

Connect

*A guide to engaging with
your public representatives
in Northern Ireland.*

northern ireland
evangelical alliance
together making Jesus known



The Evangelical Alliance longs to see Christians engaging with their public representatives in a real and meaningful way...

... but we recognise that sometimes it can be difficult to know where to start. We hope that this resource will help you to begin to build relationships with your public representatives and encourage you to pray for and support them as they represent you. You will find a range of ways to get in touch with your public representatives and the most effective way to engage with them on a matter that you care about.

In the wake of the COVID pandemic, in many cases, just like us, public representatives are challenged and concerned by the gravity of the health, economic and social crisis in front of us. What better time for Christians, churches and faith leaders to step up to the task of encouraging our elected leaders and not just those we agree with. We want Christians to be known as 'good news' people in every sphere. We have an opportunity at this time to become active citizens who engage with their political representatives in a way that fosters trust, encouragement and partnership.

We believe that Jesus' church has all the infrastructures and relationships in place to be at the grassroots of rebuilding lives and communities as we navigate the years ahead after the pandemic. We have the human resources, the heart to love and the heart to serve, we have unique relational networks, and we know how to care for the isolated, the vulnerable, and the broken.

Why should we be engaging with our Public Representatives?

The Bible instructs us to respect people in authority

1 Peter 2:17 says, "Respect everyone and love the family of believers. Fear God and **respect** the king." What better reason to connect with our elected representatives than to put God's word into action by giving respect to their leadership role and office.

The Bible instructs us to love people who differ from us

Mark 12:31 commands that we "love our neighbours", including those from whom we differ. While Jesus talks of people of different religious backgrounds being our neighbours, those of different political persuasions are our neighbours too.

As Christians we are called to seek the welfare of the city

Jeremiah 29:7 instructs us to seek the peace and prosperity of the city wherever you live. Surely this is a call to activities and conversations that make life better for all in our society?

As Christians we are called to be people marked by love and respect

This call applies to within the church and in the public sphere. We are called to be known as people who show respect to one another, even those we disagree with – and sometimes especially those we disagree with.

John 13:35 says "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Our voices matter

Everyone has a worldview shaped by beliefs, attitudes and experiences. Evangelical Christians in Northern Ireland hold a worldview that is shaped by the authority of the Bible. In modern society we hear many different voices and views, some of which stand at odds with our biblical perspective. Oftentimes we can feel intimidated or irrelevant in conversations about how society should be ordered and the rules that govern our land.

However, Evangelical Christians account for a significant percentage of the population in Northern Ireland and as a significant group we should understand that our voices matter in how our nation is governed. Instead of passively allowing other voices and worldviews to shape our national values and laws, we can all be positive active citizens in conversations about issues that matter to us. As Christians there are clearly times when we will disagree with decisions our government and Public Representatives make. There will be other times when we will want to commend them. Both conversations are important for the kind of good and flourishing society we want to see. Developing real and meaningful relationships will create space for both of these conversations to happen.

Don't forget: God wants to see all people saved, including our public representatives. Let's reach out to them and show them what good news looks and feels like.

"My Department funds the Community Faith Forum which provided a very useful platform of engagement for The Executive Office during the pandemic on issues such as the safe reopening of places of worship. Covid-19 has resulted in drastic changes in people's lives and churches have risen to the challenge of delivering key services and support to help people deal with the immediate impacts that the pandemic has had and will continue to have."

Deirdre Hargey Communities Minister & **Sinn Fein** MLA

How to get started

We don't necessarily have to join a political party, start a campaign group or march in protest rallies. One of the simplest ways to be actively engaged in public debate is to connect with your local public representatives.

As children of God, we should engage with our public representatives to show them gratitude for their service, praise them when they do something well and get to know them as people, not just a political party. When our public representative knows us as people marked by respect and love who build them up, they will hear us when we offer an alternative perspective.

We believe that one of the greatest ways to show support to our representatives is by praying for them regularly and with them when possible, as 1 Timothy 2:1-4 commands:

"I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

So, before you begin, take a moment to **pray for your public representatives**. Then read on and start the journey to getting to know how to engage better with your public representative.

"I appreciate it when my constituents contact me directly and respectfully with a return name, address and contact number; mass, proforma emails are much less effective."

Steve Aiken OBE MLA (UUP)

What are the different kinds of public representatives in Northern Ireland?

Councillors

Northern Ireland has 462 councillors spread across 11 councils. Examples of what Councils are responsible for include, local planning, parks and leisure, off street parking and registration of births, deaths and marriages. This is not an exhaustive list. You can find out who your local councillors are, here: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/local-councils-in-northern-ireland>

MLAs

The Northern Ireland Assembly which sits at Stormont is the seat of devolved legislative power in Northern Ireland. There are 18 constituencies across Northern Ireland, and each has 5 elected representatives. These make up the 90 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). MLAs are elected by, and represent the people of, Northern Ireland. MLAs pass laws and examine policy on transferred matters like health, education, the environment, social work and housing. They scrutinise the work of Ministers and hold Departments to account. MLAs sit in Stormont; however, they will also have an office in their constituency where you can discuss local issues with them. You can find out who your local MLAs are by clicking on the map at <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/mlas/locatemla.aspx> or by using the simple search tool at MLA Search (niassembly.gov.uk)

MPs

Members of Parliament sit in the House of Commons (or the House of Lords) in Westminster, representing the interests of their constituents in Northern Ireland. There are 18 available seats in Westminster for Northern Irish MPs. Like MLAs, MPs have offices in their constituency, where individuals can discuss issues with them. You can find out who your MP is here: <https://members.parliament.uk/constituencies/>

Who should I contact?

Sometimes it is not clear who is best to contact about what issues. **Generally, contact your local councillor about local services, facilities and planning. If your local councillor is not able to help you, they will gladly direct you to your local MLAs.**

Contact your local MLAs for any issue that is governed by law such as education, health, and justice. Your local MLA will be happy to hear your concerns about all issues even if it is not their area of interest. Sometimes it is worth checking out which MLAs are members of the committees or all-party groups that are relevant to your issue as these MLAs will have a particular interest in and understanding of the issue that concerns you. You can speak to MLAs outside of your constituency if you feel they have more interest or expertise in the issue.

You should contact your local MP if you have an issue that is governed centrally by Westminster such as national security or the UK tax system.

[writetothem.com](https://www.writetothem.com) is a helpful website that makes emailing your representatives easy.

You can also check your public representative's website or social media accounts for the date, time and venue of their constituency surgeries. These are times when you can drop in to see your public representative without having to make an appointment.



How do I connect with my public representative?

Your public representatives are ordinary people, so don't be afraid to approach them. Start by introducing yourself; they want to get to know their constituents. You can mention your job, the church you go to, and the community projects with which you are involved.

It is so important to contact public representatives from all the political parties. Of course, the party that you identify with or follow is the obvious starting point, but it is healthy to widen the conversation and get a full perspective of the issue from all political angles. You may be surprised by where you find common ground and support for your issue!

Some conversations might be robust, sensitive or difficult for any number of reasons but still important to have, and respectfully. Could you begin by encouraging your public representative about their public service or an area where you have common ground?

Some questions to consider in any interaction that you have with your public representative, whether that be online or in person are:

- Is what I am saying constructive?
- Would I speak to a colleague the way I speak to my public representative?
- Is my query better raised privately or publicly?
- Am I representing my church and Christians well?

How can you support your public representatives practically?

Pray for them

Begin to support your public representatives by praying for them. In addition to your personal prayers, you could pray for them regularly in Church services and prayer meetings or even hold an annual church prayer meeting specifically for your political leaders.

Email them

It is good to be in regular contact with your public representatives and sending an email is the easiest way to do so. Get into the habit of sending an email to your public representative to encourage them, not only when you have a complaint. You could let your public representative know that you are praying for them, and you could also ask for specific prayer points to share with your church. You may be surprised by how much your public representative would appreciate this.

Send them a card

Like an email, a letter or card can be used to encourage your public representative, and it is more likely to be remembered. Lots of public representatives put cards up in their office as reminders of the support and encouragement they receive from their constituents.

Visit them

The best way to get to know your public representative personally, and for them to get to know and trust you, is to meet with them face to face. Do not be intimidated by this approach; your public representative is an ordinary person after all.

Take them a gift

Being a public representative is stressful, and the overtime and community work that public representatives do can often go underappreciated. So, why not give your public representative some baked goods or a small gift, to show your appreciation for the effort they are making?

Invite them to church

By inviting a public representative to your church, you are showing them that they, like anybody, are a welcomed and valued member of your community. You could invite them to a special service, such as a celebration of a community project or a church anniversary. But don't just limit invitations to special days; invite your public representative to be part of your church and help them to witness the value that the church adds to their constituents' lives.

"I am pleased to endorse this valuable resource from the Evangelical Alliance. Social democracy is most effective when everyone takes the opportunity to use their voice to speak for the good of all in our society. I hope this CONNECT resource encourages many constituents to engage in a positive way with their public representatives."

Sinead Bradley SDLP MLA

"As Minister of Justice I have seen the value of the contribution that churches and faith organisations can make when they work in partnership with the local statutory services. I strongly encourage churches and faith organisations to take every opportunity to work together and to maintain dialogue with their public representatives, even with those they disagree with, for the good of everyone in society."

Naomi Long, Minister of Justice and Leader of the Alliance Party

"I think the CONNECT resource is a fantastic initiative and opens up a great opportunity for evangelical Christians to proactively engage with legislators in Northern Ireland and to build an open-door relationship"

Jonathan Buckley DUP MLA

"I hope this guide has inspired you to make contact with your local, public representatives and given you some ideas of how to go about it. Let's take steps to reach out and use our voices to be good news people in the public square in Northern Ireland."



Danielle McElhinney
Public policy officer, Northern Ireland

"I acknowledge the incredible role that charities and churches have played during lockdown and I think this CONNECT resource is a great idea to encourage further engagement and partnership between elected representatives and their local churches"

Pam Cameron
DUP MLA

"To be an effective elected representative I need to engage with everyone in my constituency and to be informed of the issues that matter to my constituents. My role is led by the constituents and the issues that they care about; often an issue isn't an issue until they tell me so."

Claire Sugden
Independent MLA

May we be *one*
so that the *world* will know

Since 1846 we've been a trusted voice in society,
uniting the church for the sake of the gospel.

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