

HOLDING A QUESTION TIME MEETING OR ELECTION HUSTINGS

Ideas and advice for the General Election

During the period before a General Election, churches and community organisations often 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** (Baptists Together, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church). For more information and resources visit jointpublicissues.org.uk/general-election-2019/ or www.scpo.scot/uk-general-election-2019/.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

The General Election will take place on Thursday 12 December

There hasn't been a December General Election in the UK since 1910. They are usually in May for lots of good reasons. For churches, December is a very busy time of year, and ministers and congregations will no doubt be expecting to concentrate on carol services, mince pies, Christmas dinners, children's clubs and nativity rehearsals. Could anyone fit in a hustings event on top of all of that? Or perhaps a better question is: What event in the diary could we sacrifice or change for the good of our community, to enable them to vote with a good knowledge of their candidates?

REACH OUT

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 make decisions and act is vital. You might already have a group from a previous election that could work together again. If you are trying something for the first time, are there other churches, faith or community groups that you can ask to work in partnership with?

Once you have your team, this guidance will help you get things moving quickly.

WHEN SHOULD WE HOLD THE MEETING?

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

Any time between now and the election is possible, but the best time is probably a fortnight or so before election day.

The date will depend on the availability of candidates and a suitable hall, room or church.

Experience shows that **candidates often respond positively to invitations to meetings held on Sunday evenings.**

Holding your election meeting **at least a week** before polling day will also allow those with postal or proxy votes to attend the meeting before they vote.

WHO SHOULD CHAIR THE EVENT?

Ensure that a whole range of views are heard.

Identify a respected and impartial person from the community to chair the meeting. This could be a church figure, a community leader, or someone else who is comfortable speaking in public and keeping order.

They should not belong to or be on record as supporting a political party. It is also important that they are 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 is important. It might be useful to give them a copy of this guidance and other relevant material.

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 opportunity.

Contact all the churches in the local area, asking them to put up posters and to include details of the meeting in their weekly notice sheet. If possible, get a member of each congregation 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 office, community centres, shop windows, church members' windows.

You could also ask local media to advertise the event. A simple document (stating What, When, Where, Who and Why) can be sent to local newspapers and radio stations, but don't forget to notify the candidates first.

Use **#GE19** and **#LovePrayVote** when advertising the event on facebook or twitter.

WHO SHOULD WE INVITE?

Ask for the details of the candidate's election agent.

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

The deadline for nominating candidates is Friday 15 November. After this point, the returning officer for your constituency will publish a list of candidates. You will then be able to make contact with them through the political parties locally or nationally, social media or candidates' website. If you want to get in touch before this time, you can use www.democraticdashboard.com to find out who is standing in your area.

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

Contact details for the political parties

Brexit Party	0800 414 8525	Liberal Democrats	020 7022 0988
Conservatives	020 7222 9000	Plaid Cymru	029 2047 2272
Scottish National Party	0800 633 5432	Scottish Green Party	08700 772 207
The Independent Group for Change	voteforchange.uk/contact-us/	Green Party (England & Wales)	020 3691 9400
Labour Party	0345 092 2299	UKIP	0333 800 6800

WHAT ARE THE RULES AROUND HOLDING A HUSTINGS EVENT?

Hustings are legitimate activities for churches.

Churches are charities and so are regulated by the Charity Commission in England and Wales and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) in Scotland.

During election periods campaigning activities are also covered by the Electoral Commission. Hustings are legitimate activities for churches during this period.

If you would link more advice on this, contact us at enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk or on 020 7916 8632.

DO WE HAVE TO INVITE ALL THE CANDIDATES?

Allow all those attending an equal opportunity to participate.

Impartial reasons may include:

- 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 the number of invitees.
- Security concerns.

No – but if you don't, you must have an **objective, impartial reason** for not including all of them. The simplest approach 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 views, 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.

If you don't want to invite a candidate because you don't agree with their policies, this is not an impartial reason. Whilst this may be legitimate under charity law, it has consequences for churches under election law, as spending on such hustings may count as election expenditure.

In this situation, the amount spent needs to be divided by the number of candidates and if it is over £50 then candidates need to be notified to include it in their returns to the Electoral Commission. You should consult the Electoral Commission's guidelines on organising a Selective Hustings (see <http://bit.ly/JPIVote5>) as this will be subject to regulation. You may be required to register with them and ensure that the candidates that you do invite declare your support for them.

For these reasons, it is recommended that you invite all candidates, unless there is an impartial reason for you doing so.

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 you will be better prepared. In the first instance, try to find a date which all your invited candidates can make – and try to be flexible if things go awry!

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 an email address and telephone number for the candidate 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 impartial, since it is the invitation which counts. If it is a candidate of one of the main national parties, think about whether you would be happy to have a different party spokesperson take part. You may wish to 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 holding a different event or 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 for 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.

CAN WE REGISTER OUR EVENT?

You can register your hustings with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, who will be keeping a database. You can register your hustings and access the database at www.churcheselection.org.uk/.

We'd also like to hear if you are holding a hustings. Email us at enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk, or in Scotland info@scpo.scot.

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.

How will you welcome the chairperson and the candidates? Do you want to ask them to arrive early and offer some refreshments? This could be a chance for them to relax and be put at ease before going before in front of the public. Do you want to ask the chairperson 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 chairperson at the end of the event?

Sound

It is important to have an effective public address (PA) system – check this in advance, and then ensure someone who understands its operation is responsible for it on the night. A roving microphone (and someone to run around with it) will make it much easier to take questions or comments from the audience. You should ensure that an induction loop or other solution is provided for those who require hearing support.

Livestreaming

Live streaming can make your hustings accessible to a wider audience and in some cases the broadcast can also be viewed after the event has finished. Facebook and YouTube offer popular ways to stream events and allow for live viewers to interact and send their own questions. A mobile device (phone/tablet) and a decent internet connection could be all you need technologically – in this case keep the device close to the front of the room with clear sightlines and sound. You will also need a moderator in the room, who can put questions posted on the feed to the candidates at appropriate moments and remove any unhelpful comments that remote viewers might be tempted to add!

Stewarding

Hopefully, many people who aren't 'regulars' to your church services will be coming to your hustings event. Can you assemble a team to welcome them? Will you provide refreshments? Do you need any help with signs and notices outside the building, or with parking? Do you need people who can help with issues of accessibility or setting up chairs and tables? Try to get volunteers from a range of churches.

Translation

Does your community include people who use other languages such as British Sign Language, Welsh or Gaelic? Or if there's another predominant language in your area, could you run the hustings with translation in a language other than English, such as Urdu, Spanish or Polish?

Is there anything we need to do afterwards?

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 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. Send us pictures too.

We 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... We'll use your suggestions to help prepare for the next Election, whenever that may be!

WHAT KIND OF ELECTION MEETING SHOULD WE RUN?

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

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

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. They can make a short introductory statement, and then respond to questions from the group before moving on to the next group, after a set amount of time.

The candidates are each invited to sum up with a short statement at the end of the evening.

A Virtual Hustings

This style of 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 is a large number of candidates, or in rural locations. You could ask candidates to video themselves and send the recording to be uploaded to a website or hold an event where all the videos can be shown.

The virtual hustings may be organised as follows:

- Approach parties for contact details of who would be responding to the hustings questions
- Invite suggestions for questions from church and community members, which are collated, filtered and sent to all of the candidates
- Give a deadline for answers, after which some follow-up may be required
- Publish the answers

TRADITIONAL HUSTINGS

These meetings take a 'question time' format, where candidates are invited to respond to questions from the floor.

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 (eg 30 seconds to go) and again when time is up. Some people use a bell to call time on each answer – or even an airhorn!

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. People from all sections of the community should be encouraged to attend and to participate.

Decide how you want to handle questions – should questions be submitted to the chairperson to ensure that a range of topics is covered, or are you happy simply to take questions from the floor? Whatever you decide, this should be made very clear to the audience at the start of the meeting (and paper provided if you want questions in writing*).

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, Scottish voters questions about the NHS or Education 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. Chairpeople could take three questions at a time. Questioners may also need to be kept in check by the Chair – people have come to hear the candidate, not them!

* For paper-free question submissions, you could invite people to use their smart phone and service like Slido (see <http://www.sli.do>) or to post to a Facebook group page.

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 or users of a food bank, groups with learning disabilities, young carers, asylum seekers or any others that might be applicable to your local context who are willing to share their stories (up to three people is ideal).
- At the event have the Chair introduce the format, the candidates and those who have been invited to share their story.
- The first person shares their three-minute story then poses a question that they would like the candidates to answer.
- Each of the candidates in turn responds to what they have heard and attempts answers the question. 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 have done this, the Chair will thank them and thank the person who has shared their story, before inviting 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: ideally you should spend time with them in advance ensuring that they are comfortable with the format and what is expected of them. Some may wish to have their story written down. 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. This should be explained to participants in advance of the event.

If you decide to hold this kind of meeting, let us know at enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk or in Scotland info@scpo.scot.

CHECKLIST

- ✓ 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

Please get in touch with any questions or feedback:

enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk
020 7916 8632

SCPO details:

www.scpo.scot/uk-general-election-2019/

info@scpo.scot

0131 240 2276

You can find further General Election resources at:

jointpublicissues.org.uk/general-election-2019



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