

Local government

a guide for Quakers

This guide is for individuals and groups who want to know more about how to engage with local government. It provides an overview of the structures of local government in Scotland, England and Wales, the Quaker concerns it works on, and ways of engaging with it.



Why engage with local government?

Many of the issues that Quakers choose to campaign on have far-reaching global implications. But while policy direction can be determined within central government or at international conferences, policies are frequently implemented at local level, with local councillors and officers often doing more than parliamentarians to put policy into action.

Due to the smaller geographical areas covered by councils, it is often easier to contact your councillors or find the appropriate staff member to speak to about an issue.

Councils seek to engage with the people who live in their areas to make sure they are working for them. The fact that they are often overlooked sometimes means they are more able to engage and build relationships than other representatives, who might receive overwhelming amounts of correspondence.

While central government can seem far removed from the people whose lives their decisions affect, your local government is closer to hand and should be working with you and your community in mind.

What Quaker concerns does local government deal with?

It's not all drainage and gritting roads! You'll find that local government deals with many issues that touch on Quaker concerns, such as:

- education and curriculum
- housing and homelessness
- planning, including environmental issues like fracking and renewables
- youth work

- libraries, allotments, green spaces, recreation areas and other services that encourage healthy and peaceful communities
- environment and travel
- grants for local organisations
- general support for the community.

People can positively influence their communities by working with their local councils. After all, small actions can amount to big changes.

Structure of local government in Scotland

There are 32 local authorities in Scotland, which can vary significantly in population size. Councillors are elected to local authorities by the electorate of the area they represent, known as a council ward. In 2007 proportional representation was introduced in Scotland, meaning everyone has several local councillors they can approach.

Local government elections are normally held every four years, though the last three were

held at five-year intervals (2007–2012, 2012–2017 and 2017–2022). This was to avoid local government and Scottish Parliament elections taking place in the same year.

Councils in Scotland are led by a leader and a civic leader, known as a Provost or Convener. Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, and Aberdeen all have a Lord Provost. Local government decision-making occurs primarily within a committee structure.

Structure of local government in Wales

There are 22 local authorities in Wales. Each of these is a unitary local authority, and they vary in size. Councillors represent council wards. In some areas a single councillor represents each ward, while in other areas two or three councillors are elected to multi-member wards.

Local government elections are normally held every four years, but in recent years the elections have sometimes been delayed by

a year to avoid local government and Welsh Assembly elections taking place in the same year.

Historically, many councils in Wales have been run by a coalition, with no single party winning enough seats at election to have overall control. Local government decision-making in Wales takes place through committees, often with a leader and a cabinet.

Structure of local authorities in England

Wherever you live in England, you will have either one or two layers of local government. These layers are known as 'tiers'. There is sometimes also a parish council, which could be called a town, city or community council.

In single-tier areas – London, metropolitan areas and some other parts of England – all local authority services are the responsibility of the same council. The exception to this is in Greater Manchester and London, where the directly-elected mayors are also responsible for strategic planning, fire and rescue services, and passenger transport across the whole city.

In London, single-tier councils are known as borough councils, and all councils include the word 'borough' in their name. In other single-tier areas they are either unitary authorities or metropolitan districts; the distinction is largely historical. They can use a variety of names,

including 'city council' (e.g. Nottingham City Council), 'borough council' (e.g. Reading Borough Council), or simply 'council' (e.g. Medway Council). It's important to check the type of council since some city councils are in fact parish councils, which are much smaller authorities with fewer powers (e.g. Chichester City Council).

In two-tier areas there is a larger county council and several smaller district councils. These areas tend to be rural. Some services are the responsibility of the county council, while some are the responsibility of the district councils. Parish councils are more common in rural areas, so many people find themselves represented by three different types of local authority.

You can find out which local authority or authorities provide services in your area at www.gov.uk/find-local-council.

Town and parish councils

In some parts of England and Wales there are also town and parish councils. These cover a smaller area than unitary, county or district councils. They provide services such as town and village centre management and hedge trimming, and manage amenities like

cemeteries, parks, ponds, allotments, war memorials, and community halls.

There are around 10,000 town and parish councils in England and Wales. Local authorities in areas that don't already have a town or parish council can also seek to set one up in consultation with local people.

Who does what?

The table below sets out which type of council is responsible for which services in two-tier areas. In single-tier areas all of these services are provided by the same council.

	County council	District council
Education	●	
Highways	●	
Transport planning	●	
Passenger transport	●	
Social care	●	
Housing		●
Libraries	●	
Leisure and recreation		●
Environmental health		●
Waste collection		●
Waste disposal	●	
Planning applications		●
Strategic planning	●	
Fire and rescue*	●	
Collecting local taxation		●

** In some areas, fire services are provided by metropolitan or combined fire authorities. These are solely responsible for providing fire and rescue services.*

Metropolitan fire authorities usually cover a large town or city and its surrounding area, while combined authorities cover an area in which a number of local authorities provide other services.

Fire services may also be provided by the Police and Crime Commissioner (see below). You can find out which fire and rescue authority covers your local area at www.cfoa.org.uk/frs.

Police and Crime Commissioners

Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) are directly elected every four years and are responsible for strategic decisions on policing. PCCs may also take on the responsibility

for fire and rescue services where there is a business case for doing so.

You can find out which PCC is responsible for policing in your area at www.apccs.police.uk/find-your-pcc.

How to engage with local councils

There are several ways you can engage with your local council:

- Speak to your local representative. Your council's website will give their name, contact details and surgery times.
- Many councils have consultations on issues like planning, congestion charges and how to spend budgets. Visit their website or contact the council or your local councillor to find details of consultations your local council is undertaking and how you can respond.
- Many councils have public petitions committees through which you can petition the council for changes you want to see, as long as they are within the council's powers. Public petitions cover matters like monuments, loan sharks, cycle paths and cycle hire schemes, and traffic lights.
- Many council staff have specific expertise. Depending on what you wish to achieve, speaking to council staff could be an opportunity to learn more about how the council functions in relation to your area of concern – knowledge that may help you formulate any requests.

Local government elections

Despite the degree of power that resides at local government level, local election turnout is usually low (around 30 to 40 per cent). Several councils in Britain have been run by the same political party for decades, meaning who wins a seat at elections can feel like a formality. This can also mean that very little campaigning actually takes place during election periods, making it difficult to find out where candidates, or their local party, stand on issues.

By-elections held to fill a 'casual vacancy', often when a councillor dies or resigns, can be very short, intense electoral periods. They might focus only on a few specific issues.

If there are elections where you live, you can find out the name of your ward and its current elected representatives at www.writetothem.com. A list of candidates standing for election will usually appear on your local government's website or in your local newspaper.

Useful organisations

COSLA

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities represents most authorities in Scotland and negotiates with the Scottish Government on their behalf. Visit www.cosla.gov.uk.

LGA

Local Government Association (England). Visit www.local.gov.uk.

LGiU

The Local Government Information Unit is a think tank that provides briefings, blogs and information on how local government can maximise its impact. Visit www.lgiu.org.uk (England and Wales) or www.lgiuscotland.org.uk (Scotland).

Mygov.scot

A source of information on Scotland's public sector. Visit www.mygov.scot.

NALC

National Association of Local Councils (England). Visit www.nalc.gov.uk.

WLGA

Welsh Local Government Association. Visit www.wlga.wales/home.

WriteToThem

A website to help you identify and contact your elected representatives. Visit www.writetothem.com.

How can you get involved?

Organise a hustings

As a Quaker meeting or local community group, you could organise a hustings on a particular topic. This can be a useful way of finding out the views of all of your candidates in one setting.

Ask questions of candidates

Election leaflets often give candidates' contact details. Use these to write to each of them to ask their views on a particular topic. If they're elected, you can hold them to what they promised in their response/s.

Think about what you would ask if a candidate knocks on your door. This is your opportunity to find out directly where your candidate stands on the issues of concern to you. If a candidate doesn't know the answer, share your contact details so they can get back to you.

Write to your local paper

The letters pages of local newspapers are often the most widely read. This is a way to share your concerns with a wider audience and may get other people talking about your concerns.

Get your ideas into the manifesto

Writing to local political parties or engaging ahead of elections means people will be aware of the issues you raise. You could host a public meeting, and invite representatives of local parties to attend, well before an election to get people talking.

A manifesto sets out what a political party intends to do if it is elected. If you're a party member you can influence the content of its local election manifesto. Raise your ideas and concerns at a party meeting and demonstrate that these are issues people locally care about

Stand for election

Whether or not you're a member of a political party (and provided you can find enough people to support your nomination), you can always stand for election yourself. Think about how you might bring your Quaker values into play.

Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

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Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London, NW1 2BJ

Follow us on social media @BritishQuakers.

Email us at politics@quaker.org.uk

www.quaker.org.uk