

NALC PUBLISHES 2021 ELECTIONS SURVEY REPORT

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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 role in local governance and the delivery of public services. There are roughly 100,000 local councillors elected to represent their community and make decisions that will affect the well-being of their constituents. The most recent cycle of elections took place on 6 May 2021, in which 15% of local councils held scheduled or postponed elections. Following these elections, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) undertook a mixed-method survey of councillors, local councils and county associations between July and September 2021. Survey data were analysed in conjunction with data collected from principal authority websites to paint a broader picture of the 2021 local elections cycle. Three key themes emerge from this report: democratic participation, diversity, and campaign process.

Democratic participation

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 council seats were filled by councillors who had not served before, a significant increase from 1% in 2019. Despite this positive change, there are still obstacles to overcome. 59% of local councils reported seat vacancies after the elections, with 44% needing to co-opt seats. Many local councils require additional support from county associations and principal authorities: 22% of county associations still need to raise awareness of local council elections in their boundaries.

Diversity

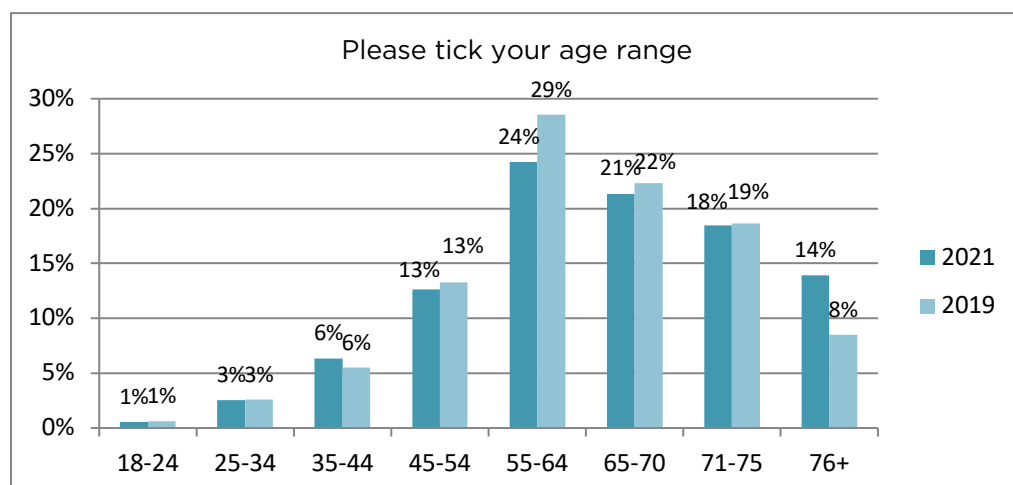
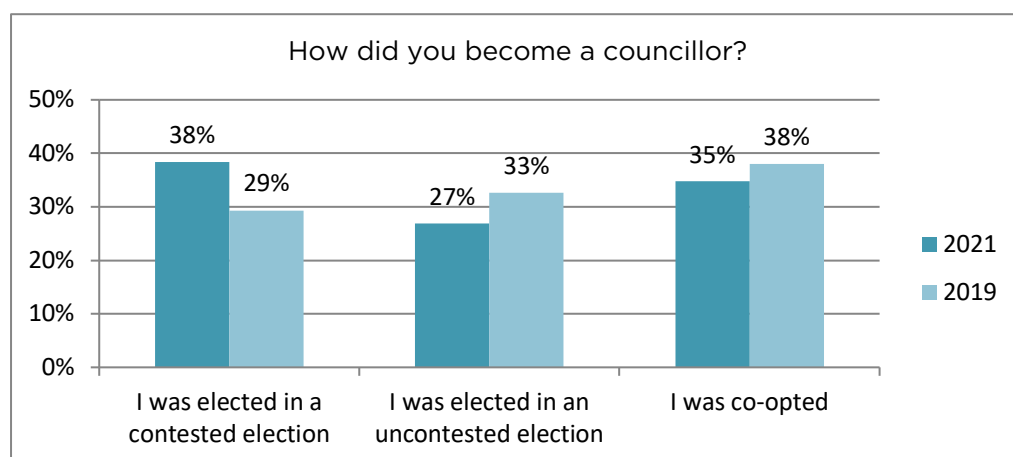
The demographics of our local councillors have changed since 2019. Responses suggest that our elected councillors are primarily of retirement age, 54% of respondents are aged 65+, whilst only 4% are aged 18-34. Furthermore, the overall proportion of first-time councillors has decreased from 30% in 2019 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 across principal authorities.

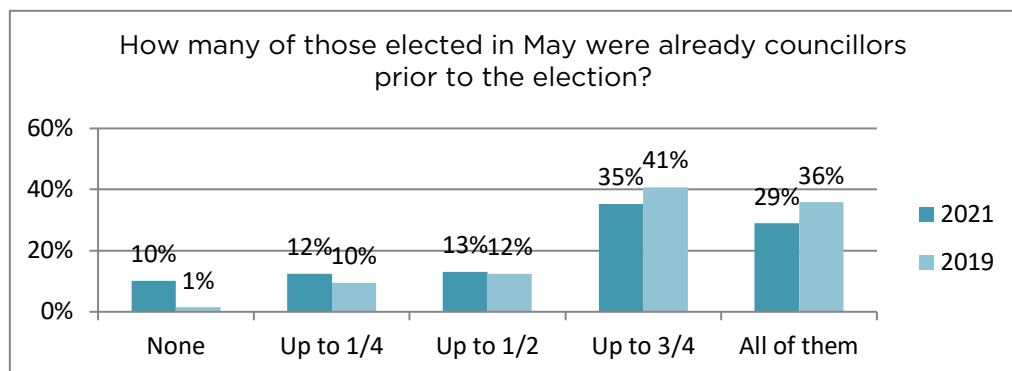
Campaign process

Elections in 2021 were hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced in-person campaigning, and physical events, and potentially lowered turnout. However, increased social media and virtual events have positively affected 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 election promotion, and only 7% used virtual events. Furthermore, calls for the simplification and cost-reduction of elections from 2019 are echoed in our 2021 report. These suggestions could increase nomination interest and, by extension, the number of contested elections.

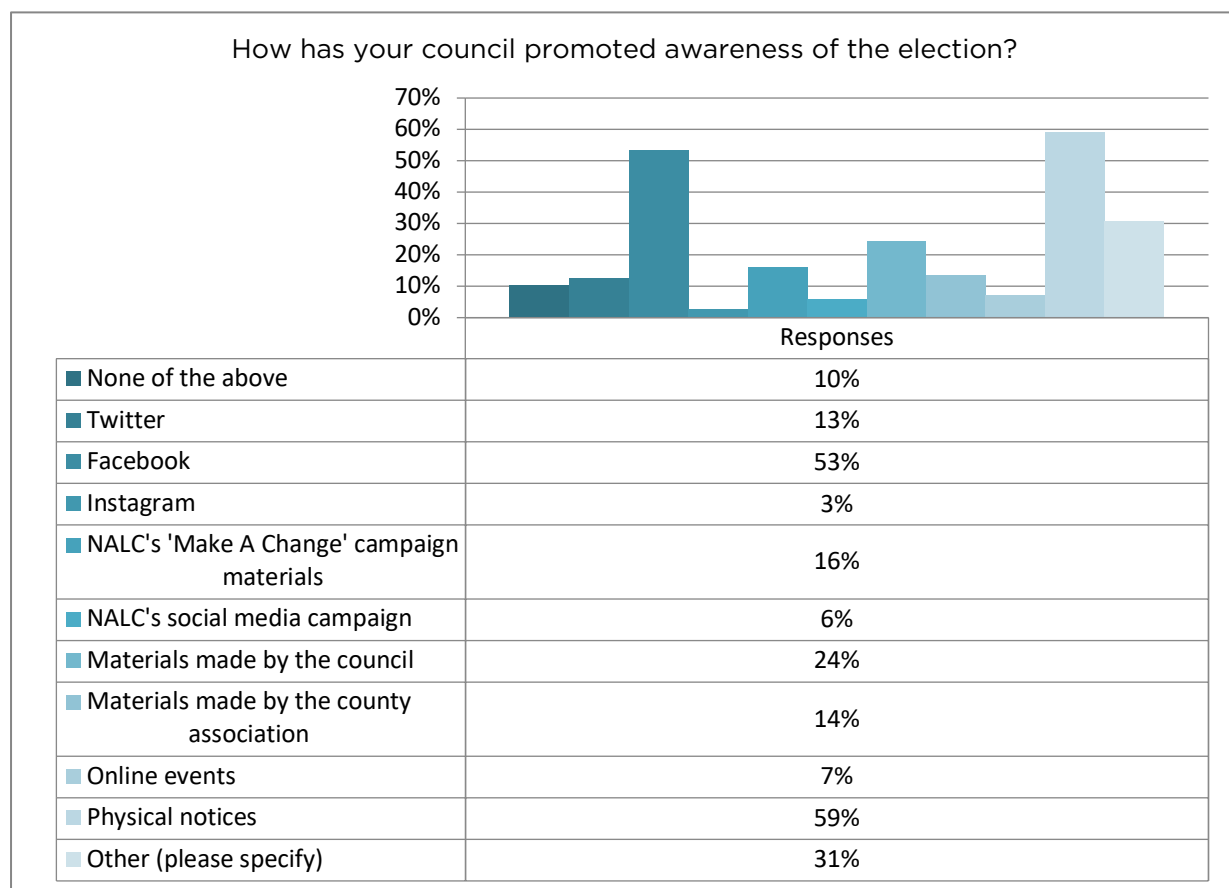
Graphs

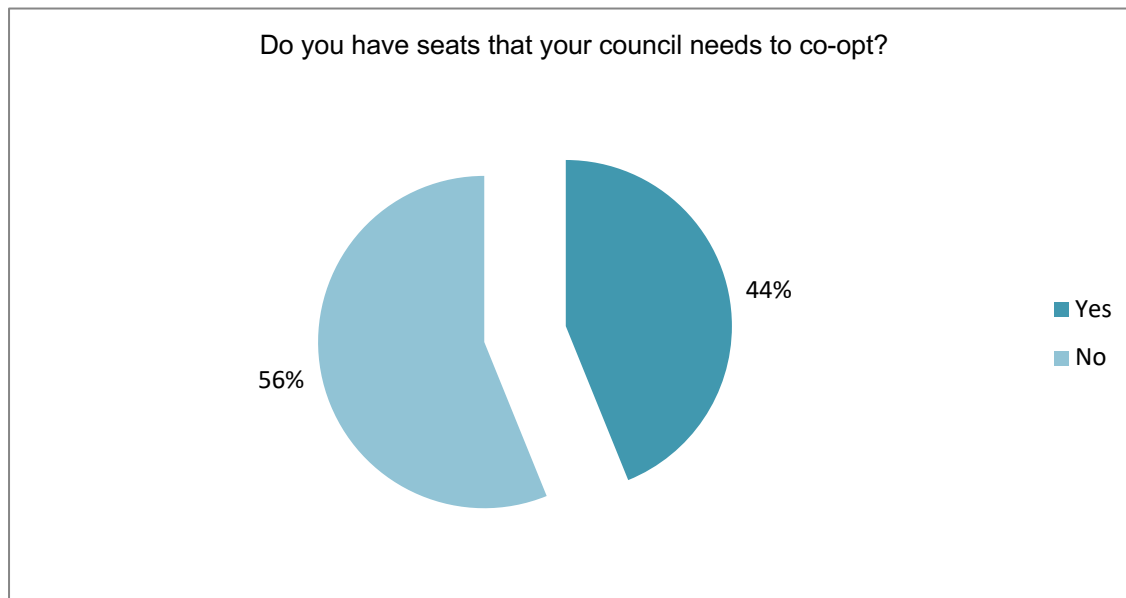
Councillors:



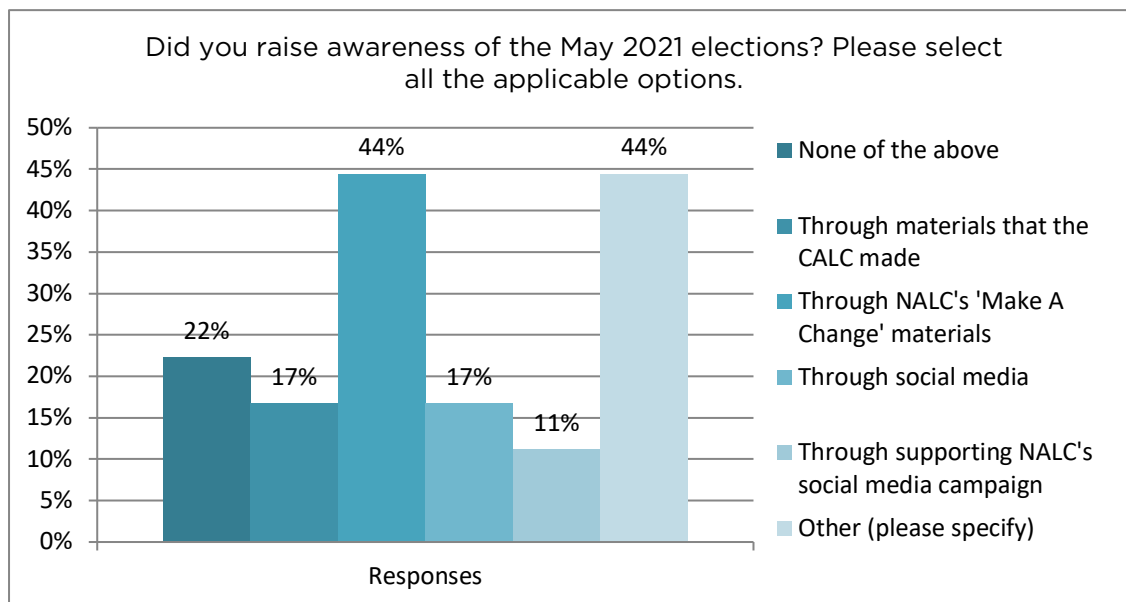


Local councils:





County associations:



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 data.
- NALC should provide county associations with access to media training and lobby the UK Government to simplify and digitalise 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 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.