

HUSTINGS AND ENGAGEMENT GUIDE

Equipping
Christians for the
General Election



enga**GE24** 

[#GetOutAndVote](#)

Introduction

Hustings provide an opportunity to find out what candidates' priorities would be if elected and what they really think about what matters to us. Whether by hosting an in-person or online hustings, the church is in a fantastic position to be able to serve and love our neighbours by helping people to engage with the election process.

What is a hustings?

A hustings is simply a meeting at which candidates in an election address potential voters. 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 an MP and what they would seek to do if elected.



Why hold a hustings?

- It is a great way 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 communicate with their potential constituents.

Preparation

Getting organised

Whether your church is large enough to consider organising a hustings yourselves or you are working together with other churches in your local area, forming a small group to coordinate your efforts is crucial. This group will ultimately be responsible for ensuring the hustings goes ahead, as well as apportioning the various tasks necessary for this to happen.

If your hustings will be taking place online, it would be extremely helpful to have at least one person on the coordinating group with experience of managing, hosting, or organising online events.

When to hold a hustings

You can organise a hustings any time from when the election is called until polling day, 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

The deadline for candidate nominations is 4pm on the nineteenth working day before Polling Day, but many of the candidates will be known well before this date. Try to contact candidates as soon as possible to begin discussing possible dates.

You should send a formal invitation to candidates, including the date, time and format of the hustings.

You can find more information about inviting candidates and other legal information further on.



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.

- A suitable host should 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.

- For an online hustings, it is important to ensure the Chair is at least familiar with whichever platform you choose for the event; experience of hosting or conducting an online gathering would also be helpful.

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 publicise your hustings as often as possible and as early as possible, and may also wish 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. You may find it useful to allocate responsibility for identifying local church champions for your hustings to someone from the coordinating group.

- Use church websites, social media, newsletters, bulletins, magazines, community notice boards and any other means to advertise your hustings. You may wish to allocate responsibility for ensuring awareness of and accessibility to the hustings for those in your local area who are less familiar with online technology.

- Send a press release or short notice ahead of time and/or take out an advert for your hustings in local newspapers/media – 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.

Running the hustings

How long should the hustings last?

Allow enough time for a good debate on a range of subjects: somewhere between one to one-and-a-half 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 event can be well managed. Ensure that candidates are aware of the format beforehand.
- Begin with an opening statement from the Chair which welcomes the audience and candidates, thanks the church for hosting and organising the meeting, asks the candidates by name 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.

How should the hustings be conducted?

As this will be a church-based hustings it is worth thinking, not only about the format of the event, but also its character. Rightly or wrongly, candidates and other guests attending the event will view the event as reflective of Christians and Christian belief.

While it is not always clear how Biblical teaching and principles applies to politics in 21st Century Britain, the Bible is clear about what behaviour is expected of believers. As believers then we want to be salt and light wherever we go and to strive to embody and display the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, thankfulness, and self-control. Politics is not renowned for these qualities, but it is right for us as believers to long to be different, even in the midst of the heat and tension of political debate and disagreement.

At CARE we want to embody truth and grace. We hold our values and convictions firmly believing that truth does exist, and that God's Word is good for the world. Yet we want to communicate these beliefs with compassion, grace, and humility. After all, all humans are made in God's image and are therefore worthy of dignity, respect, and honour (and that includes our least favourite politicians!).

There might be plenty of disagreements on very important issues, but we believe that it is better to listen to one another, take a charitable view of those with whom you're in disagreement, and to seek to debate with integrity, humility, and substance. Disagreement isn't a bad thing in and of itself, but the way we respond to, and treat those with whom we disagree can quickly become a problem. Let us ask good, direct, even tough and unpopular questions, but let us do so characterised by love, charity, humility, grace, compassion, mercy, truth, and justice – not by anger, envy, pride, jealousy, bitterness, self-righteousness, or hatred.

We would encourage you to consider how you could prepare your church to embody this ethos during your hustings, so that we might, up and down the country, be a source of salt and light this election season.

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. See Appendix 3 for some sample questions.

- Questions can be submitted beforehand by the audience 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.
- Alternatively, the Chair may ask the audience for questions and give participants the opportunity to ask the candidates directly.
- For online hustings you may seek questions using various means (e.g. the chat function, Sli.do, etc) and these will need to be monitored. You will need to agree before the meeting and communicate to candidates and the attendees how the Q&A will work.
- For the purposes of an online hustings, it may be simplest for all questions to come from the Chair. You may feel comfortable taking open questions from participants but will need to agree beforehand upon how you will do this.
- Try to vary the order in which candidates answer questions.

Inviting candidates and legal information

How to contact candidates

The best way to obtain contact details of local 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). You can also find contact details on candidates' social media profiles or websites, as well as on whocanIvotefor.co.uk. Independent or smaller party candidates may also be standing in your constituency or region, so do keep an eye on local media for mention of them.

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

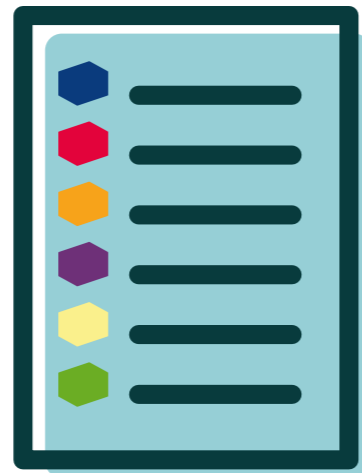
In this instance, again, politely inform them that the hustings is proceeding and that other parties will be represented. This may result in their availability changing. If they are really unable to make it and the date you have chosen is immovable, you should make it clear to the candidate who is unable 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

To ensure your hustings cannot reasonably be regarded as intended to influence voters for or against a particular party or candidate, the Electoral Commission advises that all known candidates or parties standing for election in a constituency or region 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.

However, in many cases, this simply is not practical. You do not have to invite all candidates or parties; but, if you decide not to invite all candidates or parties 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.

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- Being prepared to explain your impartial reasons to candidates or parties you haven't invited. Make sure that you have agreed a position within the Coordination Group.

- Make sure that candidates or parties you invite represent a reasonable variety of views, 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

Spending for a non-selective hustings (described above), where the hustings cannot be reasonably regarded as intended to influence voters for or against a particular party or candidate, is not regulated.

If you do not 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 to 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

Model invitation

You can personalise the example letter below. It is advisable to email or post this invitation before following it up with a telephone call 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 CANDIDATE NAME

I am writing to invite you to the NAME OF CHURCH Parliamentary Hustings at TIME on DATE.

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 NUMBER 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 town and are well networked with other church and civil society organisations in the local area. We will be promoting the hustings across NAME OF 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,
NAME

Appendix 2

Example Questions

What is and isn't covered below

We hope the questions below will help as you engage with candidates, either by writing to them, or perhaps by asking a question at a hustings or question time event. The questions here are focused primarily on subjects which CARE works on directly and will hopefully provide a good starting point for you. Of course, the Bible speaks to all areas of policy and politics, so do consider whether there are other areas you would like to question candidates about (e.g. foreign policy, housing, healthcare, climate and energy policy).

What about devolved nations?

Certain powers and areas of policy are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly and Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament. There are questions which are specific to the nations of the UK, but all questions will be worth putting to candidates.

GENERAL

- In your first 100 days, what would you like to achieve in this constituency?
- Why do you want to be our MP?
- What are the greatest needs in our constituency?

COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS

- What is the role of Government in addressing poverty and the cost-of-living crisis?
- How can the Government empower individuals, families and our society to tackle the cost-of-living crisis?

WORKING WITH CHURCHES

- What is your view on role of the church in society? How would you engage with the churches in your constituency?
- Should a Christian MP leave their faith at the door of the Commons? Why/why not?

BEGINNING OF LIFE

- What are your views on the decriminalisation of abortion? Should it be possible to have an abortion up to birth, for any reason?
- The current upper time limit for abortion is 24 weeks, but increasingly babies are surviving outside the womb from 22 weeks. What is your view on reducing the time limit in line with viability?
- What support would you offer a woman who would prefer not to have an abortion but is considering having an abortion because of the cost-of-living crisis?

ASSISTED SUICIDE

- Would you oppose a change in the law to legalise assisted suicide? If not, why not?
- If elected, what action would you take to ensure that there is universal access to high quality palliative and hospice care across the UK?

SUPPORTING FAMILIES

- What is your view on the current "two-child limit" policy, which limits means-tested financial support to the first two children in a family only? Is it time to end the policy?
- Do you support the full implementation of the family test within Government departments to ensure that the impact on families and family breakdown is considered in all new and developing policy?

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION

- How do you think Relationships and Sex Education can most effectively equip children and young people to have thriving long-term relationships?
- What steps would you take to ensure that Relationships and Sex Education material from third party providers is safe and appropriate?

- To what extent do you believe that the views of parents should be given priority when it comes to what their children are taught in RSE?

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF, AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

- How can we effectively ensure freedom of speech and conscience are protected in the UK?
- What is your view as to the best way to ensure that there is room in a pluralistic society for people to disagree well? What does that look like in practice?

ONLINE SAFETY

- What is your view on the impact of pornography on society, and what action do you think needs to be taken to combat negative outcomes for both adults and children?
- What action would you take to ensure that technology and social media companies are held to account for the content shared on their platforms? Would a ban on under-16s owning smartphones help?

GAMBLING

- At present, almost 500 people in the UK take their own life each year because of gambling debts and a feeling they have no way out. How would you propose helping people experiencing gambling harm?
- Gambling companies make over £15 billion in profit each year from the UK public. How would you ensure the gambling industry pays for the harm it is causing?

MODERN SLAVERY & PROSTITUTION

- Given the link between human trafficking and the porn industry, what would you do to stop mainstream pornographic websites hosting material depicting people who have been trafficked?
- Would you support legislation to criminalise the purchase of sexual services?

QUESTIONS SPECIFIC FOR SCOTLAND

- Why should Scottish MPs be allowed to vote on matters that only affect England?
- Would you support the lifting of the section 35 order to permit the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Act to be implemented?
- Do you support the legalisation of assisted suicide for the terminally ill?
- What are your views on the criminalisation of men who purchase women for sex? Where does your party in Scotland stand?

QUESTIONS SPECIFIC FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

- In recent years the agenda has been dominated by debate on the Protocol and the Windsor Framework. Why should we, as voters, care about the Protocol? What impact does it have on our day-to-day lives?
- How would you tackle the current funding crisis due to the Northern

Ireland Executive being underfunded from Westminster?

- Nearly everything that impacts our day-to-day lives is devolved to Stormont, so why should we bother voting for an MP at all?
- What are your thoughts on the idea that the Northern Ireland Executive has more power than it can handle? Should some devolved functions, such as healthcare, be sent back to Westminster?
- Over the last two parliamentary terms, the UK Government has passed legislation on matters such as abortion and RSE which are devolved. What would your approach be if faced with a similar situation in the next Parliament?

Appendix 3

Online hustings

There are many factors which are relevant for both a typical in-person hustings and an online or virtual hustings, but there are a few things you will need to consider specifically in relation to an online hustings.

Platform

- Initially, you will need to determine which online platform is best suited to the skillset of your coordination group or those who will facilitate the hustings. Popular options (with varying costs – some of them are free – and functionality) include:
 - *Zoom*
 - *Google Meet*
 - *Microsoft Teams*
 - *Go To Meeting*
- As well as the platform, you may also want to consider whether you would like to concurrently stream the meeting, perhaps on your church Facebook page and/or YouTube account, or Streamyard.

Online only, hybrid or pre-recorded

- The simplest option – and one familiar to many churches – may be to simply host and stream an online meeting. In many respects, this would follow a typical hustings pattern, with a Chair/host and candidates who are featured, ‘pinned’ or ‘spotlighted’ to give the appearance of a panel.
- A second hybrid option which may be suitable, subject to regulations and restrictions at the time of your hustings, would be for the Chair and candidates to be together in person on a platform, with attendance and participation from the audience conducted online only.
- A third option would be to send pre-record segments with each candidate which can be compiled into a video which can be accessed online, broadcast on a particular date and time. For this option, you would need to agree upon questions beforehand and give strict criteria to candidates in terms of the amount of time they have to answer questions; all candidates would need to answer the same questions. Whilst this option is less

interactive, it may be more manageable if you are concerned about the technical aspects of options one or two.

Dealing with Q&A

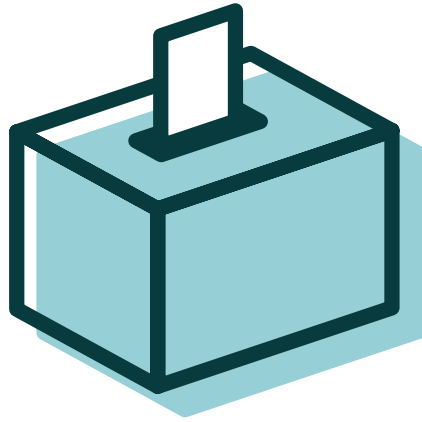
There are a range of options for dealing with questions during your hustings:

- You can use the chat or Q&A functions of whichever platform you choose; this will need to be moderated by the organiser and a means found of selecting appropriate questions for the Chair to ask. For example, you could set up a private chat or WhatsApp group for the organisers to share questions. Depending on how you choose to set-up your meeting, questions could be taken verbally directly from participants if the Chair/organiser feels comfortable doing so.
- If your coordination group is sufficiently confident in the use of technological solutions, online Q&A tools such as sli.do are available and make for a dynamic means of audience participation.

Other factors to consider:

- Regarding your choice of platform
 - *Be aware that some online platforms have caps for the number of participants in meetings or webinars*
 - *Ensure that you meet any subscription requirements (e.g. whether all features you need are usable with a free trial, whether there are time limits on your meeting based on the subscription package you have chosen)*
- Accessibility
 - *Some online platforms have caption features which can be enabled to facilitate relatively up-to-speed subtitling for a live meeting*
 - *If you are pre-recording content, consider whether you have the capacity to include subtitles*
 - *Some platforms allow participants to call in using a landline to hear audio online; this is something you may wish to explore*
- Technical support
 - *Whilst only the Chair and candidates are likely to be visible to the audience during your hustings, you will need to ensure there is sufficient technical and logistical support behind the scenes. We would recommend:*
 - *Appoint one person to manage the technical aspects of the meeting, including managing attendees (including muting and monitoring video feeds, as well as being prepared to remove participants who are not welcome or behaving inappropriately), being alert to possible technical or IT challenges, monitoring the chat function if you choose to use it, and keeping on top of questions which are submitted for candidates.*
 - *Consider appointing at least one additional person to help with these duties*
 - *The Chair should only be responsible for managing the hustings itself – i.e. engaging with candidates and ensuring discussion runs smoothly*
- Facilities

- *If considering a hybrid-style meeting, ensure you have suitable facilities for filming or live-streaming and that the internet connection is stable. It will be necessary to use a relatively high resolution camera for filming in this way, as opposed to a laptop or other device if conducting an all-online event, for example. You will also need to ensure individual microphones are available for each candidate and make sure the platform is well-lit.*
- Registration
 - *Depending on how widely shared you would like your meeting to be, we would recommend creating a registration page on a site such as Eventbrite. This will help with security, as you will be able to control how details of your meeting (including any passwords necessary for access) are distributed, and will also be able to keep track of the number of attendees.*
- 'House' rules
 - *Agree ahead of time what rules will be in place for the meeting: for example, that all participants (including candidates) should be muted unless directly asked to contribute by the Chair; how the chat function will be used; ensuring that videos remain on during the meeting.*
- Practice and test everything!
 - *We strongly recommend conducting a practice run and technical rehearsal, covering every aspect of your meeting, and using all the equipment and processes you intend to for the live meeting:*
 - *Ensure that everyone is clear about their respective roles*
 - *Check internet speed, particularly if your intention is to stream your meeting (as a rough guide, your upload speed should be approximately double the speed you plan to stream with)*
 - *Test the technological and practical aspects of the meeting, including:*
 - *Cameras (and related equipment such as CamLink) and microphones, and tripod (if using a hybrid set-up)*
 - *Lighting (for both a hybrid setting and a fully online meeting)*
 - *Laptop or broadcast devices*



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