



The State of Local Government

An audit of local councillor opinion across England and Wales

Conducted by ComRes

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Introduction

The ComRes *State of Local Government Report* is the first of its kind, revealing councillors' views of the state of their councils in terms of financial stability, service provision and future prospects. The audit is based on a survey of more than 500 councillors across England and Wales.

By engaging with the views of elected members, the report identifies the key issues facing the people at the forefront of local politics; thereby identifying the needs of constituents and the impact of the recession on local authorities.

This annual survey addresses the key issues facing local councillors. These include their perceptions of local service provision; an assessment of how councils are dealing with the recession; benchmarking the relationship with Central Government; and identifying the threats and opportunities facing local Government.

In addition, the survey provides details of how councillors spend their time and what they consider to be the best and worst parts of being a councillor. Indeed, the report examines all areas of responsibility of councillors across different council types.

The report identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that local authorities face, and looks forward to the prospects of a general election in the next 12 months and beyond to predict the state of the sector following the recession.

Survey Methodology

ComRes interviewed 518 Councillors in England and Wales by online surveys between 14th April and 31st May 2009. Data were weighted to be representative of all Councillors in England and Wales by party and region. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

The ComRes Councillor Panel is the only regular research tool for understanding the views of local government councillors in England and Wales. ComRes offers unique access to this audience through regular monthly omnibus (multi-client) surveys. This tool can be used by organisations wishing to measure and benchmark their reputation; understand the views of local councillors, and indeed constituents concerns, towards key issues; and demonstrate the value of communication with local government.



Executive Summary

The 2009 State of Local Government report reveals just how this has been a year of ups and downs for local authorities. The impact of the recession has clearly hit hard and, as a result, local councillors conclude that the financial position of their authorities has worsened overall. Worse still, most believe that they will continue to face financial pressures over the next year.

Recession has also brought an increase in demand for services from 12 months ago. Across the board there is evidence of the increased need for council housing, social housing and housing benefit - while demand for planning services has seen a sharp decrease over the same period. Looking to the future, councillors see social housing and education as the top priorities for investment.

Overall, many councillors think their authority will emerge 'about the same' after the recession; however, about a third think their authority will emerge stronger and a fifth say they think their council will emerge weaker after the recession. Conservative councillors are most likely to say that their council will emerge stronger and these are also seen as having room for improvement in terms of quality of service provision.

Councillors are quick to state their views towards central government and there is a strong feeling of a need for change – particularly in terms of the powers available to authorities and a call for devolution of control from central government. Unsurprisingly perhaps, councillors rate central government poorly in terms of their communications with them in contrast to the Local Government Association (LGA) and police forces which score well on communications.

Almost all local government councillors agree that central government should delegate more powers. There is also widespread disagreement that councils have both the resources and the power to provide the services local residents need and want. Views towards central government dominate much of the feeling from councillors towards the difficulties that they face; indeed, many councillors say they are looking forward to the possibility of a change of government, as well as the end of the recession.

Despite the political and economic climate and the threats they pose, councillors keenly offer their views on the opportunities and benefits of serving as councillors. They cite partnership working; better engagement with local people; and more power as opportunities to be taken hold of. Indeed, many councillors see that there are opportunities for improved services, and even generating income, from having more powers – particularly with regards to council housing, taxes and links with police forces and health authorities.

Finally, councillors offered their views on the best part of their role. Encouragingly, many state helping local people, solving problems and making a difference as the best part of their roles. Despite the challenges of the current climate there is demonstration of the eagerness to change society and have a positive impact for local people.

1. Service Provision

1.1 Perceptions of Performance

Public service provision is particularly relevant and undoubtedly at the centre of current local council concerns following LGA speculation that councils will suffer a large hole in their income.

With this in mind, councillors were asked to rate the performance of specific services within the local authority and how effective they perceived them to be. In order to facilitate this comparison, numerical values are awarded to each level of service provision, from "excellent" = 10, down to "poor" = 1.

The chart below shows the average scores that were given by councillors. Overall, councillors think that their councils perform best in terms of their waste and recycling provision, followed by council tax and housing. Public transport and roads or traffic are perceived to be the worst performing service in local councils in England and Wales.

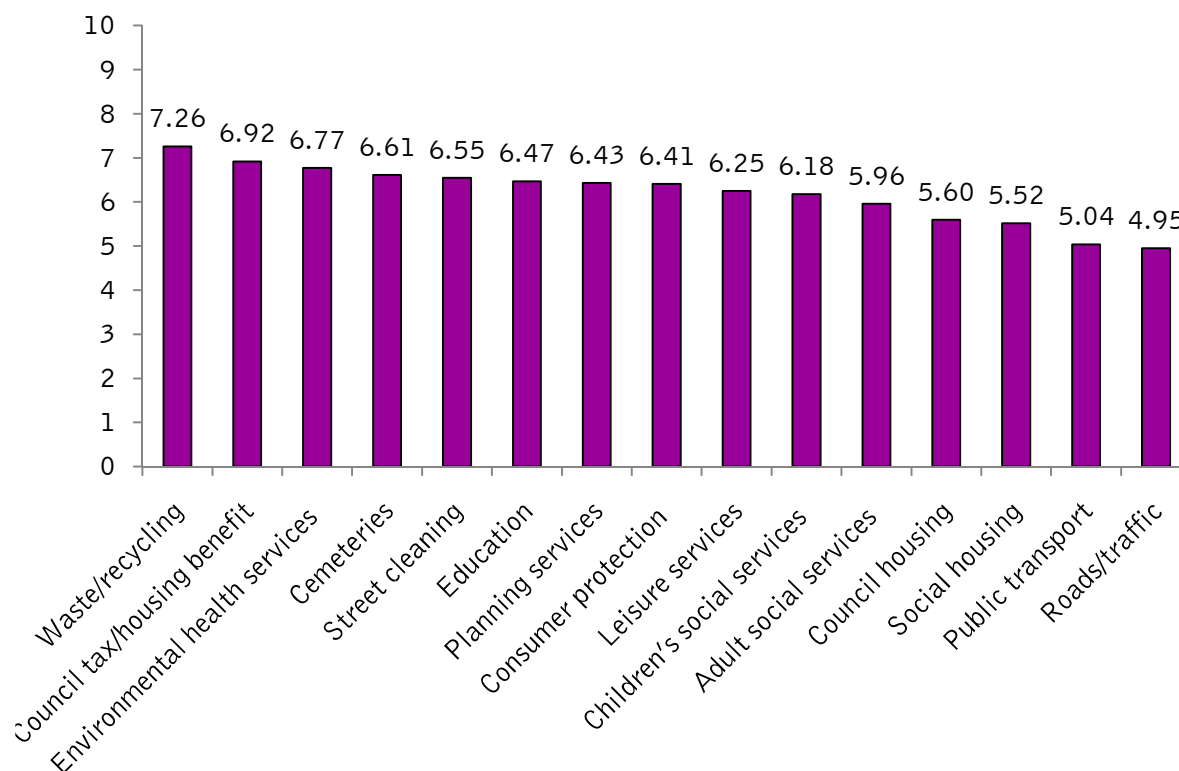


Fig.1.1: Mean scores of service performance

Base: All councillors

Below there is further analysis of each of the services in turn, examining how councillors score the performance of each.



Environment

In terms of waste and recycling, there is a general consensus that this service is good with a mean score of 7.26, the largest percentage of councillors (54%) view this service to be level 8-10. Despite this, it should be noted that only 15% believe it to be "excellent" indicating that there is room for improvement.

Street cleaning, while scoring 6.55 is not held with as high a performance score; only 5% see the service as being "excellent".

When placed against results for other community service areas, environmental health seems to be at a good standard, with 40% rating it 8 or above.

Leisure Service

Given the importance of community morale in the midst of the current economic climate, only 31% rate this as being 8 and above. This is cause for concern as 71% rate the quality of leisure services offered as being below 8. It is also particularly relevant when one considers the fact that about a third of councillors view the demand for leisure services as having increased due to the recession. These results perhaps partly stem from the reduced income councils are receiving from leisure centres.

Housing

74% of councillors rate the quality of council house provision to be 7 and below. Only 25% attributed it with levels 8 and above. Clearly, extra demands upon this service have resulted in a decrease in service quality. This is cemented by similar findings in reference to social housing, 79% view the standard of provision as 7 or below, leaving just 21% who feel the quality is 8-10.

Encouragingly however, it has recently been revealed that council housing is being built to a better standard than many private homes, as the size of rooms in social housing is monitored while private homes are not.

Planning

Despite the fact that demand for planning of housing has decreased in the current climate, it appears that improvements are still needed, with only 37% regarding planning as good (8 or above). The LGA are clearly aware of this as they are eager to sustain the building of new houses throughout the recession.

Education

In light of the recent scrutiny LEA's have been under as a result of poor SATS results, it is perhaps unsurprising that only 8% see this service to be "excellent", giving a mean score of 6.47. It is encouraging that dozens of local councils across England, Wales and Scotland have won a share of a £1billion sum to help long-term unemployed people into jobs and training, however perhaps the above results indicate that further funding needs to be directed towards lower level educational services.



Social Services

In line with perceived deficiencies in social housing provision, the majority of councillors (74%) believe provision of adult social services to be deficient (7 or below). Only 28% deem them to be very good or "excellent". These results fit into the backdrop of current issues, for example the recent outcry over the replacement of 24 hour wardens with an impersonal intercom service in sheltered homes for the elderly.

While children's social service provision is deemed to be in need of improvement (70% rating it as 7 or below), it is not regarded as poor as the service provision currently in place for adults. With these results in mind, the LGA's desire to see improvements in the recruitment and retention of social workers is very relevant. The recent Baby Peter case has however attracted more government funding into improving the quality and quantity of training. The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls, has also directed a new drive of attention and resources into this area.

These findings bring to light an ever pressing need for councils to be proactive as opposed to reactive in terms of social care provision.

Public Transport, Roads and Traffic

Perhaps stemming from the fact that, in contrast to London, local councils have little control over their transport services, it appears that there is vast room for improvement in this area. Just 13% of councillors rate this public service as being 8 or above.

Results for roads and traffic correlate closely with this, only 14% rating this service as good or excellent. This is another area where demand for these services has risen with the onset of financial difficulty.

Consumer Protection

65% view this as 7 or below, indicating that there is room for improvement. This is worth noting as recent speculation has suggested that good trading standards has remunerative effects for the local environment and crime reduction

Cemeteries

Despite recent speculation surrounding overcrowding, 38% of councillors deem this service to be 8 or above.

1.2 Priority Services For Increased Investment

Councillors were asked to consider the three services which should be priorities for investment. The table below shows the proportions of councillors who rated each of the services as their first, second and third priority. Social housing and education are most likely to be considered the top priority with 15% of all councillors citing one of these two as the top one. 34% rate social housing in their top three and 36% rate education in the top three. Cemeteries and environmental health services are least likely to be rated in the top three priorities for increased investment.

	1st	2nd	3rd	Top Three Total
Education	15%	11%	10%	36%
Social housing	15%	11%	8%	34%
Waste/recycling	13%	15%	10%	38%
Council housing	13%	5%	5%	23%
Children's social services	11%	10%	8%	29%
Roads/traffic	7%	10%	10%	27%
Adult social services	7%	11%	9%	27%
Street cleaning	6%	8%	8%	24%
Public transport	3%	6%	8%	17%
Planning services	3%	4%	6%	13%
Council tax/housing benefit	3%	4%	3%	10%
Leisure services	3%	3%	8%	14%
Environmental health services	0%	3%	5%	8%
Consumer protection	0%	0%	1%	1%
Cemeteries	0%	0%	1%	1%

Fig.1.2: Priority services for increased investment

Base: All councillors

Education, social housing and waste and recycling are the greatest priorities for investment. Since social housing particularly is not rated very highly in terms of performance quality, and due to the increased demand on this service during the recession, this priority is significant.

1.3 The impact of the economic recession on local demand for public services

Councillors were asked whether the demand for services has changed as a direct result of the financial climate. Demand for housing support, and indeed provision of local authority housing, has seen the greatest increases. However, the need for planning services has seen a dramatic decrease as a result of the current economic climate.

In line with previous results relating to quality of provision and priority investment areas, there is a general consensus that demand for council and social housing has increased. 67% believe this to be the case for council housing and 77% for social housing. As the traditional party of working class welfare, it comes as little surprise that, despite party consensus on the increased demand for council housing, more Labour councillors (78%) believe this to be the case. By comparison, 70% of Liberal Democrat councillors and 58% of Conservative councillors agree. This is reinforced by the 81% who believe the demand for council tax/housing benefit to have risen with the recession.

It is interesting to note that more councillors believe the demand for adult social services to have increased than those for children, 47% and 40% respectively.

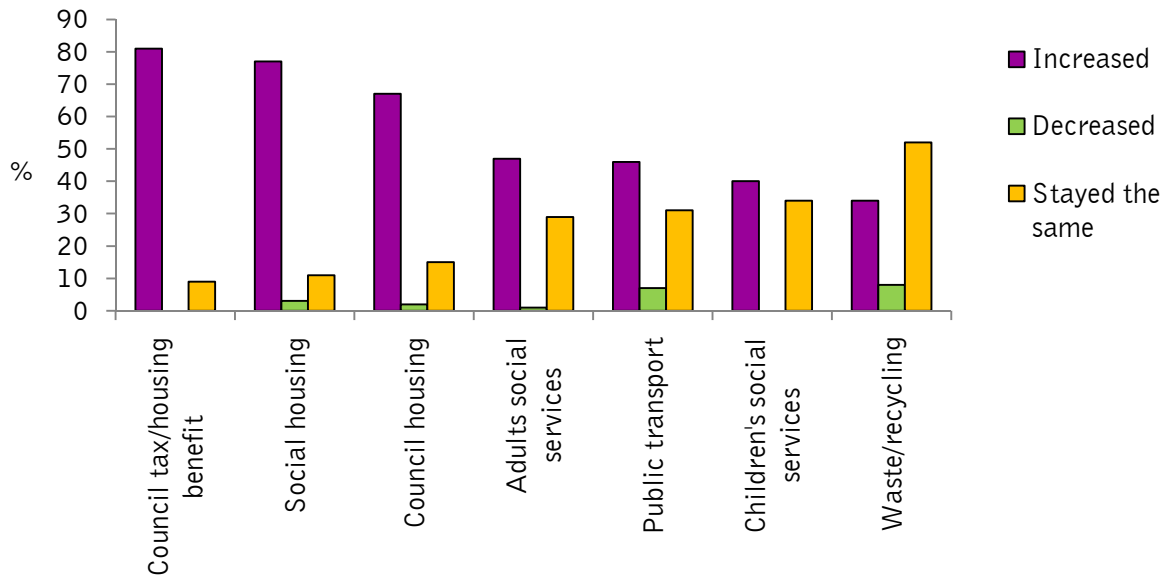


Fig.1.3a: Change in local demand for services
Base: All councillors

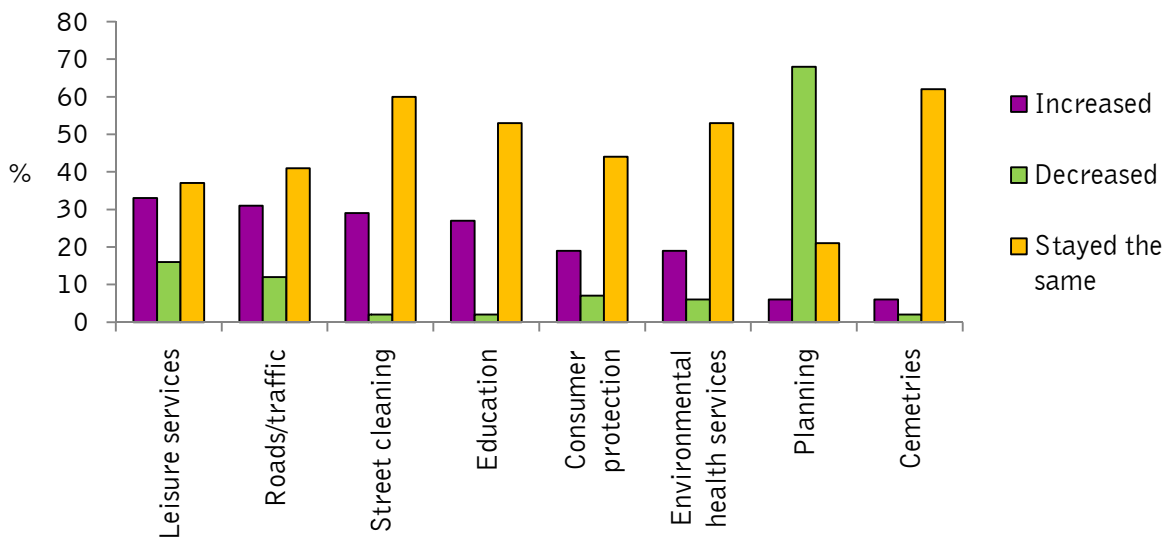


Fig.1.3b: Change in local demand for services
Base: All councillors

The LGA recently expressed their aim to sustain the building of new housing throughout the recession. However the recession has actually resulted in a decrease in demand for planning with 68% of councillors noting this. Conservative councillors tend to be more in agreement that demand has decreased (71%) in comparison to 61% of Labour.

2. Council Review

The situation has been bad over the past twelve months and is likely to continue to worsen.

2.1 Looking back

Councillors were asked to consider whether their council’s financial situation has improved, worsened or stayed the same over the last twelve months.

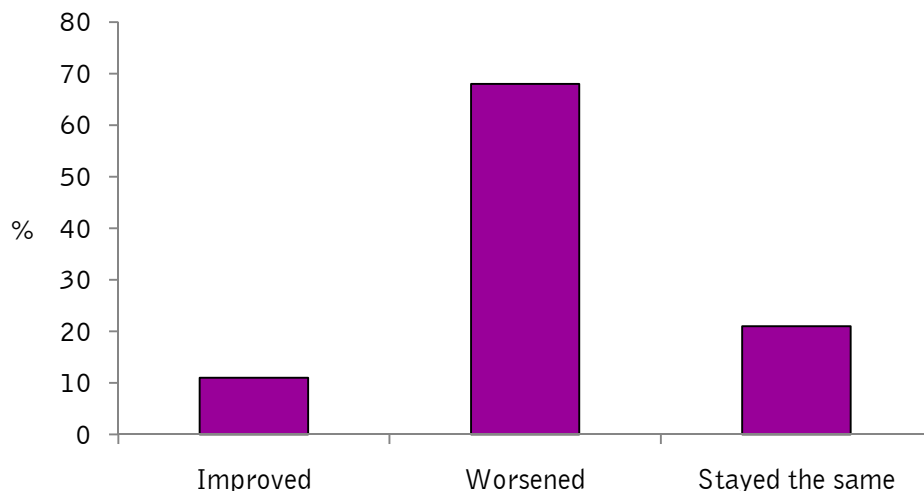


Fig.2.1: Financial state over last 12 months

Base: All councillors

More than two thirds, 68%, of councillors view their council’s financial situation to have worsened over the last twelve months. Just 11% say that it has improved and 21% say that it has stayed the same. This fits with the current LGA calculation that councils may have suffered a £4bn drop in income over the past two years.

Councillors in county and district councils (77% and 76% respectively) are most likely to say that their financial situation has got worse, compared to those in Metropolitan councils and those in London boroughs (57% and 58% respectively). Indeed, one in five councillors from London Boroughs say that their financial situation has improved, appearing to buck the trend.

2.2 Looking forward

Councillors were then asked to think about the next twelve months, and whether they believe that their council’s financial situation will improve, worsen or stay the same.

Alarming, the figures looking forward do not look much more positive than those looking back. As the chart below indicates, 67% say that they expect the financial situation to worsen, 10% say that it will improve and 23% say that they expect it will stay the same.

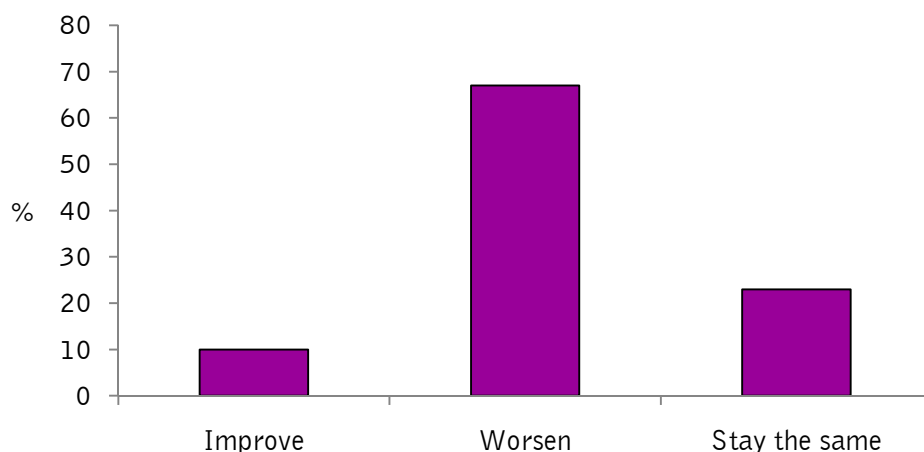


Fig.2.2: Financial state over next 12 months
Base: All councillors

2.3 Strength after recession

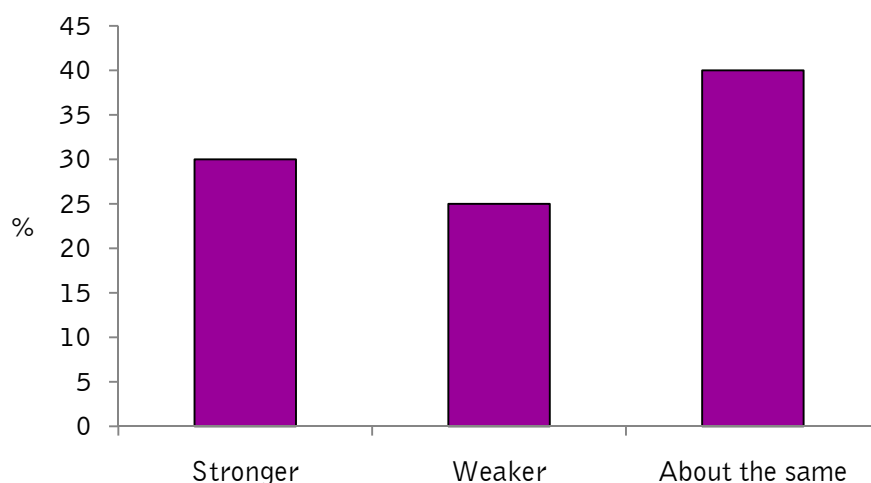


Fig.2.3: Local council strength after the recession
Base: All councillors

There are mixed views about the strength of councils following the recession. Indeed, 30% say that their council will emerge stronger and 25% thinking that their council will emerge weaker.

The largest percentage of councillors (40%) believe that their council will emerge the same after the recession. This is surprising given the concern about the effects of the recession on the ability of local government to retain support, morale and most importantly service standards. The culmination of a depressed property market and low interest rates, one would have thought, would have a negative effect on the initial emergence of any council from the depression.

Upon further analysis by party and council type, it is interesting to note that Conservative councillors are more positive than their Labour and Liberal Democrat colleagues. While 36% of Conservative councillors say that they expect their council to emerge stronger this falls to 22% of Labour councillors and 21% of Liberal Democrat councillors.

3. Central Government and Local Government

3.1 Successes and Failures

Councillors were asked what they think the successes and failures of central government have been in relation to local government in the last twelve months.

Most councillors were unable to offer examples of any successes in the last twelve months. 58% did not state an answer and 17% stated 'none' or similar. However, some did cite successes including "The Government's targets for waste and recycling will make Local Government really attain good results even when they are difficult to achieve in a rural area". Others cited successes including free swimming for people 16 and under and the over 65s; funding for schools; and the Sustainable Communities Act. Some councillors cited the introduction of the CAA as a success, although others disagree.

"The Government's targets for waste and recycling will make Local Government really attain good results even when they are difficult to achieve in a rural area"
(Liberal Democrat councillor)

The top five successes that were stated are summarised in the table below.

Success	
Schools funding/ investment in schools	4%
Financial support/ funding	4%
Free travel for over 60s	2%
Three year spending review	1%
Introduction of CAA	1%

Table 1.1 Top successes of local government

"Central Government is micro-managing local government, but was happy to let the bankers operate in an almost unregulated manner. Local government is elected and should only be accountable to its electorate unless it breaks the law"

(Councillor, North West England)

This question highlights the keen sense of dissatisfaction over the relationship between central and local government among many councillors. There is a sense of simmering resentment at central government's stranglehold. One councillor responded "Central Government impose such strict policies that Local Authorities have very little power in many cases."

Other failures listed include: not meeting social housing targets; grant allocation; not devolving enough control to local level. Some of this is driven by the economic climate, the need for increased funding and concern that budgets are likely to be cut.

A third of councillors did not state any failures but the top stated ones are summarised in the table below.

Failures	
To much interference/ centralised control	20%
Lack of funding	13%
Social/council housing investment/funding	6%
Free bus/swimming passes not fully funded	5%
Unfair distribution of funds taking money from south to give to the north	5%

Table 1.2 Top failures of local government

3.2 Communications

Councillors were asked to assess communications from different organisations and bodies with whom they regularly deal. First, they were asked to rate a number of organisations in terms of their communication with them personally as a councillor.

In order to facilitate comparison, numerical values are awarded to each level of response, where “excellent”=5, through to “very poor”=1 and mean scores calculated.

There is a consensus among councillors that communication and support from central government is poor. Councillors give this a mean score of 1.94. This is cause for concern given the speculation that increasingly centralised policies contribute to the weakening of local government and to the curtailment of local choice. Furthermore, this works both ways, there being a lack of local grass roots knowledge being communicated back to central government.



Fig 3.1 Communications with councillors

Base: All councillors

Police forces receive the highest score in terms of their communications with local councillors, receiving a mean score of 3.39 out of 5. Then comes local residents associations. All other organisations listed receive a mean score of less than 3 out of 5 indicating that their communications are not seen in a positive light.

The strong showing for police forces is encouraging for the LGA as it suggests that the much needed contact between local councils and police forces is sufficiently established. Interestingly both central government and government suppliers are considered poor in terms of effective communication with councillors.

Councillors were then asked to rate communications with a number of government bodies and organisations. The results are summarised in the chart below. As before, mean scores are awarded on a scale of 5 to 1 where “excellent”=5, down to “very poor”=1.

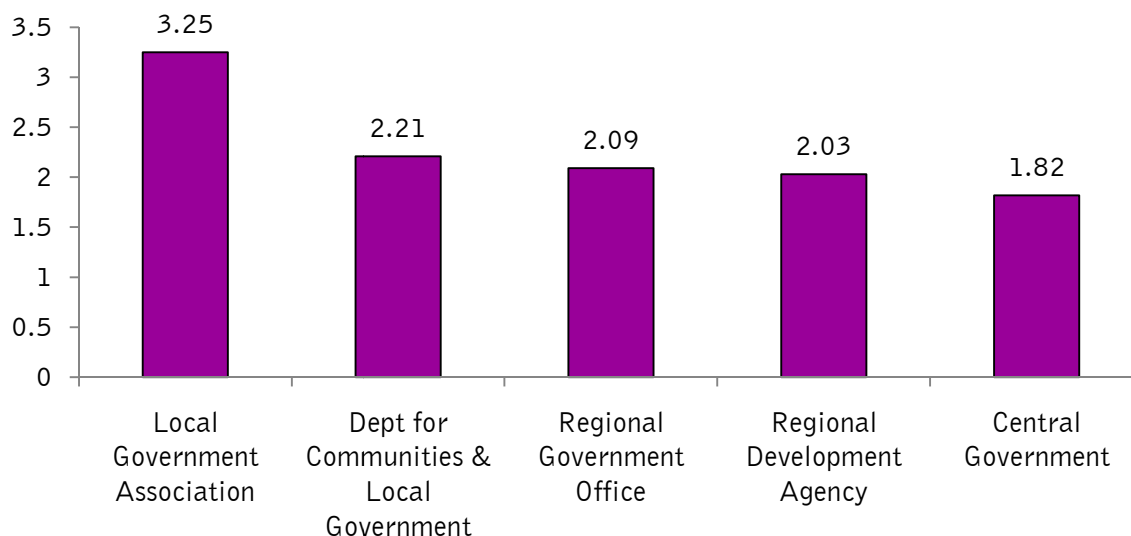


Fig 3.2 Communications with councils
Base: All councillors

Encouragingly for the LGA, councillors awarded it the highest score on communication with a mean score of 3.25. There is a significant gap between the LGA’s rating and the next best organisation in terms of local government communication (The Department for Communities and Local Government which scored 2.21). In line with previous results, central government is regarded as being the poorest in terms of communication (1.82).

Regional Development Agencies are also rated as poorly in terms of communication levels. This too is a cause for concern, one of the key purposes of RDAs being to drive regional economic development and regeneration with the aim of reducing the imbalance which exists between regions. Given, the broad representation of the Conservative party within local government, and the suggestions that RDAs may be scrapped following the next general election, it is perhaps not surprising that they receive a low mean score, particularly from Conservative councillors – 1.83.

3.3 Local Council responsibilities and resources

ComRes tested a number of statements about the role of central and local government. There is a desire for greater devolution of power from central to local government and a yearning for more resources and greater empowerment.

'Central government should delegate more powers to local government'

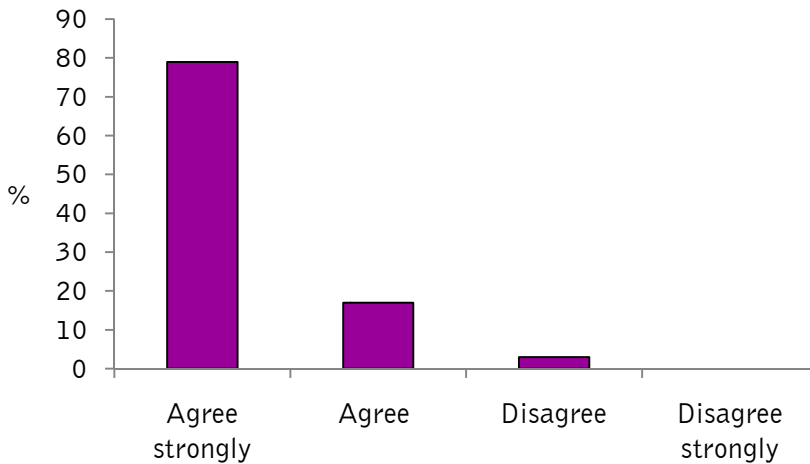


Fig.3.3: Central government should delegate more powers to local government, levels of agreement
Base: All councillors

Fully 96% of councillors agree that more powers should be delegated to local government – this is split with 79% saying they agree strongly and a further 17% saying they agree. Just 3% of councillors disagree. As was hinted at in the verbatim comments about the failures of central government, this suggests that many councils hold central government responsible for many of the shortfalls in service provision and there is a strong call for greater empowerment.

'My council has the financial resources it needs to deliver the services that local residents expect'

Given the earlier results showing the overall perception that councils' financial situation has worsened, and is looking to get worse over the coming year, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of councillors agree with this statement.

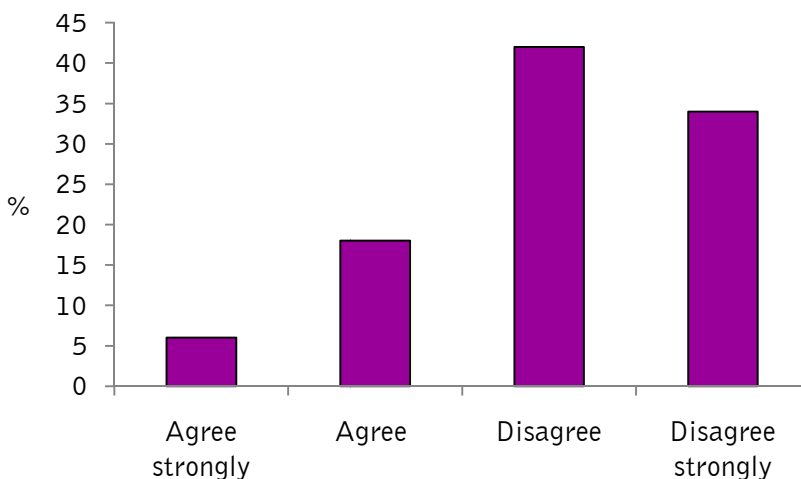


Fig.3.4: My council has the financial resources it needs to deliver the services that local residents expect, levels of agreement
Base: All councillors

Only 24% believe current financial resources to be sufficient and only 6% "agree strongly" with this statement.

'My council is sufficiently empowered to provide the services that local people really want'

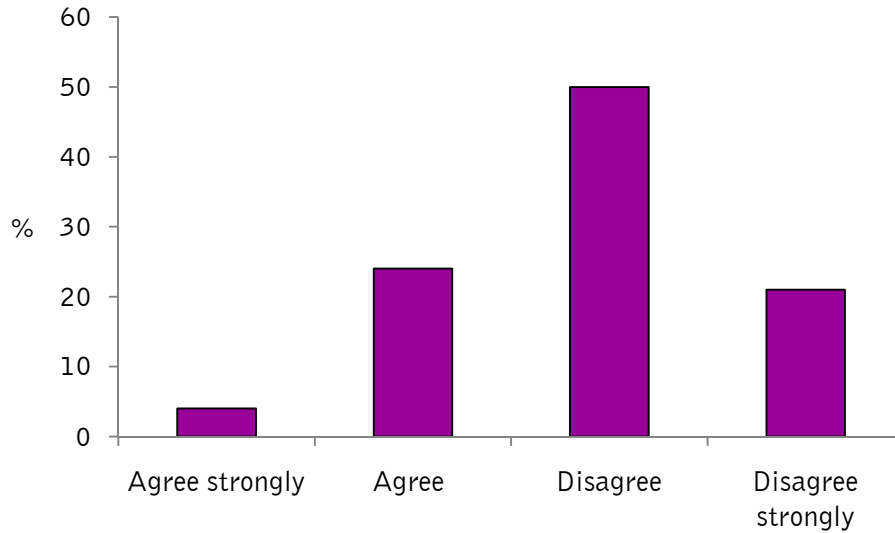


Fig.3.5: My council is sufficiently empowered to provide the services that local people really want
Base: All councillors

In line with earlier results, only 28% agree with the statement that their council is sufficiently empowered to provide local services that people really want. 71% disagree, suggesting that the devolution of power to local authorities is a key focus point for councillors.

4. Threats and Opportunities

4.1 Opportunities for local councils

Councillors were asked to consider what they believe the greatest opportunities for local government are, as well as the greatest threats facing councils.

“Getting the chance under a change of Government to make a real difference to the local community and it's economy”

(Labour councillor)

One area seen to offer the greatest opportunities for local government is a change of government. Since local councils – in particular county councils – are strongly dominated by Conservative councillors, it is not surprising so many councillors state this.

The other key opportunity is the further devolution of power. Many state empowerment, redistribution of power

and promoting local involvement in decision making.

A number of councillors also state that “partnership working” is a key opportunity for local councils - specifically working with local people, the police force and healthcare organisations.

“With the white paper on empowerment - LA's have the chance to devolve more power down to and work more closely with Town & Parish Councils - a truly great partnership is there for the taking for both sides.”

(Councillor, South East England)

Community empowerment/engagement with residents/working with community	10%
Less control by central government/more power given to councils	10%
Improve efficiency/focus on priorities/core activities	8%
New government/general election	7%
Helping people/businesses through the recession/credit crunch	6%
Developing partnerships/working with other bodies/shared services	6%
House building/social housing	4%
To get on with the job/deliver services	2%
Green agenda/energy efficiency/climate change awareness	2%
Unitary status	2%

Table 4.1: Opportunities for local government

4.2 Threats for local councils

In line with a desire for more devolution of power, the current central government focus of power is viewed as the biggest threat to local government.

“Central Government and media fuelled cynicism that encourages the public to feel underwhelmed about local government”

(Labour Councillor, West Midlands)

The financial climate and the economic downturn are seen also as a threat; after which councillors cite “lack of resources”; “lack of money” and “lack of power”.

“I'd return to the so-called Golden Age of local government of 100 years ago.”

(Councillor, North West England)

In tough times nationally, local economies and services are also under pressure and threat and as councillors express there are difficulties that are facing them. The top mentions are given below.

Lack of funding/resources/finance	20%
More centralisation/interference from Central Government	20%
Central Government	12%
Economic climate/recession/impact of credit crunch	7%
(Re-election of) Labour government	3%
Local government reorganization	3%
Public apathy/cynicism	3%
A Conservative government	2%
Regionalisation	2%
Poor image of politicians	2%

Table 4.2: Threats for local government

In summary, councillors are aware of the threats and difficulties on an unstable financial climate but many see an opportunity in a new government following the general election in the hope of seeing less centralisation.

4.2 Powers for local councils

Councillors were asked to consider whether there are any powers which they think Local Authorities should have that they currently do not have. The comments were varied and some verbatim comments have been included for interest. In particular, there are six areas which came up as areas where local councillors believe they should have greater power.

Devolution

“Local councils should have power over everything within the remit of the region”

(Councillor, South West)

There is overwhelming support for the devolution of keys powers to local government level. Many express the fact that key decisions should be based on local knowledge. Some have looked to Europe, stating that we should strive to mimic European states who allow their regional governments certain key powers which local authorities in the UK simply do not have. On councillor commented that there was a need for “local services for local people”.

Housing

Many councillors express the need for more control over house building. Comments also reflected concern surrounding council house provision, many alluding to their desire for greater powers to decide when more council houses are required. This is exemplified by one councillor’s remark that “council housing to meet proven need” is a decision which should be measured by local rather than central government.

“Local Authorities should be able to provide the complete package of services to their communities”

(Liberal Democrat councillor)

Tax Levels

A number of councillors would like local councils to have control over levels of council tax. Building on this, and relating to the concerns over decreasing local council income, some even asserted the need for local councils to have the ability to raise council tax as they see fit.

“Councils should be able to fix their own levels of council tax depending on local needs”

(Conservative councillor)

Policing

Several councillors touch on the belief in the need for police to be more localised and accountable to local as opposed to central government. Some even believe that local councils should take some types of punishment into their own hands, one asserting that local councils should be able to “issue fines for anti-social behaviour”, another being of the opinion that there is a growing need for more “control of a local police force”.

“Local government should have much greater control over the police who seem to be answerable to nobody but themselves”

(Labour councillor)

Education

Another strong theme is the belief in the need for increased local council control of education. Some express a desire for local councils to have the ability to “decide on the curriculum and testing in schools”.

“More freedom in education delivery and attainment. Freedom to innovate”

(Labour councillor)

Transport

Control over transport also appears to be a key area over which councillors would relish having increased power. Many make reference to the devolved London Transport system, citing this as a good example of the potential successes of local authority powers.

5. The Role of a Councillor

Councillors were also asked about the focus and importance of their work.

5.1 Councillor activities

Councillors spend the most hours per month attending council meetings and following this on committee work. On average, councillors spend about 19 hours a month attending council meetings. This is greatest among councillors serving in county councils who spend, on average, 24 hours a month attending council meetings. This falls to just more than 14 hours on average for councillors in London Boroughs.

The average councillor spends just over 18 hours a month on committee work and about 11 hours a month attending local events. On average about 4 hours a month are spent holding surgeries and 7 hours canvassing.

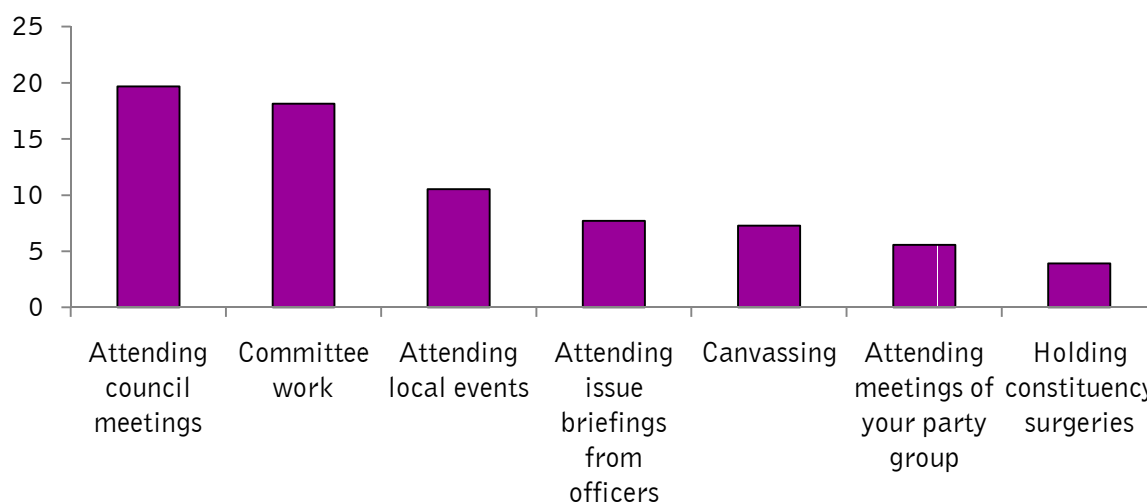


Fig 5.1: Average hours spent on each activity

Base: All councillors

5.2 Best and Worst Parts of Being a Councillor

Most commonly, councillors cite reasons such as 'being able to help people'; 'making a difference – influencing change'; and 'serving my community' as the best part of being a councillor.

Encouragingly, many councillors take enjoyment from being able to serve their local communities. They find pleasure in helping other people, meeting people and solving problems when they can. This is reinforced by the fact that the largest percentage of councillors (26%) see "Helping people within the community" to be the best aspect of the role. The second largest percentage (19%) see "getting things done/solving problems/resolving issues" to be the best part of being a councillor.

Most enjoyable thing	
Helping people/ the community	26%
Getting things done/ solving problems/ resolving issues	19%
Meeting residents/ contact with residents	9%
Making a difference	9%
Representing residents/ serving the community	7%
Influencing change/ decision making	7%

Table 4.1 Most enjoyable part of being a councillor

The largest percentage of councillors find the “slow decision making process” as being the least stimulating aspect of the role. The second largest percentage of councillors see the “long/ unnecessary meetings/ unproductive meetings” as being the worst part of the role.

Most disliked thing	
Slow decision making process/ bureaucracy	12%
Long/ unnecessary meetings/ non-productive meetings	10%
Unnecessary party politics/ political infighting	8%
Lack of real power/ have to comply with central government	7%
Lack of spare time/ loss of private life	5%
Inefficient council officers/ officers resistant to change	5%

Table 4.2 Least enjoyable part of being a councillor

ComRes Councillors Panel Research

- Benchmark your organisation’s reputation
- Understand the views of local councillors toward your projects and the issues that matter to you
- Understand the views of local people through their representatives
- Demonstrate the value of your communications

For more information on the ComRes Councillors panel, or for a quote, please contact Caroline Lawes on 020 7340 9634 or at caroline@comres.co.uk