

A Year of Encounter

**USING OUR
CATHOLIC VOICE
IN THE GENERAL
ELECTION**



St Vincent
de Paul Society

England and Wales

Turning Concern into Action



Catholic Agency for
Overseas Development

**YOUR
VOICE**

CONTENTS

- 3 **Why are we called to promote the common good?**
- 4 **Contact the candidates**
- 6 **Suggested template email for candidates**
- 8 **Attend a hustings**
- 10 **Be ready for the candidate's knock at the door**
- 11 **Other ideas to consider**
- 12 **Let's get creative!**
- 13 **What happens when we dare**
- 14 **Useful information**
- 15 **Questions for your candidates**

"...with our faith we must create a 'culture of encounter,' a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently."

Pope Francis

"...As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life..."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church



Why are we called to promote the common good?

The common good is reached when we work together to improve the lives of people both in our local community, and in the wider world.

The Church tells us that “...All citizens ought to be aware of their right and duty to promote the common good by casting their votes...”¹ But in order to arrive at the polling station as well informed as possible, it's important to know our prospective MP's views on the things that matter to us.

For this reason, the SVP and CAFOD are inviting parishes to reach out to their local candidates ahead of the next election. This is not about political affiliations, but rather about strengthening community participation as a local faith group and practicing the culture of encounter that Pope Francis talks about.

As Christians we have a long tradition of being actively involved in the big issues of our time. The lives of many saints show us that the greater their devotion to the Lord, the deeper their commitment to addressing the big problems of their time: during a period of violent crusades, St Francis of Assisi went all the way from Europe to Africa to engage the Sultan

of Egypt in true dialogue; St Catherine of Siena played a vital role in negotiating peace amongst republics of what is today Italy. And St Vincent de Paul, moved by the plight of peasants in 1600s France, started a mission to reach out to those on the periphery in a spirit of justice and solidarity.

With over five million Catholics in the UK, the next general election is an opportunity to bring attention to the big issues of *our* time.

This booklet has been jointly produced by CAFOD and the SVP to provide some easy steps on how to reach out to your local candidates. And hopefully you will meet other parishioners in your area and have some fun in the process too!

¹ *Gaudium et Spes, Vatican II, 1965, #75*

THREE THINGS YOU CAN DO

1. Contact the candidates

As part of our *A year of encounter* initiative, we are inviting you to contact your candidates together as members of your faith group. As Christians, we do things in community, as it is in relationships with others that we flourish and explore new ways of building a better society for the benefit of all.

**YOUNG PEOPLE MIGHT
BE PARTICULARLY
INTERESTED IN BEING
PART OF THIS INITIATIVE**

Reach out to them! You can contact the CAFOD Education or the SVP Youth team for support.

yearofencounter@svp.org.uk



SIMPLE STEPS

1. Let your priest know that you'd like your parish to be part of the *A year of encounter* initiative and check that he is happy about it.
2. Reach out to other parishioners to create a small group who want to work together. You might already have a group from previous projects that could work together again. Regional SVP and CAFOD staff members will be able to put you in touch with other parishioners in your area too.
3. Once you have a group of organisers, discuss what are the main issues you would like to ask the candidate about. We suggest you choose no more than three or four issues from the Questions for your candidates section (page 15).
4. Once you have selected a few issues, send an email to the candidates via this link. The link will automatically fill in all the contact details for you, but there will a blank box for you to write your message to the candidates.

act.svp.org.uk/yearofencounter

5. You can either write your own email, or you can use the template email on page 6 to complete the empty box on the webpage. We suggest you make it personal, and add some details about your parish.
6. Share the candidates' responses on the parish noticeboard or mention your involvement in the *A year of Encounter* initiative in the parish newsletter.
7. If your candidate is willing to meet, you will need to arrange a time, date and location for the meeting. As it is an election period, there are some guidelines around meeting candidates, so please do get in touch with us so we can help you.

The greater the number of parishes contacting local candidates, the stronger the Catholic voice will be in your area.



*[subject line: Create a personalised subject line eg “St. Roque ‘s Church is reaching out to you”;
“Catholics in Streattham want to know your views”]*

Dear Candidate,

I am a resident of *[add constituency]* and I am writing on behalf of *[name of your parish or local group]*. Ahead of the next election, we would like to find out more about your views on the key issues that matter to us.

[here you could add a few lines about the work of your parish]

As people of faith, we believe that the next government should urgently address domestic poverty as well as play a key role in tackling global poverty, climate change and the growing debt crisis faced by low-income countries.

As part of CAFOD's and St Vincent de Paul Society's A year of encounter initiative, our group is reaching out to our local candidates asking them what they will do on the issues that matter to us if they win at the next election. Specifically, we would like to know your views on the following topics:

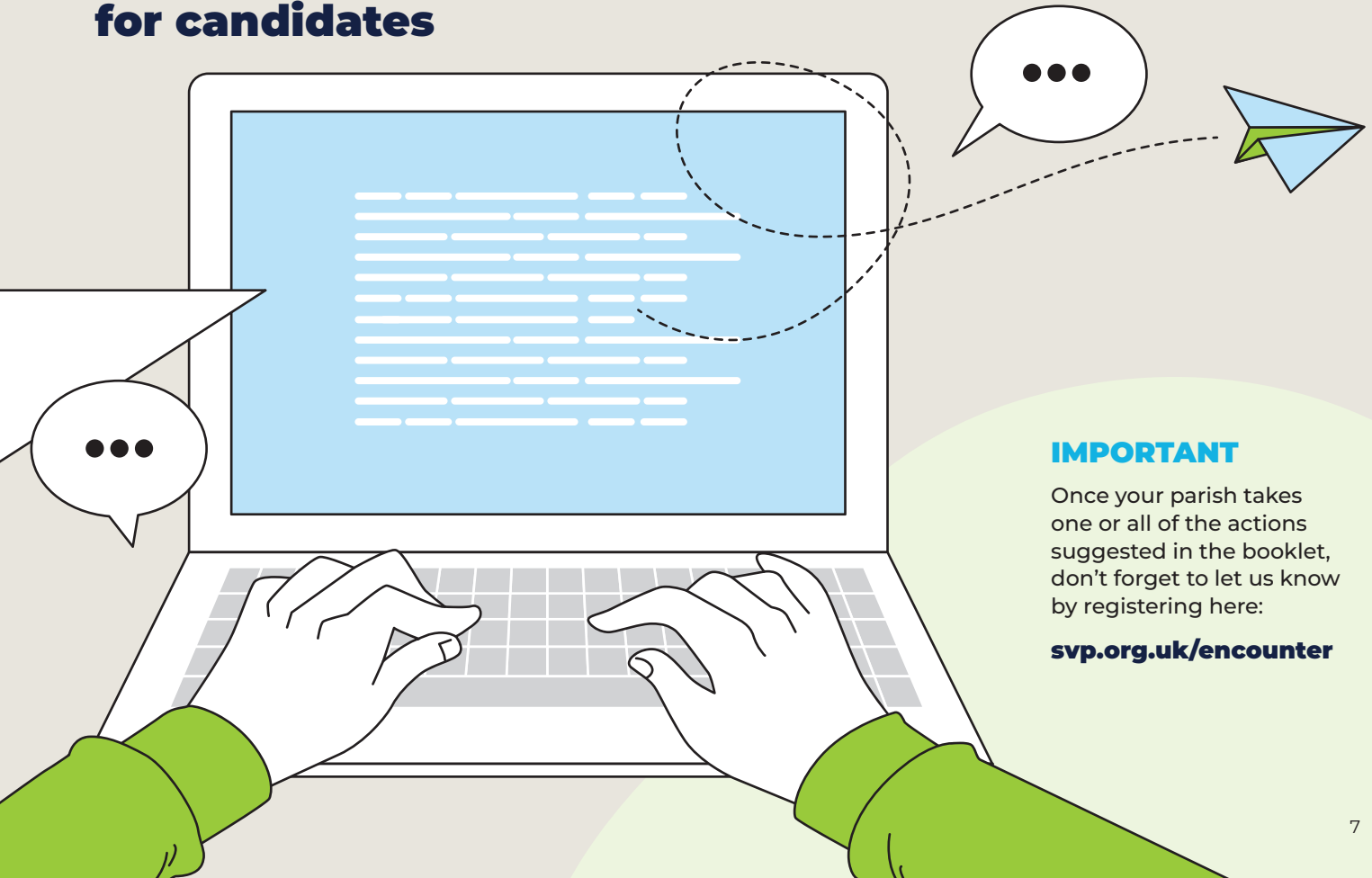
[add some of the campaign issues suggested in the section “questions for candidates”]

We look forward to hearing from you and would be grateful to receive a reply either via email, through a short video or in person.

Please don't hesitate to contact us with any questions.

[Greeting, signature and your address or the address of your parish]

Suggested template email for candidates



IMPORTANT

Once your parish takes one or all of the actions suggested in the booklet, don't forget to let us know by registering here:

svp.org.uk/encounter

2. Attend a hustings

Even if your parish has already sent questions to your candidates, it's still very important to encourage parishioners to attend local hustings. Asking questions at a hustings is a unique opportunity to bring the issues that we care about to the attention of local candidates, as well as to other people or groups from your community who are attending.

SIMPLE STEPS

1. Reach out to other parishioners to create a small group who will be able to make decisions and encourage more people in your parish to attend the hustings.
2. Find out where and when there will be a hustings in your area.
3. Put a poster on your parish board with the hustings dates and contact details so that those interested in attending can contact your organising group prior to the hustings. You can request posters for free at svp.org.uk/encounter. You can also reach out to various groups who

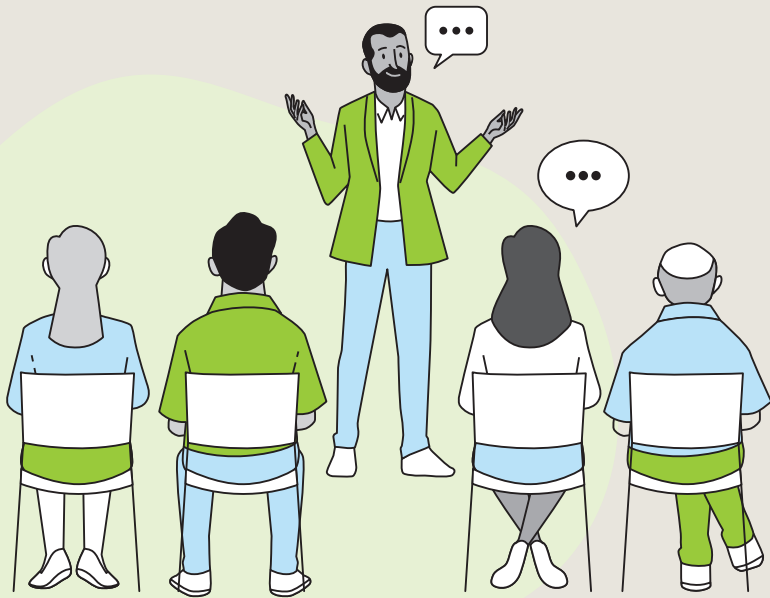
might already be active in your parish and invite their members to attend the hustings too.

4. Before the hustings, it's key that one or two questions are allocated to each parishioner willing to ask a question. The more questions members of your group ask during the hustings the better!

Sometimes hustings are very well attended, and it could be quite intimidating to raise your hand and ask a question. Feeling a bit nervous is normal. Remember that we are not there to impress, but to express our concerns.

COMMON PLACES WHERE HUSTINGS ARE ADVERTISED:

- The social media pages of the individual candidates or local political parties (eg Twitter, Facebook or Instagram).
- Local newspapers, magazines, and radio
- Community centres and libraries
- Local Authorities webpages



TIPS

Email or organise a Zoom call or have a chat after Mass with the people who are keen to attend the hustings to allocate the questions and to arrange other logistics like transport. Regional SVP and CAFOD staff members might be able to help you organise this coordination meeting before the hustings. If you don't know them, email yearofencounter@svp.org.uk and we can put you in contact with them.

It is often the case that questions are taken by audience members raising their hands. If this is the case at the hustings you attend, then be sure that your group sit in different areas of the room to increase the chances of being chosen to ask a question.

If you are invited to ask a question, give your name and mention the name of your parish or faith group that you have come with.

"...The question which is agitating the world today is a social one. It is a struggle between those who have nothing and those who have too much..."

Frédéric Ozanam

3. Be ready for the candidate's knock at the door

In the run up to an election you will likely get several knocks on your door from candidates or members of political parties, who will be keen to share why you should vote for them. Candidates also want to hear from their would-be constituents about what matters to them.

So, when they knock on your door, be ready! Don't hesitate to grab this booklet when you are about to have a chat with a candidate on your doorstep and ask any of the questions suggested in the 'Questions for your candidates' section (page 15).

Candidates care a lot about the opinions of active and visible local groups, so do mention that you belong to a particular parish or faith group.

Political parties canvass in groups. If several residents in the area raise the same concerns with the canvassers, that signals a clear message to candidates. Let's not miss this opportunity to put our faith into practice!

IMPORTANT

If you speak to a candidate on your doorstep, then please do let us know by registering at the following link:

svp.org.uk/encounter



Other ideas to consider

There are many other things that you and other parishioners can do in the run up to an election. More ideas include:

1. Write a 'letter to the editor' for your local newspaper outlining what you want to see from your next MP.

2. Write an article or blog about why you are reaching out to local candidates ahead of the next election. This could be published in the parish newsletter, or other community magazines.

3. Join up with other local groups to organise a hustings. If you do want to consider undertaking this we can support you so please get in touch with us yearofencounter@svp.org.uk

4. Get involved in activities being organised by other groups, including The Climate Coalition or Act on Poverty. If these groups do something in your local area, we will let you know.



OTHER IDEAS TO CONSIDER

Let's get creative!

Another way in which your parish can contact your candidates is by sending them a video.

You could film a group of you with your phone asking the candidate the questions suggested on p15, and sending the video to them by email.

By engaging with your candidates in a creative way you will be able to grab their attention.



WATCH

Use this link
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bcfjo4tTuhk>
or scan the QR code to watch a video example of what your parish can do



What happens when we dare

In 2021 parishes were closed and the country was in the thick of Covid 19. Yet even so, parishioners across the country organised themselves to have meetings with their MPs and to discuss vital issues which were affecting the world during the pandemic.

The result was, hundreds of parishes having meetings with 110 MPs including former Prime Minister Theresa May and the current Chancellor Jeremy Hunt. This initiative was so impactful that it was even mentioned by a minister in a debate in the House of Commons.

This coming election is another opportunity to make a difference by using our voice.

“...no one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life...”

Pope Francis



USEFUL INFORMATION

AFTER CONTACTING YOUR CANDIDATES

Thank you for all the time and energy that you and your parish have spent participating in this initiative.

We hope you found this booklet helpful and that your group received interesting responses from the candidates and managed to ask as many questions as possible at the hustings. Once you know your new MP, we hope you keep open your dialogue with them about the issues you've raised.

And don't forget to contact the CAFOD's campaigns team to let them know how the meeting went at **cafod.org.uk/encounter**

If you would like to stay updated on our work, please sign up here:

svp.org.uk/encounter

LINKS AND CONTACTS

If you would like any more detailed information visit our website and download a supporter briefing.

cafod.org.uk/encounter
svp.org.uk/encounter

CAFOD education

cafod.org.uk/families

Find your MP

members.parliament.uk/FindYourMP

What your MP can do for you

parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/members/what

If you have any questions about this initiative please contact the SVP team/CAFOD team at

yearofencounter@cafod.org.uk
yearofencounter@svp.org.uk

FOOD SYSTEMS

The issue: Global hunger levels have been on the rise in recent years with over 2.4 billion people without regular access to food.

The global food system urgently needs transforming. For too long it has been dominated by a few multinational companies who have pushed for only an industrialised approach to agriculture. This has negatively impacted the diversity of crops available, sidelined small-scale farmers in low-income countries, accelerated the climate crisis and polluted natural resources.

We would like to see a commitment to a new agricultural model that supports small-scale farmers who are practicing sustainable techniques, including agroecology.

Questions to ask:

- 1 Ten percent of the world's population regularly go to bed hungry. We urgently need to transform the way we grow, distribute and consume food to ensure everyone has enough to eat, regardless of where in the world they live. If elected, will you work towards ensuring an end to hunger both in the UK and globally?
- 2 Given that we are currently facing both a global hunger crisis and a climate crisis, would you work to ensure that small-scale farmers across the world who are practising sustainable techniques, such as agroecology, receive support from the UK?

CLIMATE

The issue: The climate crisis is one of the biggest challenges facing humanity. It is already causing mass displacement of people across the world and destroying the natural world, upon which life on earth depends. The UK is one of the largest historic emitters of greenhouse gases driving the climate crisis, so it has a particular responsibility to take action to keep temperatures rises below 1.5C.

We would like to see an end to all spending on fossil fuels both at home and abroad and ensure significant financial support for those countries who are hardest hit but least responsible.

Questions to ask:

- 1 We know that we need to transition away from fossil fuels if we are to have any chance of halting the climate crisis. Would you work to ensure that the UK finally ends all new oil, coal and gas projects and phases out existing ones?
- 2 Some of the world's poorest communities are facing the greatest burden of the climate crisis. With millions of people already displaced as a result of extreme weather events, how would you support working with other countries to raise new taxes from the most polluting industries such as shipping, aviation and fossil fuels to support countries suffering the impacts of climate catastrophes?

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR CANDIDATES

Many SVP members and CAFOD supporters have been involved in volunteering or campaigning for many years on issues such as poverty, food and climate.

In this section you will find a list of key issues to raise with your candidates with suggested questions that your group can ask of them – whether that be via email, at a hustings or on the doorstep.

COST OF LIVING CRISIS

The issue: The cost of living crisis is pushing increasing numbers of people into poverty. Almost two million people used a food bank last year, the highest number yet. Meanwhile, six in ten low-income households are not able to afford an unexpected expense, and over seven in ten families are going without essentials.

We would like to see better support for the growing numbers of people living in poverty in the UK, including a welfare system that supports people in need, whether they are in work or not.

Questions to ask:

- 1 With almost two million people using foodbanks in the UK, the highest number on record, what are your plans to tackle the cost of living crisis in our area and nationally?
- 2 If elected, would you commit to improve our social security system by raising the basic rate of Universal Credit so that people can meet their essential needs?

MIGRATION AND ASYLUM

The issue: Every year thousands of people tragically die crossing borders as they try to find safety for themselves and their families. In recent years it has become even harder for people who need safety to reach the UK.

For many that are able to reach the UK, recent changes in the law make it almost impossible for them to apply for asylum and find sanctuary here. Instead, they face the possibility of being indefinitely detained and deported to a third country, such as Rwanda.

We would like to see an asylum system based on principles of compassion, humanity and dignity.

Questions to ask:

- 1 Every year, people tragically die as they attempt to cross borders to reach safety. If elected, will you champion the right to safe and legal routes for people needing to flee their homes, rather than leave vulnerable people prey to people smugglers?
- 2 If elected, will you ensure the country is a welcoming one to refugees and migrants, including ending the unjust deportation of people who haven't even had their asylum applications heard?



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DEBT CANCELLATION

The issue: Many of the world's poorest countries have been plunged into a new debt crisis. Due to the economic crisis, high interest rates and the fall-out from the pandemic, many countries have been left with unsustainable debt burdens. This means money that could be spent on health, education or tackling climate change is instead going to big banks, who are making millions in profit while populations suffer.

The vast majority of lower-income country debt contracts are governed by English or New York law. This means that the UK could pass legislation to ensure that creditors cannot sue countries who are struggling to pay. There is growing support for this legislation, and the UK Parliament's International Development Select Committee has recommended this option is explored.

We would like to see the cancellation of unsustainable debts owed by low-income countries, including the introduction of new legislation to prevent private creditors from suing low-income countries in UK courts.

Questions to ask:

- 1 Given that over 50 of the world's poorest nations are currently struggling with a debt crisis, are you supportive of the idea that the UK should champion debt cancellation for those low-income countries who need it so that they can properly fund their essential public services?
- 2 Many of the world's poorest countries are in debt crisis meaning money they could spend on health, education or tackling the climate crisis is instead going to big banks

and wealthy nations. If you were elected, would you support a new legislation that could prevent private creditors such as Blackrock or HSBC from suing low-income countries in UK courts?

BUSINESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The issue: British businesses are some of the biggest and most powerful in the world, often with supply chains that span many countries.

It is vital that the goods they produce are not done so at the expense of either human rights or the natural environment, which is why the UK needs to legislate for greater oversight of business practices throughout their supply chains.

We would like to see the introduction of a new 'Business, Human Rights & Environment Act' to tackle corporate abuses to both people and nature through UK supply chains.

Questions to ask:

- 1 Many of the things we consume in the UK are produced via supply chains that span the world. Throughout these global supply chains, it is too often the case that workers are exploited and/or the environment is damaged. Would you support the introduction of legislation for greater oversight of business practices through these supply chains?
- 2 If elected, what steps would you take to ensure businesses are held responsible for their operations, both at home and abroad to ensure workers' rights are upheld, affected communities are safeguarded and the natural environment is protected?

BUILDING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES AND TACKLING REGIONAL INEQUALITIES

The issue: The UK has some of the highest regional inequalities in Europe, and this is leaving many people behind. Research shows that the UK is the most regionally unbalanced large, advanced economy, with growing rates of poverty in particular regions. This leaves millions of people below the poverty line and without the support they need to thrive.

Tackling this issue requires ongoing investment in community assets and leadership as well as the creation of good quality employment.

We would like to see a solid plan to tackle regional inequalities and help improve social and economic outcomes for left-behind areas.

Questions to ask:

- 1 If elected, what will your party do to address regional inequalities and help communities thrive?
- 2 Will you commit to working more closely with local groups and communities, including faith groups such as the St Vincent de Paul Society to identify the best policies to support left behind areas?

AID AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The issue: Despite the commitment to spend 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) on overseas aid being enshrined into law, the UK has slashed its aid budget, and now only spends 0.5% of GNI on overseas aid.

In addition, increasing amounts of that aid is being spent in the UK rather than overseas, meaning that compared to 2020 there has been a whopping 40% reduction in aid spending overseas.

We would like to see restoration of the UK aid budget to 0.7% of GNI and a commitment to tackling the root causes of global poverty, injustice and climate change.

Questions to ask:

- 1 The UK has slashed its aid budget, turning its back on the fight against global poverty. Will you, if elected, agree to restore the aid budget to 0.7% of national income, as agreed in the International Development Act, and show that we are a country committed to making the world a better place for all?
- 2 Our overseas aid budget has not only been cut, but the Department for International Development has been shut down, and much of the remaining aid money has been redirected to domestic spending. Can you let me know what you will do to ensure Britain restores its aid budget and supports people across the world who are experiencing in poverty?