

# A Humanist Manifesto for the 2010 Local Elections

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity supporting and representing non-religious people who seek to lead ethical lives without supernatural or superstitious beliefs.



## WE WANT:

Councils that will give equal recognition to religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs (such as Humanism) as defined in the Human Rights Act and Equality Act 2006.

At the moment, despite equality legislation, many councils fail to engage fully with humanists and other non-religious people in the same way as they do with religious people. They particularly target local religious leaders for membership on the Local Strategic Partnership and take special steps to consult the local 'inter-faith' forum on policy that will affect everybody, not just the religious.

Councils that will end privileges for 'religion or belief.'

This bias towards religious organisations and individuals is seen in other areas of local policy as well. There may be a specific staff member or councillor dedicated to working with 'faith communities' who may be located in the equalities or community cohesion team. The council may be funding an 'inter faith' forum which does not include humanists in important local dialogue.

Councils that will uphold freedom of conscience and religion and oppose bullying by religious groups.

The Human Rights Act states that "Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others." This should be paramount to a council's work on equalities and community cohesion and should be taken into account when working with 'religion or belief' groups.

Councils that will support local community schools and stop the expansion of faith-based and sectarian schools.

Faith schools give public money to the promotion of particular religions and run contrary to community cohesion. They give parents and pupils less choice and can be socially, religiously and ethnically divisive. Councils must be aware of such problems and we argue they should make sure any new school is inclusive and takes into account the needs of the whole community.

Councils that will keep religious privilege and discrimination out of delivery of statutory public services.

The government is currently looking for ways to contract out statutory public services to the voluntary and community sector. They particularly favour giving contracts to faith-based organisations. Such organisations have wide exemptions from equality and human rights laws that could put staff and service users at risk of discrimination. Councils must be aware of this and mitigate the risk by strengthening contractual obligations on religious providers of public services.

Councils that will remove the pro-religious bias in schools and the education system more generally.

The RE syllabus for local schools is written by the council's Agreed Syllabus Conference and RE is overseen by the council's Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education. These groups rarely have humanist representatives as full members yet have huge influence on what is taught in local schools.

Questions for your candidates:

1. Is it right for local councils to treat humanist organisations and representatives on a par with religious groups and representatives?
2. Do you in principle favour the council contracting with faith groups to deliver public services?
3. Should anti-discrimination legislation make exceptions to cater for the religious beliefs of faith organisations and faith schools?
4. What are your views on faith schools?
5. Do you support the Human Rights Act?
6. Should local faith leaders be targeted for inclusion on Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Authority Agreement panels? Who else from the community should be included?
7. Do you think that local community cohesion initiatives should include representatives of non-believers such as humanists?