in a district or county.



A WORD OF WARNING.

While many parish and town councillors are lovely people, who just happen to be at the top end of the age spectrum and who would be thrilled to have younger town councillors working with them, there are bound to be some existing councillors who resist input from you or the change you want to bring. They may try to bamboozle you with 'The Standing Orders', or try to wear you out with tiresome procedures and make you feel like you don't have the life experience to do this work. But [young people have just as much right to represent their communities in this capacity as anyone else](#). Don't be afraid to put yourself forward or ask questions. Your experiences as a young person living in the community give you the perspective you need to contribute and make a positive difference.

If you're worried about knowing what exactly a parish councillor does, and what skills you'd need, then the [National Association of Local Councils](#) (NALC) provides support, mentoring and training for new councillors, which you'll be able to sign up to if you get elected.

Okay, you've convinced me – I'm going to stand in my parish council elections.

What do I do next?

To stand for election, you must:

Be **18** on the day your nomination papers are submitted AND

1. be on the **Register of Electors** (the 'electoral roll') for the parish or parish ward that you are standing for, or;
2. have been **resident in the parish where you are standing** (or within 4.8 kilometres of it) for the whole 12 months leading up to nomination), or;
3. have been **working at an address in the parish** for the whole 12 months leading up to the nomination, or;
4. have been **renting a property in the parish** for the whole 12 months leading up to the nomination

It is possible for someone to actually qualify four times over, for example if they are on the electoral roll, work in the parish, and rent a property there that they have lived in for 12 months. But don't worry, you only need to be able to [tick one of the above](#).

To submit yourself for election, you can download the papers [here](#).

There are three papers that make up the nomination form:

1. the nomination form
2. a home address form
3. your consent to nomination

The nomination form has to also have the name and signature of one person who will act as your 'proposer' and one person who is your 'seconder'. Your proposer and seconder **must not** be related to you, they **must** be on the electoral roll for the ward/parish ward where you are standing for election, and they **must** be of voting age.

The full details of what you will need to do can be found [here](#).

This all sounds a bit complicated – where can I get more support and check I'm doing it right?

Every district council and unitary council runs the elections in their area. They are required to have a person working for the council whose job title is 'Returning Officer'. This person oversees all the elections in that area. You can contact your council and **ask to speak to the Returning Officer**, or a member of their team, if you need help with filling out the forms for nomination etc.

Your Returning Officer will have to publish the '**Notice of Election**' not later than **25 working days before the poll**. This informs the community that there will be an election, and when people can start submitting nomination papers. After that time, you can submit nomination papers, which you will be able to do **until 4pm on the 19th working day before the poll**. Make sure you do this early, so you can get the Returning Officer to check your forms for mistakes, and make changes if you need to - **don't leave it to the last minute**.

Do I need to campaign, and how do I do that?

Under Covid-19 restrictions, door-to-door campaigning has been suspended since January, but Government has announced that **door to door campaigning and leafleting can start again from the 8 March 2021**. And of course, as well as hard copies that you put through doors, you can use social media, and put posters up. Talk to local shop owners and see if they will let you put up a poster in their window, or on any noticeboards they have.

There is talk of restrictions on campaigning being lifted in the next few weeks, so you may decide to print some leaflets or letters, and either hand deliver them or post them. Be aware that there are spending limits for all campaigns, even at the Parish level, so you have to make a note of what you spend and submit this to the Returning Officer after the election (even if you don't win!). These are sensible rules to stop people 'buying' elections by throwing money at them, but it does mean another form to fill in and a bit of record keeping. Make notes and keep receipts for things like packets of printer paper, stamps and envelopes, and printer ink. All the information on spending limits, and a form to submit, can be found [here](#).

A simple leaflet on no more than two sides of A4 would be plenty for a parish election. Just tell people **why you want to stand**, and **what you hope to change** or improve in your town or village if you win. Talk about **what the town means to you**, what **skills** you think you can bring to your local council, and the **attributes** you have (such as dedication, hard-working, good attention to detail etc). Put in a cheerful picture of yourself, and **just be honest**. Many people will be so pleased to see someone younger putting themselves forward that your leaflets will most likely be very well received.

An alternative that also works well is to write a handwritten letter introducing yourself, explaining why you are standing etc. Make copies of this and put those through people's doors, preferably in envelopes with actual addresses on them. People receive so very few real letters these days that this approach can really stand out, and as long as your handwriting is legible, the personal touch can be very impactful!

You don't have to send one to every house in your parish. You might just focus on a few streets. It's all down to how much effort you want to put in, and how competitive you think the election will actually be. You can ask your Returning Officer for details about whether there have been un-contested elections in your parish recently, to help you judge this.



'Young people have just as much right to represent their communities in this capacity as anyone else.'

Still not sure? Here's an inspirational case study to leave you with...

Joe Harris is the Liberal Democrat Leader of Cotswold District Council in Gloucestershire. At 28, he is the youngest council leader in the country. The Liberal Democrats took control of Cotswold District Council in May 2019 (which had previously been run by the Conservative Party for around 20 years). As Leader of Cotswold District Council, he is ultimately responsible for setting the direction of the council, working with a Cabinet of other councillors, (all of whom are definitely old enough to be his parents!). Joe has worked closely with his cabinet to create an entirely new corporate plan, which sets a new direction for the council. This plan has a central focus on the Climate Emergency, the provision of genuinely affordable housing, better access to health and wellbeing facilities, green spaces for all, and building back a green economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. None of these were central to the work of the council pre-2019.

At 28, Joe is young compared to most local politicians, but still older than most participants and alumni of the Our Bright Future Programme. It's worth noting though, that the 2019 election win was not the beginning of Joe's political career in this part of the world. Joe had been elected to public office when he was just 18, getting himself elected to Cirencester Town Council (a civil parish, and the largest town in the Cotswolds). He became interested in local politics after he was mugged in the town centre and felt that the council and police had not done enough to make the local area safe.

Not long after becoming elected to the Town Council, Joe became the Mayor of Cirencester, and was the youngest mayor in the country at that time. Over the next few years, he then successfully stood in both the Cotswold District Council and Gloucestershire County Council elections, which means he is one of a select group of 'three hatted' politicians who sits on every level of local government in his local area, and was instrumental in building up his local party's support base and finding new people who also wanted to stand for election, which ultimately led to his party gaining control of the District Council as a whole.

By getting involved in local politics in a very direct way, at a very young age, Joe's influence on his local area has been immense. The voice of young people is now central to the work that the council does, not least because the leader is himself, a young person! Environmental issues, affordable housing, sustainable jobs, and health and wellbeing are central to the council's plans, all of which are the sorts of things that young people value in local politics, but often feel are ignored by the current cohort of their councillors.

'The voice of young people is now central to the work that the council does, not least because the leader is himself, a young person!'