

Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013

Executive summary



Foreword

While the world of local government is ever changing, what remains at its heart is the group of strong and dedicated leaders who put themselves forward to help improve quality of life locally, influence government and stand up for their communities.

Up against severe financial pressures and an ever-growing reliability on services, ensuring local authorities remain at the core of change is paramount. Encouraging people to think about becoming a councillor and becoming part of the challenge of reshaping service delivery is crucial if we are to continue with the momentum.

Local government is a vibrant sector in which to be involved. By having councillors who are passionate, energetic and committed, and who listen to residents, we are not only fully dedicated to the local people we serve, but residents understand our work, gain interest in what we do and why we are doing it.

The LGA's shared vision for local government supports this. Our members are bold and ambitious leaders faced with daily challenges that can make a real difference to somebody's life. Reinvigorating local governance and ensuring that we have strong democratic accountability and a reputation that can be trusted provides the platform to encourage people from all walks of life to get involved. Indeed, a recent survey carried out on behalf of the LGA indicates three in four people trust their local councillor, rather than their MP, to make decisions about their local area.

This Census has been commissioned by the LGA to ensure local government has an accurate picture of its representation. Recording a councillor's age, gender, background and how they carry out their work is key to ensuring community leadership is nurtured and represents our diverse society.

Effective political leadership means effective democracy and the LGA is committed to supporting and developing councillors. Our 'Highlighting Leadership' development programmes provide a range of opportunities to support members in their changing roles throughout their careers. From those at the beginning of their political careers to the most experienced leaders, the LGA is able to help build leadership capacity both on an individual basis and on behalf of the wider sector. We hope councillors will continue to take advantage of LGA programmes and support to develop, so that they can continue to represent residents and communities now and in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Merrick Cockell', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Sir Merrick Cockell
Chairman of the Local Government Association



Background

The Local Government Association (LGA) has carried out the seventh Census of Local Authority Councillors in England. The census provides a 'snapshot' of local government representation, and with previous years' data, analysis of trends over time.

This survey provides the most comprehensive, timely overview of local government representation and how that has changed over time. The results help to inform central and local government and political parties in the development of strategies and policies for local government.

The LGA commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake the census of councillors in 2013. The 2013 census collected data between September and October 2013 and updates previous censuses conducted in 1997, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010.

Thanks to the support from member support officers and councillors, 6,902 of the 18,111 (38.1 per cent) councillors in office responded to the survey across 349 (99.4 per cent) of the 351 local authorities in England.

The full report, and further analyses, can be found on the LGA's website (www.local.gov.uk). For further information about the Census please contact Stephen Richards (stephen.richards@local.gov.uk, 020 7664 3256).

Key findings

The key findings from the 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors undertaken in the autumn of 2013 by the National Foundation for Educational Research are presented below.

Section A – work as a councillor

- The average length of service of councillors in their current council in 2013 was 9.5 years, similar to that seen in 2010 (9.4 years). This is approximately one year longer than the average service length reported between 2004 and 2008 (8.3 years), showing a small but sustained increase in the average length of service.
- In 2013, just over half of councillors (53 per cent) held at least one position in the authority.
- On average, councillors were members of 3.3 committees or sub-committees, again showing a slight decrease in the proportion seen since 2001 (ranging from 3.8 to 3.6).
- Around a third of councillors (35.9 per cent) were members of local partnership groups or boards, most commonly a Health and Wellbeing Board (9.3 per cent).
- In 2013, councillors reported spending an average of 25.1 hours per week on council and group/party business (compared to between 22.0 hours and 22.7 hours in 2004–2010). When broken down, it can be seen that councillors spent the majority of this time on council business (20.8 hours on average) and a much smaller proportion of time on group/party business (4.3 hours on average).
- Over a third of councillors (39.4 per cent) were members of other public bodies such as parish or town councils.
- The proportion of councillors that have received one or more training opportunities peaked in 2008 at 93.7 per cent but has since fallen to 85.0 per cent in 2013.

- In 2013, the majority of councillors had access to resources such as a council email address, a PC, laptop or tablet, and a tool to enable remote log-in or access to their council's computer system. Fewer councillors had access to a Smartphone or mobile phone, access to telephone conferencing, a Blog, a Twitter account, Facebook page or YouTube. Councillors rated a PC, laptop or tablet, a council email address and a Smartphone as the most useful resources.

Section B – issues and views of councillors

- Between 2004 and 2013, councillors responded very similarly in terms of their reasons for seeking this role. In 2013, 90 per cent became councillors in order to 'serve the community', 58.7 per cent did so 'to change things' and 54.4 per cent were motivated by their 'political beliefs'.
- Overall 69.8 per cent of councillors believed the most important thing they do is listening to the views of local people. A similar proportion (64.8 per cent) believed that representing local residents' views to the council was the most important thing that they do as a councillor.
- In 2013, most councillors (81.5 per cent) anticipated that they would be able to continue their role at least to some extent without their current benefits package, although 18.9 per cent would only be able to do so to a small extent and 14.8 per cent would not at all.
- Overall, 41.4 per cent of councillors thought they had more influence to change their local area than they expected prior to being elected, while 35.7 per cent had about as much influence as they expected.
- Four-fifths of councillors (82.4 per cent) would recommend the role of councillor to others if asked.
- Councillors' intention to stand for re-election has strengthened. In 2004 and 2008, around half stated that they would stand for re-election, whereas around two-thirds did so in 2008 and 2013.

Section C – personal background of councillors

- Councillors' gender profile, ethnic origin, disability status and caring responsibilities have changed very little between 2001 and 2013. In 2013, 67.3 per cent of councillors were male (70.7 per cent in 2001) 96 per cent were of white ethnic origin (97.3 per cent), 13.2 per cent had a long-term health problem or disability and 27.9 per cent had one or more caring responsibilities.
- Councillors had an average age of 60.2 in 2013, similar to 59.7 recorded in 2010, and up a little from 57.8 in 2004. Around one in eight (12.0 per cent) were aged under-45, a proportion which has changed little since 2004. The proportion aged 70 or over has increased from 13.8 per cent to 22.2 per cent over this period.
- The proportions of retired councillors have increased slightly year-on-year from 36.8 per cent in 2001 to 46.6 per cent in 2013. At the same time, the proportion of councillors in full-time employment has decreased steadily from 27.2 per cent in 2001 to 19.2 per cent this year, whereas there has been very little variation in the proportions of councillors who are self-employed or work part-time between 2001 and 2013.
- Two-thirds of councillors (66.6 per cent) held other voluntary or unpaid positions such as school governorships (37.2 per cent).
- The proportion of councillors whose highest qualification is degree level or equivalent rose from 50.2 per cent in 2004 to 58.8 per cent in 2013. Conversely, the proportion of councillors with no qualifications has steadily fallen since 2004 (from 14.0 per cent to 5.2 per cent).

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