

General Election Hustings Guide

Equipping Christians for the General Election

PART I

Introduction

The information in this guide will help you organise and host a hustings event. We hope you will find this guide helpful and pray you will take up the exciting challenge of holding a hustings for the forthcoming General Election. Often at the time of a General Election there is a vast overload of information. We can be overwhelmed with leaflets, endless campaigning from message boards to twitter adverts to door-knocking from candidates and political parties. There is far too much information to take in. Hustings provide an opportunity to cut to the chase and find out what candidates' priorities would be if elected and what they really think about what matters to us.

What is a hustings?

A hustings is simply a meeting at which candidates in an election address potential voters. It might be easier to think of a hustings as a 'Question Time' event, akin to the BBC topical affairs programme. It is a fantastic opportunity for voters to meet and question candidates about a wide range of issues and hear them talk about their values, why they want to be a Member of Parliament (MP) and what they would seek to do if elected.

Why hold a hustings?

- It is a great opportunity for the local church to serve the community, providing people with the chance to put specific questions to all the candidates at the same time, comparing and contrasting their answers.
- A church hustings provides a simple forum in which to raise issues of particular concern to Christians which candidates might not otherwise be asked about.
- It gives people the time to consider candidates as individuals and assess their personal strengths and weaknesses first-hand as well as connecting people to the political process.
- A hustings also creates an opportunity for local churches to begin to build relationships with those who will be elected to represent them.
- Church hustings send an important message – even before any questions have been asked – by reminding aspiring politicians that the church is not irrelevant but, as a key part of civil society, is deserving of respect.
- Candidates often welcome the chance to meet and communicate with their potential constituents

PART II – Preparation

When to hold a hustings

The formal part of any General Election campaign is relatively short and runs from the dissolution of Parliament until polling day. Consider organising your hustings any time after the dissolution of Parliament, though try to avoid holding a hustings in the week immediately prior to polling day as candidates may be less willing or available to attend.

Inviting candidates

There will be a deadline for candidate nominations, but many of the candidates will be known well before this date. You should send a formal invitation to candidates, including the date, time and location of the hustings. You can find more information about inviting candidates and other legal information further on.

The venue

You will want to consider the following:

- Ensure there is sufficient capacity – if your church building is smaller, you may wish to collaborate with other churches in your area.
- Confirm that the venue is fully accessible for the elderly and disabled
- Be mindful of the capacity of the venue to accommodate a large number of people (e.g. toilets, parking facilities, etc)

Set-up

You will want to consider the following:

- Ideally, candidates and the Chair/Host will be seated on a platform at the front so they are visible to everyone; if your hustings is large, you may also want to consider having screens.....
- Provide microphones for all candidates as well as ensuring there are microphones which can be passed around the audience for questions
- Ensure the room is bright and not too warm – with a full room it will soon heat up

The Chair

It is particularly important for your hustings to be well Chaired to ensure the evening runs smoothly. You will want to consider the following:

- The host should have experience chairing meetings or discussions and be capable of calmly but firmly controlling both candidates and the audience where necessary
- As well as being a resident of the constituency, a suitable host should also be familiar with politics and be able to press candidates for full answers where necessary or ask pertinent follow-up questions to ensure clarity for the audience
- The host should be capable of being an independent arbiter of what may be a lively debate and it is therefore important that they are able to be politically impartial as well as not having ties to any of the candidates
- A suitable host may be a notable local figure, a church leader, magistrate or business executive

Getting the message out

An effective publicity strategy is vital – people cannot come if they do not know the meeting is taking place! You will want to consider the following:

- Work closely with other local churches – as well as presenting a united front it will enable you to reach a wider audience
- Use church newsletters, bulletins, magazines, community notice boards, websites, social media to advertise your hustings
- Send a press release ahead of time and/or take out an advert for your hustings in local newspapers – of course, make sure you only do this once you have all the details confirmed. You may also want to send a follow-up press release after the hustings with quotes from candidates. If any local media attend, make sure you let candidates know.
- Try to engage with local and regional radio stations as well as Christian radio stations if there is one in your area

PART III – Running the hustings

How long should the hustings last?

Allow enough time for a good debate on a range of subjects. Somewhere between one-and-a-half to two hours should be sufficient.

How should the hustings be structured?

You will want to consider:

- Create a running order so that the timings of the evening can be well managed. Ensure that candidates are aware of the format
- Begin with an opening statement from the Chair which welcomes the audience and candidates, thanks the church for hosting, asks the candidates to introduce themselves and the party they are representing, and outlines the format and ground rules for the evening
- Proceed with questioning candidates. Questions could be determined in a number of ways and are likely to broadly fall into two categories: 1) questions related to party policy (usually covered in the manifesto); and 2) questions of a 'conscience' nature.
- Consider allowing the candidates 90 seconds each at the end to make a final statement. Draw their names from a hat to determine the order and don't be afraid to use a timer – it is important for each candidate to have an equal say.
- Conclude with thanks to the candidates and their parties, your assistants, the hosting church and the audience for their questions and interest

Questions

- A series of topics should be decided upon in advance to ensure a debate which is wide-ranging. These should cover both matters of party policy and topical matters, as well as 'conscience' issues and perhaps issues specific to the constituency. As this will be a hustings run by a church, it is appropriate for the questions to focus on issues held particularly dear by Christians. Churches holding hustings provide a forum for asking questions that if Christians don't ask, no one else will.
- Questions can be submitted by the audience upon arrival and checked against the topics you wish to cover before the hustings begins. Any topics which aren't covered by audience-submitted questions can be added by the Chair from a pre-prepared list.
- It is up to you whether all questions come from the Chair or whether a roving microphone is used. Use of a roving microphone may be better left for open questions from the floor towards the end of the hustings as an opportunity for the audience to address issues not yet covered.
- Try to vary the order in which candidates answer questions

You can find much more information on all of the above in our separate 'Hosting a Hustings' guide.

PART IV – Inviting candidates and legal information

How to contact candidates

The best way to obtain contact details of local prospective parliamentary candidates and their election agents (election agents ensure the proper management of each candidates' campaign) is via the local or central offices of the political parties (you will find more information in Appendix 1 and 2). Independent or minor candidates may also be standing in your constituency, so do keep an eye on local media for mention of them.

All candidates will be extremely busy, particularly with such a constrained election timetable. It is wise to contact the candidates as soon as possible for their provisional acceptance and to consult your main local candidates on possible time and date options.

What if a candidate doesn't wish to attend?

A candidate from a mainstream party should be pleased to have an opportunity to connect with voters who are, of course, potential supporters. If the candidate declines or seems reluctant, it is likely to be for one of the following reasons:

- **They may underestimate the significance of your hustings**

In order to avoid this it is vital to convey that attending your hustings will not be a poor use of a candidate's time by making this clear in your initial request for a candidate. Be sure to mention the size of your church congregation and any community initiatives you are involved with. It would also be very helpful to stress the relationships you have with other churches and the wider locality, and that the event is being promoted widely. For more information on this, please see Appendix 2.

- **They may be reluctant to commit to attending until other parties are on board**

If a candidate sounds unsure about attending or has declined to do so, you should politely inform them that the hustings will go ahead without them and that other candidates are attending. It is unlikely they will be content for a hustings to take place without their views being heard and they are therefore likely to decide to attend.

- **They may not be free on the date of your hustings**

In this instance, again, politely inform them that the hustings is proceeding and that other parties will be represented. This may result in their availability changing. If they are really unable to make it and the date you have chosen is immovable, you should make it clear to the candidate who is unable to attend that you are proceeding with the hustings. You should also make it very clear to the other candidates as well as making an announcement to this effect at the beginning of your hustings. An option may be for the candidate to send a representative who may be a councillor or another party spokesperson; however, please note that this may not sit well with other candidates.

Rules about who to invite

The Electoral Commission advises that all known candidates standing for election in a constituency should be invited to a public hustings. This is to ensure that the hustings does not provide a benefit to a particular party or to particular candidates.

In many cases, this simply is not practical. However, if you decide not to invite all candidates then you must have what the Electoral Commission calls 'impartial reasons' not to invite them. The Electoral Commission advises that these may be as a result of considering the following:

- Resources and other practicalities constraining numbers of invitees
- Security concerns
- 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

- **NOTE: you cannot exclude a candidate or party for subjective reasons – e.g. because you disagree with their policies**

To further help your cause and to ensure a balanced hustings, you will want to consider:

- Informing the audience at the hustings of any candidates or parties standing who haven't been invited or were not able to attend
- Being prepared to explain your impartial reasons to candidates or parties you haven't invited. Make sure that you have an agreed position as organisers
- Make sure that candidates or parties you invite represent a reasonable variety of view, from different parts of the political spectrum
- Allow 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 representatives

Regulation, spending limits and campaign contributions

Unless you have 'impartial reasons' for not inviting all candidates, your hustings may be considered a 'selective hustings' – i.e. it provides a benefit to particular political parties or candidates. Spending on a selective hustings will be regulated in some circumstances and you may be considered to be making a donation to each candidate or party that attends. Charities are not permitted to give preferential treatment or make donations to political parties and to do so may affect your charitable status. Charities and churches are encouraged to discuss the question of which parties, and therefore candidates, to invite. A formal decision not to invite a particular candidate (or candidates) should be clearly minuted.

Although it is very unlikely to be needed, as a matter of good practice it may be helpful to keep a record of all monies spent on the organisation of your hustings – including staff time.

Please note, the information above should not be considered legal advice, but merely an introduction. For more detailed information, visit www.charitycommission.gov.uk and www.electoralcommission.org.uk

Appendix 1 – Party Contact Details

The following are contact details for the main political parties. You will be able to obtain details of your local party office who should be contacted to identify their candidate in your constituency. There will be other smaller parties standing too.

A model letter can be found in Appendix 2 which can be used as a guide when writing to the party

ENGLAND, WALES & SCOTLAND

The Brexit Party
83 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0HW
Tel: 0800 414 8525
E: info@thebrexitparty.org

The Conservative Party
4 Matthew Parker Street
London
SW1H 9HQ
Tel: 020 7222 9000

The Green Party
The Biscuit Factory
Unit 215, J Block
100 Clements Road
London
SE16 4DG
Tel: 020 3691 9400
E: office@greenparty.org.uk
NB. There are separate Scottish and NI Green parties

The Independent Group for
Change (Change UK)
52 Grosvenor Gardens
London
SW1W 0AU
Tel:

The Labour Party
Labour Central
Kings Manor
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 6PA
Tel: 0345 092 2299

The Liberal Democrats
8-10 Great George Street
London
SW1P 3AE
Tel: 020 7022 0988
E: help@libdems.org.uk

UKIP
PO Box 408
Newton Abbot
Devon
TQ12 9BG
Tel: 0333 800 6800
E: mail@ukip.org

WALES ONLY

Plaid Cymru
Tŷ Gwynfor
Anson Court
Atlantic Wharf
Cardiff
CF10 4AL
Tel: 029 2047 2272
E: post@plaidcymru.org

SCOTLAND ONLY

Scottish National Party
Gordon Lamb House
3 Jackson's Entry
Edinburgh
EH8 8PJ
Tel: 0800 633 5432
E: info@snp.org

NORTHERN IRELAND ONLY

Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
88 University Street
Belfast
BT7 1HE
Tel: 028 9032 4274
E: alliance@allianceparty.org

Democratic Unionist Party
91 Dundela Avenue
Belfast
BT4 3BU
Tel: 028 9047 1155
E: info@mydup.com

Sinn Féin
53 Falls Road
Belfast
BT12 4PD
Tel: 028 9034 7350
E: admin@sinnfein.ie

Social Democrat and Labour
Party
121 Ormeau Road
Belfast
BT7 1SH
Tel: 028 9024 7700
E: info@sdlp.ie

Ulster Unionist Party
Strandtown Hall
2-4 Belmont Road
Belfast
BT4 2AN
Tel: 028 9047 4630
E: uup@uup.org

Appendix 2 – Model Invitation

Before sending the model invitation below, you should contact the parties (it will be most efficient to telephone) using the details provided in Appendix 1. You will need to ask for the details of your local party to where an invitation to a hustings in your constituency should be sent and also determine to whom it should be addressed. Ask for an email address and telephone number.

You can personalise the example letter below. It is advisable to post or email this invitation before following it up with a telephone call some time later to ensure your request has been received. It should be noted that this is merely an example and should be rewritten to reflect your individual context.

Example letter

Dear

I am writing to invite you to the NAME OF CHURCH Parliamentary Hustings at TIME on DATE at FULL ADDRESS. NAME OF CHURCH is a growing church with a congregation of nearly NUMBER people which has been based in the centre of NAME OF TOWN for the last 10 years. We run E.G. A DEBT ADVICE SERVICE, A PENSIONER'S LUNCH CLUB AND HOST A NUMBER OF LOCAL YOUTH PROJECTS as well as providing E.G. AN EXTENSIVE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROGRAMME on Sundays. Our services are provided to any and all – people who attend church on a Sunday and people who don't.

We are very much engaged with community initiatives across the city and are well networked with other church and civil society organisations in the local area. We will be promoting the hustings across the constituency and amongst our own contacts and expect our hustings to be well attended.

I very much look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,