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Local government in England: structures

By Mark Sandford

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Summary

This note contains basic details of the structure and functions of English local government. It outlines the system of counties, districts and unitary authorities), and other bodies such as fire and rescue authorities, combined authorities, and Police and Crime Commissioners.

Section 3 explains the system of local government elections, including the systems of electing by 'halves' and 'thirds' used in many local authorities. It also provides details of the local government franchise (those eligible to vote).

Section 4 provides details of the legal process for structural change in English local government. This includes the merger of district councils and the creation of 'unitary authorities' to replace 'two-tier' local government – i.e., county and district councils. A number of new unitary authorities are to be created in 2019 and 2020, including in Dorset, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. Section 4 provides details of these and of the Government guidance on proposals for unitary local government. The Appendix provides a breakdown of the division of responsibilities between county and district councils in two-tier areas.

Section 5 provides brief details of the financing of English local government, including an explanation of the annual Local Government Finance Settlement. Additional details can be found in the Library briefing [Local government finances](#), and details of the 2019-20 settlement process can be found in the Library briefing on the [Local Government Finance Settlement 2019-20](#).

Section 6 provides some historical information about the development of local government in England.

1. Local government structures

1.1 Local authorities in England

The systems of local government in each part of the UK have developed separately, though often in parallel. This note focuses on local government in England: local government is devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It outlines the structure and functions of English local government, together with elections and historical development.

English local government is divided in some areas into county councils (the upper tier) and district councils (the lower tier). A major reform in 1972 established county and district councils throughout England, Wales and Scotland (excluding three Scottish island authorities). Since then, unitary authorities have been established in a number of areas. The creation of unitary authorities has frequently been contingent on Government policy, or local initiative, at a given time, rather than any rationale relating to local economy, geography or identity.

The two tiers have distinct functions, though they overlap in some matters. In other areas, “unitary authorities” carry out all local government functions. There are 353 local authorities in England, of which 27 are county councils, 201 are district councils, and 125 are single-tier authorities. Of the latter, 32 are London boroughs and 36 are metropolitan boroughs.¹

Additionally, a further tier of parish and town councils exists in some parts of England (see the Library standard note [Parish and town councils: recent issues](#)): these number some 10,000 across England. District, county and unitary authorities are sometimes referred to as ‘principal councils’ to distinguish them from parish and town councils, whilst the latter sometimes refer to themselves as ‘local councils’ to distinguish themselves from principal councils.

Wales has 22 unitary authorities (also known as county councils or county borough councils), and Scotland has 32 unitary authorities. Both Wales and Scotland also contain ‘community councils’, roughly equivalent to parish and town councils in England. As of 2014, Northern Ireland has 11 ‘district councils’, but does not have (and has never had) an equivalent to parish and town councils.

1.2 Fire and rescue authorities / Police and Crime Commissioners

There are 45 fire and rescue authorities in England (including the London Fire Commissioner) and three in Wales. Some are ‘combined fire authorities’, covering more than one upper-tier local authority area. Others cover a single upper-tier area, and may form a department of the county or unitary authority.

¹ These figures do not take account of current merger proposals in Suffolk and proposals for unitary local government in Dorset and Northamptonshire. These have yet to take effect at the time of writing. Further details can be found in section 4.

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There are 38 Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in England, including the Mayor of London, plus four in Wales. Police and Crime Commissioners are directly-elected, with elections taking place in 2012 and 2016.

In England, the boundaries of each of these types of authority are mostly based on the county areas established under the *Local Government Act 1972* (see section 5.2 below).

Both Scotland and Northern Ireland have a single fire and rescue service and a single police service, but no directly-elected PCCs.

1.3 Other authorities

The Common Council of the City of London, and the Council of the Isles of Scilly, are often described as 'sui generis' (unique) authorities. In functional terms they are unitary authorities, despite their very small populations (they are included in the figures given in section 1.1 above). It is common for Acts of Parliament to mention specifically that they extend to each of these areas.

The Greater London Authority exercises a range of functions in transport, policing, planning, fire and rescue, housing and economic development. It is not a local authority for most purposes. In other parts of England, central government manages some of the functions that it undertakes for London. Further details can be found in the Library briefing paper CBP05817, [The Greater London Authority](#).

Nine combined authorities have been established in England under the [Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009](#). These are not local authorities but joint legal bodies through which groups of authorities can work together. 'Devolution deals' have been agreed with each of these authorities during 2014-17: see the Library briefing paper [Devolution to local government in England](#) for further details.

Local authorities may establish joint waste authorities under section 205 of the *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007*. Four have been established in London (West London, North London, Western Riverside, and East London) with others in Greater Manchester (excluding Wigan) and Merseyside. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority absorbed the waste authority on 1 April 2018.

2. Functions of local government

A breakdown of the functions of county and district councils in two-tier areas can be found in the Appendix to this note. Councils in single-tier areas undertake all of these functions. Some are 'concurrent' responsibilities, which may be undertaken by either tier of government.

Under section 101 of the [Local Government Act 1972](#), counties and districts are at liberty to agree to undertake functions for one another. If they do so, the responsibility for the function remains with the council to which it belongs in law.

Many public services are delivered by national organisations that are not accountable to local government. Examples include health services (via the NHS), welfare benefits and employment services, probation, and prison services.

Many further national organisations have been established by Government to carry out functions and/or distribute funding, but they are not accountable to local government. Examples include the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Homes and Communities Agency, Highways England, the Arts Council, the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. Many local authorities will have working relationships with these bodies, but they are accountable to their sponsoring central government department. They are often known as non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), or 'quangos'.

All parts of England are covered by (at least) one Local Enterprise Partnership. These are voluntary bodies, established in 2010-11 to co-ordinate economic development and growth policy in local areas. They have a close working relationship with local authorities (and any combined authority) in their area, frequently with councillors sitting on their management boards, but they are not formally accountable to local authorities. Further details can be found in the Library briefing paper [Local Enterprise Partnerships](#).

3. Elections to local government

3.1 Electoral systems and wards

Local authorities in England and Wales use the First Past the Post electoral system. Local authorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland use the Single Transferable Vote, with multi-member wards.²

Local authorities are divided into wards, represented by councillors. Wards are based on parish areas where they exist. The [Local Government Boundary Commission for England](#) carries out 'electoral reviews', of ward boundaries, in each local authority every 10-15 years. Ward boundaries are required to take account of community identity and the need to achieve 'effective and convenient local government'. There is no requirement for ward boundaries to take account of Parliamentary constituencies, though county ward changes should have regard to district wards and vice versa.

Some local authorities have single-member wards, whilst others have multi-member wards. In each case, under the First Past the Post system, voters can vote for as many councillors as there are vacant seats. Therefore, if all three members of a three-member ward face re-election on the same date, the elector will have three votes. The major political parties commonly put forward as many candidates as there are seats available in the ward. It is common for all councillors in a multi-member ward to come from the same party.

3.2 Elections by halves and thirds

Some local authorities elect 'by thirds'. Each councillor serves for a four-year term, with elections held for one-third of councillors each year, followed by a fourth year with no elections. This pattern is common in metropolitan councils, and it is also used in some district councils, with the fourth year being used for the county council elections. A small number of councils elect by halves (half of the councillors retiring every two years). In such councils, it is possible for the political balance – and hence the council leadership - to change at each election.

The Government has published [a list of councils and their electoral patterns](#).

A council electing by thirds or by halves may resolve to change its electoral cycle so that all councillors are elected every four years.³ A council cannot make the opposite change – i.e. moving from full elections to electing by thirds or by halves – unless it is reverting to a pattern of electing by thirds or by halves that it has used in the past.⁴

² See the Library standard note [Voting systems in the UK](#) for further details of each of these.

³ See [Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007](#), s31-36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, s37-52.

3.3 The franchise

Individuals who are citizens of the UK, Republic of Ireland, a Commonwealth country or a member state of the European Union and who are 18 years old or over, and resident in the UK, may register to vote in local elections in the UK. The right to vote in local elections is reciprocal throughout the European Union.

3.4 Turnout

Turnouts for UK local government elections have long been far lower than those for general elections. Despite some claims to the contrary, this is not a recent phenomenon but can be traced back to the establishment of UK local government. Average turnouts in UK local elections have varied between 30% and 45% since 1980, except for local elections which coincide with Parliamentary elections, which typically attract a similar turnout to Parliamentary elections. More detailed figures are available in the Library standard note [Elections: turnout](#) (SN01467).

4. Boundary changes and restructuring

4.1 Becoming a unitary authority

The procedure for the creation of a unitary authority can be found in sections 1-7 of the [Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007](#).

The Secretary of State can 'invite' a proposal from a local authority to make a proposal for a county or district, or group of districts, to become unitary. The [Local Government Boundary Commission for England](#) (LGBCE) can be, but need not be, asked for advice on any matter related to the proposal. Regulations may be made covering how local authorities should go about preparing their proposal. The Secretary of State may then make an order implementing the proposal, or s/he may reject the proposal.

During the most recent round of creating unitary authorities, in 2007-09, a document was published entitled *Invitation to councils in England to make proposals for future unitary structures*.⁵ This paper provided the criteria on which the Government would base its decisions on which applications for unitary status to accept.

Any future moves towards unitary authorities may be based upon different criteria (see section 4.3 below). There is no requirement in the legislation to have a formal 'round' of bids: a single local authority, or group of authorities, could be invited to present proposals. In practice, local proposals may be submitted to Government before the formal procedures commence. For instance, DCLG received two proposals for unitary local government from Buckinghamshire in late 2016 (one from the county council, one from the districts).⁶

4.2 Consent for structural change

Section 15 of the [Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016](#) gives the Secretary of State general powers to disapply the provisions of the 2007 Act in respect of boundary change. The initial aim was to provide an expedited procedure for creating unitary authorities, and for reviewing ward boundaries and councillor numbers within local authorities or for the review of local authority areas. Where a new combined authority is to be created, this would allow the simultaneous creation of unitary authorities, if this was desired locally.

However, the 2016 Act also introduced two important changes:

- It would permit new unitary authorities to be created that cross the boundary of existing unitary authorities. The 2007 Act implicitly prevented this from taking place;
- It would permit the disapplication of the 2007 Act to take place only when the 'relevant authorities' consent. For two-tier areas,

⁵ DCLG, *Invitation to councils in England*, 2006

⁶ House of Commons [PQ 62807](#), 1 Feb 2017

the 'relevant authorities' are **either** the county **or** the district council. Thus under this section a move to unitary local government could take place without the consent of one or other of the affected tiers of local government. This element of the 2016 Act expires on 31 March 2019.

Plans for structural change in Dorset from 2019 (see below) have included draft regulations under section 15 which will give retrospective authority to the Dorset local authorities to make a proposal without a formal invitation.⁷

4.3 District council mergers

Where two district councils wish to merge into a single district council, a separate procedure exists, in sections 8-10 of the 2007 Act. Under this procedure, the LGBCE may undertake a review at the request of the Secretary of State **or** of a local authority. The review may propose boundary changes, including the alteration of a boundary, the abolition of a 'local government area' (i.e. a council area), and the constitution of a new local government area.

This procedure would be used to merge two district councils, or to divide one part of a council from another. However, it cannot be used to make proposals that would alter existing county or unitary authority boundaries.

In mid-2016, the first two proposals to use this procedure emerged. Suffolk Coastal and Waveney district councils, in Suffolk, have agreed to merge to form 'East Suffolk District Council' by 2019. In Somerset, Taunton Deane voted to merge with West Somerset district council in July 2016. West Somerset approved the plan in September 2016.⁸ A merger between Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury to form 'West Suffolk' District Council will take effect from 2019. A proposed merger between Babergh and Mid-Suffolk district councils was postponed in early 2018, and one between West Devon and South Hams district councils was rejected in October 2017.

Both of the procedures outlined here are separate from the LGBCE's regular electoral reviews of ward boundaries (see section 3.1).

The creation of new parish councils is also a separate legal procedure. This takes place under part 4 of the [Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007](#). Further details can be found in the Library briefing paper [Parish and town councils: recent issues](#).

There is no legal procedure to 'promote' a parish or town council to become a district council or unitary authority. Any attempt to create a new district council would have to take place under the procedure outlined above. There would be no formal role for a pre-existing parish or town council.

⁷ See the draft [Dorset \(Structural Changes\) \(Modification of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007\) Regulations 2018](#)

⁸ Jon Bunn, "Vote backs merger of cash-strapped Somerset districts", [Local Government Chronicle](#), 27 July 2016; Mark Smulian, "[Smallest district backs merger plan](#)", [Local Government Chronicle](#), 8 September 2016

4.4 Proposals for structural change

The financial pressures on local authorities during the 2010-15 Parliament led to calls from some quarters for the creation of more unitary authorities, as a means of saving money.

The 'Heseltine report', *No Stone Unturned*, proposed a fully unitary system of local government for England in late 2012. The Government rejected this recommendation, stating that it would prefer "authorities not to be distracted by structural change".⁹ This reflected the views of the then Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, who opposed any suggestions of reorganisation during his tenure from 2010 to 2015.¹⁰

In late 2016, proposals for unitary local government were submitted by Dorset and Buckinghamshire. In Dorset, two unitaries were proposed (Christchurch / Bournemouth / Poole; and the remainder of Dorset); The Secretary of State approved these proposals in a Written Statement on 26 February 2018.¹¹ The first elections to the two new councils will take place in May 2019.

In Buckinghamshire, the county council proposed a unitary county, and the four district councils proposed a two-unitary pattern (one covering Wycombe / Chiltern / South Buckinghamshire; one for Aylesbury Vale). In November 2018, the Secretary of State approved the proposal for a single unitary. The first elections to this new authority are expected to take place in May 2020.¹²

Additionally, Max Caller, an inspector appointed by the Government, produced a [critical Best Value report on Northamptonshire County Council](#) in February 2018, in the wake of it issuing a section 114 notice. This report recommended reorganisation of the county area into two unitary councils. The Secretary of State invited a proposal from the local authorities in the area, but the invitation ruled out a single unitary council as an option.¹³ A proposal was submitted in late August 2018 for two unitary authorities.¹⁴

In recent years, Oxfordshire, Hampshire and Lincolnshire have also been reported to be considering unitary options.¹⁵

Guidance

Following the Caller report on Northamptonshire County Council in February 2018, the Government published official guidance on the creation of new unitary authorities. This formed part of an invitation to

⁹ DCLG, [Government response to the Heseltine Report](#), Cm 8587, 2013, p.54; [HCDeb 12 Nov 2012](#) cc7-8

¹⁰ See, for instance, [HCDeb 12 Nov 2012](#) c8; [HCDeb 21 Oct 2010](#) c1155.

¹¹ [HCWS 486 2017-19](#), 26 February 2018

¹² [HCWS 1058 2017-19](#), 1 November 2018

¹³ MHCLG, [Northamptonshire councils: invitation to restructure](#), 27 March 2018

¹⁴ See Northamptonshire CC, [Northamptonshire Local Government Reform Proposal](#) [item 5a apx 2], 31 August 2018

¹⁵ LGC Briefing, ["The Siege of Oxford part ii"](#), 6 February 2017; David Paine, ["Districts cast doubt over two-unitary plan"](#), *Local Government Chronicle*, 1 February 2017; Jon Bunn, ["County leader pushes for unitary referendum"](#), *Local Government Chronicle*, 24 January 2017; Mark Smulian, ["Push for 'Greater Portsmouth' unitary as devo bid falters"](#), *Local Government Chronicle*, 7 February 2017

the local authorities in Northamptonshire to put forward proposals for reorganisation under the 2007 Act. The guidance said:

1. A proposal should seek to achieve for the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government, that is the establishment of unitary authorities:
 - a. which are likely to improve local government and service delivery across the area of the proposal, giving greater value for money, generating savings, providing stronger strategic and local leadership, and which are more sustainable structures;
 - b. which command a good deal of local support as assessed in the round overall across the whole area of the proposal; and
 - c. where the area of each unitary authority is a credible geography consisting of one or more existing local government areas and having a substantial population that at a minimum is substantially in excess of 300,000.¹⁶

The guidance also required any Northamptonshire proposals to describe, with evidence, how they would achieve these ends; to demonstrate local consultation; to take account for 'plans for growth' in the Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford area; and the proposal for two unitary authorities ('West and East Northamptonshire') in the Caller report.

Previously, published minutes of a meeting of Dorset County Council on 10 March 2016 contained a number of 'guidelines' that had been indicated to the council by the Department for Communities and Local Government:

- The optimum size for a unitary council is 300,000-700,000 residents. These are not absolute rules, but the government will ask searching questions of proposals of fewer than 300,000 and more than 700,000 residents;
- Proposals should complement economic geographies. Appropriate governance is a major determinant of an area's economic prospects, so a successful submission for local government reform will need to demonstrate that any proposals are in the best economic interest of the area. This relates to the national discussion on Devolution;
- Government will look for proposals to come forward that cover the whole Dorset area – it will not look favourably on partial solutions or solutions which leave unviable options in other parts of the county, nor will it act on the views of one council acting in isolation from its neighbours;
- If more than one new council is created, those councils will be created at the same time;
- The Secretary of State will look for a solution to be delivered through agreement / consensus;
- Councils should submit devolution proposals and proposals for local government reform as part of a single package;
- Agreeing a new unitary structure/s will enable Dorset to submit more ambitious devolution proposals;

¹⁶ MHCLG, [Invitation to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government in Northamptonshire](#), 27 Mar 2018

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- Looking to alter district boundaries in advance of any reorganisation will add a considerable amount of time to the process;
- Councils need to be mindful of the next general election in 2020, and avoid running into the election period as the point of change;
- To meet a potential change date of 2019, DCLG's preferred date for the submission of proposals on devolution and local government reform is January 2017.¹⁷

¹⁷ Dorset County Council, [*Exploring Options for the Future of Local Government in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole*](#), Report to full council, 10 March 2016

5. Local government finance

Local government finance is extremely complex. This section of the paper presents a very brief framework of the key sources of funding and procedures for allocating funds to local authorities.

5.1 Sources of finance

English local authorities have four principal sources of finance, as follows. The bulk of the funds from these sources is not 'ring-fenced' – i.e., local authorities can spend the money as they choose.

Council tax

Local authorities set their own levels of council tax and retain all of the revenues locally. Council tax bands are fixed by the Government, and properties are allocated to the bands by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA). Annual rises in council tax are subject to 'referendum principles' set by the Secretary of State (see the Library briefing [Council tax: local referendums](#)).

Business rates

Local authorities collect business rate revenue. Some of this is retained locally, some passed to central government, and some redistributed within the sector (see the Library briefing [Business rates](#)). The Government intends the sector to retain all rate revenue in the future ('100% business rate retention': see the Library briefing [Reviewing and reforming business rates](#)). This was to have been introduced from the 2019-20 financial year, but delays arising from the 2017 General Election now make this unlikely.

Currently, local government as a whole retains 50% of business rates revenue (the 'local share'), with the other 50% being passed to central Government (the 'central share'). The 'local share' is subject to a system of redistribution between authorities (the 'tariff and top-up' system). In short, areas with high rate revenues pay a 'tariff' in, and areas with low rate revenues receive a 'top-up' out. Additionally, a number of areas are piloting local retention of 100% of rate revenue from 2017 onwards.

Central government grants

Central government passes a number of grants to local authorities. The largest is the annual Revenue Support Grant (RSG). This grant is not ring-fenced.

Some additional grants are ring-fenced (e.g. the Public Health Grant). Others are not, and may be spent as local authorities choose (e.g. the New Homes Bonus, Rural Services Delivery Grant). Each of these grants are distributed between authorities according to separate criteria.

Local fees and charges

Local authorities have hundreds of powers to charge fees for services provided.¹⁸ In most cases, fees must not exceed the cost of providing

¹⁸ These powers are found in multiple Acts of Parliament: a comprehensive list is not available.

the service, and in many cases fee levels are set nationally. The income is retained locally but must be treated as a contribution to the provision of the service for which it is paid. Thus it does not constitute a separate source of revenue in local government accounts.

Local authorities may also receive commercial income deriving from their ownership of assets, or from investments.

5.2 The Local Government Finance Settlement

Funding included

Each year, levels of central government grant for local authorities in England are decided via the annual Local Government Finance Settlement. This involves the setting of redistribution provisions for business rates revenue ('tariffs' and 'top-ups') and the fixing of Revenue Support Grant levels. These sums, together with a few smaller grants are known as an authority's Settlement Funding Assessment (SFA).

The annual settlement covers all county, district and unitary authorities in England, plus fire and rescue authorities and the Greater London Authority. It has also recently included mayoral combined authorities.

Police and education funding are not included in the annual settlement. Nor are figures for housing benefit (which is administered by local government to central government requirements). However, some central government statistical publications list all of these lines of funding as elements of 'local government funding'.

The funding mentioned here solely consists of revenue funding. Local authorities also receive annual allocations of capital funding, which must be accounted for separately (see the Library briefing paper [Local government in England: capital finance](#)).

Local government finance is devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In each location, the devolved legislature operates a comparable annual procedure, though with differences regarding the funds included.

Annual practice

The Government is required by statute to publish Revenue Support Grant allocations annually, and the House of Commons must approve the settlement.¹⁹ Practice in recent years has been for a draft settlement to be published in mid-December, and a final settlement in early to mid-February, before the start of the relevant financial year in April. [The Library has published a briefing paper](#) on the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement for 2019-20.

In December 2015, for the first time in recent decades, the Government published indicative funding levels for the following four financial years (2016-20). Local authorities were given the opportunity to 'sign up' to a four-year settlement:

¹⁹ See sections 78 and 78A of the *Local Government Finance Act 1988*. The law is silent on what happens if the House of Commons fails to approve the settlement.

The Government will offer any council that wishes to take it up a four-year funding settlement to 2019-20. As part of the move to a more self-sufficient local government, these multi-year settlements can provide the funding certainty and stability to enable more proactive planning of service delivery and support strategic collaboration with local partners. Councils should also use their multi-year settlements to strengthen financial management and efficiency, including by maximising value in arrangements with suppliers and making strategic use of reserves in the interests of residents.²⁰

Funding levels for individual authorities agreed at this time can be found on the website of the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).²¹

The *Local Government Finance Bill 2016-17* proposed to abolish Revenue Support Grant and the annual settlement process, at the same time as introducing full local retention of business rates. This Bill fell at the 2017 General Election and has not reappeared at the time of writing.

It is commonplace for funding streams to be transferred in and out of the finance settlement each year. This makes it difficult to provide meaningful figures for how much an individual authority's funding has risen or fallen over several years, as it is not possible to directly compare like with like. In some years, the Government has published adjusted figures for the current year alongside the forthcoming settlement to allow direct comparison to be made.

²⁰ DCLG, [The provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2016-17 and an offer to councils for future years](#), December 2015, p. 24

²¹ See the spreadsheet entitled [Core Spending Power: supporting information](#).

6. Structures: history

6.1 Pre-1972

Elected county councils were established in England and Wales by the *Local Government Act 1888*, and district councils by the *Local Government Act 1894*. A number of larger towns and cities were permitted to opt out from county government under the 1888 Act: these became 'county boroughs'. The 1888 Act included criteria through which authorities could apply for county borough status in the future. Similar structures were introduced by the *Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898* and the *Local Government (Scotland) Act 1889*.

6.2 The 1972-74 reforms

The *Local Government Act 1972* reorganised the whole of England (except London) and Wales into a two-tier structure, with 45 county councils as upper-tier authorities and 332 district councils as the lower tier. Six of the counties, and 36 of the districts, were 'metropolitan counties' and 'metropolitan boroughs' respectively: the division of functions between the two tiers in metropolitan areas was different to that in non-metropolitan areas. In addition, London was governed by the Greater London Council (GLC) and 32 London boroughs.

Immediately prior to the reorganisation, England had 46 county councils, 79 county boroughs, 32 London boroughs, 449 urban districts, 227 metropolitan boroughs, and 410 rural districts.²² The changes came into effect on 1 April 1974.

The six 'metropolitan counties' all covered newly-constituted geographical areas, with most including parts of two or three traditional county areas. Their boundaries took strong account of 'functional economic geography' – essentially uniting cities with their economic hinterlands. Metropolitan counties handled police, fire, passenger transport, waste disposal, economic development and land-use planning. These counties were abolished by the *Local Government Act 1985*, following the Conservative government's 1984 white paper *Streamlining the Cities*.

An equivalent reorganisation took place in Scotland under the *Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1973*, which replaced 33 counties, 197 burghs and 196 district councils with nine regional councils, 53 district councils, and three unitary authorities (Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles). The *Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972* replaced 55 district councils, two counties, six county boroughs and ten boroughs with 26 district councils in Northern Ireland.

London had previously been reorganised under the *London Government Act 1963*, with changes taking effect in 1964. This Act introduced one county council, 32 boroughs, and left the City of London untouched. The area covered by the new Greater London Council had previously been covered by the London County Council (with 28 boroughs, smaller

²² Lord Redcliffe-Maud, *Royal Commission on Local Government*, 1968, p. 21

than the current ones), Middlesex County Council, and a patchwork of municipal boroughs and urban district councils.

A number of local authorities were permitted to retain the title of 'borough council' or 'city council' following the 1972 reforms, despite taking on the status of a district. These are honorific titles and have no implications for these authorities' functions.

6.3 Structural changes since 1972

A number of further reforms to local authority structures have taken place since 1972 (see the Table below). The overall effect has been to reduce the overall number of authorities and councillors, and to move further towards a pattern of unitary authorities and a move away from the two-tier structure of the 1972 reforms.²³

Table: changes to local government structure in England since 1972

1986	Abolition of the six metropolitan county councils and the Greater London Council, passing some of their functions to joint boards and some to borough councils in their areas
1994	Replacement of two-tier structure in Scotland and Wales with 32 and 22 unitary authorities respectively
1996-98	Creation of 46 new unitary authorities across England
2003-04	Proposals for unitary authorities in the North-East, Yorkshire & Humber and North-West regions, accompanying plans to introduce elected regional assemblies in the North of England. Neither plan succeeded.
2007-09	Creation of nine new unitary authorities across England, in an application-based process
2014-15	Merger of 26 district councils into 11 larger district councils in Northern Ireland. Proposals for the merger of 22 unitary authorities in Wales into 10-12 larger unitary authorities

²³ See Office for National Statistics, [Historical boundary change](#), for details of changes up to 1998; Office for National Statistics, [United Kingdom: Local Authority Districts, Counties and Unitary Authorities, 2012](#), for subsequent changes.

Appendix: functions of local authorities in England

Function	Tier
Arts and recreation	County / district
Births, deaths and marriage registration	County
Building regulations	District
Burials and cremations	District
Children's services	County
Coastal protection	District
Community safety	District
Concessionary travel	County
Consumer protection	County
Council tax and business rates	District
Economic development	County / district
Education, including special educational needs, adult education, pre-school	County
Elections and electoral registration	District
Emergency planning	County
Environmental health	District
Highways (not trunk roads), street lighting and traffic management	County
Housing	District
Libraries	County
Licensing	District
Markets and fairs	District
Minerals and waste planning	County
Museums and galleries	County / district
Parking	County / district
Passenger transport (buses) and transport planning	County
Planning	County / district
Public conveniences	District
Public health	County
Social services, including care for the elderly and community care	County
Sports centres, parks, playing fields	District
Street cleaning	District
Tourism	County / district
Trading standards	County
Waste collection and recycling	District
Waste disposal	County

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