

Questions for 2017 local election candidates on key humanist issues



The next local elections in England and Wales are on Thursday 4 May 2017. The following questions will help you identify where your candidates stand on key humanist issues.

'Faith' school admissions

Will your party ensure that all new and existing schools are fully inclusive, with no religious selection in their admissions?

- Councils have control over the admission arrangements of a large number of 'faith' schools.
- They can also influence decisions over which new schools are built in their area.
- New and existing schools should be open to all children in a local area and should not discriminate on religious grounds.
- More than 1.2 million places at state schools are subject to religious discrimination.
- Religious selection reduces the access of local families to their schools.
- Parents are often forced to lie about their religion or attend church just to get their children into a local school.
- Religious selection segregates children along religious, ethnic, and socio-economic lines.

Humanism in local RE syllabuses

Will your party ensure that non-religious perspectives, such as Humanism, are included in locally agreed RE syllabuses?

- RE syllabuses are frequently set by local authority bodies (called standing advisory councils for religious education, or SACREs) comprising representatives from the local authority, teacher organisations, religious groups, and humanists.
- Currently, some SACREs exclude Humanism from the syllabus and do not allow humanists to be represented.
- This is despite the fact that over two-thirds of young people say they are not religious.
- Religious and non-religious worldviews should be included on an equal footing in RE syllabuses so that pupils can learn about a range of different beliefs, while developing their own.

Prayers at council meetings

Will your party end the practice of saying Christian prayers in local council meetings?

- In 2012 the High Court ruled that prayers as part of a formal council meeting is unlawful under the Local Government Act 1972, although subsequent legislation has re-legalised the

practice.

- This tradition is archaic and inappropriate and should be abandoned.
- Councillors from all religious and non-religious backgrounds should feel equally welcome and included in council meetings.

Human rights and equality

Will your party ensure that all religious organisations providing contracted public services do not discriminate on the grounds of religion, and no public posts are reserved exclusively for religious people?

- Religious organisations are not currently bound by the Human Rights Act 1998 when providing public services under contract, and have important exemptions from the Equality Act 2010. This allows them to discriminate in employment and service delivery on the grounds of religion, even when working to provide a public service.
- Councils should work to ensure that all religious organisations providing public services abide by the tenets of the Human Rights Act and Equality Act in the same way a public authority must.
- Many publicly funded posts are also currently subject to unjustified religious discrimination, such as pastoral support roles in hospitals and prisons. These posts should not be unfairly reserved for people of particular religions.
- Parties should commit to keeping the Human Rights Act and remaining a party to the European Convention on Human Rights. Doing otherwise would endanger the human rights of millions of people.

In addition to the issues set out above, many of the areas that the BHA campaigns on, such as assisted dying, abortion law, and the abolition of the Lords Spiritual, are national campaigns and require new legislation to be passed by Parliament. However, it is still worthwhile to question and lobby local council candidates on these issues too, as most councillors represent national parties, often attend national party conferences, and play an important part in shaping what policies those parties adopt.

Background to Council elections

The next local elections in England and Wales are on Thursday 4 May 2017.

Local councillors are elected for four year-terms by the local community they represent. In England and Wales constituents vote for candidates using the first-past-the-post system. In Scotland and Northern Ireland constituents will rank candidates in order of preference under single transferrable vote.

Engaging candidates on humanist issues

During an election candidates are keen to meet local people and groups. This offers several opportunities to lobby and engage them on humanist issues.

Attend surgeries

Check whether your councillor is holding a surgery before the election on Thursday 4 May. All current councillors will hold regular surgeries, where local people can come to discuss issues. You can find details of when these surgeries are scheduled on your local council website, or on councillors' websites and Facebook pages. Please note that you can only attend surgeries of councillors who represent the ward or branch of the constituency in which you live.

Visits

In the last few weeks of campaigning before the election, look up if candidates are planning any visits to local groups and centres in your area. These will usually be advertised on their websites and social media. Go along to these visits and put your questions to the candidate. Candidates will also be knocking on doors in the local area to try and drum up support. This is also an opportunity to question them on key humanist issues.

Attend local hustings

Often candidates for council elections will participate in local hustings, where they will discuss a range of issues. This is an opportunity to raise humanist concerns which would not normally make the agenda. Check local newspapers and community groups publications to see if a hustings is being organised near you.

Local press

Candidates will be particularly sensitive to matters being raised in the local press (print, online, and broadcast) around election time. This presents a good opportunity to raise humanist issues by, for example, writing to your local paper.

Social media

A lot of candidates will be using Twitter and Facebook to promote their campaigns. Posting about humanist issues will raise the profile of Humanism in the local area and with the candidates. You can also directly tweet candidates to ask them to support humanist causes.

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