

Guide to Planning a General Election Hustings Meeting



**A step by step guide to organising
your own local Hustings event**

www.churcheselection.org.uk

For the past 40 years churches across the country have joined together to run General Election Hustings meetings: Public meetings where people can listen to and ask questions of the candidates who hope to represent them in the UK Parliament. Meetings sponsored by the churches provide opportunity for genuine political debate on neutral territory.

What is a hustings?

A hustings is a meeting where election candidates or parties debate policies and answer questions from the audience. Hustings provide voters with an opportunity to hear the views of candidates or parties. A **local hustings** is a meeting that involves the candidates standing in a particular constituency

This guidance offers information and advice on how to plan such a meeting locally. Our suggestions are based on the experiences of people who have organised hustings in the past.

If you are interested in holding a Hustings meeting, please visit www.churcheselection.org.uk to register your interest.

In registering an event you need to confirm that it is organised by churches or church-based organisations (including in collaboration with others), and is a non-selective hustings event, as described below.

The election is on Thursday 7 May

For the first time, the date of the general election was agreed at the start of parliament in 2010, and enshrined in law as **Thursday 7 May 2015**. The 'official' start of the General Election campaign is likely to be at the end of March, when Parliament is formally dissolved – but in reality the campaigning for the General Election has already started. Given that the date is already known, you can start planning your event now!

First steps

These meetings work best when they are organised ecumenically, so the first thing to do is to form a local ecumenical planning group. This could be under the auspices of your local Churches Together group, but if that is not possible it is better to set up a special organising group made up of representatives from different churches rather than to act as a single church or denomination. Contact as many churches as possible in your constituency to see if you can work together. Consider whether you also want to invite members of other faiths to take part in the process. Call a meeting of this group as soon as possible.

Liaising with others who register an interest in organising a local hustings

The registration system on the CTBI website enables you to view the contact details of other individuals and groups that are interested in organising a meeting, so that you can get in touch and plan to act together. Ideally there should be one churches election meeting in each constituency, but life is rarely that simple. Some ecumenical bodies may only cover part of a constituency, whilst others may straddle several. If you live in one of the very large constituencies it might in the end be more practical to organise two meetings at different ends of the constituency.

2020 Vision of the Good Society

Alongside this guide to organising a Hustings Meeting, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, in collaboration with a number of ecumenical partners, has also produced a '2020 Vision of the Good Society.' This document sets out a positive vision for the kind of 'Good Society' we would like to see in 2020 – the end of the next Parliament – rooted in Christian theology and statements the Churches have made on key issues in recent years. This document is specifically designed for use in Hustings events and includes suggested questions to use as discussion starters with candidates in relation to five key 'Good Society' themes. Copies can be downloaded (along with other Election briefings from churches and church organisations) from the CTBI election website at www.churcheselection.org.uk

When should the meeting be held?

In the past, candidates have responded well to meetings held on a Sunday evening during the formal General Election period. However, most of the political parties have already selected candidates, and given the Election campaign period is an incredibly busy time for candidates, it may be possible for you to organise a hustings meeting *in advance* of the Election being formally announced, if you want to do so. If you choose a Sunday, the meeting could be held after an ecumenical evening service, but you should make it clear that the meeting is open to all - church attenders or otherwise.

Don't worry if you can't hold the meeting on a Sunday evening. Consider possible dates and try to choose an earlier rather than a later date. The

sooner you can confirm the date with the candidates the better!

Remember to update your entry on the website www.churcheselection.org.uk with your date, time and venue details as soon you have them. You can email election@ctbi.org.uk with any queries.

Who should run the meeting?

Try to identify a respected and impartial person from your community to chair the meeting. This could be a church figure, a professional or community leader. It is vital that the Chair is not identified or connected with a 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 (particularly on the timing of the contributions, see below) so a face-to-face meeting might be helpful. It might also be useful to give them a copy of this guidance and other relevant material.

Organising a 'non-selective' Hustings

The Electoral Commission, which regulates political activities particularly in relation to the General Election has issued guidance on Hustings meetings. According to this guidance, there are two kinds of Hustings meetings:

- Non-selective Hustings, which are not regulated by electoral law
- Selective Hustings, which are classed as a 'regulated' activity under electoral law and have to abide by additional conditions, including limits on spending.

It is our strong recommendation that you should organize a non-selective Hustings event.

A non-selective hustings is a hustings that would not reasonably be regarded as intended to influence voters to vote for or against political parties or categories of candidates, including political parties or categories of candidates who support or oppose particular policies or issues.

In the Electoral Commission's view, a hustings will be non-selective if the organiser has invited all the candidates known to be standing in the constituency or you have impartial reasons for not inviting certain candidates or parties.

If you are holding a public hustings, 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.

The organiser does not have to ensure that all candidates or parties attend the event. They just need to be invited.

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

Impartial reasons do not include reasons such as your views on the policies of a candidate or party.

This is consistent with the generally guidance from the Churches at previous elections which has been to suggest inviting all candidates in the interests of freedom of speech unless you consider that it might cause a breach of the peace to do so.

Organising a selective Hustings event

Some Churches in the past have made statements on the unacceptability of particular extremist and racist parties. You may wish to take these into account and not give such views a platform – but if you do so you **must** read the Electoral Commission guidance on organizing **selective** Hustings meetings, available at:

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

We will NOT be able to register selective Hustings events on the CTBI website.

If you have any doubts about who to invite you should discuss these with your local ecumenical group and contact your Constituency Returning Officer via your local authority, or the Electoral Commission for advice at <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/>

How do we find the candidates?

Most constituency parties have already identified many of their candidates for the election. Details of candidates are available on the major parties' websites.

Conservative Party

www.conservatives.com/OurTeam/Prospective_Parliamentary_Candidates.aspx

Labour Party

www2.labour.org.uk/candidates

Liberal Democrat Party

www.libdems.org.uk/general_election_candidates

Green Party www.greenparty.org.uk/

UKIP www.ukip.org/

Plaid Cymru www.partyofwales.org/westminster-elections-2015/

Scottish National Party www.snp.org/

For other parties, information can be found at www.theyworkforyou.com

Alternatively, contact the political parties' national offices to find out if a party has a local organisation in your constituency which will be able to identify your local candidate. Many candidates will have their own website.

Contact the candidates with an initial invitation, explaining the aims of the meeting and mentioning the provisional time and date. This should then be confirmed as soon as possible, with details of the other candidates who are being invited.

You can find out details of any other candidates from your local Returning Officer once nominations have closed. Deadlines for valid nominations are fixed and will be stated in the Notice of Election published by the (Acting) Returning Officer. Contact your local authority for details. Once the election has been called, the candidates and their election agents are very busy, which is why it is better to do as much of the organising in advance of the Election being formally called as possible.

What if a candidate refuses to attend?

Once you know who you are inviting, contact the candidates, stating who else has been invited to the meeting. If a candidate is invited and refuses or is unable to attend, you should give their apologies at the start of the meeting. They may wish to provide a short statement to be read out. It is up to the organizing group together with the chair to decide on this.

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. Remember to include contact telephone numbers and email addresses so they can find out further details. It is important to stress that these meetings are not campaigning events, although churches and Christian bodies may be actively campaigning on particular issues on other occasions.

Decide how to make good use of electronic media to help your publicity, e.g. blogs, social networking sites.

You may wish to inform the Police that a meeting is being held.

What about the venue?

You might decide to hold the meeting in a local church, or somewhere that is more convenient. The venue should be easy to find, accessible to people with disabilities including wheelchair users and, if at all possible, have a hearing loop.

Sound - It is important to have a public address system. Check this in advance, and then make someone responsible for it on the night. A '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.

Stewards - Decide how many stewards you will need to welcome and assist people. Decide whether you be serving tea and coffee. Try to get volunteers from a range of churches.

Running the meeting...

It is up to the planning group to decide the timetable for the meeting. You might want to consider the following structure:

- Welcome by the Chair, who also describes the way in which the meeting is to be conducted
- Brief introduction by the Chair of the candidates by name and party
- Introduction to the 2020 Vision of the Good Society theme
- Short statement by each candidate (a couple of minutes)
- Questions from the floor, allowing each candidate to respond
- Final few sentences from each candidate

Remember that you may have 5 or more candidates present. You will need to ensure that statements and answers are kept strictly to time. If your Chair does not want to control the meeting *and* keep an eye on their stopwatch, you could have someone at the back of the room holding up a card when the speaker is one minute from the end, and again when their time is up.

Resources available on the website www.churcheselection.org.uk include the 2020 Vision of the Good Society and briefings on a range of other issues and questions which could be raised at the meeting. These could be used to stimulate discussion before the event, or could be summarised and made available to the audience on the evening.

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 warm up! These meetings are run by – but not for – the churches, so 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. This will mean speedy sorting through the questions while the candidates are being introduced. 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.

There may be some issues where it is appropriate for a supplementary question to be asked – especially where a general question might be followed up by a more specific one. However, be aware that even if each of five candidates is given just two minutes to answer, each question will take ten minutes.

Questioners may need to be kept in check by the Chair – people have come to hear the candidate, not them!

And finally...

Please let us know how you got on!
Any suggestions will be used by the churches for the next election campaign.

Thank you for your interest in organising an election meeting. We hope that it will be successful, and will provide a valuable opportunity for the political debate and reflection necessary for true democratic participation.

Further information and help can be found at www.churcheselection.org.uk

And at the Electoral Commission www.electoralcommission.org.uk

For information about material produced specifically for constituencies in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland contact:

- **Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales)**
www.cytun.org.uk
- **Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office**
www.actsparl.org
- **Irish Council of Churches**
www.irishchurches.org

Checklist

	Action to take now – or as soon as possible.	In the 3-4 weeks before the meeting, either once the election has been called – or sooner, if you want to hold your meeting in advance of the formal election period.
Website	Register your plans so far on www.churcheselection.org.uk	Ensure your entry on the website is updated with the date, time and venue for your constituency meeting.
Planning Group	Contact the Churches Together Group/ other churches in your constituency. Form a planning group, and have at least one initial meeting. Draw up list of tasks	Regular meetings/contact
Date	Set a date for the meeting	Confirm the date with candidates' offices by phone
Candidates	Identify the candidates for the main parties and contact them to invite them to the election meeting	Once nominations have closed, get hold of the final list of candidates. Invite any candidates you have not already been in contact with. Brief all candidates on the timetable (including strict time limits)
Venue	Identify and confirm a suitable venue.	Check out sound system, and identify someone to run it on the night. Decide where the candidates will sit and prepare name/party labels to go in front of them
Chairing	Identify someone to chair and confirm date with them	Brief the Chair fully on timetable. Appoint a timekeeper with stopwatch and card if required.
Stewards	Recruit stewards	Brief stewards on welcoming/serving refreshments. Photocopy 2020 Vision of the Good Society summary or briefings on other issues for audience if required.
Publicity	Plan your publicity. Contact other local churches. Distribute advance notices, newsletter articles, press release. Plan/produce posters.	Distribute posters/ information for display Send press release to local media Promote on social media (twitter/facebook etc)

Published by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX (www.ctbi.org.uk).
Registered charity 1113299 and company limited by guarantee 5661787.