

Can churches in your area organise a husting in the run up to local Council elections on Thursday 22 May?

Gathering candidates together in advance of an election is an opportunity to hear the views of prospective Local Authority Councillors and observe their interaction with local residents. For a list of candidates and contact details you will need to search your local authority website after the close of nominations on 24 April.

How well do they know the community they wish to serve?

Are they able to listen and build trust with people if they are elected?

What values support their politics?

The following subjects and questions are offered as starters to initiate debate with candidates. Also to encourage your voting thoughts...

Values

Alongside the political affiliation of candidates, you may wish to assess the values that underpin each candidate's responses to local issues. Question:

How will you balance views of the majority when they conflict with the legitimate concerns of minority groups?

The Community

"In England, local government spending (excluding police, schools, housing benefit) is set to fall by nearly 30 per cent in real terms between 2008 and 2015".¹ Despite early signs of economic recovery, continued reductions to Local Authorities budgets mean that for the foreseeable future Councillors will be prioritising public spending and reorganising services in the search for greater efficiency. Some questions aimed at exploring candidate's priorities to ensure the Local Authority serves the wider needs of the communities it serves.

If elected, how will you go about protecting the most vulnerable people in our community from the cuts to public services?

*What are good examples of local partnerships between Local Authority and Faith/Voluntary Groups?
What are the issues of concern in these relationships?*

Economy, skills, employment and migration

Teasing out the candidates understanding of the complexity of the job market, in particular how they envisage bridging skills gaps through choices such as migration, the promotion of apprentices, vocational training and business regulation.

Can the Local Authority encourage growth in the local economy in a way that will benefit everybody, especially those who are not currently in employment or do not currently have the skills

Can economic growth be used to make our local community more inclusive?

Questions specific to the needs of your locality

Don't forget to ask questions relevant to specific local needs and issues.

¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation Programme Paper, Austerity: Coping with the cuts? Local government and poorer communities (November 2013) <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/local-government-communities-full.pdf>

Education: schools and colleges

The role of the Local Authority in Education is changing dramatically. National Government is encouraging Academies and Free Schools that are independent of the Local Authority, and have more control over their admission policies. Curriculum and the Ofsted Inspection regime are also being reformed, amongst other changes. There may be concerns that schools are becoming over fragmented and competitive; and that curriculum changes do not suit all people in the West Midlands. Questions:

What are the key outcomes that schools should be aiming for? Does faith play a role in these?

How should the local authority be working for fair, affordable access to good education for all?

Health and Wellbeing

Clinical Commissioning Groups have replaced Primary Care Trusts to organise the delivery of NHS services in England. Also every 'upper tier' local authority is establishing a Health and Wellbeing Board to act as a forum for local commissioners across the NHS, social care, public health and other services.

Health and Wellbeing boards are intended to:

- increase democratic input into strategic decisions about health and wellbeing services;
- strengthen working relationships between health and social care;
- and encourage integrated commissioning of health and social care services

Prior to a husting find out who currently represents you on your Health and Wellbeing Board. Find out if candidates understand these changes to the provision of our health care, and if they are aware of the current representatives and of the opportunities to represent local health concerns to Clinical Commissioning Groups and Health and Wellbeing Boards. <http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/thenhs/about/Pages/nhsstructure.aspx> Questions:

If elected, how will you represent the health concerns of our community to the NHS?

What are the health priorities in this ward?

How will you help improve local access to health and wellbeing services for young and old?

How will you promote healthy attitudes to food - in production and consumption?

Climate change and the environment

In light of the recent extreme fluctuations of the weather in recent years and the increased risk to flooding, responsibility for addressing climate change falls on all our shoulders. This may be a 'hot' topic if flooding is a local issue, for example, the granting of planning permission for houses on flood plains. Elsewhere, there is opportunity to create new water retention areas on upland farm areas and there is opportunity for tree planting in all our communities.

What impact do you think climate change will have in our community and what should our Local Authority do about it?

What will you do to build trust and develop partnership between the Council and the people of this community?

Revd Colin Marsh, Secretary, West Midlands Region Churches Forum
Revd Peter Sellick, Chair of West Midlands Industrial Mission Association
John Cooper, Regional Coordinator, Christian Aid