

General Election



How to organise election hustings

“Some of the liveliest debates that I take part in at election time are organised by the local churches. It is important for Christians to get informed and get involved at election time, and this is an excellent way for churches to reach out to people in their local area at the same time.”

Steve Webb MP, Northavon

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What is a hustings?

A husting is an open meeting where the public gets to meet candidates who are seeking to represent them. Usually held in the run up to elections they are an opportunity to hear different candidates answer questions and set out why they deserve your vote.

Sometimes they are focused around specific policy areas, or held by a particular group, but the idea remains the same. As voters decide how to cast their ballot this is an opportunity for local and national issues to be raised and candidates to offer their response.

Why should churches hold hustings?

Churches are often at the heart of a community, so are in a prime position to pose questions to candidates about issues that will impact on them and their local area.

It is often only churches who hold hustings during election campaigns and candidates are grateful for the opportunity to address a gathering of their would-be constituents.

Over the past decade voters have felt increasingly disconnected from their political representatives. In holding hustings churches offer an opportunity to bridge this divide by allowing candidates to hear the concerns of their electorate and the voters the chance to ask questions.

Where should you begin?

Election campaigns only last between 3 and 6 weeks, so there will not be much time to finalise the arrangements for your event. However, the major parties have selected candidates for most of the constituencies so you can find out now who will be standing in your seat.

The candidates won't be able to commit until the election is formally called, but it might be a good idea to write to the candidates and tell them of your plans. You can then follow this up with a formal invitation, including a date, as soon as parliament is dissolved.

In some seats there will only be candidates from the three main parties, plus the SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales. In other seats they can be many more candidates standing, from smaller nation-wide parties to local campaigns and independents.

Legal Information

Most churches are charities, and as such have to abide by the rules set out by the Charity Commission. The key rule to remember is that charities must not support or oppose a specific party. This does not prevent you from supporting or opposing specific policies. If you wanted to limit the number of candidates at a hustings that would be acceptable, but it would be advisable to ensure that more than one party is not invited so no single candidate is at an electoral disadvantage.

In addition the guidance that relates specifically to charities' activities during election campaigns states that: *'it is open to charities to decline to invite to a public meeting a representative from a political party which advocates policies which are in contravention of the charity's objects, or whose presence or views are likely to increase the chance of public disorder or of alienating the charity's supporters.'*

Marketing your hustings

Hustings are a great opportunity to demonstrate church unity, so we would suggest that you organise your event in conjunction with other churches. If your constituency covers a large geographical area it might be a good idea to collaborate with churches in other areas so that more than one event is held.

By working with other churches you also have an easy way of advertising your event to a larger audience. It may also be possible to make use of community notice boards and websites to reach beyond the church to other local residents.

When you've got the details finalised for your event contact your local papers, TV and radio stations to tell them about your event. A sample press release will be available on the Evangelical Alliance's General Election website closer to the election. Even if members of the press don't attend make sure you take some photos of the event to send to your local paper afterwards along with key quotes from the candidates. If you would like advice on dealing with the media call the Press Office.

Preparations for the meeting

Choose a venue

- That is central to the constituency or in a convenient location
- Easy to find and with disabled access
- Big enough to fit your expected audience, but doesn't look uninviting if sparsely filled

Set-up

- Ideally seat the candidates on a raised platform along with the host
- Make sure that the room is well lit and appropriately heated
- You will need microphones for each of the candidates as well as a couple of roving microphones for questions from the audience

People

- Stewards will be needed to make guests feel welcome, serve refreshments and generally help out.
- An operator for the sound system.

Pick a host Finding the right person to moderate the discussion is critical to the event's success. They will need to be familiar with the key political issues to understand the answers the candidates give, push for clarification and challenge if they think the answer is inaccurate or even dishonest.

An ideal host would be someone who has experience of chairing discussions, in particular they will need to be able to think on their feet, control a lively crowd and treat audience members and candidates firmly but fairly. It may be that a local TV presenter would be willing to chair the discussion, or other similar notable local figure.

Security It may also be necessary to take the precaution of having some extra stewards for security. Sometimes specific groups may try to disrupt the meeting to make their voice heard. It is therefore sensible to notify the police in advance that you are holding a hustings.

Educating voters Encouraging voters to take an active role in the democratic process and educating them on political issues are major benefits of churches holding hustings. The Evangelical Alliance has produced a brief summary of the key issues (available at www.eauk.org/elections). This could be helpful to focus contributions before the event and to find out more afterwards, as it is unlikely that you will be able to cover all policy areas in one evening.

Running the election hustings

The format of the evening is up to you and below are a few examples, but there are countless other variations.

If a high level of control is desired then all the questions can be determined prior to the event, perhaps by the group of church leaders who are organising it. A variation on this theme is to ask the audience as they arrive to write down questions that they are prepared to ask and then submit them. This allows for audience participation, especially if they are then called to read out their question, but still ensures that the content is planned.

On the other extreme it is possible for the discussion to consist entirely of unprompted questions from the floor. In this circumstance the host needs to take an active role to ensure that a lively discussion does not descend into chaos.

A compromise is to ask for questions as the audience arrive, if these are written down and submitted a basic structure can still be given to the evening around issues that you want covered. Supplementary questions can then either be taken from audience members raising their hands or through further written questions selected and passed to the chair.

Introductory statements may help the audience if they are not familiar with the candidates, however, they can take up a lot of time especially if there are a large number of candidates. The husting needs to be long enough to cover a range of topics, but short enough to ensure that the audience's attention is maintained, between 1½ and 2 hours would be a suitable length.

The candidates will need to be aware of the format for the evening, for example whether or not they will need an opening statement, as well as all the practical details such as the location, timing and who will be hosting the event.

Before the main event begins, especially if you have a visitor as a host, the organiser, or local church leader should welcome the audience, open with a prayer and then introduce the host. The host can then offer a brief reflection on the importance of voting and being informed, explain the format of the evening, and quickly introduce each of the candidates. At the end of the evening, and hustings usually take place in the evening; the meeting should be wrapped up with the organiser thanking the host, the candidates and the audience before closing in prayer.

After the event write to the candidates to thank them for taking part and after the election you can continue to build a productive relationship with your local MP.

Please visit the Evangelical Alliance's General Election website for further resources to help you engage during the campaign: www.eauk.org/elections.

For further information contact Daniel Webster at d.webster@eauk.org or 020 7207 2129, or call the Press Office for media advice 020 7207 2107

