

Holding a Question Time Meeting or Election Hustings

Ideas and advice for the General Election

Churches and community organisations regularly organise election meetings (sometimes known as hustings) where members of the public can listen to and ask questions of the candidates who are standing for election. Meetings held in or organised by church groups provide the opportunity for respectful dialogue in a space which is impartial.

This guidance and advice has been produced by the Joint Public Issues Team (the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church). For more information and resources visit www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/general-election-2017/

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE...

The general election will take place on Thursday 8th June.

The election has been called early and lots of people – including candidates and political parties – might not be as well prepared as in 2015. We have had to re-jig our priorities and you might have to as well; would it be better to postpone other work that can wait until after the election meeting?

GET YOURSELVES ORGANISED

Are there other churches, faith or community groups that you can work in partnership with?

Forming a small group of people who will be able to take decisions is really important. You might have a group from the 2015 election that will work together again. You might be doing something for the first time, and so are there other churches, faith or community groups that you can contact to ask to work in partnership with?

Once you have a group together, you should work your way through this guidance and decide what you will do.

WHEN SHOULD WE HOLD THE MEETING?

It is often a good idea to consider holding your election meeting at least a week before polling day, if possible.

Any time between now and Wednesday 7 June.

This might depend on the availability of candidates first and a hall, room or church second.

Past experience has suggested that candidates often respond well to meetings held on Sunday evenings.

It is also often a good idea to consider holding your election meeting at least a week before polling day, if possible. This might allow people with Postal or Proxy votes to attend the meeting and then decide how to vote, and for others to have time to think about what was said before polling day itself.

WHO SHOULD RUN THE EVENT?

Ensure that a whole range of views are heard.

Try to identify a respected and impartial person from the community to chair the meeting. This could be a church figure, a community leader, or someone who might be comfortable speaking in public and keeping order such as a teacher or lawyer.

They should not belong to or be on record as supporting a particular political party. It is also important that s/he is able to conduct the meeting firmly, ensuring that a whole range of views are heard.

They will need to be well-briefed as to how the meeting will run, so a face-to-face meeting with them before the event might be helpful. It might also be useful to give them a copy of this guidance and other relevant material.

WHAT ABOUT THE VENUE?

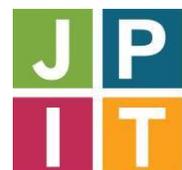
Wherever the meeting is held, it should be easy to find and accessible.

You might decide to hold the meeting in one of the local churches, or in another building that is more convenient – for example, a school or community centre.

Wherever the meeting is held, it should be easy to find and accessible to people who use wheelchairs.

You should make sure there is a PA system with induction loop.

Convenience to public transport and /or car parking facilities should also be considered.



CAN WE REGISTER OUR EVENT?

Get on with planning your event as quickly as possible!

In previous years organisations like Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and MeetYourNextMP have asked local organisers to register their plans, which has helped to provide an online database so members of the public can see what is happening in their area.

As this election has been a surprise to lots of people, at the time of writing we do not know if there will be a registration process offered. And so our advice is not to worry in the short term about registering – just get on with planning your own event as quickly as possible.

Keep checking the following websites for information about any developments around registration and publicity:

www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/general-election-2017/ and www.churcheselection.org.uk

WHO SHOULD WE INVITE?

Candidates might be less organised than at previous elections.

You should contact the candidates as soon as possible. If you are not sure of your Westminster constituency, you can find out by entering in your postcode here <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/>

You should also ask for mobile numbers and the name and details of a candidate's election agent so you can keep in touch in the run up to the event.

Candidates and their supporters will be very busy, and because of the sudden calling of this election they might be less organised than in previous elections.

The deadline for nominations is 4pm on Thursday 11 May. If you don't already know who the candidates are in your constituency, you may have to do some research to find their details.

You can do this by:

- looking at the websites of the different political parties who often list all their candidates
- contacting Political Party headquarters to ask for a name and contact information to send an invitation
- Asking your Local Authority Returning Officer for details, especially if smaller parties or independents are standing that you might not be aware of.



Conservatives	020 7222 9000
Green Party (England & Wales)	020 3691 9400
Labour	0345 092 2299
Liberal Democrat	020 7022 0988
Plaid Cymru	029 2047 2272
Scottish Green Party	08700 772 207
Scottish National Party	0800 633 5432
UKIP	0333 800 6800

DO WE HAVE TO INVITE ALL THE CANDIDATES?

The Electoral Commission has provided advice on holding hustings.

No – but if you don't you must have an objective, impartial reason for not including all of them. The Electoral Commission has provided some advice on holding hustings which can be read here:

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/169480/sp-hustings-npc-ukpge.pdf

Your event should not reasonably be regarded as intending to influence voters to vote for or against a particular candidate or party. If you invite all the candidates standing in the constituency, or if you have impartial and objective reasons for not inviting certain candidates or parties, your event will not be covered by electoral law regulations and restrictions.

If you are holding a public event, and you want to ensure that it is a non-selective hustings, the simplest way is to invite all the relevant candidates in the area or all political parties campaigning in the election, and allow all those attending an equal opportunity to participate.

However, this may not always be practical. For example, there may be so many candidates or parties standing that a meeting would be hard to manage.

If you decide not to invite all candidates, there are some good practice recommendations you should follow to ensure your hustings is genuinely not promoting particular candidates or parties more than others.

These include:

- being able to give impartial reasons why you have not invited particular candidates or parties. You should be prepared to explain your reasons to candidates or parties you haven't invited
- making sure that candidates or parties you invite represent a reasonable variety of view, from different parts of the political spectrum
- allowing each candidate or party representative attending a fair chance to answer questions and, where appropriate, a



- reasonable opportunity to respond to points made against them by other candidates or party representative
- informing the audience at the meeting of candidates or parties standing who haven't been invited.

Impartial reasons may emerge from the following considerations:

- local prominence of some parties or candidates over others
- the number of elected representatives at the local or national level
- recent election results in the area
- resources and other practicalities constraining numbers of invitees
- security concerns

If you don't want to invite a candidate because you don't agree with their policies, this is not an impartial reason: you should consult the Electoral Commission's guidelines on organising a Selective Hustings (see

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/169480/sp-hustings-npc-ukpge.pdf) as this will be subject to

regulation and you may be required to register with them and ensure that the candidates that you do invite declare your support for them.

If you have any doubts, discuss these locally first with your planning group, contact your local Returning Officer or the Electoral Commission for advice.

WHAT IF...

A candidate doesn't respond, declines, boycotts or fails to turn up?

For organisers, this can be very irritating. But if you anticipate how you will handle the situation before it arises, then you will be better prepared.

Try if you can to find a date which all your invited candidates can make – and try to be flexible if you are able.

Non-response – you might need to follow-up on your invitation if you haven't heard back, especially for main national parties. Keep chasing and try to get the Candidates email and telephone number, and their election agent so you can keep in touch.

Declines – if a candidate has declined to attend (due to another commitment for example) you don't have to worry about whether your event is still impartial or not – it is as it is the invitation which counts. If it is one of the main national parties, think about whether you would be happy to have a party spokesperson take part or make



a statement at the start of the event, explaining why the candidate is not able to make it.

Boycotts – some parties have a policy of not sharing a platform with other parties, as it is felt this conveys a degree of legitimacy on them. If you find that because party X is standing, candidates from Y and Z will not turn up, what should your planning group do? Be prepared to consider not holding an event if it will not be of benefit to the community.

No-shows – clearly this would be disappointing for the planning group and the audience; but also possibly a candidate who has forgotten. Elections can be very busy times, so minimise the unexpected by keeping in touch with candidates, share phone numbers, and confirm all the arrangements a couple of days before the event.

WHAT TYPE OF ELECTION MEETING SHOULD WE RUN?

Here are four ideas.

Your local planning group should decide the timetable and format for the meeting. Here are four ideas:

- Traditional hustings
- Speed hustings
- A virtual hustings
- A “people’s politics” election meeting

Traditional hustings

You might want to consider the following structure:

- Brief introduction of the candidates by name and party
- Short statement by each candidate (a couple of minutes at most)
- Questions from the floor on political issues, allowing each candidate to respond
- Final few sentences from each candidate

Bearing in mind that you may have six or more candidates, you will need to ensure that statements and answers are kept strictly to time. You will probably want to have someone with a stopwatch at the back of the room who can hold up a card when the speaker’s time is nearly up (say 30 seconds to go) and again when time is up.

It is always a good idea to have someone lined up to ask the first question – people may be slow in starting, but they will soon heat up!



These meetings are run by – but not for – the churches; people from all sections of the community should be encouraged to attend and to participate.

Decide how you want to handle questions: Do you want people from the audience to submit them in writing to the Chair at the start of the meeting or as it progresses? You may wish to collect questions in advance of the meeting, so that a good spread of issues is covered. Or are you happy to take questions from the floor? Whatever you decide, this should be made very clear to the audience at the start of the meeting.

You *may* also want to remind people that this is a UK Parliament election, and encourage them to focus on issues within the Parliament's powers (for example, for Scottish voters questions about the NHS or Education are not entirely relevant, as these are issues that are governed by the Scottish Parliament). Also decide whether you will allow supplementary questions to be asked – remember that even if each of six candidates is given just two minutes to answer, each question will take twelve minutes. Questioners may also need to be kept in check by the Chair – people have come to hear the candidate, not them!

Speed Hustings

Based on a "speed dating" format, this type of hustings enables a dialogue to take place between candidates and the audience. It would take the following format:

- the audience is distributed around the hall at tables, or in small groups, or in separate rooms
- each table has one candidate, allowing the conversation to flow, without candidates being able to directly address one another
- candidates move around the tables
- the candidates are each invited to sum up with a short statement at the end of the evening.

A Virtual Hustings

This hustings does not require candidates and audiences to meet in the same physical location. Candidates are contacted with a range of questions by email, and this allows them to respond, in their own time, but with a pre-arranged deadline. This may be beneficial in situations where there are a large number of candidates, or in rural locations. The virtual hustings may be organised as follows:

- approach parties for contact details of who would be responding to the hustings questions
- accept suggestions for questions, which are collated and sent to all of the candidates
- give a deadline for answer, after which some follow-up may be required
- publish the answers



- you could ask candidates to video themselves and send the recording in to be uploaded to a website or hold an event where all the videos can be shown.

A 'People's Politics' Election Meeting

Whereas a conventional hustings places the emphasis on hearing from politicians and parties a 'People's Politics' event begins by hearing from those whose voices are not often heard within the political discourse before asking candidates to respond. The event would take the following format:

- Identify individuals or representatives from groups who are often marginalised within society, this might be someone from a homeless shelter, a foodbank, groups with learning disabilities, young carers, asylum seekers or any others that might be applicable to your local context. Who you invite will depend on your local context and the willingness of people to share. It is advised that you do not invite more than three people to share their stories.
- At the event have the Chair introduce the format, the candidates and those who have been invited to share their story.
- Give the first person sharing their story 3 minutes to share their story before posing a question that they would like the candidates to answer.
- After this story ask each of the candidates in turn to discuss what they have heard and answer the question that had been posed. This should be a three way conversation between the Chair, the person sharing their story and the candidate. It is not a dialogue between the candidates.
- Once all the candidates had done this the Chair will thank them and thank the person who has shared their story. The Chair will then invite the next person to share their story.
- Once all the stories have been heard, and responses from candidates given, the Chair has the option to ask all the speakers to come to the front of the stage and take questions from the audience (time permitting).

Much of the success of this event relies on facilitating individuals to share their stories. For some of those individuals this may be an intimidating process and if possible you should spend time with them beforehand ensuring that they are comfortable with the format and have what they wish to say prepared. Some may wish to have their story written down in advance. For others speaking for three minutes may be difficult and in these instances an interview approach between the Chair and the story teller may be advisable.



Knowing what question to ask the candidates may also be difficult for those sharing their story. If this is the case you may need to help them think about the question in advance. The question does not need to be complicated and often simple questions such as “if elected what would you do to address this issue?” can be very powerful.

The second significant part of the process involves facilitating the discussion between the candidates and the story teller. In this instance it is important that the Chair ensures that both individuals are allowed a fair contribution and that they do so in a measured and constructive way. It may be worth going through this with the participants in advance of the event.

HOW SHOULD WE PUBLICISE THE MEETING?

Try to get publicity for the meeting out to as many people and in as many ways as possible – and at the earliest practical opportunity.

Contact all the churches in the local area, asking them to put up posters and to put details of the meeting in their weekly notice sheet. If possible, get members of each denomination or church to take responsibility for publicising it within their own church.

Make a list of public places where details of the meeting could be advertised, e.g. public libraries, doctors’ surgeries, post offices, community centres, shop windows, church members’ windows.

You can also ask the local media to advertise the event. Notify the candidates that you will be doing this, and send out a press release in advance. The press release can be very simple (stating What, When, Where, Who and Why) and should be sent to local newspapers and radio stations.

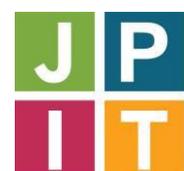
WHAT ABOUT PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS AT THE MEETING?

Send a friendly reminder to candidates a couple of days before the event – it will be a busy time for them and they should appreciate your help.

How will you welcome the Chair and for the candidates? Do you want to ask them to arrive early and offer some refreshments? A chance for them to relax and be put at ease before going before the public. Do you want to ask the Chair to thank the candidates for being willing to participate in the process and to answer people’s questions? Do you want to have someone else offer a vote of thanks to the Chair at the end of the event?

Sound

It is important to have an efficient and effective public address system - check this in advance, and then make someone who understands its operation responsible for it on the night. A mobile “floor” microphone (and someone to run around with it) will make it



much easier to take questions or comments from the audience, which are a vital part of the process.

Stewarding

Decide how many people you will need to welcome people, etc – for example, will you be serving tea and coffee? Do you need any help with signs and notices outside the building? Any issues with access? Setting up chairs and tables? Try to get volunteers from a range of churches.

Translation

Does your community have a link with people who use other language such as British Sign Language, Welsh or Gaelic? Could you run the hustings with translation or in a language other than English?

IS THERE ANYTHING WE NEED TO DO AFTERWARDS?

Thank everyone for taking part... and vote!

CHECKLIST

Report back – let us know how you get on!

- ✓ Form planning group
- ✓ Research who the candidates are in your constituency
- ✓ Set date, time and venue
- ✓ Invite candidates and chase up responses
- ✓ Agree format and ask someone to chair the meeting
- ✓ Organise stewards and hospitality
- ✓ Publicise event

As well as thanking everyone for taking part, and voting, there is just one more thing to do: please let us know how you got on!

We'll love to know where your event was held, who attended, what questions were asked and especially if you tried a new kind of format for engagement.

We'd also want to know if this guidance was useful, if there was anything you needed to know that was missing or if our advice wasn't so useful...who knows when the next election will be!

enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk

www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/elections



The Church of Scotland



The **Methodist** Church 

