nalc

Report
**Local council
elections 2021**

**National Association
of Local Councils**

www.nalc.gov.uk

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

England's 10,221 local (parish and town) councils are the first tier of local government. Local councils are the smallest local authorities and play a crucial role in local governance as they cover an estimated 40% of the population across England (Baker and Sandford, 2020). They raise over £600 million through council tax, referred to as a 'precept', and like any local authority they have specific statutory functions and powers. These councils employ staff, own premises, and provide services to their local community.

Like any local authority, councillors are elected to represent their community, develop strategies for their area, and work with community groups, amongst other responsibilities. There are around 100,000 local councillors in England - four times as many councillors than in principal authorities - all volunteering their time (over 14 million hours a year) by taking up civic office to make decisions about improving their area (NALC, 2018). The decisions they make affect the quality of life and well-being of citizens in countless ways, given that local councils are responsible for a growing range of responsibilities, assets, and services.

The most recent slate of local council elections took place on 6 May 2021. Following this, NALC undertook a mixed-method survey of councillors, local councils, and county associations. Furthermore, this data was collated in conjunction with election results data from district and borough council websites. This report is a continuation of the work conducted to produce the first report on the 2019 local elections, to provide a sense check of the status of local democracy, which will inform the strategic direction of NALC's elections campaign and engagement with various stakeholders, including central government.

The councillor, local council, and county association surveys ran from July 2021 to September 2021 receiving 1,004 responses.

We must consider that whilst the sample size for these surveys is statistically significant, results are indicative of the respondents in areas that held elections. NALC estimates that about 15% of local councils held elections in May 2021. Therefore, some of the results displayed in this report may be skewed away from nationally representative results.

CONTEXT

NALC report on the 2019 local elections

In 2020, NALC published its inaugural local elections report. This report followed the main cycle of local elections in May 2019, in which an estimated 59% of local councils held elections. The report collated data from surveys of local councillors, local councils and county associations and concluded that this research project would be completed within the same template for every election cycle, to ensure a thorough analysis of the status of local democracy.

Several themes emerged from this report:

- Use of social media for the promotion of elections was not widely used by councillors (7%) and local councils (32%)
- Local councils and county associations should be working with underrepresented groups to encourage increased diversity on local councils
- Many councillors were elected in uncontested elections (29%) or co-opted onto local councils (38%)
- The lack of contested elections was a hindrance to the democratic process and limited the ability of the electorate to hold local councils accountable for their actions

Obtaining data in the local council sector is a difficult process. The lack of an accessible single data source means that significant resources are required to liaise with county associations and research the elections results pages of principal authorities. Despite this, NALC concluded that this report should be conducted for every election cycle, to sense check the status of democratic participation, diversity, and awareness in our local councils.

COVID-19

The delivery of local elections in May 2021 was hindered by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which restricted the freedom of in-person gatherings. On 6 May 2021, the UK Government reported a weekly case rate of 23 individuals per 100,000 (Public Health England, 2021). Wider social contact rules were still in place to prevent the indoor mixing of different households.

Furthermore, due to rising concern about the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK Government postponed all local elections whilst the nation was under lockdown. As such, there was an increase in elections at all levels of local government across England in May 2021, including those scheduled and those delayed.

The delivery of elections under ongoing COVID-19 restrictions compounded the difficulties already faced by local councils. A survey of those who voted in the May 2021 elections across England found that 16% of people were not confident that it was safe to attend polling stations (The Electoral Commission, 2021).

Make A Change campaign

In 2020, NALC launched the Make A Change campaign to continue its longstanding work to promote local council elections and encourage undiscovered community heroes to run for election. As part of this campaign, NALC worked with county associations to create a dedicated webpage containing a range of promotional materials for councillors, local councils, and county associations to use for the election cycle. These include:

- Editable elections flyer — easy-to-read information about local elections
- Editable A4 posters and A3 posters — quick and precise way to publicise the local elections
- Editable press release — a template to help publicise local elections through the local media
- Information sheet for prospective candidates — key information about local councils and the role of councillors
- Social media assets — includes images and suggested posts for social media channels

Along with this, NALC released a series of promotional videos in collaboration with serving local councillors. These videos highlight why these individuals became councillors, what they do on their local council and how their work benefits their community. This series and more information on the 'Make A Change' campaign can be found on the *Elections* page of the NALC website.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

England's 10,221 Local (parish and town) councils are the first tier of local government, represent around 40% of the population and have an increasingly important and growing role in local governance and the delivery of public services. There are around 100,000 local councillors elected to represent their community and make decisions that will affect the quality of life and well-being of their constituents. The most recent cycle of local council elections took place on 6 May 2021, in which 15% of local councils took had scheduled or postponed elections. To gain insight into these elections, NALC undertook a mixed-method survey of councillors, local councils and county associations between July and September 2021. This report has analysed survey data in conjunction with data collected from principal authority websites, to paint a broader picture of the 2021 local elections cycle. In analysing this data, three key themes emerge: democratic participation, diversity, and campaign process.

The number of councillors elected through contested elections has significantly increased from 29% in 2019, to 38%. Furthermore, 10% of responding local councils reported that all local council seats were filled by councillors who had not served before, a significant increase from 1% in 2019. Despite this positive change

for democratic participation, there are still obstacles to overcome. 59% of local councils reported seat vacancies after the elections, with a further 44% needing to co-opt seats. Many local councils require further support from county associations and principal authorities. A reported 22% of county associations did not raise awareness of local council elections in their boundaries.

The demographic profile of our local councillors has changed since 2019. The results suggest that our elected councillors are getting older. Our survey results suggest that 54% of respondents are aged 65+, whilst only 4% are aged 18-34. Furthermore, the number of first-time councillors has decreased from 30% in 2019 to 24%. Our survey also highlights no change in the gender gap between councillors who identify as men (59%) and women (38%). This gap, however, is smaller than that between men (63%) and women (36%) councillors in principal authorities (Local Government Association, 2018).

Whilst the election cycle was hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic - reducing in-person campaigning, events and potentially lowering turnout - the increased use of social media and virtual events has had positive effects on community engagement and expressions of interest in certain councils. There is a heavier focus on social media, where 53% of local councils reported using Facebook for elections promotion, only 7% used virtual events. Furthermore, there have been consistent calls for the simplification and cost-reduction of elections since 2019, which have the potential to increase nomination interest and by extension, the number of contested elections.

In summary, NALC makes several recommendations:

- Councillors should raise awareness of local elections and encourage others to become councillors by 'talent spotting'
- Local councils and county associations should make use of NALC's 'Make A Change' materials to encourage more people to stand for election
- Local councils should budget for the costs of local elections and by-elections
- County associations should engage with regional media to increase coverage of local elections and work with principal authorities to promote local elections and capture elections data
- NALC should provide county associations with access to media training and lobby the UK Government for the simplification and digitalisation of local council elections.
- LGA should encourage principal authorities to work with county associations and ensure the 'Be A Councillor' campaign links and provides support to NALC's 'Make A Change' campaign
- National media should increase coverage of local councils, including local elections
- The UK government should set up a National Democracy Fund pilot digital voting in local council elections and work with NALC to ensure information about local councils is publicly available

2021 LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS DATA

The 2019 report highlighted the need to provide a transparent view of the democratic process at the local level, by compiling and publishing elections results data. NALC has conducted similar research for the 2021 election report.

Data from the May 2021 elections were collected through principal authority websites. Where there were difficulties in obtaining data or results were estimated, these gaps were overcome by further desktop research on local council websites.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of availability of election notices on principal authority websites, data on councillor vacancies is not displayed below. There has likely been an increase in councillors seat vacancies from 7% in 2019, although accurate data to this effect is not available. The government's decision not to allow a continuation of remote meetings is also considered a possible cause.

County associations who held elections in May 2021 include Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Cheshire, Cornwall, Cumbria, Devon, Durham, Essex, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Hereford, Isle of Wight, Kent, Lancashire, Northamptonshire, Northumberland, Oxfordshire, Shropshire, Suffolk, Surrey, Warwickshire and West Midlands, Wiltshire, Worcestershire, and Yorkshire.

The estimated election numbers are as follows:

- Total number of local councils with elections in May 2021 — 1,546
- Total number of elected councillors — 9,460
- Total number of councils with contested elections — 544
- Total number of councils with uncontested elections — 1,339
- Total number of county associations — 26

There are 10,221 local councils across England, represented by 100,000 councillors (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2021). Therefore, approximately 15% of local councils across England held their scheduled or postponed elections on 6 May 2021.

This number is significantly reduced from the 59% who took part in 2019 as elections are typically run across each county in four-year election cycles. Due to the higher number of local councils with elections in 2019, many seats are not up for election until 2023.

This section highlights the lack of councillors in the local council sector and the need to entice more people to run to promote democratically elected and accountable local bodies.

How many principal authorities in your area were subject to elections in May 2021?

Legend: 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10+

Bars: 73%, 19%, 8%, 0%

X-axis: Responses
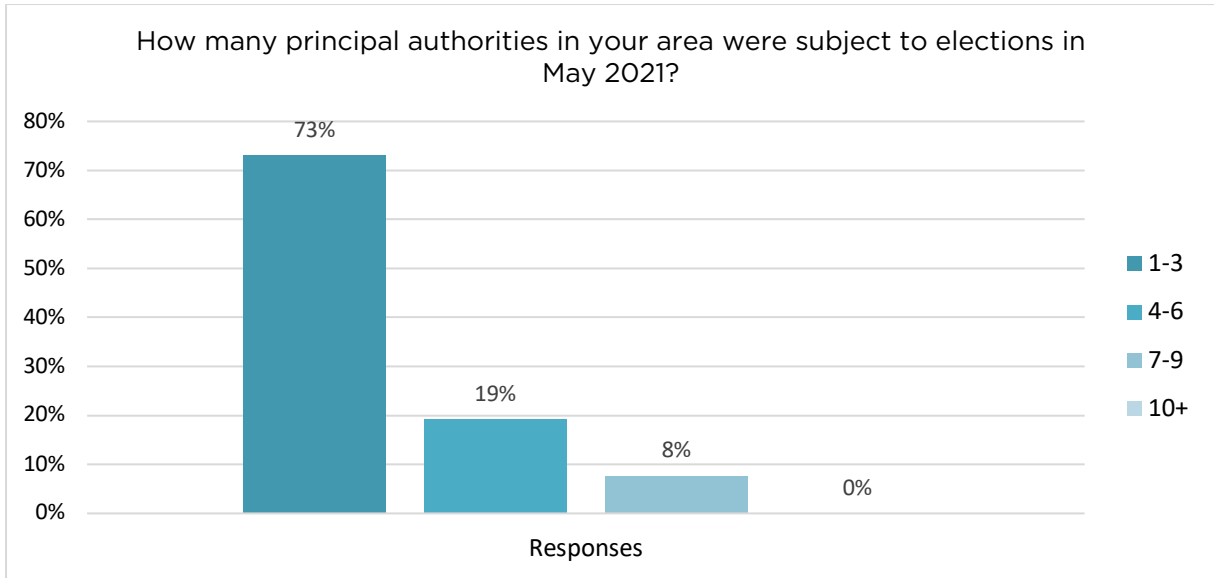
- 73% of county associations holding elections reported that 1-3 principal authorities across their area were holding elections.
- The limited number of principal authorities having elections could be due to the lack of councils having elections in this cycle or due to local government reorganisation.

How many local (parish and town) councils had contested elections this year in your county area?

Legend: 0-25, 26-50, 51-75, 76-99, 100+

Bars: 73%, 19%, 8%, 0%, 0%

X-axis: Responses
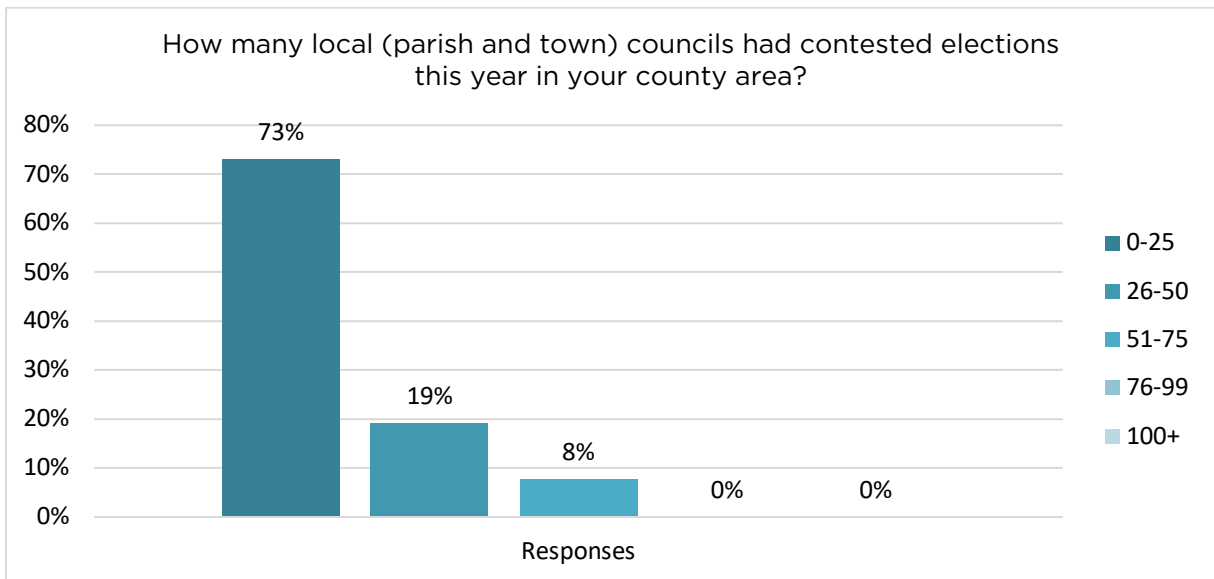
- 73% of county associations reported 0-25 councils in their boundary held contested elections; no county associations reported more than 75.
- In keeping with the previous surveys, this tells us that there were limited numbers of contested elections in many county associations.

How many local councils had uncontested elections this year in your county area?
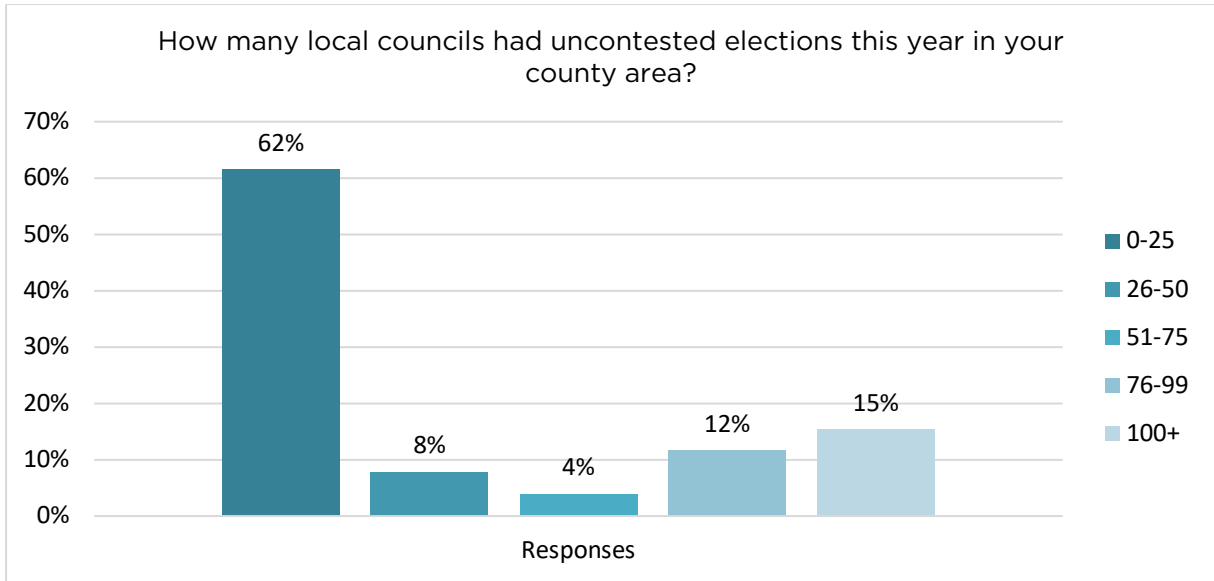
- 62% of county associations reported 0-25 uncontested elections in their area, whilst 27% reported 76+ uncontested elections in May 2021.
- This tells us that there are large swathes of local councils holding uncontested elections in over a quarter of county associations.

How many local councils (in all principal councils across your county area) had elections in May 2021?
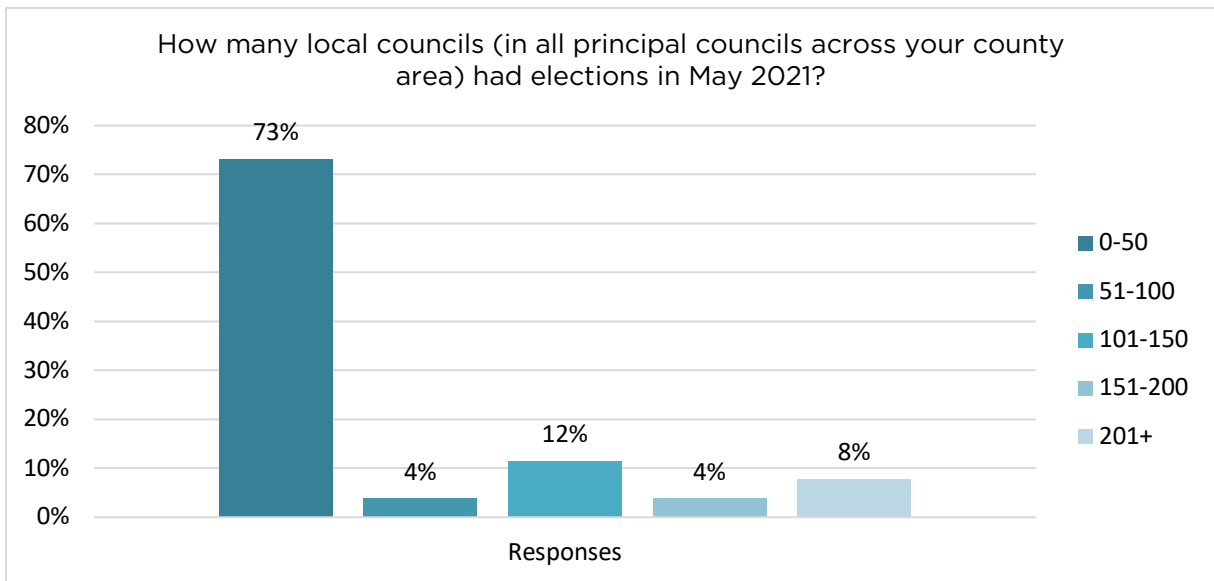
- 73% of county associations reported 0-50 local councils held elections in May 2021., 19% reported between 51-200 and only 8% reported more than 200.
- This tells us that in most county associations, a limited number of local councils held elections in May 2021.

As an estimate, how many councillors were elected on local councils which had elections in May 2021 in your county area?

Legend: 1-49, 50-99, 100-499, 499-999, 1,000+

Bar values: 20%, 28%, 32%, 8%, 16%

X-axis: Responses
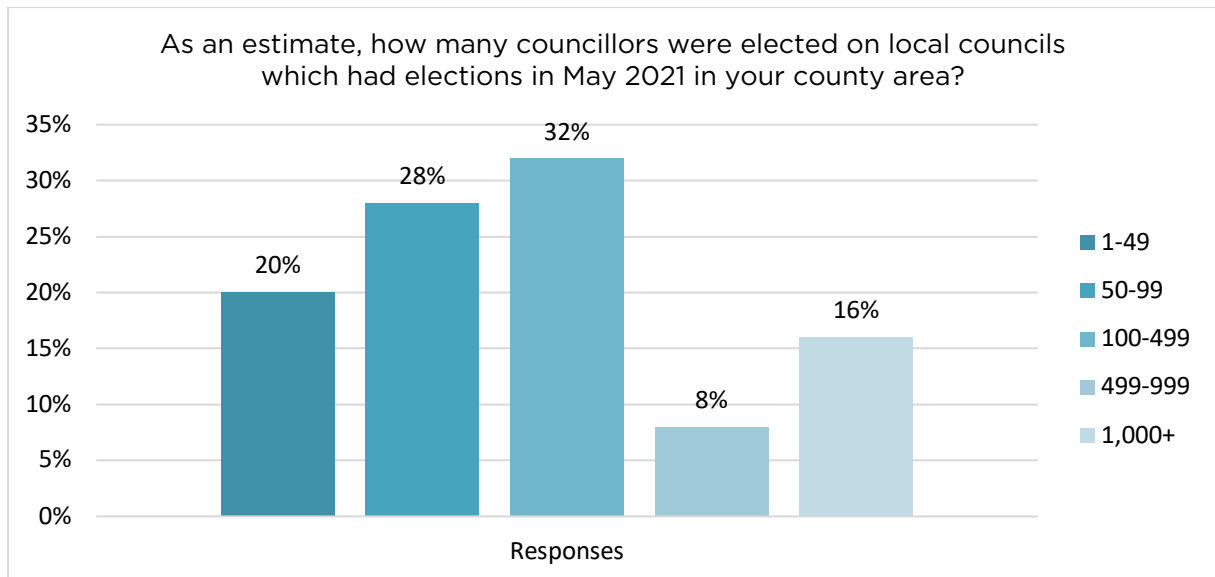
- 56% of county associations reported between 100+ councillors were elected in their boundaries in May 2021; whilst almost a quarter (24% reported 499+ councillors were elected.

SURVEY OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS

Total responses: 556

The purpose of this survey was to explore the experience of the local councillor; for example, their reason to run for local council. Most councillors reported that they wanted to serve their community, a further 56% reported that they wanted to change things on their local council, but few councillors ran on a political platform.

Furthermore, this survey provides an overview of the demographics of newly elected councillors. Who are they? The average local councillor in this study is a white (91%), heterosexual (83%) male (59%).

Finally, this survey gives an update on the status of participatory democracy. 49% of respondents have served for 5+ years and 62% were elected in an uncontested election or co-opted. Social media use was varied but Facebook was the most common platform used by 37% to promote the election and 20% to promote their candidacy.

How long have you been a councillor for?

	Responses
■ New councillor	24%
■ 1 year	2%
■ 2 years	10%
■ 3 years	8%
■ 4 years	7%
■ 5-10 years	25%
■ 11-15 years	12%
■ 16-20 years	4%
■ 20+ years	9%
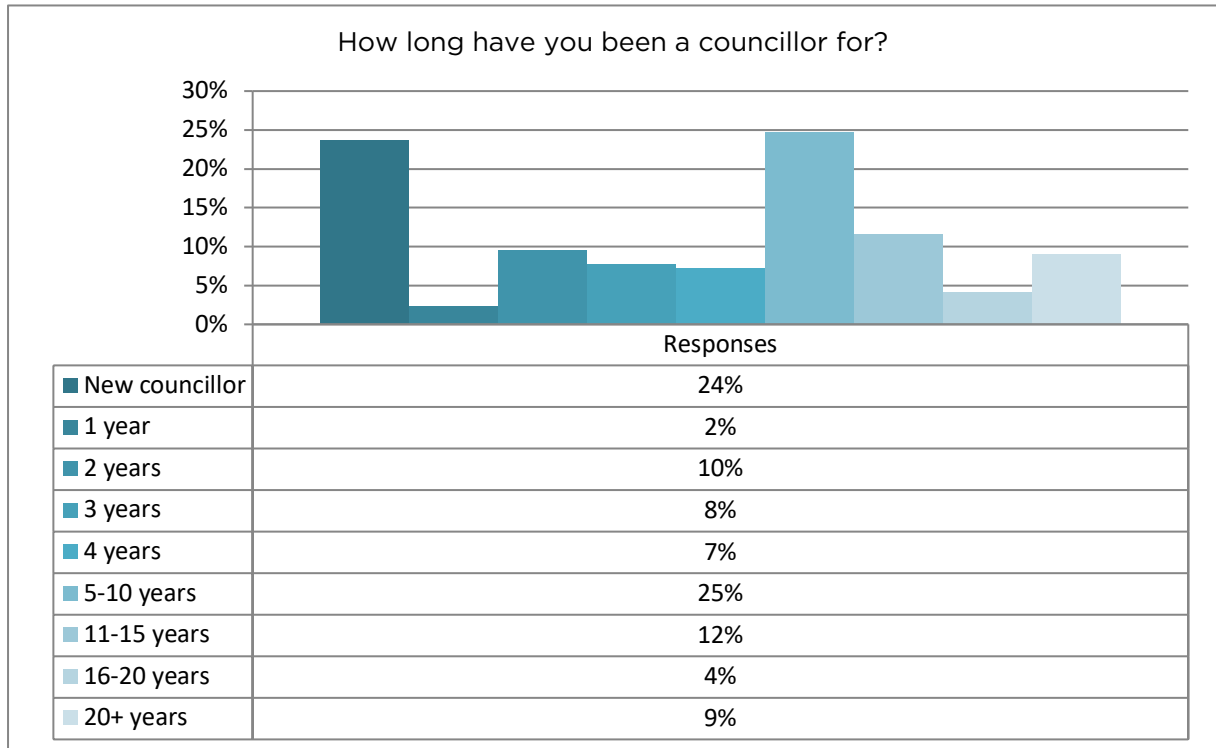
- 24% of those elected were new councillors; however, 49% of elected councillors had served for 5+ years and 25% had served for more than a decade.

How did you become a councillor?

- 38% — I was elected in a contested election
- 27% — I was elected in an uncontested election
- 35% — I was co-opted
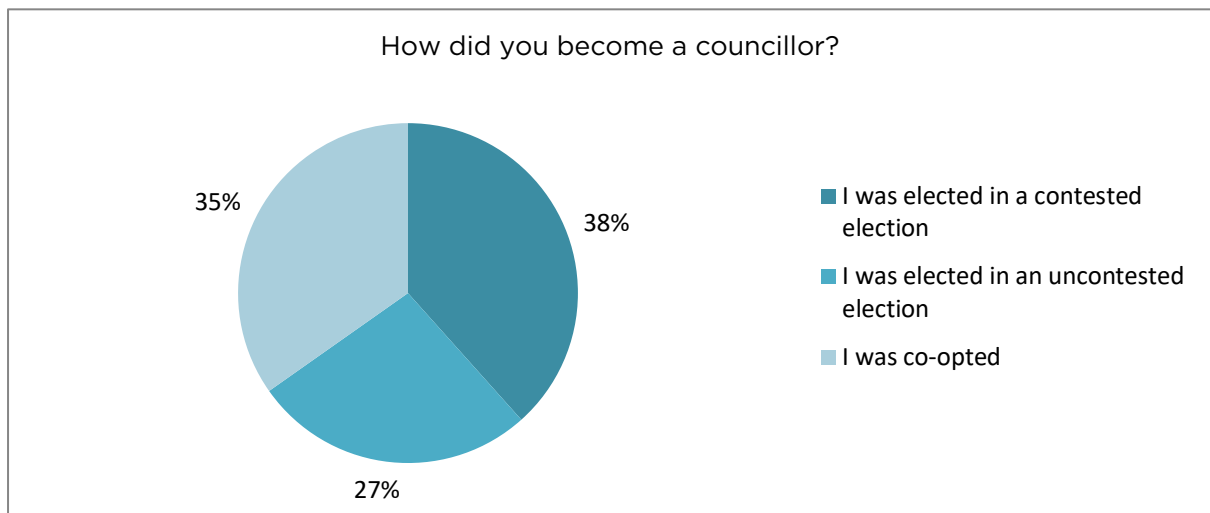
- 38% of councillors were involved in a contested election; 27% were elected in an uncontested election and 35% of councillors were co-opted.
- This tells us that there is a need to encourage election participation to ensure democratically elected and accountable local councils.

Why did you stand for election as a town or parish councillor? (Select all that apply)

- To serve the community — 86%
- To change things in my community — 56%
- For political beliefs/values — 15%
- Because I was asked to — 22%
- To resolve an issue — 8%
- Other (please specifiy) — 7%

Responses
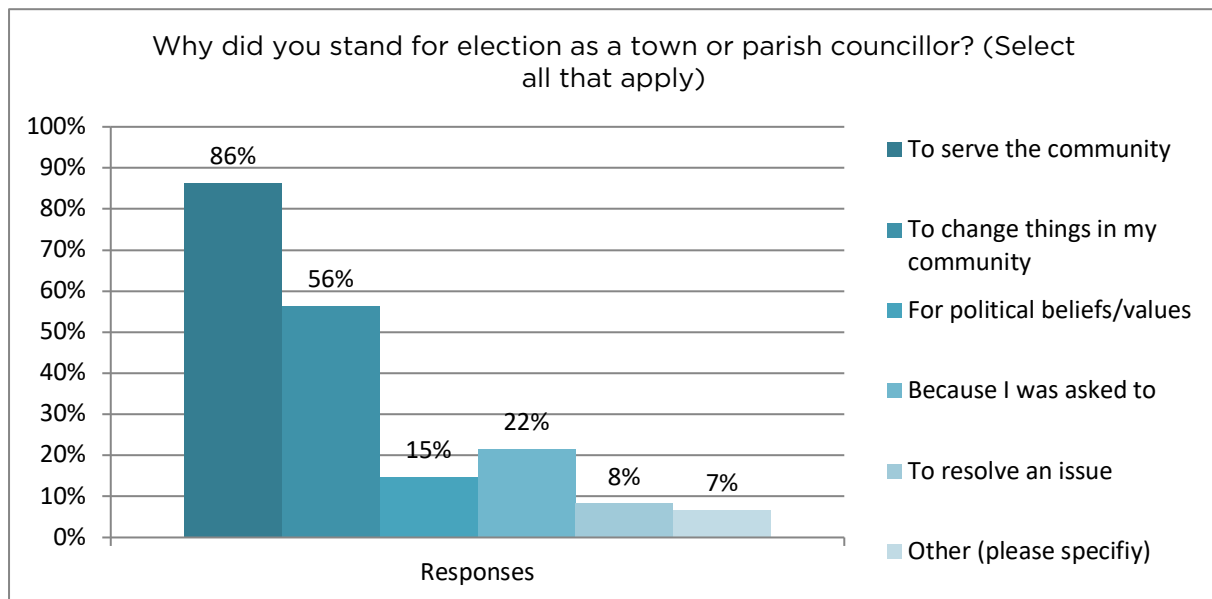
Other — Climate change and sustainability:

- "Specifically, to help the parish council take strong action on climate change."
- "To lead environmental/sustainability improvements."
- "To try (to) make climate positive change."
- "The existing parish council lacked knowledge of ecological issues."

Other — Party politics and democracy:

- "To try to encourage other independent candidates to stand for our parish council- rather than be put off by historical co-opted conservative party members sitting in parish councillor seats without the right focus for parish council issues. To discourage party politics at parish council levels."
- "To try to stop a political parties total control over the council."

Other — Planning and development:

- "To understand planning law better & to not let developments happen without understanding what needed to be thought about when giving approval."
- "Fight unwanted development and save our countryside."

Other — Representation:

- "To represent women and serve the community."
- "To bring diversity into our town council."

How did you get involved in standing for election to your council?
(Select all that apply)
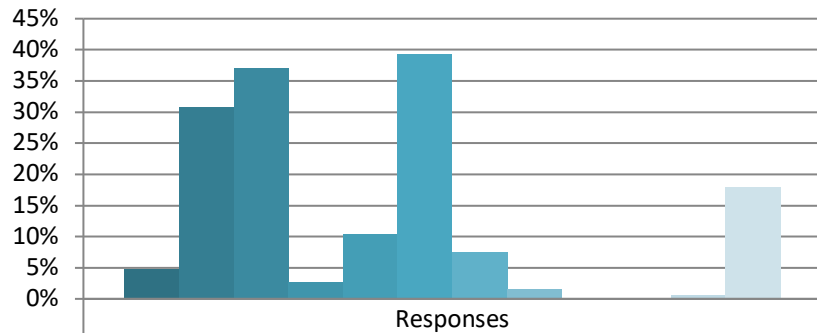
Responses	
▆ None of the above	5%
▆ Through family or friends	31%
▆ Through an issue or interest	37%
▆ Through an event	3%
▆ Through work or an organisation	10%
▆ Through your community	39%
▆ Through the neighbourhood plan	8%
▆ Through attending a councillor traning event	1%
▆ Through NALC's 'Make A Change' campaign	0%
▆ Through NALC's 'Make A Change' social media campaign	0%
▆ Through NALC's 'Make A Change' online even for prospective councillors	1%
▆ Other (please specify)	18%

- 39% of councillors became involved in their election through the community; 37% through and issue or interest; 31% through family or friends.

Other — Existing local Council members:

- "Invitation to stand by a sitting councillor."

Other — Political parties:

- "Through a political party of my choice."
- "I joined a political party that reflected my values."

How readily available was information (such as nomination papers) regarding the 2021 May election?
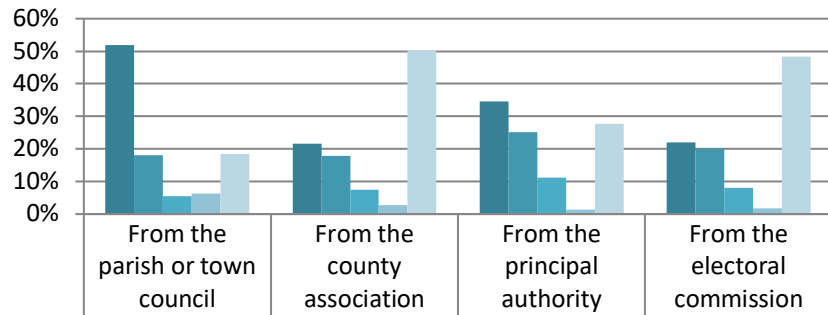
	From the parish or town council	From the county association	From the principal authority	From the electoral commission
■ Readily available (easy and clear on the website)	52%	22%	35%	22%
■ Available (had to search on the website but not difficult to find)	18%	18%	25%	20%
■ Hard to find	5%	8%	11%	8%
■ Didn't exist	6%	3%	1%	2%
■ Did not look	18%	50%	28%	48%

- 52% of councillors found information readily available from their parish local councils; 35% for principal authorities and 22% reported the same for county associations and the electoral commission.

Did you stand as a political candidate?
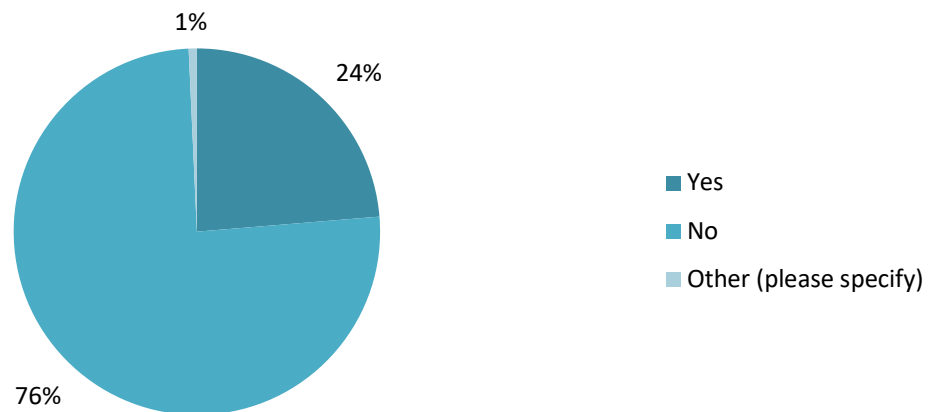
- 76% of elected councillors do not have a political affiliation, contrasted against 24% who did.

Did your council use social media to promote the election?

Bar chart showing responses:
- Twitter: 2%
- Facebook: 37%
- Instagram: 1%
- Combination of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram: 4%
- Used another platform: 5%
- No: 41%
- Other (please specify): 10%
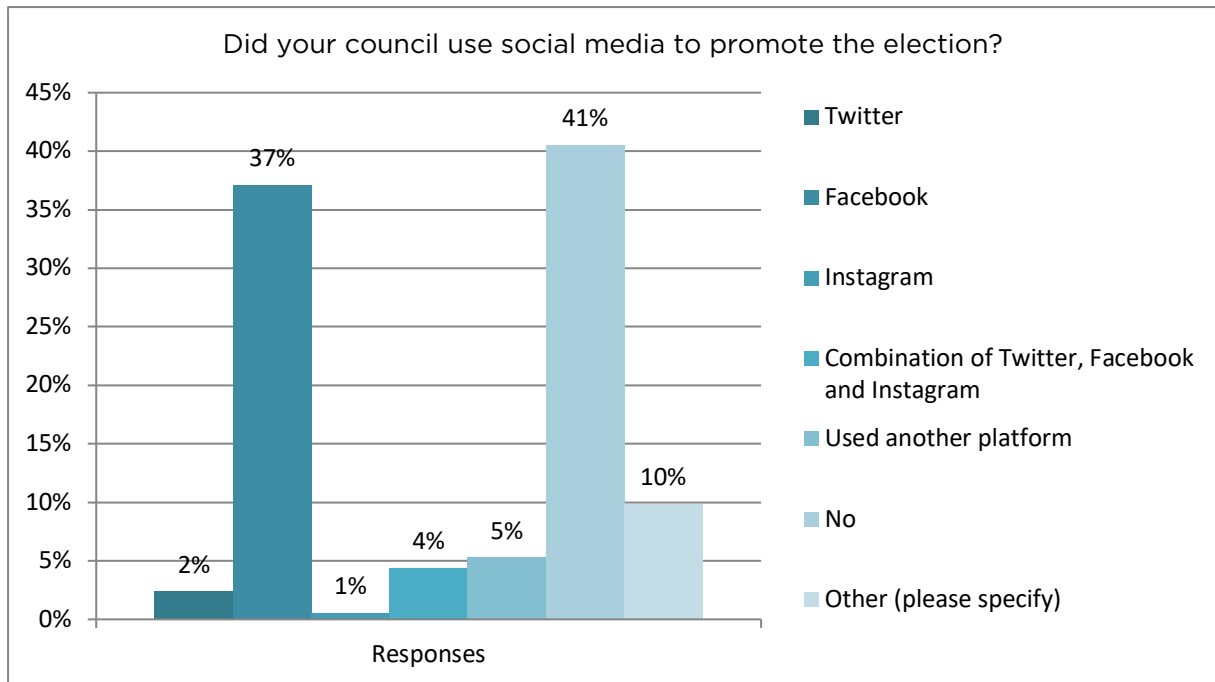
- 49% of respondents stated that their local councils used social media to promote their elections, the most popular of which was Facebook which was used by 37% of local councils.
- However, 41% of respondents reported that local councils did not use social media in their elections.

What did you use to promote yourself as a candidate?

Bar chart showing responses:
- None of the above: 39%
- Twitter: 6%
- Facebook: 20%
- Instagram: 3%
- NALC 'Make A Change' material: 1%
- Created a leaflet: 30%
- Word of mouth: 43%
- Other (please specify): 8%
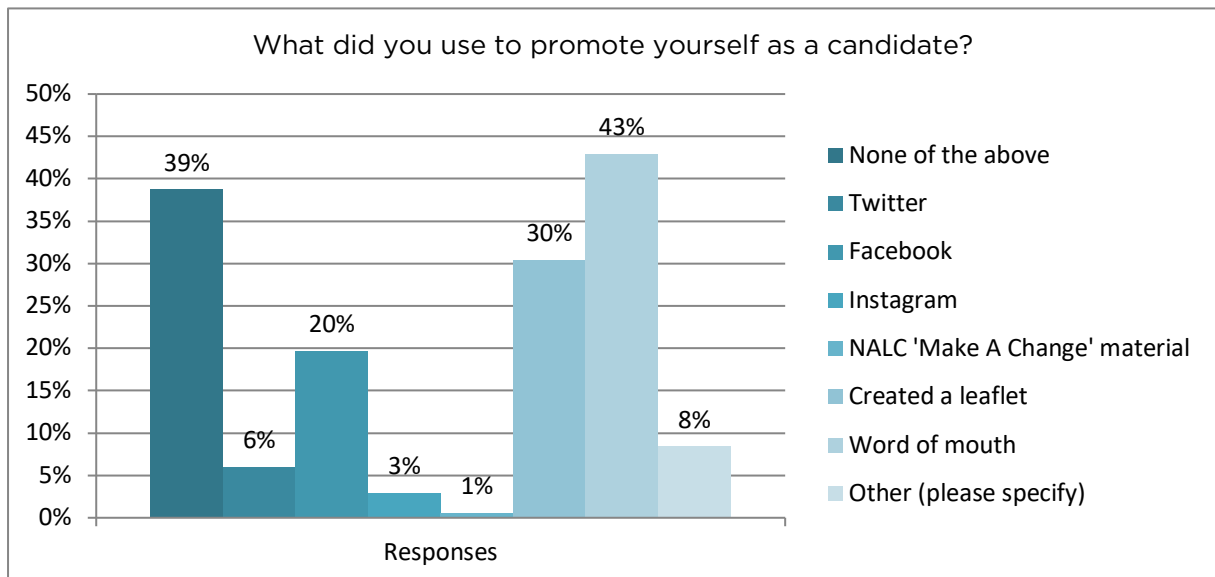
- 43% of candidates promoted themselves through word of mouth and 30% through physical leaflets.
- There is a distinct lack of digital promotion, but Facebook was the most popular social media platform, used by 20% of respondents.
- 39% of respondents did not use any of the above methods of promotion.

COMPARISON TO 2019 SURVEY OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS

The purpose of this section is to compare survey data between the 2019 and 2021 surveys of local councillors. This section highlights questions that were present in both surve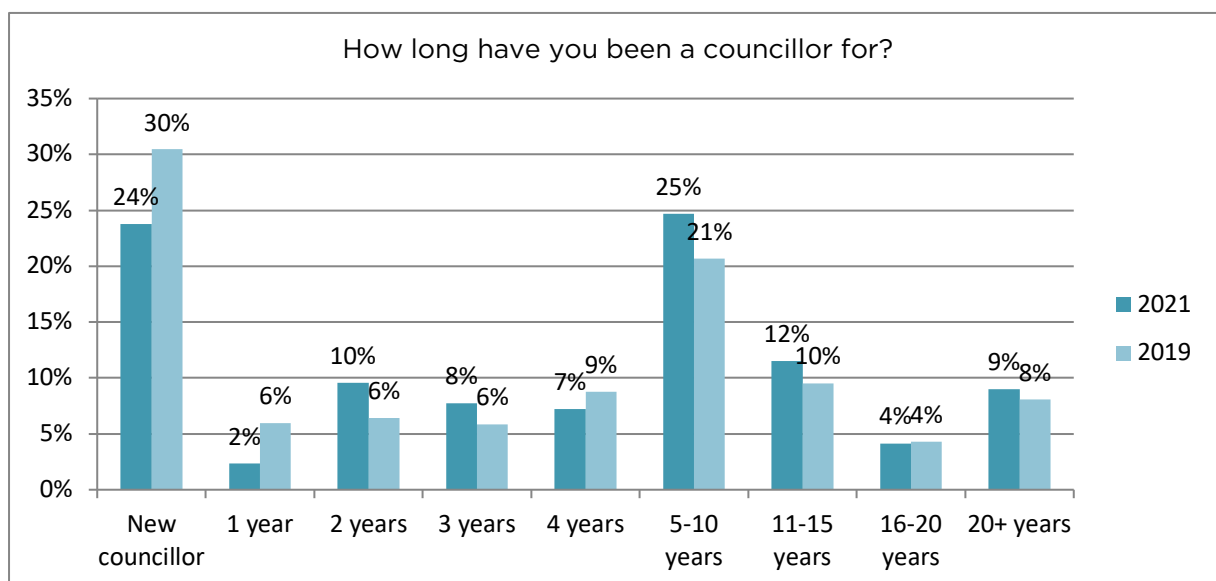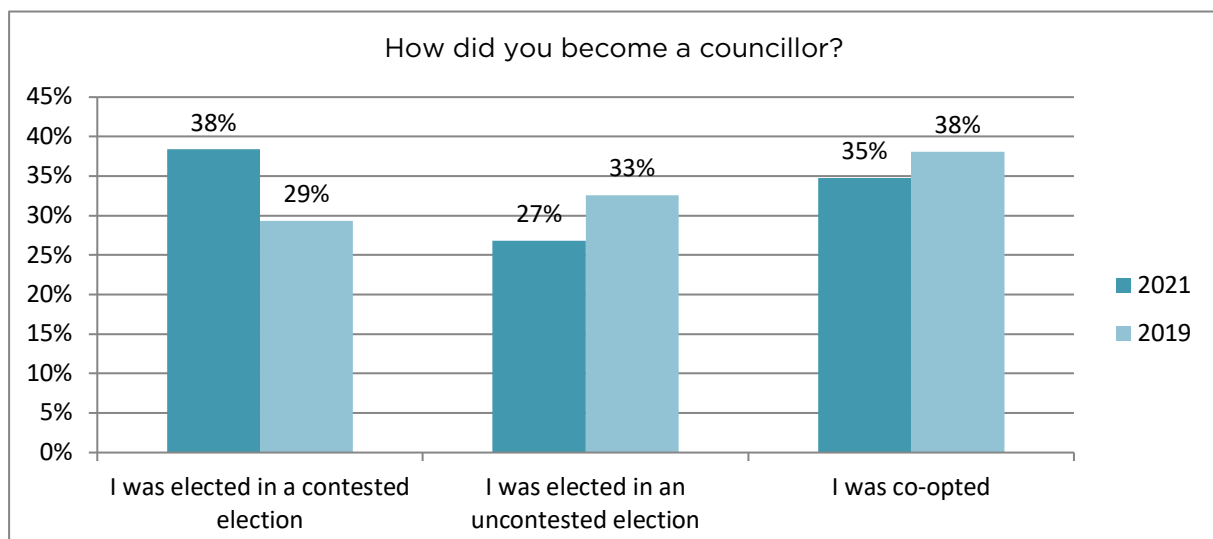ys and therefore allow for comparison. These questions provide demographic data on local councillors such as age, race, sexual identity and religious affiliation.

There are considerations to be made in the difference in survey sample sizes. The 2021 survey of local councillors received 556 responses, whereas the 2019 survey received 2,821 responses. Therefore, responses from the 2021 survey are representative of a smaller sample size than in 2019 and this is a factor in any data changes.

How long have you been a councillor for?

	New councillor	1 year	2 years	3 years	4 years	5-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	20+ years
2021	24%	2%	10%	8%	7%	25%	12%	4%	9%
2019	30%	6%	6%	6%	9%	21%	10%	4%	8%

- Only 24% of respondents were new councillors compared to 30% in 2019.
- The number of elected councillors serving for 5+ years increased by 6 percentage points and the proportion of those serving for more than a decade increased by 3 percentage points, between 2019 and 2021.

How did you become a councillor?

	I was elected in a contested election	I was elected in an uncontested election	I was co-opted
2021	38%	27%	35%
2019	29%	33%	38%

- A higher proportion of councillors declared that they were elected through contested elections in 2021 (38%) when compared to 2019 (29%).
- The number of respondents declaring that they became councillors through uncontested elections fell by 6 percentage points between 2019 and 2021; whilst the proportion of co-opted councillors fell by 3 percentage points.

Please indicate the gender that you identify with

Category	2021	2019
Female	38%	38%
Male	59%	59%
Transgender	0%	0%
Prefer to self-describe	0%	0%
Prefer not to say	2%	2%
Other (please specify)	1%	0%
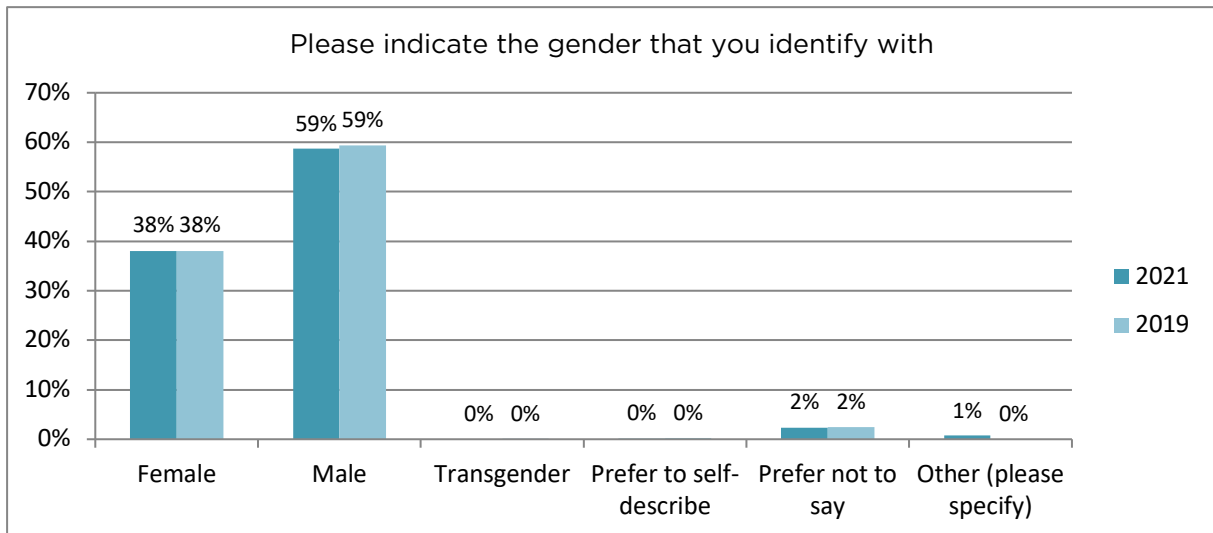
- 59% of responding councillors identify as male, 38% identify as female.
- No change in gender demographics from 2019.
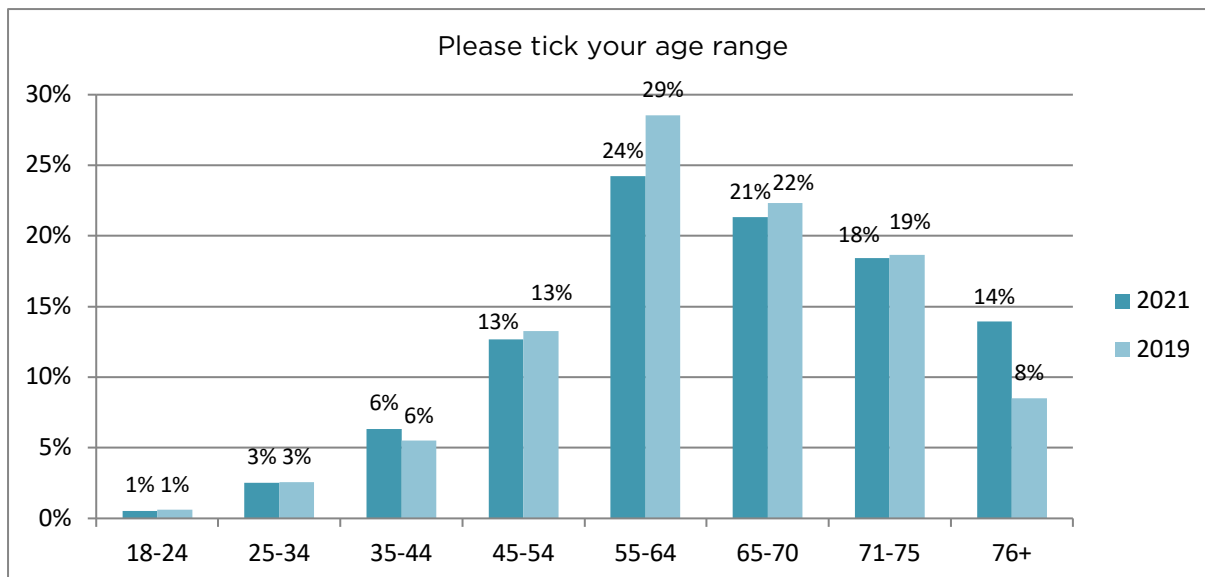
What is your sexual orientation?

Category	2021	2019
Heterosexual	84%	86%
Homosexual woman	1%	1%
Homosexual man	2%	1%
Bisexual	1%	1%
Prefer to self-describe	0%	0%
Prefer not to say	10%	9%
Other (please specify)	1%	3%
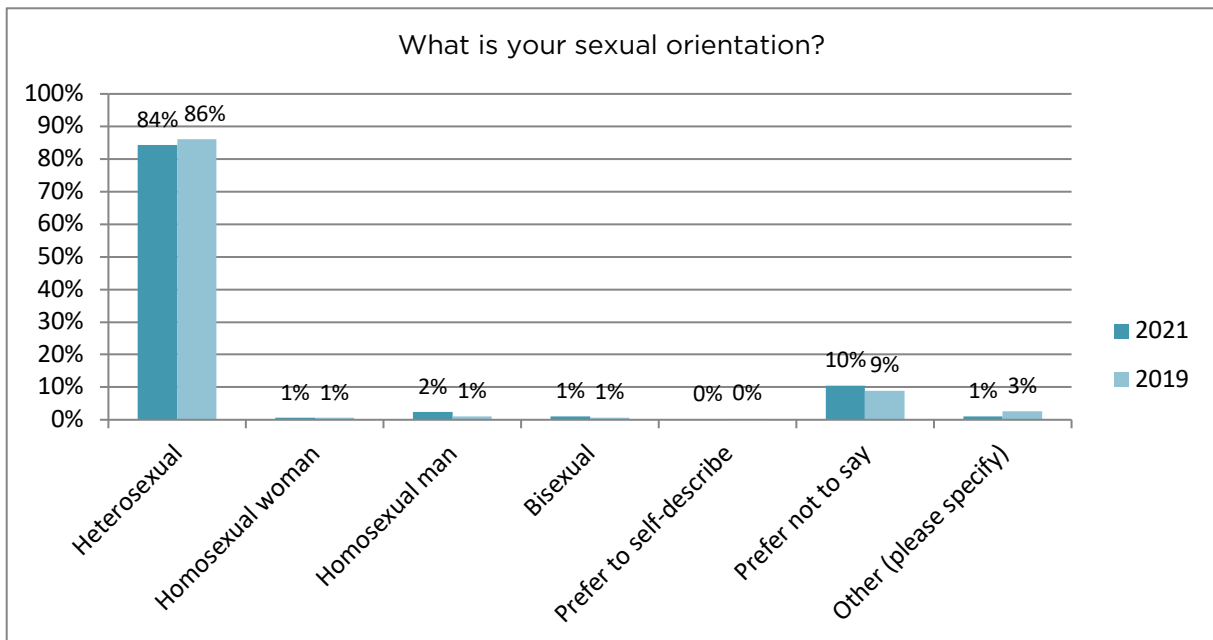
- 84% of responding councillors identify as heterosexual.
- Little change in sexual orientation demographics from 2019.

Please tick your age range

- No change in the proportion of councillors aged 18-34 between 2019 to 2021.
- The proportion of councillors aged 65+ increased from 49% to 54%, whereas the proportion of respondents aged 76+ increased from 8% to 14%.

What is your religious affiliation?
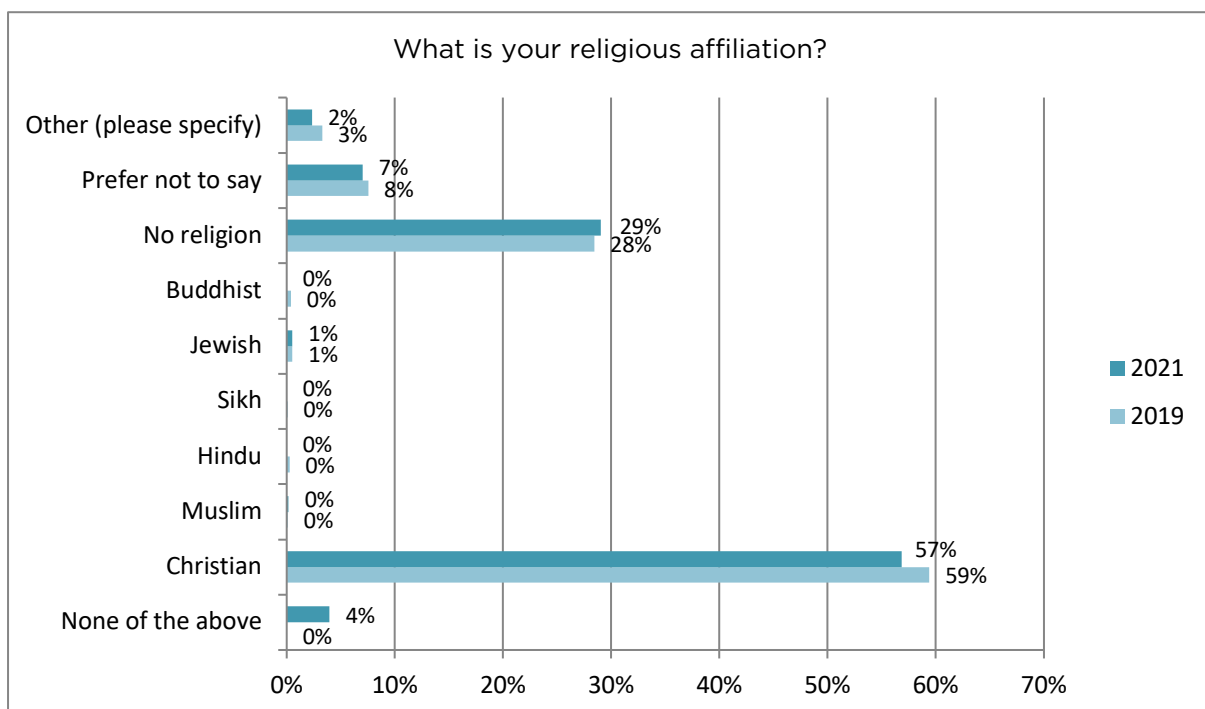
- 57% of responding councillors identify as Christian; 29% state no religion.
- Little change to data on religious affiliation from 2019.

Do you identify as a disabled person?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to say
2021	9%	86%	1%	4%
2019	7%	89%	0%	4%
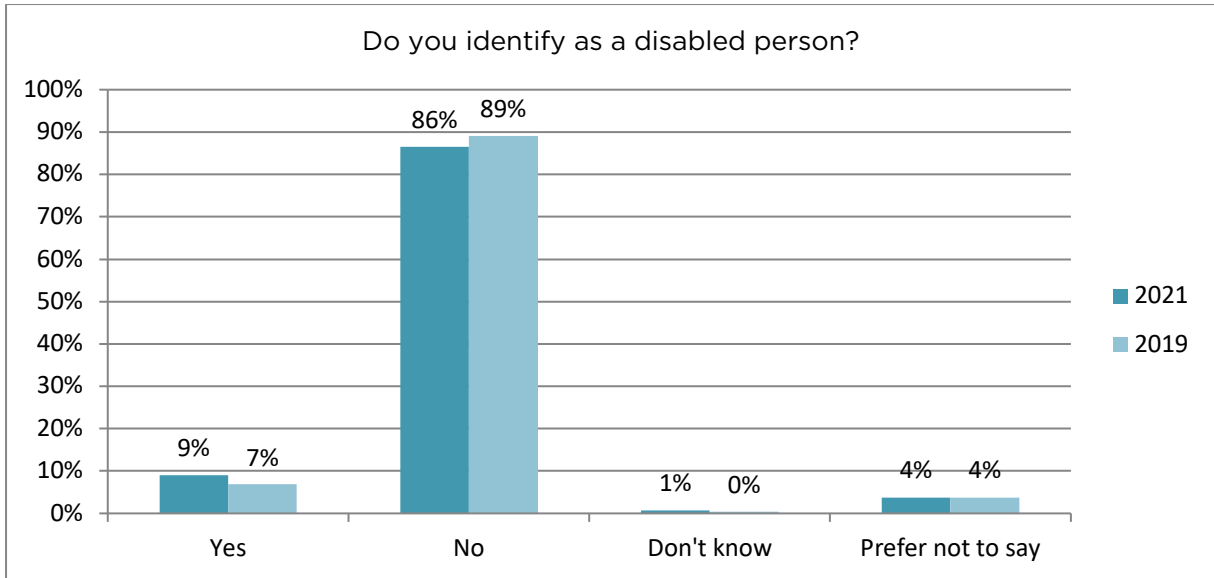
- Small decrease in the proportion of respondents who identify as disabled from 89% in 2019, to 86% in 2021.

Do you have caring responsibilities?

	Yes	No	Prefer not to say
2021	15%	80%	5%
2019	17%	79%	5%
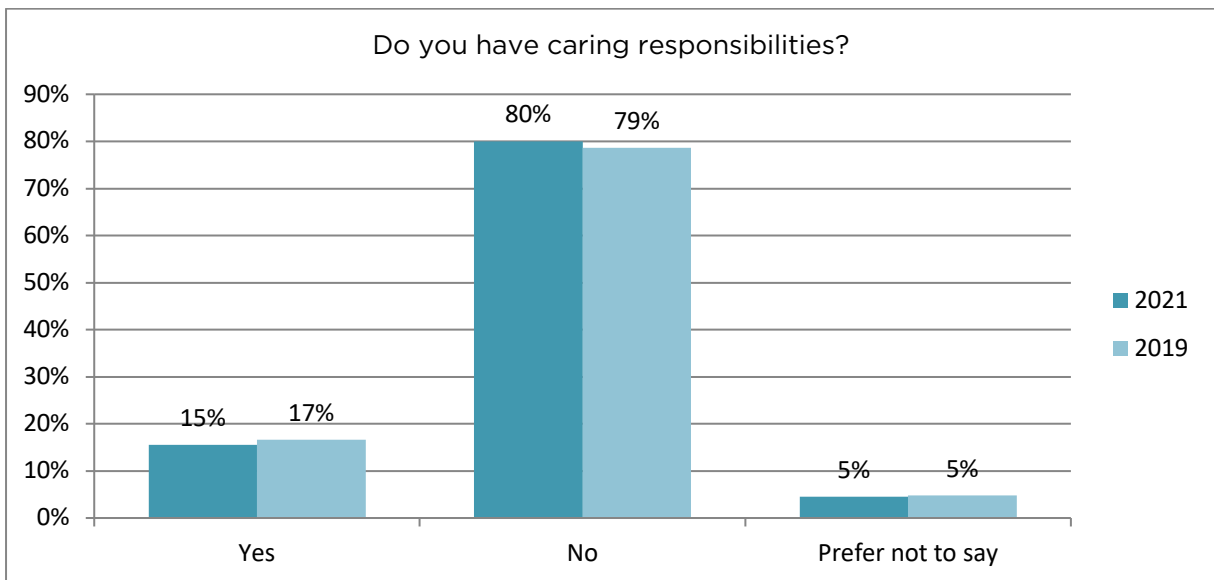
- 80% of councillors do not have caring responsibilities.
- Little change in respondents who declared caring responsibilities.

Which of the following ethnic groups would you describe yourself as belonging to: (Commission for Racial Equality categories)
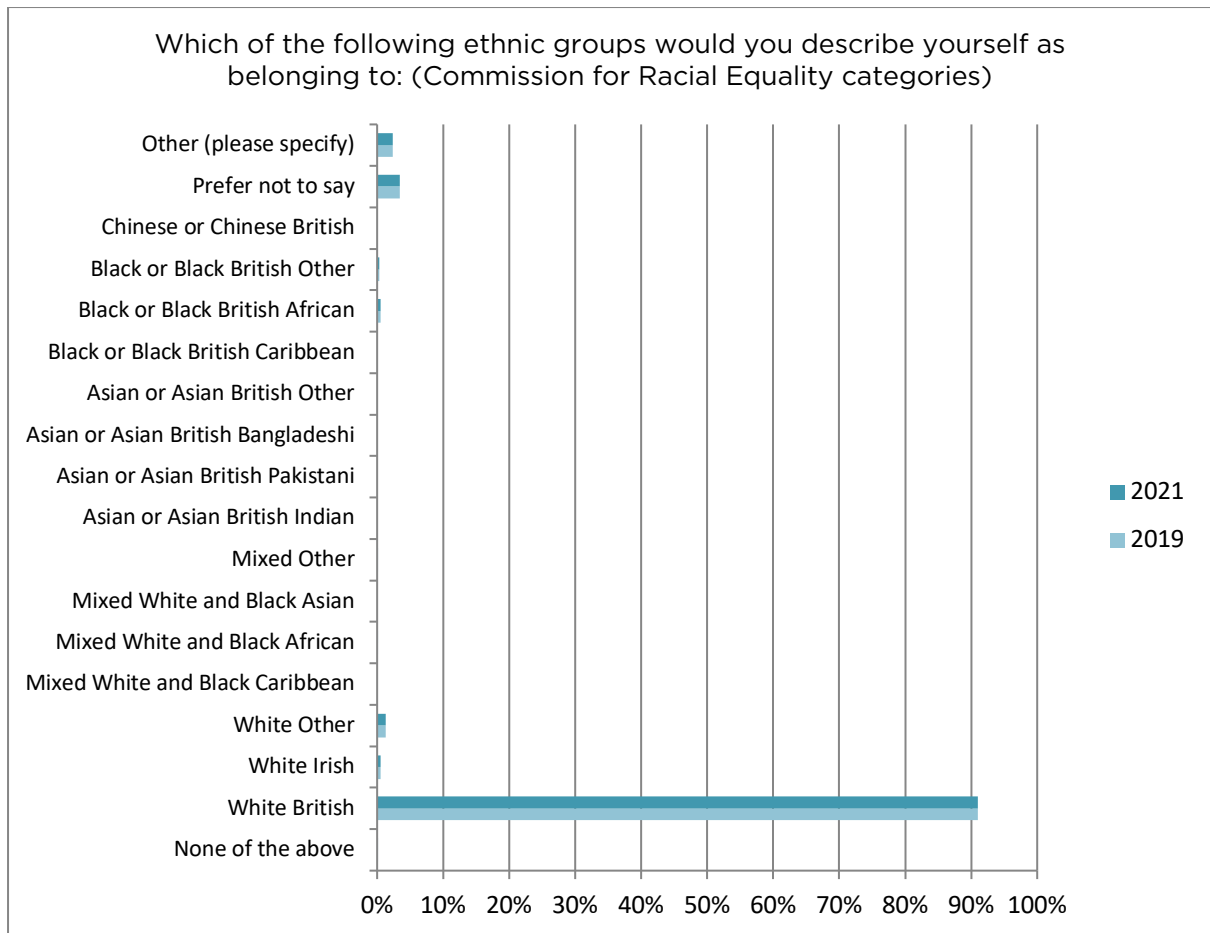
- 91% of responding councillors identify as White British.
- Little to no change on ethnographic data from 2019.

SURVEY OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Total responses: 429

The purpose of this survey was to investigate how the election process could be improved with a particular focus on democratic participation and campaign awareness.

NALC found that many of the local councils reported high levels of seat vacancies (59%) and a significant proportion (44%) had seats to co-opt.

Furthermore, social media is becoming a more intrinsic part of the local election campaign process for many local councils (50%) however, there is little variety in the platforms they use, and many (59%) still use physical notices.

We find that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted local councils in several ways, whilst some have embraced the move to digital, others have struggled to promote elections and reported a lower voter turnout.

What is your council's precept for 2021/2?

Legend:
- █ £0.00
- █ £1-24,999
- █ £25,000-£124,999
- █ £125,000-£249,999
- █ £250,000-£999,999
- █ £1,000,000-£1,999,999
- █ £2,000,000-£2,999,999
- █ £3,000,000-£6,499,999

Values: 1%, 31%, 35%, 13%, 16%, 3%, 1%, 1%

X-axis: Responses
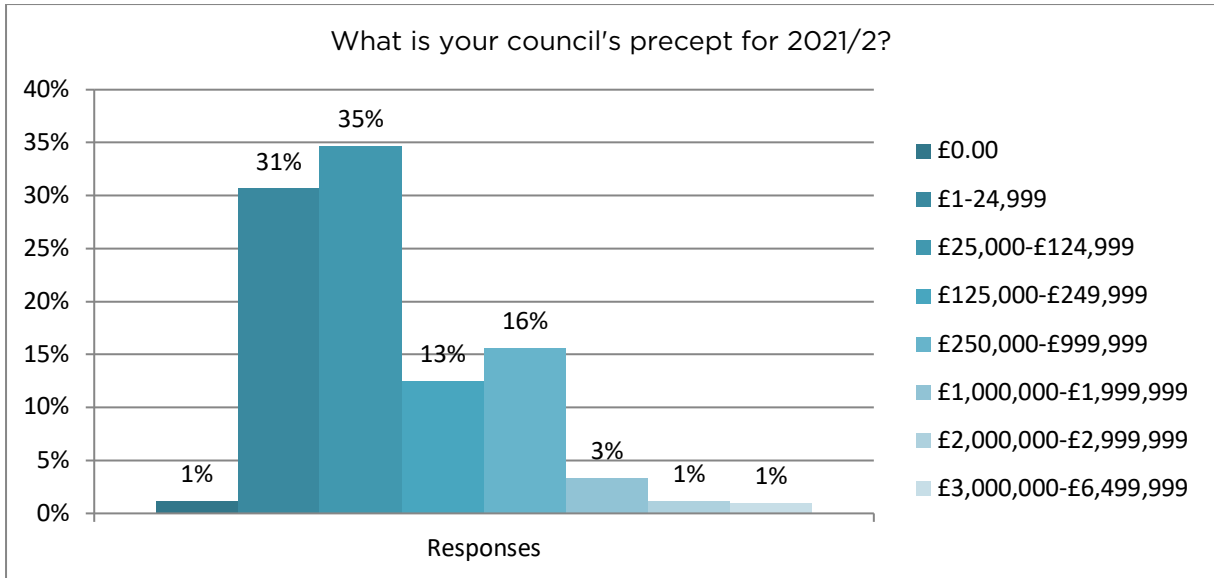
- 67% of local councils reported a precept of less than £125,000.
- Most local councils (66%) reported an annual precept of £1-£124,999.

How many candidates stood for election?

Legend:
- █ 0
- █ 1-5
- █ 6-10
- █ 11-20
- █ 21+

Values: 12%, 21%, 36%, 23%, 8%

X-axis: Responses
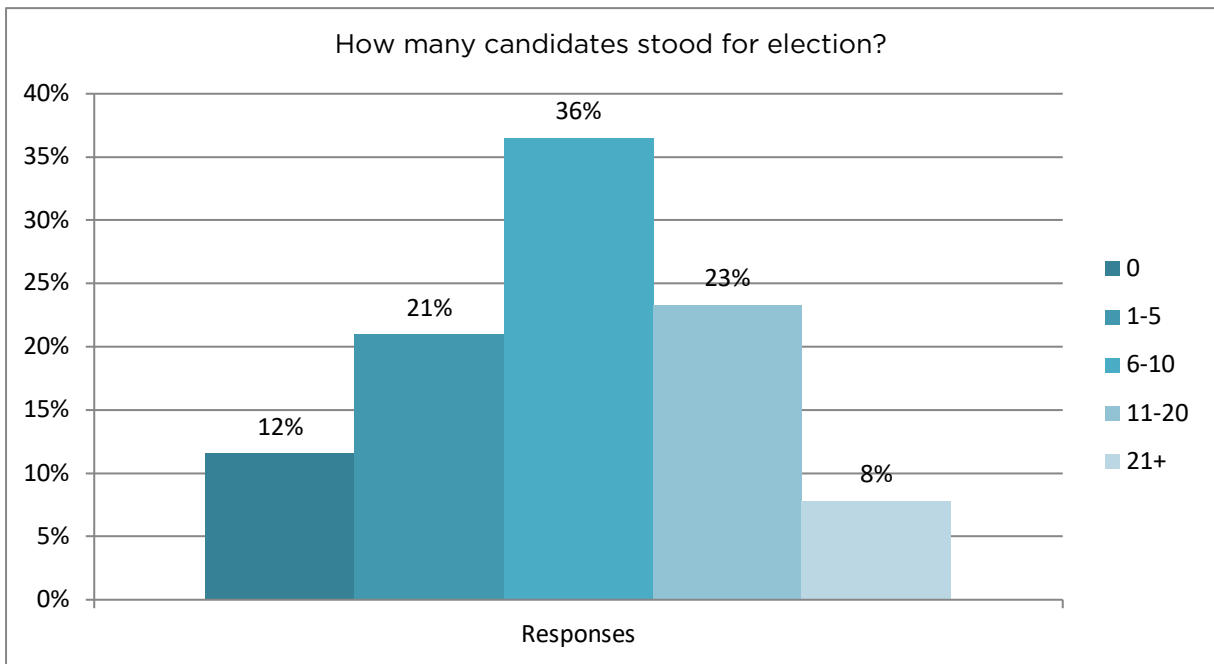
- 36% of local councils had between 6-10, 23% had between 11-20, and 21% had between 1-5.
- 12% of local councils reported that no candidates stood for election.

23

If your council election was uncontested, how many vacant seats did you have on 10 May 2021? Please choose from the options below:

Legend: 0, 1-3, 4-6, 5-9, 10+

Bar values: 41%, 46%, 9%, 3%, 1%

X-axis: Responses
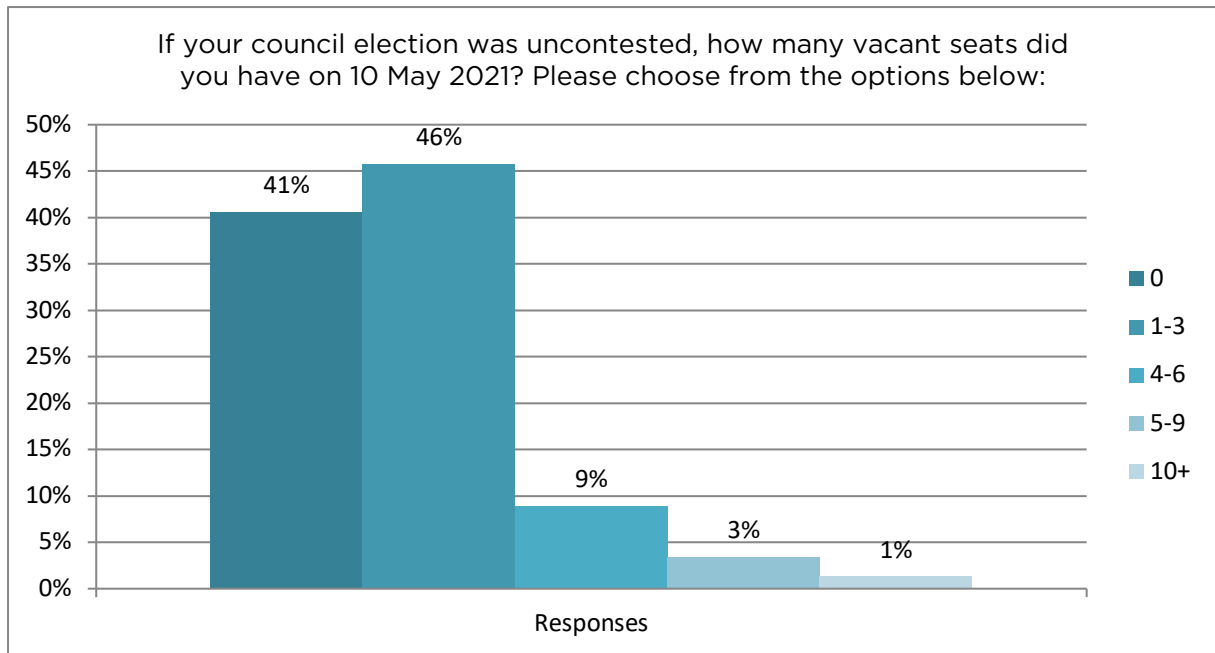
- 59% of local councils reported vacant seats after the elections; 46% reported between 1-3 vacant seats.

Do you have seats that your council needs to co-opt?

44% (Yes), 56% (No)

Legend: Yes, No
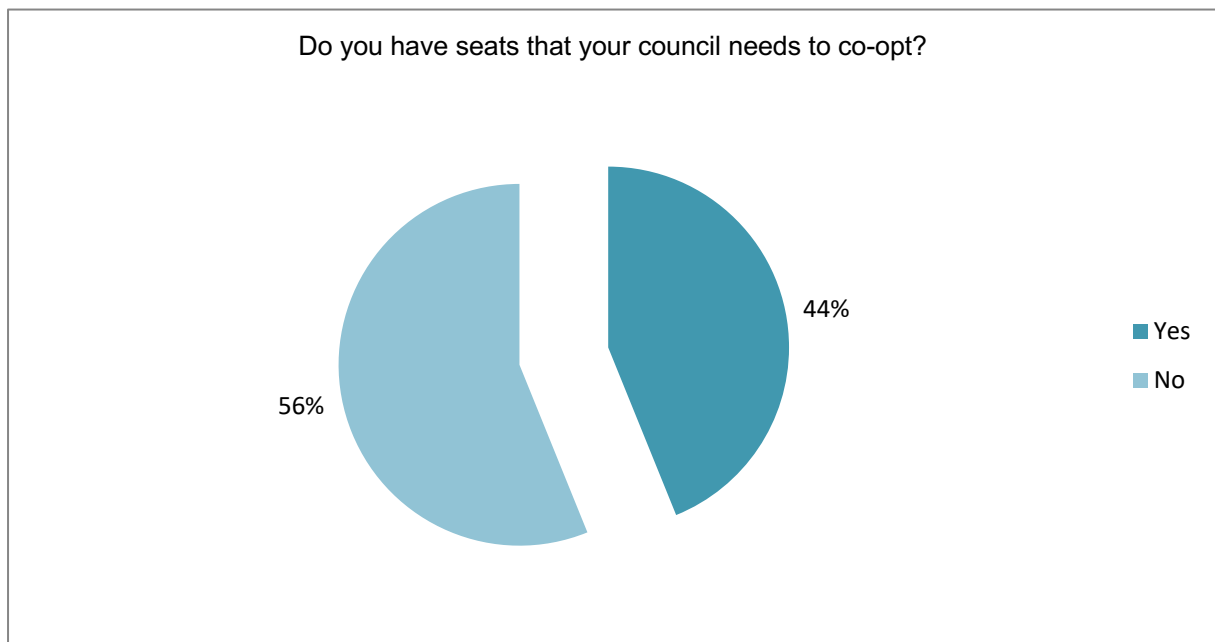
- 44% of local councils reported the need to co-opt seats.
- A significant proportion of local councils are using their own time and administrative effort to source councillors; encouraging democratic participation can help reduce vacancies and the need to co-opt.
- This dataset, however, does not display the specific number of seats each council needed to co-opt.

If yes, what method are you using to co-opt?

Responses	
■ Social media	50%
■ Advertising in leaflets	27%
■ Word of mouth	60%
■ Targeting people directly	38%
■ Selection process	25%
■ Increasing diversity of the council	7%
■ Looking for a specific skill set	8%
■ Other (please specify)	32%
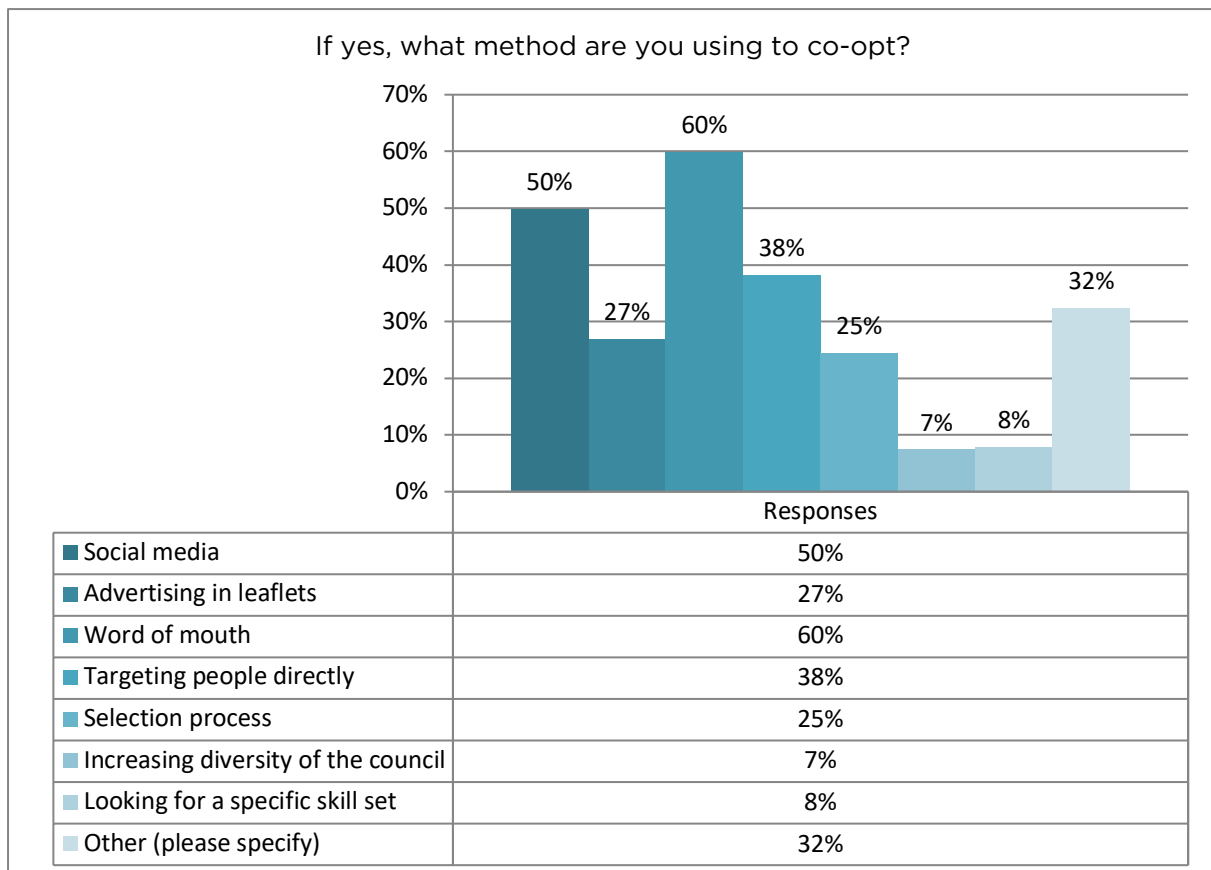
- 60% of local councils used word of mouth to co-opt; 50% used social media; 38% targeted candidates directly, and 27% used leaflets.

Other:

- "Include a mention at the end of correspondence a polite version of 'and if you don't like the answer, join the council, and get what you want."

- "By writing articles about our work in local newsletters."

- "Adverts on website and noticeboard."

- "Local paper and village magazine."

- "All of the above, and targeting unsuccessful candidates."

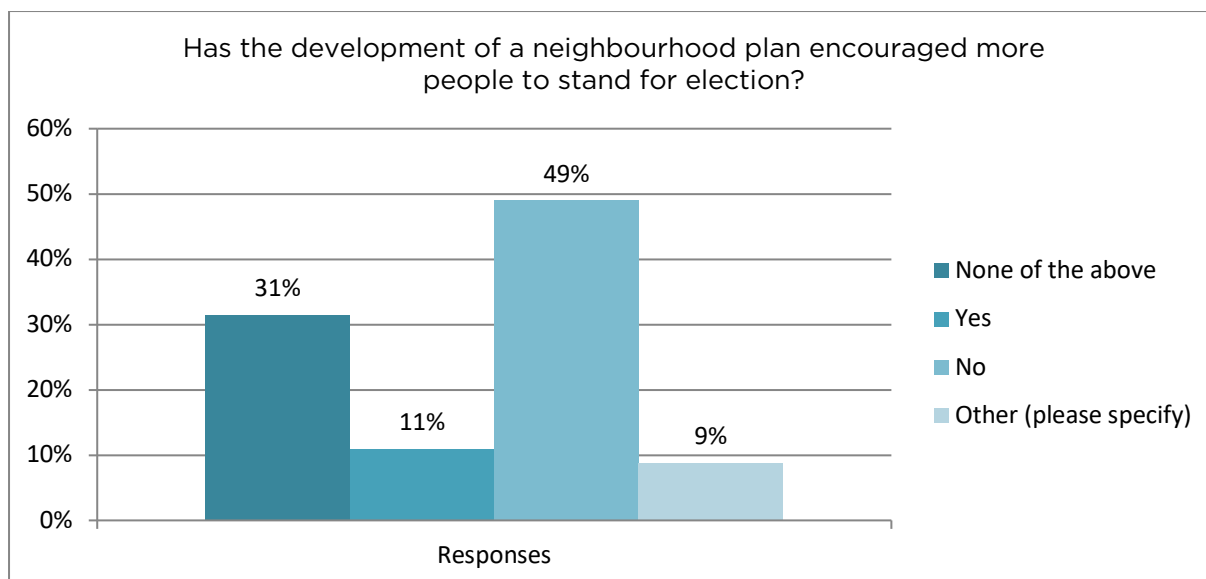## How has your council promoted awareness of the election?
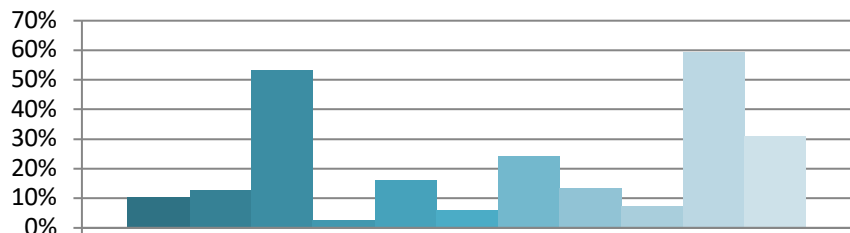
	Responses
■ None of the above	10%
■ Twitter	13%
■ Facebook	53%
■ Instagram	3%
■ NALC's 'Make A Change' campaign materials	16%
■ NALC's social media campaign	6%
■ Materials made by the council	24%
■ Materials made by the county association	14%
■ Online events	7%
■ Physical notices	59%
■ Other (please specify)	31%

- 59% of local councils used physical notices to promote elections, 53% used Facebook.
- This tells us that despite the rise of technology in digital campaigning and the COVID-19 pandemic, a larger proportion of local councils prefer to use physical forms of campaigning.

Other:

- A small proportion (7%) of local councils reported using newsletters, local magazines, and free local newspapers.

- A proportion (15%) of local councils reported use of their council website.

Has the development of a neighbourhood plan encouraged more people to stand for election?

Legend
None of the above
Yes
No
Other (please specify)

- None of the above: 31%
- Yes: 11%
- No: 49%
- Other (please specify): 9%

Responses

- 11% of local councils reported that more people stood for election due to the development of a neighbourhood plan, which gives local councils the power to shape the development and growth of their local area.

What has the effect of the coronavirus pandemic been on this election cycle?

Turnout:

- "Kept people away from the polling station."
- "Less campaigning, lower turnout. More complex voting arrangements."
- "No polling station in the village with electors having to travel to another Parish to vote. Turnout lower than expected."

Election delay:

- "One year's delay and then elected councillors will only hold their positions for three years. Not aware of any other consequences of COVID-19 on elections."
- "Delayed by a year and one Councillor resigned during the year as they had intended not to stand."
- "It was a very long election cycle: elections were delayed by a year to coincide with the introduction of the unitary authority and by a further year because of the pandemic - it has thus been six years since the last election."

Move to digital:

- "Holding of meetings virtually rather than face to face may have limited the interest around the election this time."
- "Canvassing has been an issue. Residents didn't want door knockers or leaflets."
- "Reluctance on candidates to physically canvas."
- "Other than lower turnout, actually had more interested candidates who had been attending zoom meetings."

- "More people have become interested in the workings of the Council because of remote access meetings; I have had four expressions of interest in one vacancy which is more than usual."
- "Virtual meetings led to more community engagement at meetings and therefore greater interest in the election. The mix of age and gender is also better, also resulting from that greater engagement in 2020."

What support did you receive from your county association?
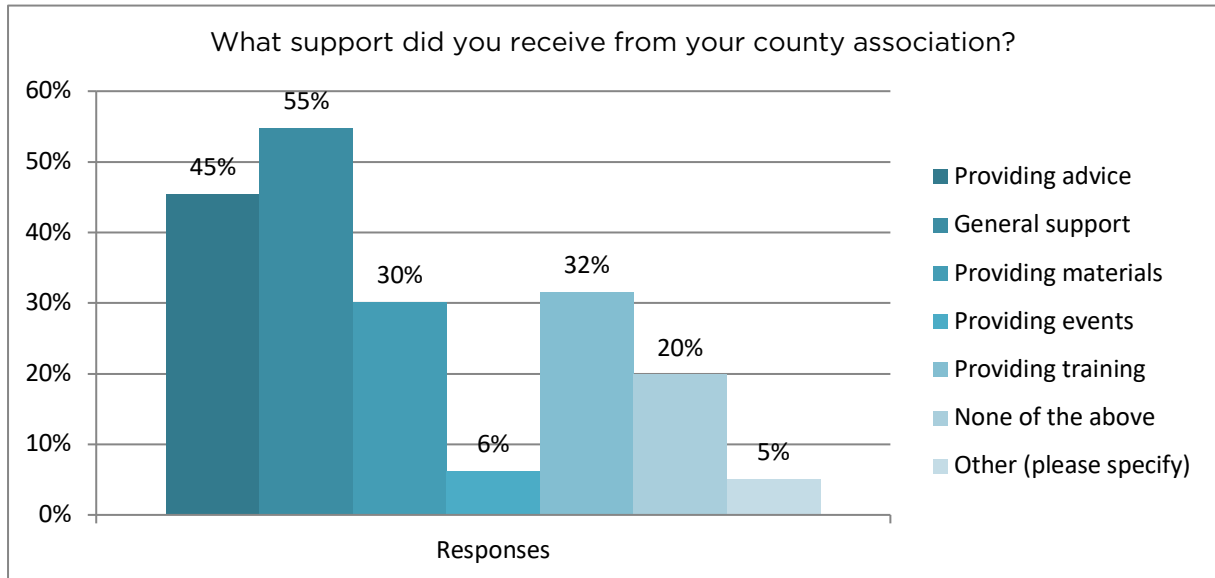
- 55% of local councils reported that county associations provided them with general support; 35% received advice; 32% received training, and 30% received materials. Only 6% received events support.

What support did you receive from your principal authority?
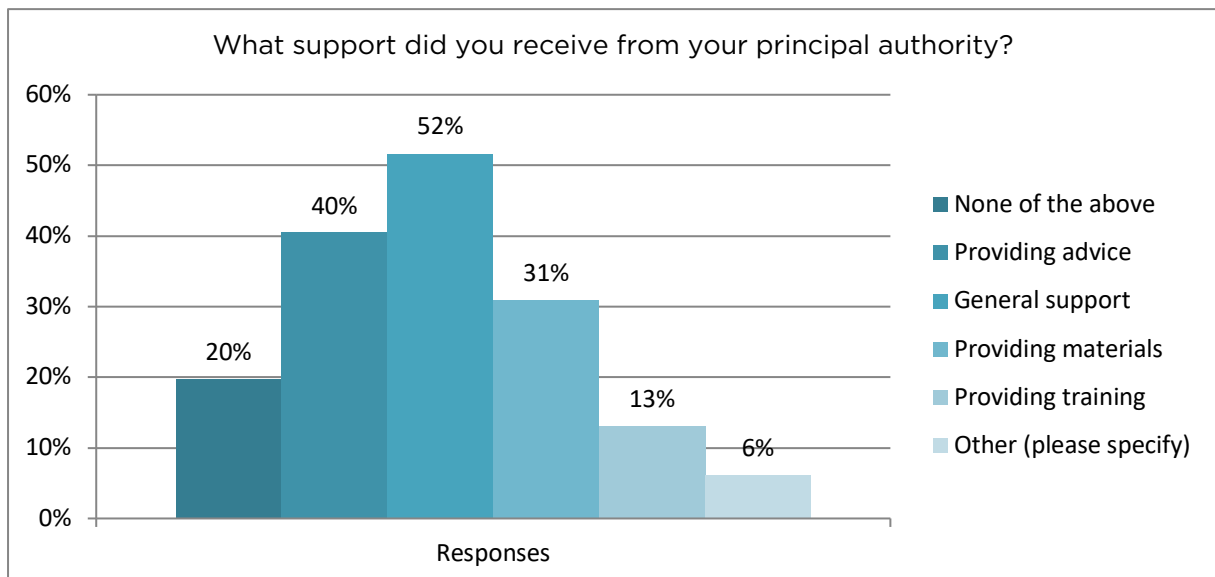
- 52% of local councils reported that they received general support from their principal authorities; 40% received advice; 31% received materials

COMPARISON TO 2019 SURVEY OF LOCAL COUNCILS

The purpose of this section is to compare survey data between the 2019 and 2021 surveys of local councils. This section highlights questions that were present in both surveys and therefore allow for comparison. These questions provide local council elections data such as the size of council electorates, number of vacant council seats and feedback on specific changes to electoral processes.

There are considerations to be made in the difference of survey sample sizes. The 2021 survey of local councils received 429 responses, whereas the 2019 survey received 900 responses. Therefore, responses from the 2021 survey are representative of a smaller sample size than in 2019 and this is a factor in any data changes.

How many electors do you have?
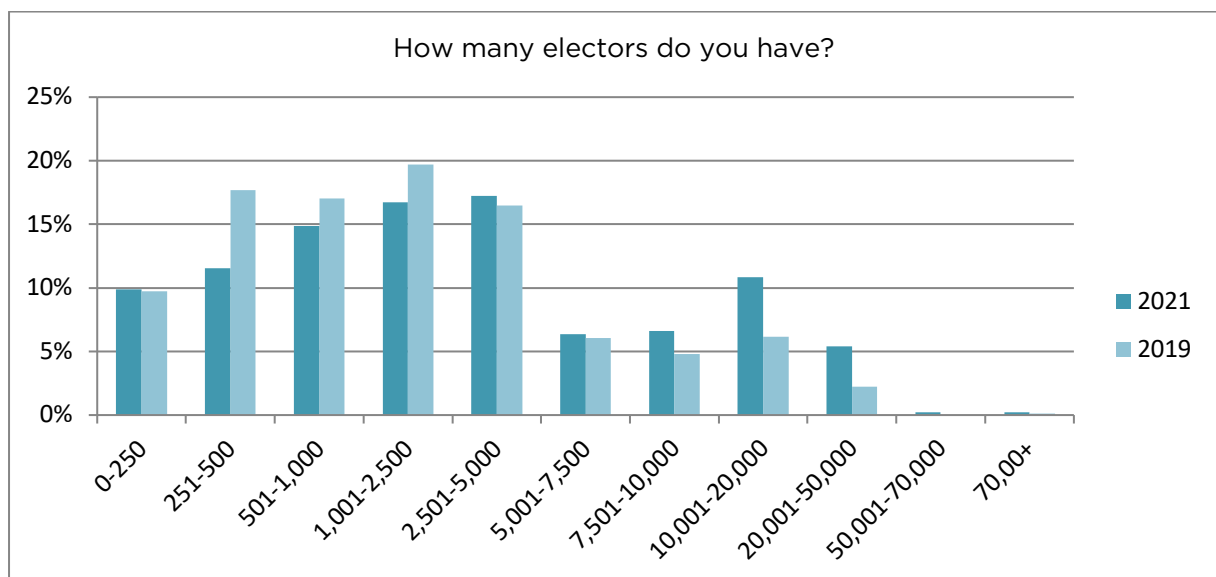
- 70% of responding local councils reported electorates of 5,000 or fewer in 2021, a decrease of 11 percentage points since 2019.
- In 2019, 44% of responding local councils reported electorates of 1,000 or fewer, compared to 36% in 2021.

How many candidates stood for election?
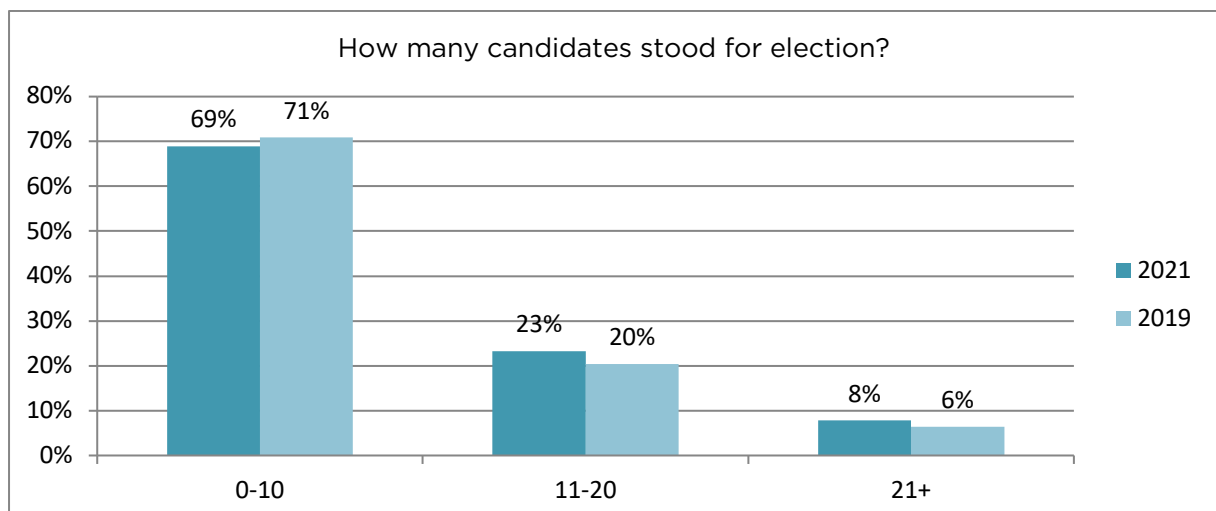
- 69% of local councils had 0-10 candidates standing for election, compared to 71% in 2019.
- This shows that there were very minor changes to the proportion of councillors elected across each local council.


Do you have any vacant seats?
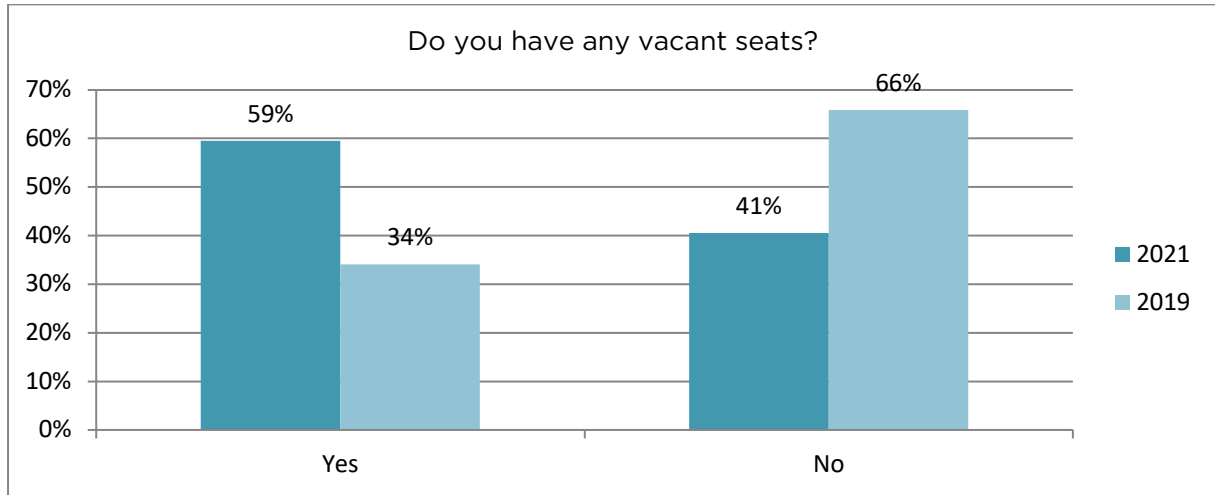
- The proportion of local councils reporting vacant seats increased by 25 percentage points, from 34% in 2019 to 59% in 2021.
- This shows that there were significantly more local councils reporting vacancies in 2021. There are several potential reasons for the increased number of reported vacancies due to a lack of democratic participation.
- One major issue for this year's election cycle was the continuation of remote meetings and restrictions on indoor gatherings which hindered in-person campaigning.

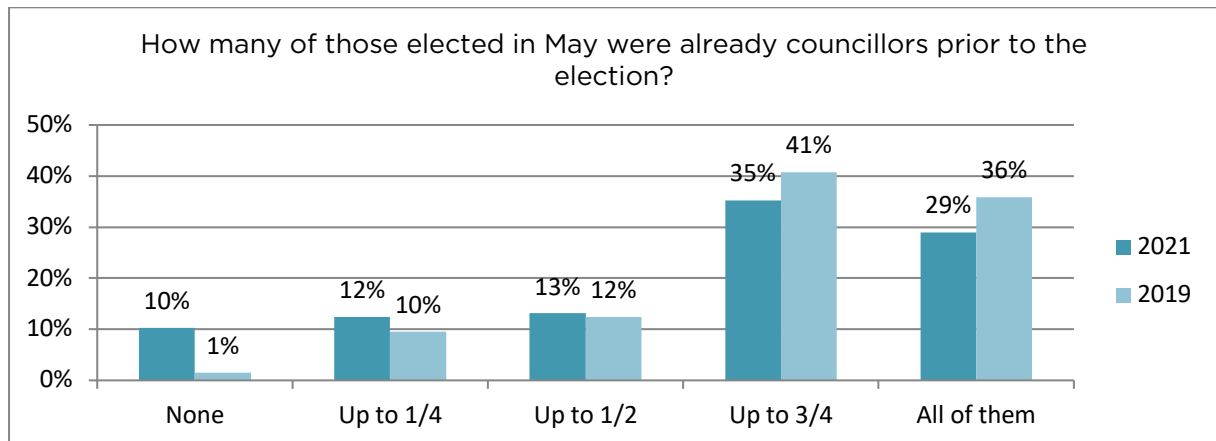**What method are you using to co-opt?**
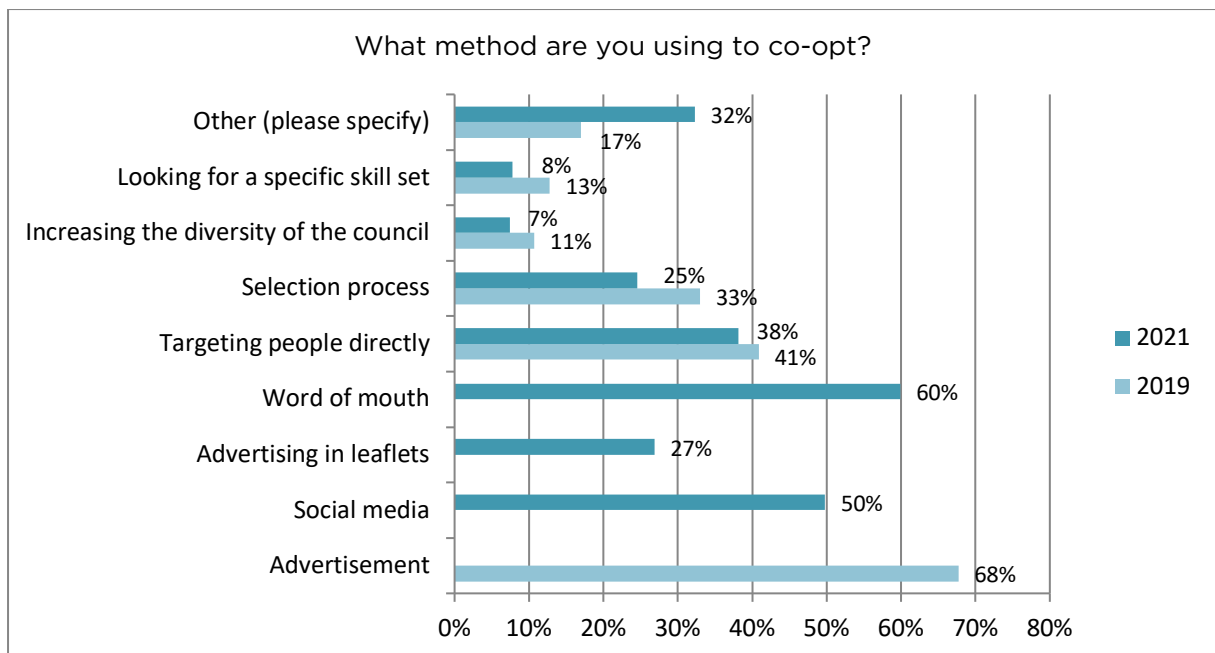
- There are difficulties in directly comparing responses to this question due to the differences in proposed answers between the 2019 and 2021 surveys.
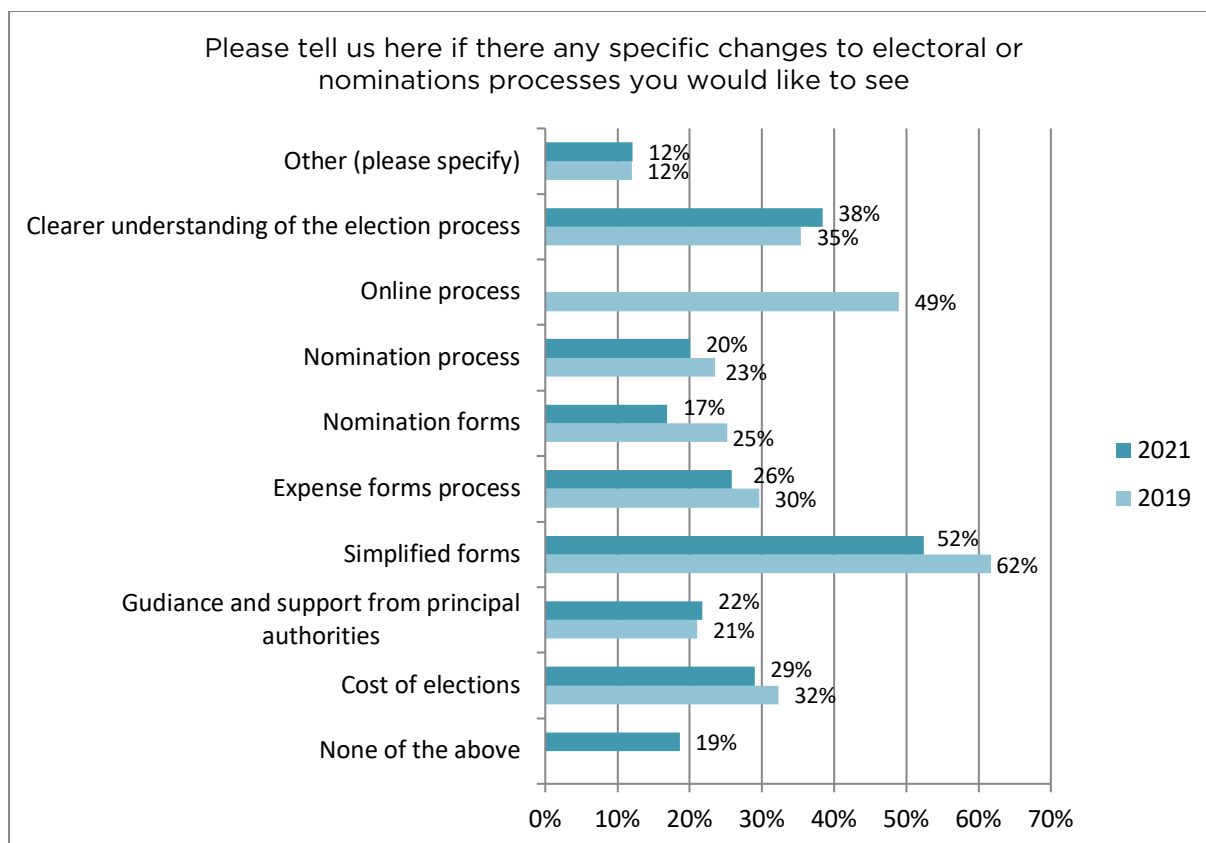
- There were decreases in the use of selection processes (33% to 25%); decrease in attempting to diversify the council (11% to 7%) and focusing on a specific skillset (13% to 8%).
- In 2021, 60% of local councils still rely on word of mouth, whilst 50% use social media to co-opt.

Other:

- 9% using notice boards.
- 8% used local press, magazines, newsletters.

How many of those elected in May were already councillors prior to the election?

	None	Up to 1/4	Up to 1/2	Up to 3/4	All of them
2021	10%	12%	13%	35%	29%
2019	1%	10%	12%	41%	36%

- In 2021, 64% of local councils reported that more than 3/4 of those elected were already councillors; a decrease from 77% in 2019.
- However, 10% of reporting local councils declared brand-new council; an increase from 1% in 2019.
- The increase in the proportion of local councils declaring the election of first-time councillors tells us that the promotion of this election cycle has engaged a significant number of individuals who have no previous council experience.

Please tell us here if there any specific changes to electoral or nominations processes you would like to see

Category	2021	2019
Other (please specify)	12%	12%
Clearer understanding of the election process	38%	35%
Online process		49%
Nomination process	20%	23%
Nomination forms	17%	25%
Expense forms process	26%	30%
Simplified forms	52%	62%
Gudiance and support from principal authorities	22%	21%
Cost of elections	29%	32%
None of the above	19%	

- There have been small decreases in the proportion of respondents asking for changes to nomination processes (23% to 20%) and nomination forms (25% to 17%) between 2019 and 2021.
- There was a bigger decrease in the proportion of local councils reporting the need for simplified forms, from 62% in 2019 to 52% in 2021. However, this is still the most important point of change to the election process for a majority of responding local councils.
- This shows a greater proportion of local councils are reporting that they would like to see the simplification of the nomination process and reduction in overall election costs.

Other — Online nomination forms:

- "The need to hand-deliver forms to the district council were a barrier during covid. There must be a modern way of achieving this."
- "There needs to be an online delivery of forms or at the very least the ability to submit forms in the town of the election, not 30 miles away."
- "The expectation that people are available to deliver the form to the offices of the District Council between the hours of 9 am and 5 pm on a weekday. This causes an issue with candidates who work or cannot drive. The electronic delivery of the form should be allowed."

Other — Raising the profile of local councils:

- "More information regarding the roles and purposes of town and parish councils - many get elected not understanding the limited powers as opposed to a principal authority, the roles of councillors as employers, etc."
- "Somehow raise the positive aspect of taking part in a local government initiative."

COUNTY ASSOCIATION SURVEY

Total responses: 19

How many inquorate councils are there in your county area?

42%

58%

- 0
- 1-9
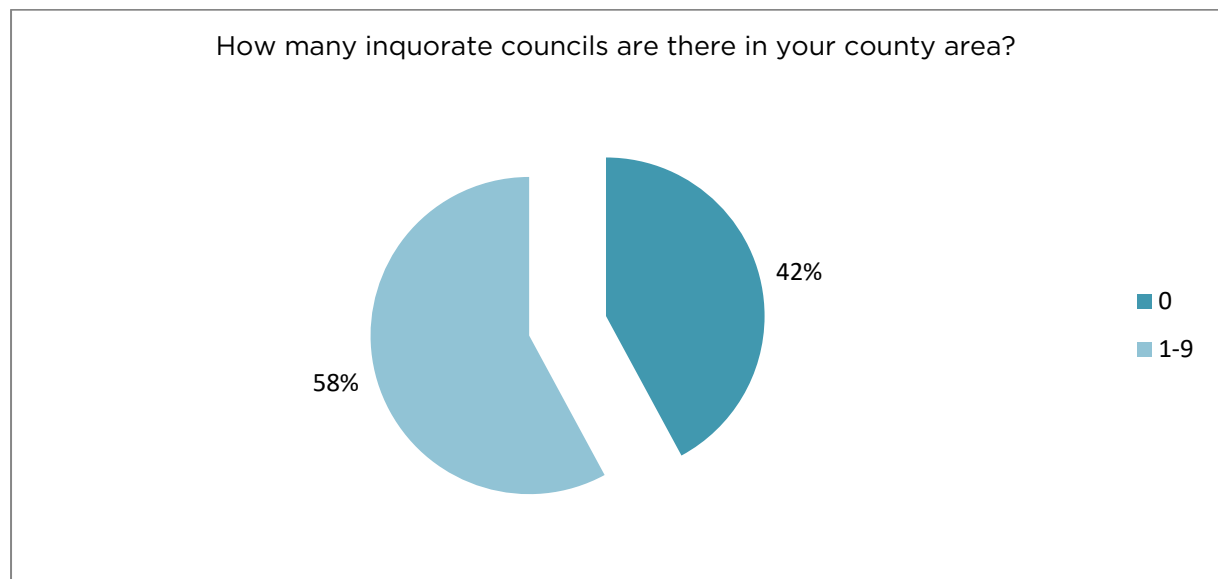
- 58% of reporting county associations reported that they had at least 1-9 inquorate local councils in their area
- The majority of responding county associations report at least 1 inquorate council which tells us there is a lack of democratic participation to promote effective local governance

Do your principal authorities absorb all elections costs in an all-out election?
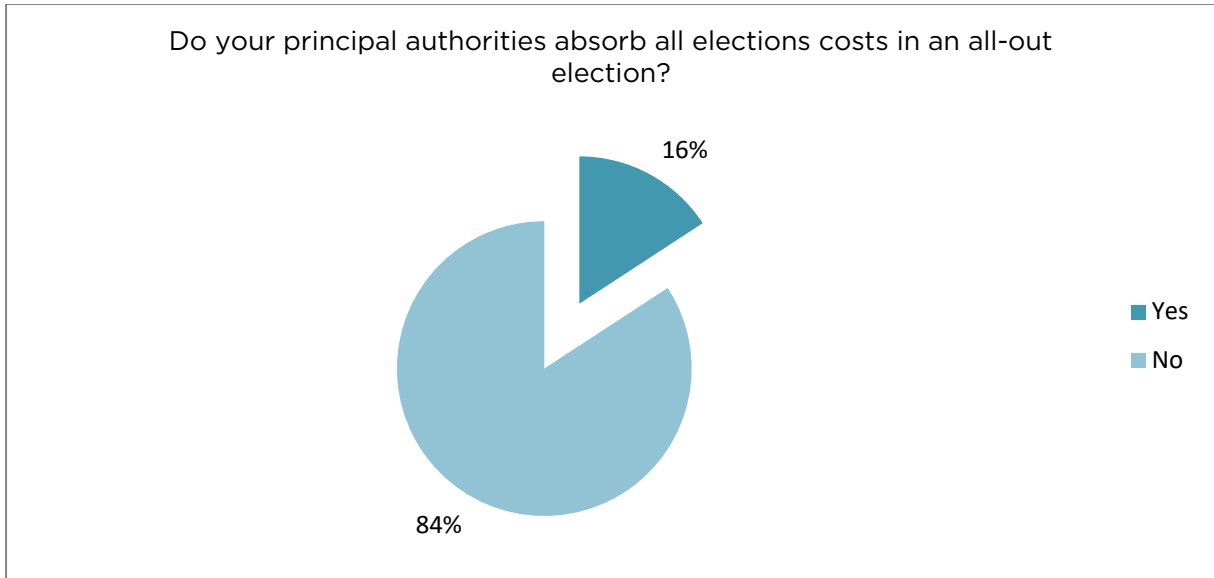
- 84% of county associations reported that principal authorities do not absorb all election costs in an all-out election

If not, on what basis do the principal authorities recover the cost?

Some county associations did report that their local authorities have specific processes for recovering costs:

- "A fee is set based on the number of the electorate."
- "Some recover the actual cost the following financial year. Others have an educated rounded figure which they invoice."
- "Town/parishes are recharged in the following financial year."
- "Full cost recovery for parish councils."
- "On a shared 50/50 basis between parish councils and principal authorities."
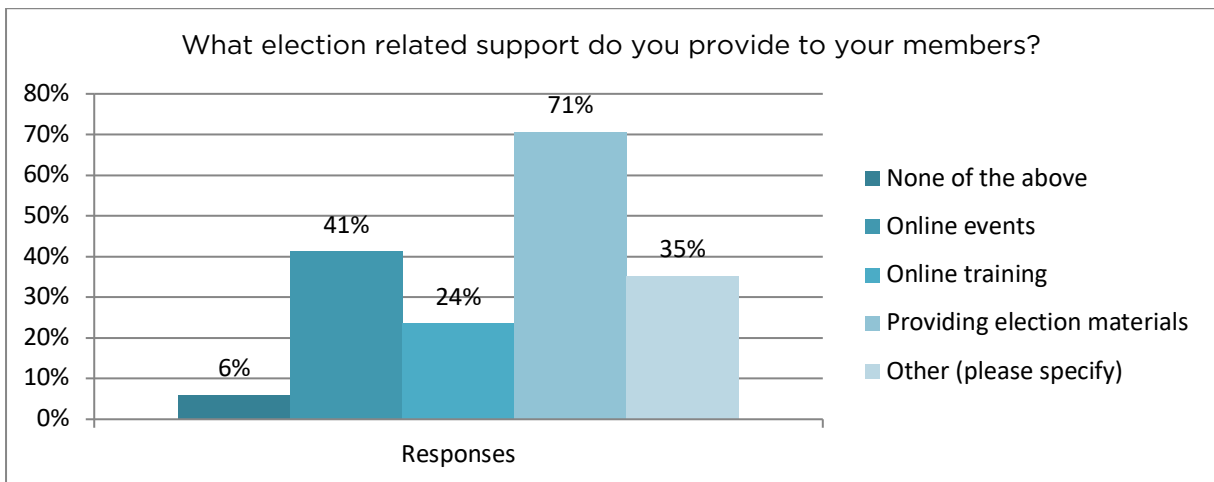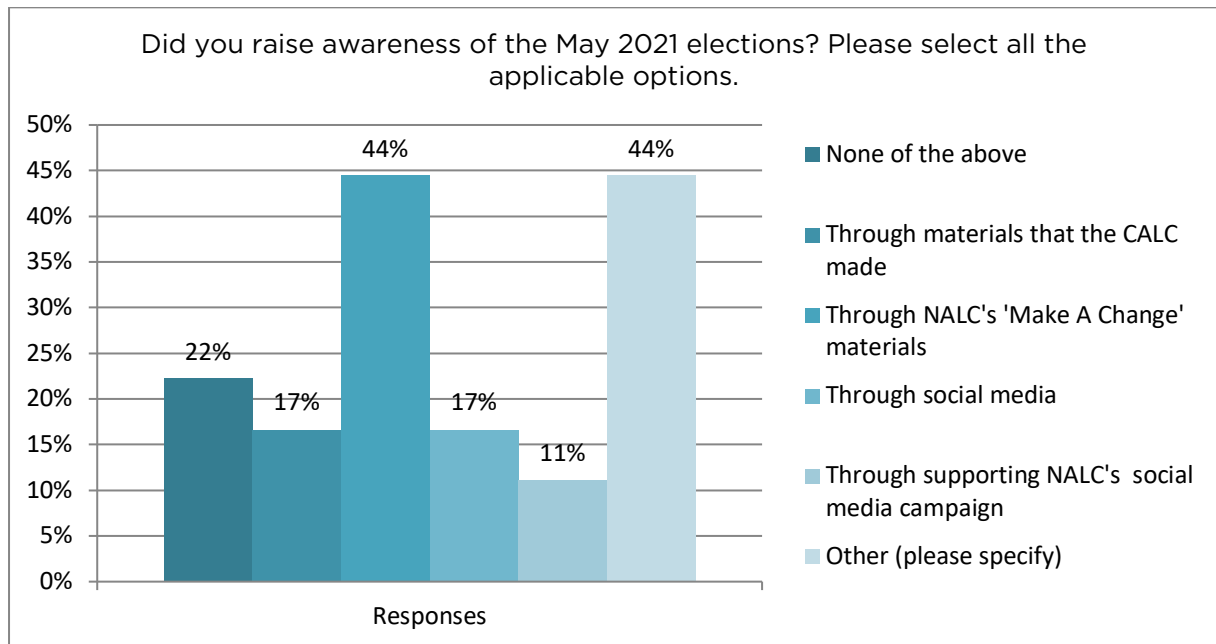

- 71% of reporting county associations provided election materials, 41% held online events and 24% provided online training.
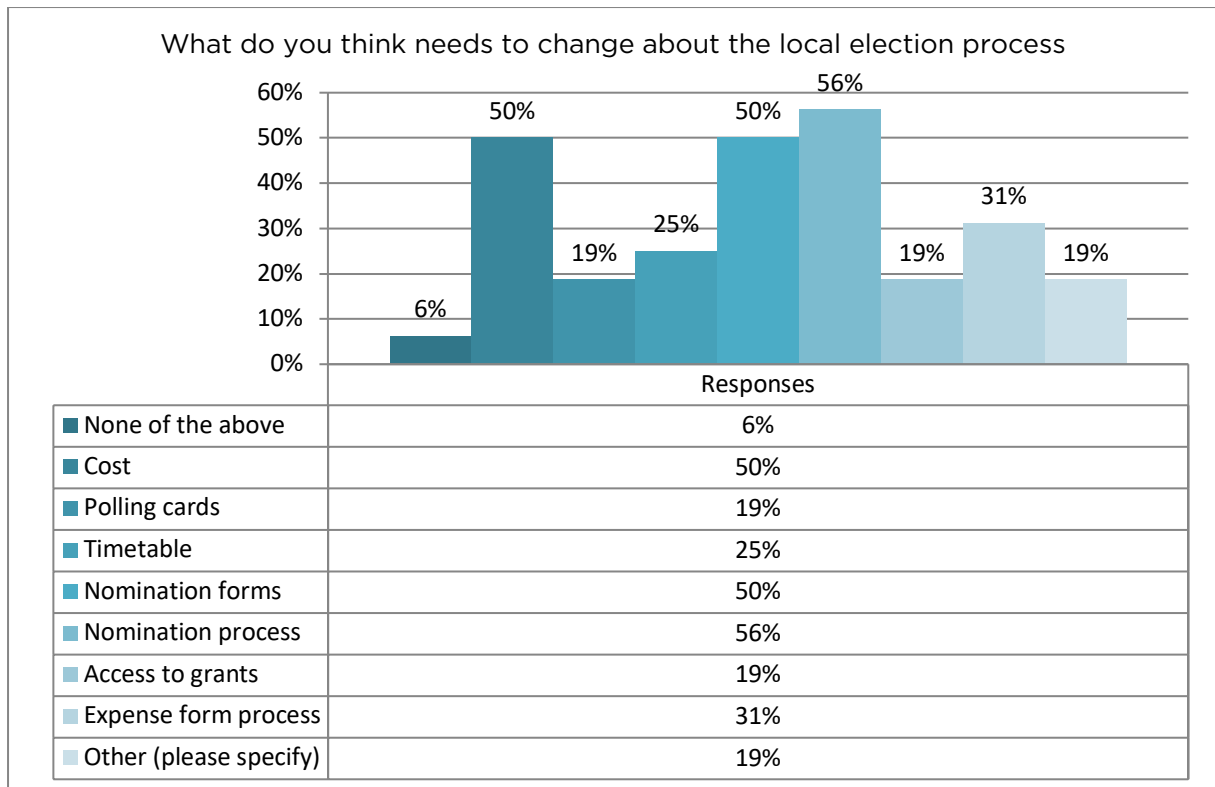
- Despite the move to virtual meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many county associations are still not providing online training to their local councils, however, a large majority provide physical materials.
- This suggests that county associations may lack the time, resources, or infrastructure to offer digital events or training.

Other:

- "Advice and support from county officers."
- "In-person training for prospective councillors."

Did you raise awareness of the May 2021 elections? Please select all the applicable options.

- 44% of reporting county associations used NALC's Make A Change materials to raise awareness of local elections.
- Only 17% of reporting local councils used social media to promote awareness of the elections; whilst 11% utilised NALC's Make A Change social media campaign.
- 22% of reporting county associations did not use any of the above methods to promote election awareness.

What do you think needs to change about the local election process

Responses	
■ None of the above	6%
■ Cost	50%
■ Polling cards	19%
■ Timetable	25%
■ Nomination forms	50%
■ Nomination process	56%
■ Access to grants	19%
■ Expense form process	31%
■ Other (please specify)	19%

- 56% of reporting county associations would like to see changes to the nomination process, a further 50% would like to see changes to the nomination forms.
- Financing was another point of change for many reporting county associations; 50% reported that they would like to see changes to costs, 31% asked for changes to expense form processes and 19% would like changes to accessing grants.

What has the effect of COVID-19 had on this election cycle?

- "Covid 19 depressed turnout on election day - which is normally low at the best of times. It caused a lot of stress for district council elections teams."

- "Campaigning difficult: some candidates reluctant to stand and/or campaign; benefited candidates and voters who use social media. No face-to-face meetings so publicity is confined to online meetings and material. Covid regulations were confusing at the time of elections: door-to-door campaigning allowed despite Covid restrictions; election date coincided with the requirement to return to face-to-face meetings."

- "Made voters feel unsafe to come to polling stations - many more postal votes than normal. Cost of running actual polling stations much higher to protect staff and public."

CONCLUSION

This report has analysed survey data from councillors, local councils, and county associations to provide insight into the key themes of local (parish and town) council elections that took place in May 2021. Furthermore, desktop research was conducted to complement data on the overall status of the local democratic process. In analysing the output data for this report, three key themes emerge campaign process, diversity, and democratic participation.

The diversity of local councillors has been a subject of our elections reports since they began in 2019. It was suggested that local councils, which are predominantly 'White British' are reflective of the electorate in the rural areas of England. However, it is worth noting that currently only 38% of our elected councillors identify as female and even fewer (4%) would qualify as a young councillor (18-34). As such, diversity is still a central tenet to the promotion of local elections, and we could see positive change through increased democratic participation in contested elections.

Democratic participation represents a mixed picture, since our last report in 2019. Whilst a minority of councillors still report that they were elected in contested elections (38%), this is a 9-percentage point increase from two years previous. Furthermore, 10% of responding local councils reported that all local council seats were filled by councillors who had not served before, a significant increase from 1% in 2019. Despite this positive movement, 59% of local councils reported vacancies after the elections (an increase from 34% in 2019), 44% reported the need to co-opt seats and 42% of county associations reported inquorate local councils within their boundaries. Several local councils require further support from county associations and principal authorities. A reported 22% of county associations did not raise awareness of local council elections in their boundaries.

The campaign process has become a more digital affair in recent years, especially with the need to socially distance due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, physical promotion is still favoured. Whilst 53% of local councils made use of Facebook, 59% still used physical notices to promote their elections. Furthermore, when needing to co-opt, local councils favoured word of mouth (60%) to social media (50%).

Finally, there are parts of the campaign in which increasing numbers of local councils would like to see changes, namely, to do with nomination administration and election costs. The former could benefit from a digital-first process as the current system requires in-person paper nominations supplied by principal authorities which is both time-consuming and carbon producing.

In conclusion, NALC makes several recommendations:

Councillors

- Raise awareness of local council elections and encourage more people to become a councillor by 'talent spotting' and asking them to stand for election in their local council
- Continue to raise awareness of the work of their local council including using social media and local council newsletters

Local councils

- Raise awareness of local council elections and encourage more people to stand for election using NALC's Make A Change materials, engaging with media, holding virtual events, and publishing information on candidates on their websites
- Review the annual budget of the local council to set aside funds for promotion and costs of elections, including by-elections
- Consider highlighting the work undertaken by local councils by applying for the Local Council Award Scheme

County associations

- Continue to utilise NALC's Make A Change materials to encourage more people to stand for elections in their local council; especially women, LGBT+, and younger candidates
- Work with principal authorities to promote local council elections in their area and capture accurate data
- Engage with regional and county media outlets to increase their information and coverage of local council elections

NALC

- Ensure that NALC's Make A Change campaign and materials meet the needs of councillors and local councils by incorporating results and feedback including from election surveys
- Provide county associations with access to media and communications training and support liaising with regional and county media outlets to promote local elections
- Lobby the Electoral Commission and UK Government to simplify and digitalise local elections

Local Government Association

- Ensure that all principal authorities are providing materials, support and training to local councils in their boundaries whilst also promoting these elections
- Encourage principal authorities to work together with county associations in providing election support and promotion

- Share best practice with NALC and ensure that LGA's Be A Councillor campaign links to and supports NALC's Make A Change campaign

National media

- Increase coverage of local councils including local elections to highlight the important work of local councils in local governance and communities

UK government

- Set up a National Democracy Fund to promote local council elections and encourage democratic participation
- Pilot digital voting in local council elections
- Work with NALC and other stakeholders to ensure that information about local councils is available including on GOV.UK and the Find Your Local Council page
- Ensure that data from local council elections is collated, published and easily accessible

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