

The cost of council elections

Jonathan Eida

January 2025



Introduction

Local authorities in England can, within statutory limits, determine their electoral arrangements. All councils must hold elections in four-year cycles, but many can choose whether to elect councillors all at once every four years, half the councillors every two years or a third of councillors in three years out of every four. These options are available primarily to district, metropolitan and unitary councils. Other authorities, such as London boroughs and county councils, however, must hold whole council elections every four years and cannot adopt elections by thirds or halves.¹

Each electoral model carries distinct implications for cost, stability and democratic engagement. Elections by thirds can promote continuity by ensuring that only a portion of councillors are up for election at any one time. This reduces the risk of a dramatic shift in the council's political makeup, allowing for more gradual change and longer-term financial planning. It also offers residents more frequent opportunities to influence local decision-making and hold councillors to account, potentially increasing the responsiveness of local government. This system can help insulate councils from sudden national political swings, fostering more consistent governance.

Whole council elections, on the other hand, offer a different kind of stability. By electing all councillors simultaneously, councils can implement longer-term plans without the disruption of annual elections. This model enhances democratic accountability by enabling residents to assess councillors on their performance over a full term, rather than on partial or staggered mandates. It also simplifies communication between councillors and voters, as all councillors will campaign under the same political conditions and manifestos. Furthermore, reducing the frequency of elections can ease voter fatigue and could result in higher turnout, which is typically around 30 per cent in local elections,² when voting does occur.

From a financial perspective, whole council elections are generally less expensive to administer than elections by thirds or halves. Fewer election events mean lower recurring costs for staffing, venues, printing and voter communications. In a period of intense financial pressure on local authorities, with a growing number issuing section 114 notices,³ these savings could be significant.

This note examines the cost of different electoral cycles in local authorities excluding by-elections. While each system has merits, councils must consider whether the benefits of more frequent elections justify their additional financial burden on residents.

Key findings

- As of 2025, **283** councils elect their councillors by whole elections, **91** elect by thirds and **7** elect by halves.
- If councils that held elections in halves or thirds had instead held whole council elections between 2021 and 2024, they could have saved almost **£25 million**.
- **Leeds** had the highest total costs over the four-year period between 2021 and 2024, spending over **£3.1 million** on **three** elections. The council elects its member in thirds.

¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Local authority, combined authority and county combined authority election cycles in England*, 14 February 2025, www.gov.uk/government/publications/election-timetable-in-england/election-timetable-in-england#london-boroughs, (accessed 7 May 2025).

² Uberoi, E., *Turnout at elections*, House of Commons Library, 10 January 2023, p.17.

³ Sandford, M. & Brien, P., *Why are local authorities going 'bankrupt'?*, House of Commons Library, 16 July 2024, commonslibrary.parliament.uk/why-are-local-authorities-going-bankrupt/, (accessed 8 May 2025).

- **Croydon**,⁴ who elect councillors in whole elections, had the highest singular election cost between 2021 and 2024, at **£1,282,044** for an election held in **2022**. The cost per councillor elected was **£18,315**, the **12th highest** of any council.
- Of councils that elected in thirds or halves, **Leeds** had the highest average election cost, averaging **£1,048,920** per election across the four-year period between 2021 and 2024.
- **Coventry** had the highest cost per councillor elected between 2021 and 2024, with an average cost of **£38,839** for each of the **54 councillors** elected.
- The average cost per election cycle for a **district council** electing by thirds between 2021 and 2024 was **£455,221** per election cycle. In comparison, district councils electing in whole elections averaged **£201,566**.
- Between 2021 and 2024, **metropolitan district councils** electing in thirds averaged **£1,170,951** per election cycle, while those with whole elections had an average cost of **£285,842** per cycle.
- **Unitary councils** electing in thirds between 2021 and 2024, had an average election cycle cost of **£686,705** while councils electing in whole elections averaged **£379,580** per cycle.

Data

Table 1: frequency of council elections by election type in the United Kingdom, 2025

Election frequency	Number of councils ⁵
Thirds	91
Halves	7
Whole	283

Table 2: 10 councils with the highest total costs for local elections, 2021-2024

Local authority	Council type	Frequency	Total cost (£)	Average cost per election (£)	Number of councillors
Leeds	Metropolitan district	Thirds	3,146,761	1,048,920	99
Coventry	Metropolitan district	Thirds	2,097,332	699,111	54
Sheffield	Metropolitan district	Thirds	1,753,000	584,333	84
Kirklees	Metropolitan district	Thirds	1,639,526	546,509	69
Manchester ⁶	Metropolitan district	Thirds	1,616,758	808,379	96
Bradford ⁷	Metropolitan district	Thirds	1,593,000	796,500	90
Salford	Metropolitan district	Thirds	1,455,674	485,225	60
Stockport	Metropolitan district	Thirds	1,320,777	440,259	63
Wakefield	Metropolitan district	Thirds	1,310,000	436,667	63
Croydon	London borough	Whole	1,282,044	1,282,044	70

⁴ This includes some costs that relate specifically to the Mayor of Croydon election.

⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Local authority, combined authority, and county combined authority election cycles in England*, 14 February 2025, www.gov.uk/government/publications/election-timetable-in-england/election-timetable-in-england, (accessed 19 February 2025).

⁶ An election was held in 2024, but the cost was not made available.

⁷ An election was held in 2024, but the cost was not made available.

Table 3: 10 councils with the highest average cost per local election, 2021-2024

Local authority	Council type	Frequency	Average cost per election (£)	Number of councillors
Croydon	London borough	Whole	1,282,044	70
Surrey	County	Whole	1,230,694	81
Glasgow	Scottish	Whole	1,200,000	85
Belfast	Northern Irish	Whole	1,120,354	60
Cheshire East	Unitary	Whole	1,100,000	82
Staffordshire	County	Whole	1,065,528	62
Hampshire	County	Whole	1,061,880	78
Leeds	Metropolitan district	Thirds	1,048,920	99
Ealing	London borough	Whole	1,039,223	70
Hertfordshire	County	Whole	994,205	78

Table 4: 10 councils with the highest election cost per councillor, 2021-2024

Local authority	Authority type	Frequency	Cost per councillor (£)	Number of councillors
Coventry	Metropolitan district	Thirds	38,839	54
Leeds	Metropolitan district	Thirds	31,785	99
Salford	Metropolitan district	Thirds	24,261	60
Kirklees	Metropolitan district	Thirds	23,761	69
Bury	Metropolitan district	Thirds	22,590	51
Stockport	Metropolitan district	Thirds	20,965	63
Sheffield	Metropolitan district	Thirds	20,869	84
Wakefield	Metropolitan district	Thirds	20,794	63
Calderdale	Metropolitan district	Thirds	19,549	51
Basingstoke and Deane ⁸	District council	Thirds	18,674	54

Table 5: five councils with the highest total election costs by local authority type, 2021-2024

Local authority	Frequency	Total cost (£)	Average cost per election (£)	Number of councillors
District				
Basingstoke and Deane ⁹	Thirds	1,008,400	504,200	54
Reigate and Banstead	Thirds	770,311	256,770	45
Elmbridge	Thirds	711,013	237,004	48
Winchester	Thirds	670,164	223,388	45
Runnymede	Thirds	645,815	215,272	41
Unitary				
Cheshire East	Whole	1,100,000	1,100,000	82
Southampton	Thirds	876,712	292,237	51

⁸ An election was held in 2024, but the cost was not made available.

⁹ An election was held in 2024, but the cost was not made available.

Local authority	Frequency	Total cost (£)	Average cost per election (£)	Number of councillors
East Riding of Yorkshire	Whole	728,652	728,652	67
Blackburn with Darwen	Thirds	725,087	241,696	51
Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole	Whole	680,000	680,000	76
Metropolitan district				
Leeds	Thirds	3,146,761	1,048,920	99
Coventry	Thirds	2,097,332	699,111	54
Sheffield	Thirds	1,753,000	584,333	84
Kirklees	Thirds	1,639,526	546,509	69
Manchester ¹⁰	Thirds	1,616,758	808,379	96

Table 6: average cost per councillor in district councils, 2021-2024¹¹

Election frequency	Number of councils	Average cost per councillor (£)
Halves	6	9,687
Thirds	32	11,273
Whole	91	4,793

Table 7: average cost per councillor in unitary councils, 2021-2024¹²

Election frequency	Number of councils	Average cost per councillor (£)
Thirds	7	13,080
Whole	36	6,446

Table 8: average cost per councillor in metropolitan district councils, 2021-2024¹³

Election frequency	Number of councils	Average cost per councillor (£)
Thirds	29	20,067
Whole	4	5,015

Table 9: average cost per authority type, 2021-2024¹⁴

Authority type	Average total cost of elections	Average cost of election	Average cost per councillor
County	795,685	795,685	12,067
District	258,847	189,919	6,327
London boroughs	501,802	501,802	8,882
Metropolitan district	1,080,741	396,544	16,843
Northern Irish	597,956	597,956	13,684

¹⁰ An election was held in 2024, but the cost was not made available.

¹¹ Average cost calculated by only using figures for councils which provided data for all respective years.

¹² Average cost calculated by only using figures for councils which provided data for all respective years.

¹³ Average cost calculated by only using figures for councils which provided data for all respective years.

¹⁴ Average cost calculated by only using figures for councils which provided data for all respective years.

Authority type	Average total cost of elections	Average cost of election	Average cost per councillor
Scottish	351,402	351,402	8,343
Unitary	410,293	364,512	7,259
Welsh	232,843	232,843	4,133

Methodology

The cost of each council election was collated through freedom of information requests sent to all councils in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Local authorities were asked:

“Please provide between January 2021 – December 2024:

- *How often local election cycles are held excluding by-elections. For example, the full council is elected every four years or a third of councillors are elected every year except the county council year.*
- *The year or years local elections took place in the latest cycle since 2021 excluding by-elections. For example, if there is one local election where all councillors are elected once every four years then provide the year in which that election was held. If councillors are elected by thirds over a four-year period then provide all years within the time period that these elections took place in the latest cycle to elect all councillors.*
- *The total cost of each local council election held excluding by-elections broken down by election. For example, if there is one election where all councillors are elected once every four years then provide the cost of running that election. If councillors are elected by thirds over a four-year period then provide the costs for each of those three elections in the latest cycle.”*

Some councils provided the cost of their elections including, where relevant, either parish council, police and crime commissioner, fire authority, mayoral and county or district elections. Councils were asked to exclude these costs although in some cases this was not possible. In such instances, a note has been made. Where other elections have been included, the cost of the elections tend to decrease as the costs are shared across multiple bodies.

Of the 381 councils requests were sent to, 300 responded with usable data. Of these, 75 stated either that they could not separate the cost of the multiple concurrent elections or simply that there were same day elections, but did not specify if the figure they provided excluded the cost of other elections.

On several occasions, councils produced a nil response as the returning officer was not subject to the freedom of information requests. Meanwhile, some councils that held elections in 2024 have not been able to produce a total cost for the election.

Numerous councils refused to respond under section 12 of the Freedom of Information Act stating the costs of complying with the request would exceed the limit set under the Act. In total, 78 councils either did not respond, stated an exemption or did not provide adequate data.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, councils that were meant to hold elections in 2020 delayed them until 2021. These elections have been excluded from the data as the aim is to capture the cost of an election cycle. Including these delayed elections would have distorted the data as these elections were scheduled outside of the cycle analysed.

On occasion, councils that normally elected in thirds held “all out elections” which saw the whole council being up for election. This was due to boundary changes. This data was included in the paper, and notes have been made in the dataset accordingly.

Two councils changed their election cycles during the period specified in the freedom of information request, changing from electing councillors in thirds to whole elections. In these instances, only the whole council election was included.