

Navigating changes in local councils post-May 2026 elections

NAVCA and ACRE have produced this resource as part of a project supporting the VCFSE sector and forming unitary and strategic authorities to work together through devolution and local government reorganisation.

Introduction

Following the May 2026 local elections, the political landscape for councils in England has changed significantly. The political party system has continued to fragment and there has been a substantial turnover in councillors, with thousands elected for the first time. The largest changes are the increase in the total number of councils now with no overall control, and the election of 1451 councillors for Reform UK, who took control of 14 new councils. These changing circumstances have implications for how local infrastructure organisations [LIOs] work with councils.

Implications for local infrastructure

As the May elections resulted in a large number of councillors elected for the first time and therefore with no previous experience of local government and its responsibilities, many local council officers will currently be spending a significant amount of time supporting and providing induction for these new councillors. This is hugely challenging for all concerned, but it also creates an opportunity for LIOs to build relationships with these new councillors.

Other areas that have previously experienced a large influx of new councillors recommend:

- spending time building relationships with new councillors
- offer support – either formal or informal – to relevant council staff
- offer to provide training and induction for new councillors on the VCSE sector in the local area and the role and value of local infrastructure
- be able to explain what the VCSE sector delivers on behalf of the council and its outcomes – both through the formal delivery of public services and informal contributions to the wider determinants of health, well-being and isolation etc.
- recognise that new councillors are unlikely to know most things and offer to help them learn, particularly around complex issues
- recognise that many council staff will be currently spending additional time working with new councillors, placing extra pressures on them, and that decision-making may well be delayed.

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Councils with No Overall Control

The outcome of the local elections is having big effects on most councils where elections took place – 136 local authority areas. There are now 64 councils from this group with no overall control, bringing the total number of councils in England with no overall control to 162, 50.9% of all councils. This includes councils where there is a minority administration.

The fragmentation of the political system following these elections is reflected in some council areas with no overall control, where three or more parties will need to work together to pass business [this includes residents associations and other independents]. This means that a lot of councils may face inertia with an inability to pass resolutions, make decisions or allocate spending, especially if there is animosity between the different political parties that cannot be overcome.

Whilst previously many no overall control councils have been able to establish a Cabinet / Committee system and have a good track record of getting business done, it is unclear in the current political turbulence whether this will continue. You can read more about no overall control from the [Local Government Information Unit](#). The LGA provides additional support for councils in no overall control, as do the different political groups within the LGA. The national parties mostly require any local working agreements to be signed off by their central offices.

This situation will also be tested before the end of May when all councils need to hold an annual general meeting, before which a leader and cabinet or committee structures will need to be in place. This timetable also puts significant pressure on council officers to ensure that this happens.

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Working with Reform UK

Following the May 2026 elections Reform UK took leadership of 14 councils and is the largest party in another 14, with 1451 new councillors elected. Newly elected Reform UK councillors may not have expected to be elected, and the group may have no formal organisation such as a leader so there may be a delay in appointments to key positions. Many Reform UK councillors have limited or no previous experience of elected roles, serving on local [parish or town councils] or in other forms of governance. However, they come from a broad range of backgrounds and experiences including of the voluntary sector. However, Reform UK council groups may often be led by or have considerable representation from ex-Conservative councillors with years of council experience.

Experience following the May 2025 local elections is mixed. Although new Reform UK councillors may have little or no understanding of how a council operates and delivers its services, or the relationships between councils, local infrastructure and the VCSE sector, most want to learn. There are some who want to challenge everything or play out more extremely views from the beginning.

The importance of communities has been a common narrative in Reform UK local campaigns. This is obviously a shared interest with the VCSE and may give some common ground to start engagement.

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Building relationships

If you have good working relationships with council officers, particularly at director level, contact them first to discuss the most effective strategic approach to engage with the new councillors of all parties. Also get guidance on how to engage with any new leaders and portfolio holders.

Continue to work with council staff to share information, demonstrate outcomes and impact for local infrastructure and the VCSE, and for mutual support.

Find out what new councillors are interested in. Ask the questions:

- What do you want to achieve for communities?
- What are your outcomes?
- How can we work together to make these outcomes happen?

Demonstrate what local infrastructure and the VCSE can contribute to council priorities and set up briefings and visits on an ongoing basis.

Proactively seek to meet new portfolio holders particularly for adult social care, children's services, public health and communities, to introduce the work and role of the VCSE. Aim to turn these into regular meetings.

Work with council officials in relation to addressing potentially difficult issues for Reform UK councillors such as migrant communities, EEDI, net zero etc., and use them to find out the situation and approaches that might be taken by the council, before VCSE organisations raise these issues directly with elected members.

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Working with the VCSE sector

Keep the local VCSE sector informed as much as possible.

Create opportunities for the VCSE sector to meet together to discuss relevant issues and ask questions.

Plan to demonstrate the impact and value of local infrastructure and the VCSE sector, and show how they can contribute to achieving outcomes for communities.

Consider creating a voluntary sector manifesto that clearly demonstrates what the VCSE contributes, and what it can offer to help the council deliver its services and outcomes.

It is never too early to start planning for a re-tender of contracts, particularly as the current situation suggests these may become riskier.

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Learning from experience

Incoming Reform UK council groups have often had little clarity on policies and objectives with the initial focus still on cutting waste and controlling the flags flown on council buildings. In some councils, lots of meetings have been cancelled meaning that funding decisions including those affecting LIOs and the VCSE have been delayed further. There have been a few examples of deliberate delays to decision making, leading to some levels of political inertia. A current example of this sort of tactic is the decision by Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk county councils to mount legal challenges to LGR. Be prepared for political in-fighting within the Reform UK group.

Some officials have needed to provide additional support for elected members to enable councillors to take decision and do their work. Resourcing these officials with relevant information could prove very useful.

Some new councillors have struggled to understand their statutory duties – something to be cognisant of and to aim for clarity in explanations about the activities and work of the VCSE sector and in relation to service delivery on behalf of the council.

Some council staff will be anxious about job roles, with a chilling effect on those working on climate or any aspect of EEDI in Reform UK led councils. In some instances, council officials have had a poor experience such as being told their work is worthless. In other areas there have been attempts to cut what is considered to be unnecessary council spending, which has had various impacts on the VCSE sector, and may result in vital services being cut.

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What you can do now

- Listen: to new councillors, council officers, communities and VCSE organisations.
- Keep track of what new councillors are saying and doing whilst not deferring from LIO and VCSE sector strategic priorities.
- Maintain key relationships: speak to and continue to work closely with council directors, heads of service and officers to look at how to build the understanding of newly elected councillors.
- Consider what may need to be reframed or re-expressed in terms of presentation but not strategy or outcomes.
- Build relationships with Reform UK councillors wherever possible, particularly in areas that currently have only a few councillors.

Find out more

For forming unitary and strategic authorities

To find out more about how you can work with the VCFSE sector and how local infrastructure can help you to do this, [contact your local NAVCA member](#) and, for rural issues, [contact your local ACRE member](#).

For VCFSE organisations

To get more support on local government reorganisation and devolution, [contact your local NAVCA member](#) and, for rural issues, [contact your local ACRE member](#).