

## **2007 ENGLISH LOCAL ELECTIONS**

A briefing from the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church

Local council elections are taking place in England on Thursday 3 May for all metropolitan boroughs, and almost all district councils and unitary authorities. There are also some local mayoral elections. There are no county council or London borough elections this year.

District councils are the lowest tier of local government in areas that have county councils. District councils are responsible for local planning housing, local highways, building regulation, environmental health, recreation, cultural matters and refuse collection. Metropolitan borough and unitary authority councils are in place in areas where there is one tier of local government, and they have responsibility for all of the above, plus education, social services, transport, strategic planning, fire services, consumer protection, refuse disposal, smallholdings and libraries.

This document is designed to provide voters with a guide to the responsibilities of local councils, to help people know what they are voting for.

Local authorities, possibly even more than central government, have a direct effect on our lives. Whilst strategic policies may be set by central government, local government is responsible for carrying out many of those policies at a local level. Councils do have some control over spending priorities in their particular authority.

The issue in local elections is not about how the country is run as a whole, but about how our children are educated, how our elderly are cared for, what provision is made for homeless people, what happens to our rubbish, where the planners let us build homes, offices and factories, whether we have enough open space, where our children play and how we get around.

Local elections are often seen as a test of the government in power, or the performance of the major parties in Westminster. Before they vote, Christians will want to think about the principles on which the different political parties base their policies – but remember that these elections could deliver real change in how your local authority deals with people experiencing disadvantage in your neighbourhood.

Baptists, Methodists and United Reformed Church members are active in all mainstream political parties, and those who are not active vote for a variety of parties. This is as it should be: Christians can agree that God calls us to care for those in need in society, but may disagree on the way to go about this.

Recently there has been growing support for political parties that advocate policies of hatred and fear of racial, religious or other minorities. The Methodist and United

Reformed Churches have made statements against these views, as they are incompatible with the Gospel of Christ. The Methodist Church has set up a website *Countering Political Extremism*, which has more information on what to do if you have concerns about the views of some candidates standing for election in your areas. See [www.methodist.org.uk](http://www.methodist.org.uk) (enter Site Ref code: NE 160 404).

The following pages contain lists of topics that local councils have responsibility for, and are accompanied by some questions that could be used to quiz a candidate. If you get canvassed before the election, you might want to think about which of these areas you are most concerned about, and see what your candidates' opinions are.

Elections to Scottish Councils, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are also taking place on 3 May 2007. For more information visit [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk)

### **Community Relations & Democracy**

All candidates

- What plans do you have to improve community cohesion and integration in our area?
- What should the council do to support young adults in our area?
- How would you work to eliminate overt and covert racism from public life, especially surrounding local election campaigns?
- How would you improve popular engagement with political processes? In particular, what would you do to persuade more people to vote at local elections?

### **Council Tax**

All candidates

- What policy would you pursue with regard to the lowest and highest council tax bands?
- How would this improve the living standards in our community?
- What is the most important benefit for the community from council tax revenue?

### **Economic Development**

All candidates, although district councils are not responsible for strategic planning

- How would you go about attracting more jobs to this area?
- What kind of jobs would you like to see here?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of any specific regeneration proposal in our area?
- What type of shops would you like to see in our area? How important is it to retain a local post office or local branches of banks?
- How would your party encourage credit unions to help those who do not have the security to borrow from banks, who might otherwise go to loan sharks?

### **Education**

Only a responsibility of metropolitan borough and unitary authority councils

- What are your priorities and values for our local schools?

- What can be done to make education more attractive to disaffected or low-achieving young people?
- What place do schools have in the spiritual development of children and young people?
- How can churches and other faith communities contribute?
- How would you promote and encourage adult learning courses and use of public libraries?
- What would you do to maintain and improve local museums and cultural heritage sites?

### **Environmental Issues**

All candidates; district councils are responsible for rubbish collection but not for its disposal

- What are your targets for recycling household waste? How would you achieve this?
- What proposals do you have to limit the amount of waste being sent to landfill?
- What measures would you like the Council and its offices to implement, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions?
- What would you do to improve the cleanliness and appearance of open spaces such as public parks and gardens?

### **Housing**

All candidates

- What is the price of an average three-bedroom family home in this area? What is the average income in this area?
- How should the needs of key workers be balanced against others with housing needs?
- How can the council help first time buyers get on the property ladder?
- Is there more the council could be doing to tackle homelessness problems in our neighbourhood?

### **Leisure**

All candidates

- Would you ensure that local swimming pools and recreation grounds are not closed?
- How would you support schemes like toy libraries?

### **Licensing (Alcohol and Gambling)**

All candidates

- Local councils now have the power to regulate licensing for premises serving alcohol and hosting gambling. How do you think they should exercise this power in our area?
- What are your party's plans for tackling drinking problems that leads to anti-social behaviour?
- Do you think the Council's current gambling licensing policy is helpful? How would you work to reduce problem gambling?
- What is your position on a specific proposal for our area?

## **Planning**

All candidates

- If you were elected, how would you approach planning matters?
- Do you think there should be more houses/business premises/ industrial development in our neighbourhood?
- Would you want to see more or fewer planning restrictions in our area?
- How should planning policies support people who want to live in an environmentally friendly way?

## **Social Services**

Only a responsibility of metropolitan borough and unitary authority councils

- How would you improve the Council's service provision to the older and housebound people?
- What support would you give to children at risk and their parents or carers?
- What would you do to improve support for disabled people?
- Current policy means that unsuccessful asylum seekers who cannot return to their home country are neither entitled to state benefits nor allowed to work. How should the local authority support such people in this area?

## **Transport**

District councils are only responsible for local highways

- What are your views on increasing public transport services? What is your position on any road-building schemes in our area?
- Can you think of a way to improve the quality of service of public transport which would cut down on greenhouse gas emissions?
- Is enough being done to promote safety issues, particularly in the road and rail sectors, and involving children and young people?
- What is your attitude to speed limits and traffic calming measures in our area?

This document has been prepared by the Joint Public Issues Team on behalf of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church.  
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