

## Who's Who in Local Government? Rotating Interviews with Officials & Staff

### Overview

Students will visit the public library with the goal of learning about local government and the roles and responsibilities of public officials. As part of their visit, they will participate in rotating interviews with elected and appointed local government officials and staff. Interviewees might include a representative from the public library, parks and recreation, public works, city council, county commissioners, etc. Students can also complete the attached "Name That Local Government Job" at the library or back in the classroom.

### Grades

6-12 (This activity – excluding the attached Name That Local Government Job - can also be utilized with elementary students, but it is recommended teachers have additional volunteers to help facilitate the interviews between students and officials.)

### Essential Questions

- What types of jobs do local government officials perform?
- What are the responsibilities of local government officials?
- How is the work of local government officials relevant to each of us?
- What challenges do local government officials face?
- What is our responsibility as citizens and community members regarding our local government?

### Materials

- Sample thank you note, attached
- Local government officials
- Name tags for officials and students; name tents for local government officials
- Reflecting on Local Government Interviews, response sheet attached
- Name that Local Government Job, worksheet and key attached

### Duration

- 30-45 minutes for student preparation time
- 45-60 minutes for interviews

### 1. Teacher Preparation

- The goal of this activity is to allow students to learn about local government through first hand interviews with local officials during a visit to the local public library. (This activity can also be conducted at school, however.) Interviews can be based on learning about general responsibilities and roles of various local government officials, or can also include questioning on a specific area of student concern. The teacher should consider these components when choosing which officials to schedule for the interviews
- Students will be placed in small groups of 4-5 to conduct their interviews, and will rotate between all visiting officials (in "speed-dating" style.) Thus, you will need to schedule enough visiting officials so that each group has someone to interview. It is recommended that each group (pending age) have around 8-10 minutes with each official.

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- Teachers will also need to work with the library in advance to schedule your group and ensure the space is arranged to accommodate the rotating interviews. For instance, if there are 5 visiting officials to interview and 5 groups of students to rotate between the officials, you will need 5 pods of chairs and perhaps a table, spread out over a large enough space (or adjacent spaces) so that students can still hear and focus well.
- Research and begin recruiting local government officials (elected and/or appointed) several weeks in advance of the activity. After making an initial contact with each desired interviewee in which you explain the activity and its purpose, follow up with the date, time, location, parking arrangements, school procedures for guests (if not conducting the activity at the library), and a list of possible questions to give officials an idea of what will be asked (see the attached *Utilizing Resource Persons* for more information).

## 2. Student Preparation

- One-two weeks before the interview date, give students an overview of the upcoming interview activity (as well as the field trip to the public library, if this is to be conducted there.) Explain to students that in small groups, they will be able to further explore the roles and responsibilities of various officials from their local government by interviewing them when they visit! If your class is focusing on a particular area of concern in their local government (such as global warming/ environmental issues) let students know they will also be able to respectfully question officials regarding their thoughts and actions on that topic. Have students mark their calendar with the date of interviews, and help them prepare by going over behavior expectations and generating appropriate interview questions.
- **Prepare Questions in Advance:** Break students into their small groups several days before the interviews, letting them know that they will be working together to create questions for the upcoming interviews. Let students know that the questions they prepare in advance are intended to get the conversation started, but they should feel free to ask appropriate questions on their own during the interview, and allow the conversation to go where it takes them.
- Instruct students to brainstorm the various things they would like to know about visiting officials, their responsibilities, their views and/or intended actions on a particular topic, etc. Explain to students that the success of their interviews and the amount of information they get will depend largely on having good, **open ended questions** (questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no). If possible, the teacher should provide a list of the officials who are scheduled to visit, so that students can research those officials and tailor some questions for that particular person. (If possible, allow student's access to the Internet to research the visitors; otherwise the teacher may choose to print relevant information off of the Internet and provide it to students in handout form while they are preparing questions.)
- Monitor groups as they work, offering guidance as needed. Tell students that when the interviews occur, they should each ask at least two questions per interview. (After reviewing each group's questions, instruct students to bring them the day of the interview. The teacher may wish to keep a copy of each groups questions as well incase they are needed by a group that day.)
- **Examples of General Questions:**
  - How long have you been serving as an elected or appointed official?
  - When you first ran/applied for office, what were your reasons for wanting to serve?
  - For officials who have served multiple terms: Have your reasons for serving changed since your first term?
  - For elected officials: How much time do you spend each month on your duties as an elected official?
  - For appointed officials: What does a typical day look like for you?

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- What areas of municipal or county operations interest you the most and why? What areas do you find most complex?
  - What are your favorite parts of serving the public?
  - What do you find most challenging about your job?
  - What accomplishment are you most proud of? Why?
  - Did any aspect of the job come as a surprise after you started? Is there anything you wish someone had told you about the job before you began?
  - What is the toughest decision you've ever had to make as an elected/appointed official? What made it especially difficult?
  - Has your perception of state and local government changed in any way since you have been working in this position? Has your perception of federal government changed? Explain.
  - What, if anything, would you suggest as a prerequisite for serving in local government? What qualifications and interests does one need?
  - Why should citizens care about the decisions that are made in your office? How are we directly impacted?
- Before the date of the library visit and interviews (if conducting this activity at the local public library), review expected behavior with students for field trips as well as expected behavior for interacting with the visiting interviewees. Provide students with an overview of how the interviews will be structured (see “Conducting Interviews” below). At the beginning of each interview, students should introduce themselves, thank the visitor for coming, and begin asking questions. Let them know you will use a signal (bell, lights on/off, etc.) to let groups know when their time is up and to rotate. Explain to students that they will end the interview by again thanking the official for their time, and how and where to rotate for their next interview. Remind students of appropriate behavior for moving about the library or classroom as well.

### 3. Conducting Interviews

- Students should be seated at the section they are starting in. (This might be a good time to provide an activity such as the attached “Name That Local Government Job.”)
- As officials arrive, welcome them and quickly review the activity with them. Once all officials have arrived, introduce each to the entire class by reading a brief bio.
- Let students know how long they will have to interview each visitor (i.e., 8 minutes), as well as what signal they should listen/look for to switch.
- Place each visitor with a group and allow students to conduct their interviews, asking questions from their list of questions that arise in the course of their conversations.
- Check on groups throughout the process but try not to get involved in the discussion unless a group really seems to be struggling. Near the end of each time period, give a two-minute warning, then signal the end of the interview. Guide students clockwise to the next elected official/round table section.

### 4. Closure

- Bring all groups back together and thank the elected officials for participating. You may wish to present each of them with a school token (such as a t-shirt).
- Review the experience with students in a debriefing discussion (and/or assign the attached Reflection Sheet):
  - Based on the interviews you conducted, how would you describe working in local government? What did you learn about local government? Did you hear anything that surprised you? Explain.
  - Which interview did you find most interesting and why?

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- How would you characterize the jobs of the local government officials you met with? Would you be interested in having any of these jobs? Why or why not?
- Why is it important to interact with your local government officials on an on-going basis?
- Why should young people care about the work that local government officials do, and the decisions that local governing bodies are making?
- In what ways can you make your opinions known to local governing officials?
- If you had to pick one job in local government to do, what position would you want and why?

### **Culminating Activities**

- Thank-you notes: Have students write a thank-you note to one of the local government officials, as well as the library staff who helped with the visit. See the attached sample.
- Have students complete the attached *Name That Local Government Job* in groups or individually if they have not done so already.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Reflecting on Local Government Interviews

1. Based on the interviews you conducted, what did you learn about local government? Did you hear anything that surprised you? Explain.
2. Which interview did you find most interesting and why?
3. How would you characterize the jobs of the local government officials you met with? Would you be interested in having any of these jobs? Why or why not?
4. Why is it important to interact with your local government officials on an on-going basis? Why should young people care about the work that local government officials do, and the decisions that local governing bodies are making? In what ways can you make your opinions known to local governing officials?
5. If you had to pick one job in local government to do, what position would you want and why?

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## Sample Thank You Note to a Resource Person

Jamaal Williams  
Smithfield High School  
900 Cornwallis Road  
Durham, NC 27707

May 1, 2018

Mayor Jose Jenkins  
Office of the Mayor  
101 City Hall Plaza  
Durham, NC 27701

Dear Mayor Jenkins:

Thank you for taking part in our class interviews of local government elected officials last Tuesday. I hope you enjoyed the chance to talk with us about your service as mayor to Durham, North Carolina. We certainly learned a great deal about Durham in addition to the challenges and rewards of public service. I particularly enjoyed hearing you speak about why you signed the “Cool City Pledge” and the ways Durham is working to improve carbon emissions.

With your help and the help of the other elected officials, we gained a deeper appreciation for the role of local government in our daily lives and appreciate the attention you have show to environmental issues in our city.

Sincerely,

<<signature>>

Jamaal Williams

## Name that Local Government Job!

### Directions:

1. Read the job descriptions provided on the following Name that Local Government Job worksheet.
2. Determine whether or not you believe the job to be performed by your county government, your municipal government, or both.
3. From the Local Government Job Titles provided below, determine what title(s) perform what job. Job titles vary slightly from one organization to another and some descriptions are general enough to apply to multiple positions within the same department.

### Local Government Job Titles

- 911 dispatcher
- Animal control officer
- Building inspector
- Buyer
- Child support agent
- City/Town clerk
- City/Town manager
- Civil engineer
- Clerk to the board
- Code enforcement officer
- Codes inspector
- Community disease control specialist
- County manager
- Dental assistant
- Detention officer
- Division right-of-way agent
- EMT
- Engineer
- Firefighter
- Habilitation specialist
- Housing specialist
- Librarian
- Mental health counselor
- Mental health specialist
- Paramedic
- Pharmacist
- Planner
- Public health specialist
- Purchasing agent
- Recreation coordinator
- Revenue officer
- Sanitation worker
- Signal systems technician
- Solid waste collector
- Social worker
- Substance abuse counselor
- Tax appraiser
- Tele-communicator
- Traffic engineer
- Zoning officer

**Name that Local Government Job!**

**Team members:** \_\_\_\_\_

Job Description	County, Municipality, or Both?	Job Title
1. Attends all meetings of governing board; drafts minutes for board approval; maintains custody of minutes, ordinances, and resolutions; answers questions about board actions.		
2. Provides technical assistance to dentist in the care of dental patients.		
3. Inspects buildings under construction or renovation for safety and for compliance with local state, and federal regulations.		
4. Responds to questions about submitting sales tax reports; reviews sales tax reports from businesses; investigates discrepancies.		
5. Transports patients to local medical facilities and provides emergency medical aid and life-saving measures.		
6. Reviews requisitions; performs market research; prepared bid invitations; analyzes bids and recommends bid awards; completes contract documents; monitors performance by vendors.		
7. Initiates, prepares, and enforces child support orders.		
8. Manages all local government services, serving at the pleasure of the governing board.		
9. Investigates complaints concerning substandard housing, weedy lots, trash and debris on lots, and abandoned vehicles on both public and private property.		
10. Plans activities for children; supervises groups of children in a recreational facility; manages snack time and bathroom breaks; resolves squabbles; treats minor injuries.		

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11. Designs and reviews plans for public works improvements; obtains permits; performs field surveys; prepares and administers contracts; inspects projects such as streets, sidewalks, water and sewer lines, and storm drainage systems.		
12. Picks up lost, dangerous or injured animals; locates owners of lost animals; orders quarantines as necessary; assists public at the animal shelter.		
13. Research traffic patterns; monitors traffic computers; recommends adjustments in traffic light signals to facilitate the flow of traffic.		
14. Evaluates and counsels substance abuse clients ; develops and serves as primary contact for therapy, including individual, group, or family counseling.		
15. Takes emergency calls and transmits radio, telephone, and computer messages, dispatching police, fire, and emergency medical assistance on a 911 telephone system.		
16. Applies development ordinances to specific proposals; analyzes planning issues; prepares reports; makes presentations to citizens and to appointed and elected boards.		
17. Combats, extinguishes, and prevents fires; removes people from danger and administers first aid; responds to spills/leaks of hazardous materials; maintains firefighting equipment.		
18. Investigates cases of specific communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, AIDS, and sexually transmitted diseases; identifies contacts of the patient; refers individuals for treatment.		
19. Identifies, negotiates and makes purchase arrangements for properties needed for the construction or expansion of highways.		
20. Assists patrons by recommending and locating library materials and equipment; classifies materials; recommends materials to be purchased.		
21. Collects residential solid waste on an assigned route.		
22. Helps clients and their families to assess needs and develop plans for caring for developmentally disabled or mentally ill clients.		

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23. Researches and appraises residential, commercial, or industrial properties for tax assessment purposes.		
24. Maintains order during daily routine at jail; provides supervision for and ensures security of inmates.		
25. Processes prescription orders; registers and counsels patients; maintains inventories of drugs and supplies.		

**Of all of the jobs you have learned about...**

...Which do you think is most important and why?

...Which would be most difficult to perform and why?

...Which would you most like to perform and why?

**Name that Local Government Job Answer Key**

Job Description	County, Municipality, or Both?	Job Title
1. Attends all meetings of governing board; drafts minutes for board approval; maintains custody of minutes, ordinances, and resolutions; answers questions about board actions.	Both	City/Town clerk Clerk to the board
2. Provides technical assistance to dentist in the care of dental patients.	County	Dental assistant
3. Inspects buildings under construction or renovation for safety and for compliance with local state, and federal regulations.	Both	Building inspector Codes inspector
4. Responds to questions about submitting sales tax reports; reviews sales tax reports from businesses; investigates discrepancies.	Neither (State government)	Revenue officer (Department of Revenue)
5. Transports patients to local medical facilities and provides emergency medical aid and life-saving measures.	County (Often contracted out)	EMT Paramedic
6. Reviews requisitions; performs market research; prepared bid invitations; analyzes bids and recommends bid awards; completes contract documents; monitors performance by vendors.	Both	Buyer Purchasing agent
7. Initiates, prepares, and enforces child support orders.	County	Child support agent Social worker
8. Manages all local government services, serving at the pleasure of the governing board.	Both	City/Town manager County manager
9. Investigates complaints concerning substandard housing, weedy lots, trash and debris on lots, and abandoned vehicles on both public and private property.	Both	Code enforcement officer Zoning officer Housing specialist
10. Plans activities for children; supervises groups of children in a recreational facility; manages snack time and bathroom breaks; resolves squabbles; treats minor injuries.	Both	Recreation coordinator Mom/Dad (1/2 point)
11. Designs and reviews plans for public works improvements; obtains permits; performs field surveys; prepares and administers contracts; inspects projects such as streets, sidewalks, water and sewer lines, and storm drainage systems.	Both	Engineer Civil engineer
12. Picks up lost, dangerous or injured animals; locates owners of lost animals; orders quarantines as necessary; assists public at the animal shelter.	Both	Animal control officer

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13. Research traffic patterns; monitors traffic computers; recommends adjustments in traffic light signals to facilitate the flow of traffic.	City	Signal systems technician Traffic engineer
14. Evaluates and counsels substance abuse clients ; develops and serves as primary contact for therapy, including individual, group, or family counseling.	County	Substance abuse counselor Mental health counselor
15. Takes emergency calls and transmits radio, telephone, and computer messages, dispatching police, fire, and emergency medical assistance on a 911 telephone system.	Both	911 dispatcher Tele-communicator
16. Applies development ordinances to specific proposals; analyzes planning issues; prepares reports; makes presentations to citizens and to appointed and elected boards.	Both	Planner
17. Combats, extinguishes, and prevents fires; removes people from danger and administers first aid; responds to spills/leaks of hazardous materials; maintains firefighting equipment.	City (Usually VFD firefighters are not county employees)	Firefighters
18. Investigates cases of specific communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, AIDS, and sexually transmitted diseases; identifies contacts of the patient; refers individuals for treatment.	County	Community disease control specialist Public health specialist
19. Identifies, negotiates and makes purchase arrangements for properties needed for the construction or expansion of highways.	Neither (State government)	Division right-of-way agent (Dept. of Transportation)
20. Assists patrons by recommending and locating library materials and equipment; classifies materials; recommends materials to be purchased.	Both	Librarian
21. Collects residential solid waste on an assigned route.	Both (often contracted out)	Sanitation worker Solid waste collector
22. Helps clients and their families to assess needs and develop plans for caring for developmentally disabled or mentally ill clients.	County	Habilitation specialist Mental health specialist
23. Researches and appraises residential, commercial, or industrial properties for tax assessment purposes.	County	Tax appraiser
24. Maintains order during daily routine at jail; provides supervision for and ensures security of inmates.	County	Detention officer Teacher (1/2 point)
25. Processes prescription orders; registers and counsels patients; maintains inventories of drugs and supplies.	County	Pharmacist

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