

Research Briefing

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History of local government in English towns and cities



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Summary

Historically, it was possible for significant towns and cities to acquire powers of self-government that were not available to smaller towns or rural areas. In many cases these powers were granted piecemeal through royal charters or Acts of Parliament granting specific rights to individual towns and cities.

Forms of urban local government have evolved over time and successive reforms since the 19th century have changed the way in which towns and cities are governed, but some traces of their historic status remain.

Local government reforms have often, but not always, applied to both England and Wales. This briefing focuses on local government in English towns and cities.

The history

From the medieval period, borough status gave towns and cities in England certain rights of self-government. Borough status could be granted by royal charter or by prescription, meaning that the town or city had historically been self-governing and so had borough status through custom. The rights of boroughs varied depending on what each borough had been granted by royal charter, but a borough's rights could include:

- independence from the jurisdiction of the courts of the surrounding county
- special rules around taxation
- the right to hold fairs and markets
- the right to representation in Parliament

Over time many boroughs became 'incorporated', meaning that they were governed by corporations similar to the City of London Corporation today. A town or city that was large or significant enough could be designated as a 'county corporate' or a 'county of itself'. A county corporate was administratively separate from the neighbouring county and had the right to appoint their own sheriffs to administer justice.

Successive Acts of Parliament in the 19th century reformed local government. As local government began to provide more services, a range of ad hoc committees and boards emerged, each handling specific services such as

poor relief or public health and sanitation. The [Municipal Corporations Act 1835](#) converted some towns and cities into ‘municipal boroughs’, where corporations were replaced by elected town councils. Later, the [Local Government Act 1888](#) created ‘county boroughs’, where towns of exceptional importance were kept administratively separate from the neighbouring county, similar to counties corporate in the medieval era.

However, county boroughs were abolished by the [Local Government Act 1972](#), which divided responsibility for local services between two tiers of local government: the lower-tier district councils and the upper-tier county councils. Under the [Local Government Act 1992](#), some areas then became ‘unitary authorities’ with a single tier of local government, providing the services of both a county and a district council.

The current system

Under the current system of local government, a town or city can be subject to one or more levels of local government.

Some areas are governed by unitary authorities, which provide all local government services. Unitary authorities can cover:

- a large town or city, such as Nottingham City Council
- part of a county, such as Thurrock Council in Essex
- a whole county, such as Cornwall Council

Other areas are governed by a two-tier system, where a county council provides services such as education and adult social care to the whole county while district councils (known in some places as city or borough councils) provide services such as refuse collection and leisure services to a smaller area.

As of April 2025, fifteen areas are governed by combined authorities or combined county authorities, where neighbouring local councils are grouped together, in some cases under a directly elected mayor. Combined authorities and combined county authorities have greater devolution of powers from central government compared to other areas. London has a unique model of local government which is broadly similar to a combined authority.

In any of these systems, parish councils (known in some places as town councils, community councils or city councils) can operate in a smaller area, providing services such as maintenance of local amenities. Parish councils are not a mandatory tier of local government and do not exist in all parts of the country. Parish councils have traditionally been less common in urban areas, though a parish council can cover either a whole town or city or a neighbourhood within it. Currently, roughly 40% of the population of England lives in an area with a parish council.

1 Medieval towns and cities

From the time of the Norman conquest in 1066, local administration in England was based on counties (or 'shires'). A sheriff (or 'shire reeve') acted as the king's officer in each county, with responsibilities including keeping the peace and collecting tolls and tax revenue on behalf of the king.

From at least the 12th century, it was possible for towns and cities to organise 'opt-outs' from the jurisdiction of the neighbouring county. Towns and cities could bypass sheriffs and pay revenue directly to the king in exchange for a royal charter. The powers granted in each royal charter differed but could include the right to hold a market or freedom from paying tolls and customs fees. Towns and cities with powers independent from the surrounding county were often known as boroughs.¹

1.1 Borough status

The term 'borough' (or 'burh') had been used to describe certain towns and cities since Anglo-Saxon times. It was originally used to describe a 'fortified place', though its meaning evolved over time.²

In the centuries following the Norman conquest, there was no one set of criteria for what made a town a borough nor was there a definitive list of boroughs in England. Even royal charters from the period do not give a full list of boroughs: while some towns were granted rights through royal charters, others claimed borough status by prescription, meaning that they had the powers of a borough through longstanding custom.³

Royal charters

Royal charters were used as ways for larger towns and cities to 'opt out' of the jurisdiction of the sheriffs and gain some independence from the surrounding (or adjoining) county.

Sheriffs acted as the king's first officers in the counties, looking after the king's properties, collecting tolls and revenues due to the king and keeping the peace by presiding over the county court. Over time, towns and cities

¹ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, p54

² J A Chandler, [Explaining local government: local government in Britain since 1800](#), 2007, pp1-2

³ Frederic A Youngs, [Guide to the local administrative units of England](#), 1980, xi-xii

were granted royal charters that allowed them some level of independence from the county's sheriff by paying revenues directly to the king.

For this reason, the rights granted in early royal charters often gave boroughs powers that would previously have rested with the sheriff. For example, boroughs could be granted the right to try certain crimes in their own courts, outside of the jurisdiction of the county court, or the freedom from paying tolls and customs fees that would have been collected by the sheriff.⁴ However, royal charters granted towns rights on an individual basis and – at least initially – there was no standard template for the rights that a borough would be granted through a royal charter.⁵

Boroughs by prescription

While a royal charter will often be the first evidence of borough status, some towns and cities enjoyed special rights as a borough before a royal charter was ever granted. These towns and cities that enjoyed rights by custom were known as boroughs by prescription. Royal charters granted before the mid-12th century in particular tended to either confirm or add to the rights that a borough already enjoyed by custom.⁶ For example in 1067, before he had even entered the capital, William I (the Conqueror) granted a royal charter to the City of London preserving the laws and customs it had enjoyed under Edward the Confessor.⁷

1 Cambridge: the evolution of a borough

Cambridge was an ancient borough by prescription. Its first charter was granted by Henry I sometime between 1120 and 1131, giving the town exclusive rights over traffic and tolls on the river and recognising the town's court. In 1185-86, Cambridge agreed to pay a fee to the king “so that the sheriff might not meddle therewith”, though this was agreed by a writ rather than a royal charter and the town was later brought back under the jurisdiction of the sheriff.

A royal charter granted by King John in 1201 recognised the “established customs and tenures” of Cambridge and once again recognised the authority of the town's court. A 1207 charter gave Cambridge financial independence from the sheriff, allowing the town to appoint its own agent (or ‘reeve’) to collect revenues for the king, while a 1256 charter gave it administrative independence from the sheriff, allowing the town to elect its own coroner and to take on other powers related to justice.

⁴ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp54-55

⁵ Martin Weinbaum (ed), *British Borough Charters 1307-1660*, 1943, xxi-xxii

⁶ Martin Weinbaum (ed), *British Borough Charters 1307-1660*, 1943, xxi-xxii

⁷ City of London Corporation, [Heritage Gallery: A History of the City in Ten Documents](#), accessed 28 March 2025

In a case heard in 1529-30, the court of King's Bench recognised Cambridge as a corporate borough by prescription, agreeing with the mayor and bailiffs of Cambridge that the town was "one of the most ancient boroughs of this realm of England and from time immemorial the said borough and town have been one body". However, the town was not formally incorporated until 1605, when James I granted a charter creating a corporation for Cambridge that could hold property, sue and be sued, and make by-laws.⁸

1.2

Incorporation

From the 14th century, the Crown began to grant charters of incorporation. These charters created a corporation, which acted as a legal person and took on certain powers on behalf of the town or city:

- perpetual succession (allowing corporations to exist permanently and maintain all the rights granted by previous royal charters)
- the ability to sue and be sued (preventing the mayor or other officials from being personally sued for decisions or actions of the corporation)
- the right to hold land
- a common seal (an official seal used to authenticate and execute legal documents)
- the power to make by-laws⁹

At first charters of incorporation were granted to towns and cities on an individual basis. However, in 1466 the Court of Common Pleas held that every town in England should be considered to be incorporated, regardless of whether or not it had a charter of incorporation. This principle was later extended so that earlier royal charters granting borough status were considered to be charters of incorporation.¹⁰

Counties corporate

A town or city that was sufficiently large or important could be granted the status of a 'county corporate' (or 'county of itself'), giving it independence from the surrounding or adjoining county and the right to appoint its own

⁸ Victoria County History, [A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 3, the City and University of Cambridge - The city of Cambridge: Constitutional history](#), 1959

⁹ Martin Weinbaum (ed), *British Borough Charters 1307-1660*, 1943, xxiii-xxiv

¹⁰ Josef Redlich and Francis W Hirst, *The History of Local Government in England*, 2nd edition, 1970, pp28-29

sheriff. This went further than royal charters, which granted boroughs specific rights but did not grant total independence from the county.

While London had the right to appoint sheriffs from the 12th century, other towns and cities gained this right in the following centuries. Over the years Bristol (1373), Southampton (1447), Canterbury (1471), Gloucester (1483), Exeter (1537), and Poole (1571) were all designated as counties corporate.¹¹

2 Norwich: from Anglo-Saxon borough to county corporate

Norwich was made a county corporate under a royal charter granted by Henry IV in 1404, though in practice it had been administratively independent before this.¹² Norwich had been a borough since the Anglo-Saxon era and was one of the largest boroughs in England by the time of the Norman conquest. A royal charter granted by Richard I in 1194 had made Norwich a city and granted it the same privileges as London, including the right to appoint its own sheriffs.¹³ Prior to becoming a county corporate, civic business was carried out in a general assembly of citizens, led by four bailiffs and 24 councillors who were elected annually. From 1404 Norwich became a county corporate with a mayor and two sheriffs replacing the existing four bailiffs, though for decades afterwards there were disputes within Norwich over how these officers should be elected.¹⁴

Norwich remained administratively independent from the surrounding county of Norfolk for centuries: first as a county corporate until 1836, then as a municipal borough until 1889¹⁵ and finally as a county borough until 1974.¹⁶ However, since 1974 the city has had a two-tier system, with responsibility for local services split between Norwich City Council and Norfolk County Council.¹⁷

The members of a corporation were generally not elected by popular vote and in many cases appointments were for life. Over time, this led to efforts to reform local government in the boroughs. In 1833, a Royal Commission was appointed to assess the state of borough corporations in England and Wales.

¹¹ Frederic A Youngs, [Guide to the local administrative units of England](#), 1980, xiii

¹² J S Roskell, L Clark and C Rawcliffe (eds), [The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1386-1421 – Norwich](#), 1993

¹³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, '[Norwich \(England\)](#)', Volume 19, 1911

¹⁴ J S Roskell, L Clark and C Rawcliffe (eds), [The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1386-1421 – Norwich](#), 1993

¹⁵ Schedule A to the [Municipal Corporations Act 1835](#)

¹⁶ [Third Schedule to the Local Government Act 1888](#)

¹⁷ [Schedule 1 to the Local Government Act 1972](#)

The Commission found that often unelected corporations were not trusted by local people and did not govern effectively.¹⁸ Their report found that:

...there prevails amongst the inhabitants of a great majority of the incorporated towns a general and, in our opinion, a just dissatisfaction with their municipal institutions, a distrust of the self-elected municipal councils, whose powers are subject to no popular control, and whose acts and proceedings, being secret, are unchecked by the influence of public opinion; a distrust of the municipal magistracy, tainting with suspicion the local administration of justice, and often accompanied with contempt of the persons by whom the law is administered; a discontent under the burthens of local taxation, while revenues that ought to be applied for the public advantage are diverted from their legitimate use and are sometimes squandered for purposes injurious to our character and morals of the people.

The Commission concluded that “the existing municipal corporations of England and Wales neither possess nor deserve the confidence or respect” of local people and recommended “thorough reform”.¹⁹

¹⁸ Josef Redlich and Francis W Hirst, *The History of Local Government in England*, 2nd edition, 1970, pp118-125

¹⁹ First report of the commissioners appointed to inquire into the municipal corporations in England and Wales, 1835, p49

2 The development of local government in the 19th century

By the 19th century, there were roughly 200 boroughs in England governed by corporations. Systems of governance varied between boroughs, with members of corporations being either elected or co-opted (chosen by existing members of a corporation).

Borough corporations were independent from the governance of Justices of the Peace (the successors to medieval sheriffs) in the counties. Justices of the Peace had both judicial and administrative roles, including presiding over county quarter sessions, maintaining highways and bridges, and overseeing the work of civil parishes. Parishes themselves had responsibilities over law and order, road maintenance, and poor relief.²⁰

2.1 Ad hoc authorities

Many local services were provided by ad hoc authorities, such as boards of improvement commissioners or turnpike trustees, which were each established for a single purpose by an Act of Parliament. The responsibilities of these authorities varied in line with the Acts of Parliament that created them and in many cases they covered geographic areas that did not align with parish, county or borough boundaries.²¹

Poor law unions

Poor relief was the term historically used to describe the system for looking after people in poverty, or those unable to care for themselves. From 1601, poor relief had been the responsibility of civil parishes, the smallest unit of local government. Parishes collected a 'poor rate', or local tax, to provide 'outdoor relief' in the community (such as money, food and clothes) and to fund 'indoor relief' (workhouses). The amount that a household paid in the poor rate depended on the value of their property.

The [Poor Law Amendment Act 1834](#) reformed the system, with responsibility for poor relief transferred from parishes to roughly 700 newly created 'boards of guardians', which were elected locally in the new 'poor law unions' (or 'poor law districts'). Members of the boards of guardians were elected by local ratepayers, with those who paid more in rates entitled to a higher

²⁰ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp57-58

²¹ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp57-58

number of votes.²² A national Poor Law Commission (later called the Poor Law Board) was set up to inspect and supervise the work of local boards.²³

Improvement commissioners

By 1834, 708 Acts of Parliament were in force establishing boards of improvement commissioners. Each Act of Parliament created one board in one local area, each with its own specific remit to ‘improve’ and maintain public spaces and infrastructure. This remit could include responsibilities for street cleaning, paving and lighting, providing watchmen or a police force, or preventing ‘public nuisances’. Boards with more limited responsibilities were sometimes named accordingly, and could be called paving commissioners, lighting commissioners or police commissioners.

Boards of improvement commissioners were generally appointed through a mixture of co-option and election by wealthier ratepayers. Improvement commissioners had the power to raise a ‘district rate’ for their ‘improvement district’ (the area in which they operated). As with the poor rate, the amount that households paid for the district rate was usually assessed by the value of their property.²⁴

2.2

Municipal boroughs

The [Municipal Corporations Act 1835](#) established municipal boroughs as elected local bodies that were responsible for multiple local services in one area. Unlike many of the corporations that preceded them, municipal boroughs were governed by an elected council.²⁵

For the first time, the 1835 act set a standard structure across England and Wales for how corporations should be composed and what their responsibilities should be:

Table 1 Provisions of the Municipal Corporations Act 1835

Definition	A municipal corporation was defined as a ‘legal person’ that could act on behalf of the borough. It was represented by a council elected by ratepayers in the borough.
Composition	Councils would be led by a mayor. A third of members would be aldermen (who served a 6-year term) and two thirds of members would be councillors (who served a 3-year term).

²² Josef Redlich and Francis W Hirst, *The History of Local Government in England*, 2nd edition, 1970, p147

²³ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp57-58

²⁴ Josef Redlich and Francis W Hirst, *The History of Local Government in England*, 2nd edition, 1970, pp136-137

²⁵ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp57-58

	A mayor would be elected every year by the council from among the alderman and councillors.
	Aldermen would be elected every six years by the councillors.
	Councillors would be elected every three years by the equal vote of male ratepayers who had lived or worked in the borough for at least three years. Only male ratepayers with three years' residence could stand for election as a councillor.
	Boroughs with a large enough population would be divided into wards.
Accountability	Council meetings would be open to the public.
	The council's accounts would be audited annually.
Role	The main responsibilities of the council were the administration of local revenues and finance, administration of the police and passing by-laws "for the good rule and government of the borough".
	Councils would no longer have a judicial role. Magistrates would now be appointed centrally by the Crown rather than by borough corporations.
	Councils would need permission from central government before taking certain actions, such as taking out loans or selling municipal property.

Source: Josef Redlich and Francis W Hirst, *The History of Local Government in England*, 2nd edition, 1970, pp129-133

2.3 Local boards of health and sanitary districts

The [Public Health Act 1848](#) created a General Board of Health, a central government body that had the power to create 'local health districts' served by local boards of health. A local health district could be created in areas either where 10% of ratepayers had signed a petition in favour of a local board of health or where the mortality rate was sufficiently high.

Local boards of health (known as 'local boards' from 1858) had responsibilities for the sanitary condition of the district. These responsibilities varied, but could include maintenance of the water supply, sewers and drainage, street cleaning and paving, burial-grounds, and environmental

health regulation. Local boards of health could charge a rate to fund their work, with householders charged according to the value of their property.²⁶

In municipal boroughs, the council became the sanitary authority and so responsible for appointing the local board of health; in other areas, members of the board were elected by local ratepayers. The [Local Government Act 1858](#) allowed existing boards of improvement commissioners to take on the powers of a local board.

The Public Health Acts of 1873 and 1875 created ‘urban sanitary districts’ in municipal boroughs and other areas, such as towns with a board of improvement commissioners. These districts held responsibilities for public health, such as providing clean water, disposing of sewage and waste, and inspecting for overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in the local area.

Under the [Local Government Act 1894](#), local boards were abolished and urban sanitary districts were converted into urban districts, which provided a range of services beyond the public health focus of the sanitary districts.²⁷

2.4 County boroughs

The [Local Government Act 1888](#) created the status of ‘county boroughs’. County boroughs were towns and cities which were made independent from the surrounding or adjoining county, similar to medieval ‘counties corporate’.²⁸ Any city with over 50,000 residents at the time of the 1888 act was made a county borough,²⁹ as were many existing counties corporate with under 50,000 residents.³⁰ 61 county boroughs were created through the 1888 act and others were created later by Acts of Parliament.

All county boroughs were later abolished as part of local government reforms in 1974.³¹

3 York: from county corporate to county borough

York’s earliest surviving royal charter was granted by Henry II around 1154-58, though it seems that the city had at least some rights as a borough from the time of Henry I (1100-1135). These rights included the right to have a merchant guild and freedom from ‘lestage’, an export tax.³² In 1396 the city became a county corporate, with the right to appoint a mayor and two sheriffs.³³

A board of improvement commissioners was appointed in 1825 to maintain local infrastructure and provide a watch.³⁴ The board was made of 40

³² Victoria County History, [A History of the County of York: the city of York – The twelfth and thirteenth centuries: The achievement of civic liberties](#), 1961

commissioners, with 10 elected by ratepayers in each ward. Responsibilities were split between – and sometimes duplicated by – the corporation and the commissioners. For example, the corporation managed one police force, the commissioners manage another police force, and the local magistrates appointed 54 of their own parish constables. Both the corporation and the commissioners took some responsibility for maintaining the streets, and at times had to draw up agreements to confirm which stretches of road each body was responsible for. In addition to these two bodies, some local services were provided by poor law guardians in York’s 32 parishes and by private companies providing gas, water and fire services.³⁵

York became a municipal borough in 1836, with a corporation elected by ratepayers. A local board of health was appointed in 1850 to take over the work of the improvement commissioners, before this work was then taken over by the corporation when it became the urban sanitary authority in 1873. The corporation also took over responsibility for the city’s electricity supply in 1897 and for education in 1902.³⁶

York was designated as a county borough in 1889, keeping its independence from North Yorkshire County Council until it was converted to a two-tier system in 1974.³⁷

By the end of the 19th century, medieval corporations and ad hoc bodies had been replaced with multi-purpose authorities elected by ratepayers. There were several types of local authorities, which differed between urban and rural areas:

Local government at the end of the 19th century

County councils	The upper tier of local government, taking over the administrative roles of Justices of the Peace. Initially their role was limited, including responsibility for highways and
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²⁷ Frederic A Youngs, [Guide to the local administrative units of England](#), 1980, xviii

²⁸ Josef Redlich and Francis W Hirst, *The History of Local Government in England*, 2nd edition, 1970, pp202-203

²⁹ [Section 31 of the Local Government Act 1888](#)

³⁰ [Third Schedule to the Local Government Act 1888](#)

³¹ Frederic A Youngs, [Guide to the local administrative units of England](#), 1980, xii; David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp57-58

³² Victoria County History, [A History of the County of York: the city of York – The twelfth and thirteenth centuries: The achievement of civic liberties](#), 1961

³³ Victoria County History, [A History of the County of York: the City of York – The later middle ages: The city’s franchise and officers](#), 1961

³⁴ [York Improvement Act 1825](#)

³⁵ Victoria County History, [A History of the County of York: the city of York – Modern York: City Government, 1800-1835](#), 1961

³⁶ Victoria County History, [A History of the County of York: the City of York – Modern York: Local government, 1835-1902](#), 1961

³⁷ Part 27 of the [English Non-metropolitan Districts \(Definition\) Order 1972](#), SI 1972/2039

	bridges and for weights and measures, though this grew over time.
Urban and rural district councils	The lower tier of local government, taking over from urban and rural sanitary districts. Initially their role included public health issues including the water supply, street cleaning and the clearance of slum housing.
County boroughs	A single tier of local government in towns and cities, outside of the jurisdiction of the surrounding or adjoining county council.
Non-county boroughs	Boroughs that fell under the jurisdiction of a county council but retained more powers than a district council, sharing responsibilities including education with the county council.

Source: David Wilson and Chris Game, Local Government in the United Kingdom, 5th edition, 2011, pp57-58

3 Reforms to local government in the 20th century

The 20th century saw several major reforms to local government, which had differing effects on towns and cities. Towns and cities that had been counties corporate and county boroughs came under the jurisdiction of county councils for the first time in centuries. In some cases, towns and cities were brought under a district council or unitary authority that covered a larger geographic area, losing their own council even for the lower tier of local government.

The responsibilities of local government increased gradually over the first few decades of the 20th century. County boroughs took on responsibilities over council housing, utilities and local public transport. Following the passage of the [Local Government Act 1929](#), poor law unions were abolished and counties and county boroughs took on their responsibilities, including poor relief, civil registration and hospitals. The following decades saw some local services nationalised, including poor relief, which was transferred from local government to the national Unemployment Assistance Board under the [Unemployment Act 1934](#). This was followed by wholesale reforms to local government from 1974.³⁸

3.1 A two-tier system

Under the [Local Government Act 1972](#), county boroughs were abolished and, with the exception of London, all parts of England and Wales were placed under a two-tier system of local government. 47 county councils formed the upper tier while 333 district councils formed the lower tier of local government across England and Wales. These included 6 metropolitan county councils established in urban areas (Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, West Midlands and West Yorkshire), containing 36 metropolitan district councils between them.³⁹

Responsibility for local services was divided between the two tiers of local government, with county councils providing services such as education and social care and district councils providing services such as waste disposal and social housing. In metropolitan counties, county councils managed

³⁸ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp59-60

³⁹ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp61-62

police, fire, transport, planning and other strategic functions, while district councils provided most other services.

4 Carlisle: back and forth between a one-tier and two-tier system

Carlisle was an ancient borough by prescription. Its earliest surviving royal charter was granted by Edward III in 1352, confirming the rights it had previously held by custom. The city was incorporated by Charles I in 1637⁴⁰ and became a municipal borough following reforms to urban local government in 1835.⁴¹ Carlisle fell under the administrative county of Cumberland when Cumberland County Council was established in 1889,⁴² but became a county borough independent of Cumberland County Council in 1914.⁴³

In 1974, Carlisle reverted to a two-tier system, with local services divided between Carlisle City Council and Cumbria County Council, the larger successor to Cumberland County Council.⁴⁴

More restructuring led to both Carlisle City Council and Cumbria County Council being abolished in 2023. The city is now governed by Cumberland Council as a unitary authority, covering the area of Carlisle and two other former district councils.⁴⁵ Before the restructure came into effect, Cumbria County Council twice attempted to bring a judicial review against the restructure, but both claims were dismissed by the High Court.⁴⁶ As of 2025, there is no council for the city of Carlisle. More information can be found in section 6.1 of the Commons Library research briefing [Unitary local government](#).⁴⁷

The abolition of metropolitan county councils

The [Local Government Act 1985](#) abolished the 6 metropolitan county councils, along with the Greater London Council. Most of the responsibilities of the county councils were taken over by the metropolitan district councils and by the London boroughs. Some of the responsibilities of the former metropolitan counties continued to be managed on a city-wide basis, but by bodies that

⁴⁰ T Cadell and W Davies, [Magna Britannia: Volume 4, Cumberland – The city of Carlisle](#), 1816

⁴¹ Schedule A to the [Municipal Corporations Act 1835](#)

⁴² [Local Government Act 1888](#)

⁴³ [Local Government Board's Provisional Order Confirmation \(No. 10\) Act 1913](#)

⁴⁴ [Schedule 1 to the Local Government Act 1972](#)

⁴⁵ [Cumbria \(Structural Changes\) Order 2022](#)

⁴⁶ BBC News, '[Cumbria Council loses legal challenge over county split](#)', 22 February 2022

⁴⁷ Commons Library research briefing CBP-9056, [Unitary local government](#)

were not directly elected, such as central government departments or joint boards appointed by the metropolitan district councils.⁴⁸

3.2 The creation of unitary authorities

Following the [Local Government Act 1992](#), unitary authorities were created in some parts of England, which replaced both county and district councils to act as a single tier of local government and provide all local services. By the end of the 20th century, unitary authorities covered roughly a quarter of the non-metropolitan population of England.⁴⁹ More information about the history of unitary authorities can be found in the Commons Library research briefing [Unitary local government](#).

⁴⁸ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp64-65

⁴⁹ David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition, 2011, pp69-70

4 Towns and cities in the 21st century

In the 21st century, towns and cities can be subject to a variety of local government structures, ranging from one tier to effectively four tiers of local government. A town or city may have its own district council as the lower tier of local government, which sits within a county council as the upper tier. Alternatively, a town or city may be part of a district council or unitary authority that covers a larger area. In these cases, there may (or may not) be a parish council that covers the town or city itself. Under any of these structures, a town or city may also fall within a combined authority or combined county authority.

4.1 Combined authorities and directly elected mayors

The [Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009](#) allowed two or more neighbouring local authorities to create a ‘combined authority’.

Combined authorities are formed of two or more councils and some (but not all) are led by a directly elected mayor. Combined authorities allow councils to co-ordinate on issues such as housing and transport. Combined authorities may include lower tier authorities (borough and district councils) and upper tier authorities (county councils and unitary authorities).

Under combined authorities, local councils retain most of their powers and responsibilities, though the combined authority holds certain powers (such as over local transport) that previously sat with the local council. Combined authorities can also be granted devolved powers that are not generally available to individual councils.

The creation of a combined authority is led by local councils and historically there has been no requirement for local areas to form combined authorities.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, [English institutions with devolved powers: Plan English guidance](#), 26 March 2024

Combined county authorities

The [Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023](#) created the status of ‘combined county authorities’. These function like combined authorities but allow only upper-tier authorities (county councils and unitary authorities) as members.

5 Derby, Nottingham and Leicester: combined county authorities

Since 2024, Derby City Council and Nottingham City Council have been members of the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) with a directly elected mayor.⁵¹ The mayor has powers over transport, housing and skills not available to the local authorities themselves. For example, the mayor and the EMCCA have the power to introduce bus franchising and create a local transport plan for integrating transport in the area, as well as compulsory purchase powers and the ability to establish Mayoral Development Corporations to enable housebuilding and regeneration.⁵²

The EMCCA was the first mayoral combined county authority in the country and was formed on the initiative of local authorities, following a proposal submitted by Derby City Council, Derbyshire County Council, Nottingham City Council and Nottinghamshire County Council in March 2023.⁵³ However, not all authorities in the East Midlands are included in the EMCCA. Leicester City Council opted not to join the combined county authority, with the Mayor of Leicester Sir Peter Soulsby stating that it would be “daft” to have two elected mayors covering the city. Leicestershire and Rutland were then excluded from the EMCCA as they were not considered a “functional economic area” without the city of Leicester.⁵⁴

4.2

Town councils

Parish councils (known in some places as town councils or community councils) are the lowest tier of local government, operating in a smaller area than borough or district councils and providing services such as the maintenance of local amenities. They are also consulted on local issues such as highways and planning applications.⁵⁵

⁵¹ [East Midlands Combined County Authority Regulations 2024](#), SI 2024/232

⁵² Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, [East Midlands devolution deal](#), 30 August 2022

⁵³ Derbyshire County Council, Nottinghamshire County Council, Derby City Council, Nottingham City Council, [East Midlands Combined County Authority Proposal \(PDF\)](#), March 2023

⁵⁴ BBC News, [‘Why is the East Midlands electing a mayor?’](#), 9 April 2024

⁵⁵ Local Government Association, [How is local government organised?](#), accessed 28 March 2025

Parish councils are not a mandatory tier of local government and have traditionally been less common in urban areas, though a parish council can cover either a whole town or city or a neighbourhood within it. Currently, roughly 40% of the population of England lives in an area with a parish council.⁵⁶

In some towns, an area roughly equivalent to the size of the historic borough is governed through a town council. These include Warwick, Hereford, Salisbury, Chichester, Berwick-upon-Tweed, and Durham. In some cases, a town council and a district council share a name, but the town council covers the historic area of the town while the district council covers a wider area, including surrounding towns and villages.

6 Warwick: three tiers of local government

Warwick was already a borough at the time of the Domesday survey in 1085-86.⁵⁷ The town received a charter of incorporation in 1545⁵⁸ and became a municipal borough in 1836.⁵⁹

Under the [Local Government Act 1972](#), Warwick was structured as a two-tier system, with Warwickshire County Council as the upper tier of local government and Warwick District Council as the lower tier. While the council is named for Warwick, it covers a larger area than the historic town, including the borough of Royal Leamington Spa, the urban district of Kenilworth and the rural district surrounding Warwick as well as the historic borough of Warwick itself.⁶⁰

By contrast, Warwick Town Council covers the area of the old borough of Warwick, which became a civil parish under [section 9\(4\)](#) of the Local Government Act 1972.⁶¹ Warwick Town Council acts as a third tier of local government, providing services including managing allotments and supporting local projects through community grants.⁶²

Charter trustees

When county boroughs were abolished under the [Local Government Act 1972](#), provisions were made to allow historic towns and cities to continue using

⁵⁶ Commons Library research briefing CBP-4827, [Parish and town councils: recent issues](#), Section 1.2

⁵⁷ Victoria County History, [A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 8, the city of Coventry and Borough of Warwick – The borough of Warwick: Political and administrative history to 1545](#), 1969

⁵⁸ Victoria County History, [A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 8, the city of Coventry and Borough of Warwick – The borough of Warwick: Political and administrative history, 1545-1835](#), 1969

⁵⁹ Schedule A to the [Municipal Corporations Act 1835](#)

⁶⁰ Part 37 of the [English Non-metropolitan Districts \(Definition\) Order 1972](#)

⁶¹ Warwickshire World, '[Warwick Town Council marks its 50th anniversary](#)', 17 December 2024

⁶² Warwick Town Council, [Services](#), accessed 28 March 2025

‘borough’ as a style, though the term no longer had a meaning in terms of local government organisation.

[Section 245\(4\)](#) of the Local Government Act 1972 allowed the new district councils to petition the Queen for the right to use the style ‘borough council’ if they contained the area of an existing borough.

Where a new parish council covered the same area as an existing borough, [section 246\(3\)](#) allowed the parish council to take over the charter and corporate identity of the borough. Parish councils are allowed to use the style ‘town council’ (or ‘city council’, where the parish covers a whole city) but cannot use the style ‘borough council’, even where they take over the corporate identity of an old borough.

[Section 246\(4\)](#) created a body of ‘charter trustees’ for boroughs in areas where the new district council was not granted the right to use the style ‘borough council’ and where there was no parish council. Charter trustees were responsible for maintaining the borough’s royal charter and other marks of its corporate identity.

Under [section 246\(7\)](#), charter trustees would cease to exist as soon there was a district or parish council that could take over responsibility for maintaining the identity of the borough. This was amended by the [Charter Trustees Act 1985](#), which provided that charter trustees could only transfer their responsibilities to a new parish council that was formed covering the former borough.

7 Hereford: re-establishing a parish council

The earliest known royal charter for Hereford was granted by Richard I in 1189. Hereford was incorporated by a royal charter granted by Elizabeth I in 1597⁶³ and became a municipal borough in 1836.⁶⁴

In 1974, Hereford was converted to a two-tier system, with local services divided between Hereford District Council and Hereford and Worcester County Council.⁶⁵ However, in 1998 Hereford and Worcester County Council was abolished and Herefordshire and Worcestershire were re-established as separate counties. Since then, Hereford has been governed as a unitary authority by Herefordshire Council (officially named the County of Herefordshire District Council, in a mark of its complicated history).⁶⁶

⁶³ Hereford City Council, [City History](#), accessed 28 March 2025

⁶⁴ Schedule A to the [Municipal Corporations Act 1835](#)

⁶⁵ [Part 18 of the Schedule to the English Non-metropolitan Districts \(Definition\) Order 1972](#), SI 1972/2039

⁶⁶ [Hereford and Worcester \(Structural, Boundary and Electoral Changes\) Order 1996](#), SI 1996/1867

When Hereford District Council was abolished in 1998, its former councillors became charter trustees, responsible for maintaining the city's charter and the corporate identity of the former borough while it was without a council.⁶⁷

Hereford was re-established as a parish council in April 2000 and regained responsibility for the former borough's charter from the charter trustees. Initially known as Hereford Town Council, this was changed to Hereford City Council when Hereford's ancient status as a city was reconfirmed by Queen Elizabeth II in October 2000. Using the title 'town council' or 'city council' has not changed its powers as a parish council.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ [Charter Trustees \(Hereford\) Order 1998](#), SI 1998/582

⁶⁸ Hereford City Council, [Council History](#), accessed 28 March 2025

Appendix

Timeline of local government reform in England

Until the 19th century, local government in English towns and cities was reformed piecemeal. At first, individual towns and cities gained additional rights and powers through royal charters. Later, Acts of Parliament were used to set up ad hoc local authorities on an individual basis. From the 1830s, Parliament began to reform local government into a more standardised structure across the country.

Table 2 Legislation reforming local government

Pre-1835	100s of Acts of Parliament	Before 1835, local government bodies were generally formed by individual Acts of Parliament setting up bodies for specific purposes in specific areas. For example, one Act of Parliament in 1769 created the Birmingham Street Commissioners to manage markets, ensure public safety at night and provide street lighting in Birmingham. ⁶⁹
1834	Poor Law Amendment Act 1834	Poor law unions were created in local areas to administer poor relief. A central Poor Law Commission (the Poor Law Board, from 1847) was created to oversee the system nationally.
1835	Municipal Corporations Act 1835	Medieval corporations were replaced by directly elected municipal borough councils in many areas. Initially, 178 municipal boroughs were created in England and Wales.
1848	Public Health Act 1848	Local boards of health were created with responsibility for the sanitary condition of towns and cities. Local boards were either appointed by a borough's corporation or, in

⁶⁹ Victoria County History, [A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7, the City of Birmingham - Political and Administrative History: Local Government and Public Services](#), 1964

		areas without a corporation, elected by local ratepayers.
1888	Local Government Act 1888	An upper tier of councils was established covering the counties, as well as county boroughs that were independent from the surrounding county. Initially, 62 county councils and 61 county borough councils were created in England and Wales.
1894	Local Government Act 1894	A lower tier of councils was established under county councils. Over 1270 urban and rural district councils and non-county borough councils were created in England and Wales.
1929	Local Government Act 1929	Boards of poor law guardians were abolished. Their functions were transferred to lower tier councils (district councils and county borough councils).
1972	Local Government Act 1972	County borough councils were abolished and a two-tier structure was established across England and Wales. 47 counties were created encompassing 333 non-metropolitan districts, as well as 6 metropolitan counties encompassing 36 metropolitan districts.
1985	Local Government Act 1985	The 6 metropolitan counties were abolished, along with the Greater London Council (GLC).
1992	Local Government Act 1992	Unitary authorities were created as a single tier of government, replacing district and county councils in some areas. 44 unitary authorities were created in England, replacing 5 county councils and 58 district councils.
2007	Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007	9 more unitary councils were created in England, replacing 7 county councils and 37 district councils.
2009	Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009	Combined authorities (CAs) were established as a way for neighbouring councils to co-ordinate their strategic functions and gain devolved powers. Specific combined authorities were not created by the act, but were created later by secondary legislation

		following proposals made by participating councils. Greater Manchester became the first combined authority to form in 2011.
2023	Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023	Combined county authorities (CCAs) were established as groupings similar to combined authorities, but with only upper tier authorities (county councils and unitary authorities) as members.

Local government reform in London

London has long had a unique model of local government. The City of London has retained certain rights to self-governance since Anglo-Saxon times and, since the start of national reforms to local government in the 19th century, the capital has been either excluded from – or singled out for different treatment in – legislation.

Table 3 Legislation reforming local government in London

1067	The ‘William Charter’	William I issued the first charter to the City of London in 1067, preserving the laws and customs that the City had enjoyed prior to the Norman Conquest. ⁷⁰ The area now known as Greater London is not covered by the charter; until the 19 th century, the area was split between the counties of Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex and Surrey.
1215	The ‘King John Charter’	King John issued a royal charter granting the City of London the right to elect a mayor annually. This charter confirmed existing practice, as the earliest record of London having a mayor comes from 1194. ⁷¹
1855	Metropolis Management Act 1855	The Metropolitan Board of Works was created to provide sewerage and drainage, paving, street cleaning, street lighting and other ‘improvements’ in the city. The ‘metropolis’ is

⁷⁰ City of London Corporation, [Heritage Gallery: A History of the City in Ten Documents](#), accessed 28 March 2025

⁷¹ City of London Corporation, [Heritage Gallery: A History of the City in Ten Documents](#), accessed 28 March 2025

		broadly similar to the area now known as Inner London, but excludes the city of London.
1888	Local Government Act 1888	London County Council (LCC) was established, covering the area managed by the Metropolitan Board of Works. The LCC worked alongside existing bodies, including the board of works and poor law unions across the city. Under the act Croydon and West Ham, which are now part of Greater London, were also established as county boroughs.
1899	London Government Act 1899	28 metropolitan borough councils were created in London as a lower tier under London County Council. Local boards and other bodies were abolished in the LCC area, with their powers transferred to the new boroughs.
1963	London Government Act 1963	The boundaries of local government in London were extended to include the City of London, the county of Middlesex, the county boroughs of Croydon, West Ham and East Ham, and certain urban districts surrounding London. The Greater London Council (GLC) was established as the upper tier authority, with 33 metropolitan boroughs as the lower tier authorities. The GLC was responsible for strategic services including fire and emergency planning and refuse collection, but responsibility for most local services remained with the boroughs.
1985	Local Government Act 1985	The Greater London Council (GLC) was abolished. London boroughs became the single tier of local government, though some local services were provided by joint boards. The Inner London Education Authority continued to manage education across 12 boroughs in inner London until 1990. ⁷²
1999	Greater London Authority Act	The Greater London Authority (GLA) was established, covering the 32 London boroughs and the City of London. The directly elected position of Mayor of London was established to lead the GLA, along with the elected 25-member

⁷² [Education Reform Act 1988, ss 162-164](#)

London Assembly to scrutinise the work of the Mayor and the GLA. Like the GLC before it, the GLA is a strategic authority and responsibility for most services remains with the boroughs. The GLA has powers over services including fire and emergency planning, transport, policing, and economic development.

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