



**Getting involved as
a Local Councillor**

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WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE INVOLVED LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

A good place to start to get involved in politics is in the area you live and worship in.

Christians can make an impact in their local community by getting engaged the local authority/council because it provides so many local services that affect all our lives.

Things like education, social services and health, housing and regeneration, waste collection, maintenance of roads and street lighting, arts, sports and culture,

community safety and crime reduction, planning and licensing regulation – all these need Christians to help serve and lead. Indeed, in Britain today many of these services are often provided in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, which includes ‘faith groups’. There are also opportunities to influence decisions such as whether a strip club gets permission to operate, or another establishment is licensed to sell alcohol.

When I got elected the first thing I was able to do was initiate prayers in the Town Hall and as a result was able to lead a staff member to Christ, who now worships at my local church. We also now have a designated room for prayer.

Local Councillor

HOW IS LOCAL GOVERNMENT ORGANISED AND FUNDED?

There are two main ways that local government is organised, depending on where you live: one-tier or two-tier systems. There have been several reforms over the past forty years, leading to different arrangements in different areas.

In the larger towns and cities of England, and in some small counties, there is just one level called a **unitary authority** (or a metropolitan district council). They are responsible for all local services. Some towns also have their own directly elected mayor. In London, each borough is a unitary authority, but the Greater London Authority (the Mayor and Assembly) provides London-wide government with responsibility for certain services like transport and police.

In other areas of the country there is a two-tier system, with **county councils** at the top and **district councils** for each area within the county. These are supported by parish/town councils at local level. Powers and responsibility for local services are divided up between the tiers. Each level holds elections for councillors.

Regardless of the exact structure, Councils tend to run on a system similar to that of central government, with an executive (or ‘cabinet’) to determine policy and to make decisions, and with other councillors to scrutinise or examine them in detail. Normally the largest party gets to form the executive and thus to set the key policies. Councillors from all the parties will work on committees to scrutinise the work of the full time officers who are employed by the council, and to vote on decisions at council meetings.

A large proportion of the work councils do is actually determined by central government, within the powers laid down under various Acts of Parliament. Councils are funded by a combination of Central Government grants and Council Tax - a locally set tax based on house values (although this only makes up about 25 per cent of a

council's income). The rest comes from business rates and fees and charges for services (such as parking fees and penalties). If a council wants to increase the money available to spend on services, it has to increase Council Tax. If the tax is thought to be too high by Central Government, they have the right to 'cap' it.

Council Tax is collected by the local authority, but other bodies such as the Greater London Authority, parish councils, passenger transport authorities, fire authorities and national parks will then take a proportion for the services they provide.

Local councils vary in their style and approach to delivering central government programmes, and it is here that local knowledge and commitment make a real difference. The main link between local authorities and central government in England is the Department for Communities and Local Government. However, other departments, such as the Department for Education and Skills, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and the Home Office, are also concerned with various local government functions.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, local authorities now deal mainly with the devolved Parliament and Assemblies. There is more on the structure and responsibilities of local government in the Christians in Politics resource **making contact with your elected representatives**.

WHAT DO LOCAL COUNCILLORS DO?

Local councillors oversee the administrative affairs of a local authority, through setting the budget, developing and reviewing policies, and ensuring that there is strong community leadership and engagement. This normally happens at meetings held within the council offices, such as committees and full council meetings.

Councillors also advocate on behalf of the citizens in the Ward (the local area they have been elected to represent). Most hold up to three drop-in advice surgeries each month. Surgeries are a chance for residents to meet them and discuss their problems or concerns face to face. They may also need to spend time visiting constituents in their homes. On top of this they also deal with letters, emails and phone calls from constituents. When dealing with casework or council business, councillors may need to meet with council staff (the paid professionals who actually run council services day to day). These meetings, and any visits to council offices, will often need to be during the working day. You can sometimes negotiate time off from work for this.

Finally, local councillors do need to work to get elected. Having a good reputation for serving in your community is a big help, but you will also have to spend time campaigning, canvassing on doorsteps, and getting involved in the activities of your chosen political party.

Councillors are not paid a salary for the work that they do, but there is a system of allowances and expenses to help them cover their costs. A typical councillor might put in 20 hours per week across all aspects of their role (and some do much more!) Clearly this is a big commitment, especially alongside work and/or family life, and one which requires prayerful consideration before taking up the challenge to serve and lead in this way.

HOW CAN I BECOME A LOCAL COUNCILLOR?

Most councillors are affiliated to a political party, which present and support candidates for elections and develop policies for their councillors to pursue if they are successful. Running an election campaign can be expensive and also requires a lot of time, which means that you will need a team of volunteers around you. The three main UK political parties (Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats) all control councils in various parts of the country. Some people also choose to stand as an independent or for one of the smaller parties, and nationalist parties play an increasing role especially in Wales and Scotland.

For many Christians, choosing a party to join can feel like a daunting task. We should probably not worry quite so much! The parties are the life-blood of our political system, and despite their flaws and failings on the whole they are a democratic institution that we need to support. Political parties at a local level are community organisations staffed by volunteers and focussed on working for local people; this is an environment in which Christians will often feel quite at home and able to make a positive contribution. You do not have to 'sell your soul' to join a party; there is lively internal debate within all the parties and you are entitled to your own opinion. This is a hugely important area for Christians to have an influence and is only accessible to those 'inside the system'.

Very few people will approach us and ask if they can stand as a candidate; it is up to us to find people. So where should we look?

Local election manual of major UK political party

You will need to look at the policies of the party both locally and nationally. You do not have to agree with every detail of party policy, but you do have to feel able to broadly support its aims and ideas. You also need to consider the political situation locally. If you have not previously been committed to any particular party it may make more sense to join one which is strong in your area, you can feel comfortable in supporting, and with whom you stand a realistic chance of being elected.

Once you are a party member you will be expected to attend political meetings, training, and events. It is important to get fully immersed in as many activities as possible, in order to start building relationships and trust. If your desire is to become a councillor, let your fellow party members know. All the parties are on the look-out for good candidates, and once you have some gained some experience of supporting others in a political campaign it is entirely possible even for relative newcomers to be given a chance to stand.

To become a candidate you have to go through a selection process. This varies from party to party, but it normally involves being approved as a potential candidate, applying for a vacant opportunity, and then being interviewed by members in the ward you wish to represent. The 3 main UK political parties all have a Christian organisation affiliated to them, and these can be an invaluable source of help and advice for Christians who feel a sense of calling into local politics.

HOW ELSE CAN I GET INVOLVED IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Local government needs local people. Residents can raise issues and get involved in local decision making in a variety of ways, not just by voting in elections (Incidentally, you must be on the electoral register to be able to vote).

There are usually a number of meetings in the local authority that are open to the general public. These are advertised on the council's website. If there is a particular issue that you and others are concerned with, you can start by writing to your councillor(s) or speaking to them at one of their surgeries. If the issue is supported by a number of local people, you can present petitions to the full council, to your councillor, to the Chief Executive or to the Mayor.

The council often consults the public before making important decisions, or involves them directly in local issues such as deciding where smaller sums of money should be spent to improve local amenities.

WHAT OTHER ORGANISATIONS EXIST IN THE AREA OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Alongside direct and indirect engagement with local authorities, there are also many other places where a Christian input can make a difference:

Residents associations

These groups represent the concerns of residents to local authorities. If you don't have one, you can easily get a group of residents together and set one up. Also, if you live in council accommodation you can normally get assistance from the local authority to start one and this includes training.

Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education

Every Local Education Authority (LEA) is required by law to have a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE). A SACRE is composed of four representative groups (or three in Wales): Christian and other religious denominations, the Church of England (except in Wales), teachers' associations, and elected councillors. The responsibilities of the SACRE are:

- to provide advice to the LEA on all aspects of its provision for teaching religion in its schools (this does not include Voluntary Aided Schools);
- to decide whether the LEA's Agreed Syllabus for RE needs to be reviewed and to require the LEA does so;
- to provide advice to the LEA on Collective Worship in its schools (this does not include Voluntary Aided or Voluntary Controlled Schools);
- to consider any requests from Headteachers to hold Collective Worship that is not of a broadly Christian character;
- to advise on matters relating to training for teachers in RE and Collective Worship.

Christians will often be well informed on these issues and have connections with local churches, which equips you to make a positive contribution to the day to day work of

the SACRE. On the rare occasions when more controversial issues concerning religious freedom or teaching do come up, having served in this way will mean that you are well placed to have a voice at an early stage.

Civic Forums

The London Civic Forum (LCF) is a network of 1300 full member organisations and associate individual members, from the capital's private, public and not-for-profit sectors. Their membership covers a wide range of community organisations, Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, faith groups, disabled people's organisations, young people's organisations, older people's groups, disabled and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people's groups. Members are based across all of Greater London in every London borough and include colleges, hospitals, trade unions, chambers of commerce, large corporates, small consultancies, advice providers, campaign groups, big charities, local strategic partnerships, community policy consultative groups, training providers, helplines, museums, libraries, theatres, city farms, housing associations, social enterprises etc. The Civic Forum brings these groups together in order to strengthen civil society. They work in partnership with other umbrella or second tier organisations in London and closely work with institutions that have responsibility for the governance of London.

Other areas may not have organisations on quite this scale, but smaller bodies with similar objectives do exist in other parts of the country. Again, the internet is a great place to start searching for what is going on near you.



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