

This is the toolkit we provided for the General Election in 2017. It will be reviewed when the next General Election is called and is provided here for information.

Churches have organised hustings across the Diocese of Salisbury in the lead-up to previous General Elections. The following information will help you plan an event, but it is important that organisers also check the guidance on the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland website when it is updated shortly. There are no significant changes to the legal framework compared with 2015, but as there were several changes then it is worth reminding yourself of the current guidance.

Why should churches consider holding hustings?

There is a long tradition of churches in Britain organising election hustings to help voters make informed, educated decisions, and foster a high quality of political debate. This is particularly important in an era of sound-bite politics and 'fake news'. Hustings must not be a platform for a particular party or candidate. They must be neutral and seen to be neutral, not just on principle, but because partisan events are covered by more rigorous aspects of election law.

Dates

Parliament was dissolved on Wednesday 3 May and the deadline for nominations is 4.00pm on Thursday 11 May. The cut-off date to register to vote in the General Election is Monday 22 May. This is worth communicating among church members, especially those who may be entitled to vote for the first time.

Monday 22 May also marks the deadline for voters to apply for a postal or a proxy vote.

Who can or should organise hustings?

There is no theoretical reason why an individual parish or benefice should not organise hustings, but they have most commonly and most effectively been organised ecumenically. If there is an active Churches Together group in your area, that is likely to be the most sensible organising body.

Date, Time and Venue

It is important to find a date and time that suits all candidates, or at least those of the main parties in the constituency. If the sitting MP is standing again, it is usually best to find available evenings for him or her first. Contact their agent and find suitable dates, then invite all other candidates. Think about the best time and venue for your community. Remember, events on weekdays during working hours are not accessible to those in work. Weekday evenings are most common although some have found Sunday evenings at 8pm effective.

Expect a worthwhile event to last anything from 75 minutes up to 2 hours.

School or church halls or community centres are useful places. In some larger towns, you may consider taking the hustings to the people by holding a series of events in communities, housing estates and venues which people find more accessible.

Think about parking, disabled access and, in larger towns, public transport when considering venues.

Also think about microphones and amplification. Not all candidates can be heard in a large hall without amplification, and few members of the audience asking questions will be.

Invite all the candidates (unless there is good reason otherwise)

The nature of a hustings is usually to invite all those standing for election. The latest guidance from the Churches' Legislation Advisory Service is that some candidates can legitimately not be invited if there is a clear, objective, reason which you are prepared to make public. These include that the individuals not invited are likely to obtain very few votes; that those invited are those most likely to win in the constituency, or that a particular candidate or candidates present a public order risk. Mere disagreement with the political views of a candidate (however repulsive) is not a sufficient reason not to invite them to the hustings.

If you cannot demonstrate what the Electoral Commission judges an objective reason for not inviting every candidate, your event may count as a donation to the candidates who were invited. If the cost is above £50, it will need to be recorded as a political donation, and you will have fallen foul of charity law because it is axiomatic that charities may not make political donations.

If you do have what would clearly be understood as an objective for not inviting one or more candidates, former practice has been that if you exclude someone you invite them to send a statement to be read out at the meeting.

If a candidate fails to attend, the suggestion is that you leave a vacant chair on the platform with their name on it to make it clear that they were invited.

Publicity

Hustings should be for everyone in the community and so publicise them widely and make sure everyone knows they are welcome. But remember it is a hustings and not Question Time or party lobbying.

Your local newspaper will almost certainly carry details of the event prominently if they are given sufficient notice and your local radio station may also give you a brief mention. A very brief press release, perhaps as short as 100 words or so, is probably enough. It needs to state date, venue, time, and explain that the hustings is run by a local ecumenical church grouping (e.g. Christians/Churches Together in xxxxx) for the benefit of the community and to enable people and candidates to engage in quality discussion of important issues.

Chair

It is important to find the right person who can handle and direct a complex meeting. This should not be someone closely linked to a particular party or view. Having a separate Chair and organiser allows for a neat division of tasks during the event.

It's useful if the organiser and Chair prepare some simple hand signals to help steer the meeting. For example 'there's time for one more question...' and we suggest

you locate the organiser at the back of the hall/room since not everyone needs to see gestures.

Prepare questions

Aim for about 5 questions per event. (5 questions to 5 candidates giving 3 mins reply equals a minimum of 1 hour and 15 mins.) Most Hustings invite people to submit questions beforehand, then organisers go through and select 5 that represent the major interests shown in the questions. It may also be necessary to prepare some that cover essential issues and 'plant' a question on the night. Or you could invite people to come early (7pm for 7.30pm) meeting and write down their questions for a quick review on the night.

Encourage questions to be for the benefit for the whole community 'the Common Good' rather than around a Christian focus or issue.

Open-ended questions can sometimes be more productive, e.g. 'How does the candidate define poverty?' Also try questions that give them the opportunity to express their personal and genuine hopes and aspirations, rather than a paragraph from their party's manifesto.

Another suggestion is to ask the candidates to come with a question for the public there, since they are supposed to be representing them. However, this is best suited a longer meeting, with sufficient time for what can be a longer process, and an experienced Chair to control answers from the audience.

Running the event

Timekeeping during the meeting is crucial. The Chair should make the point that this event is not modelled on Question Time, nor is it a lobbying event. It is a good idea to give a specific time for each candidate to reply, e.g. 3 minutes each per question. Have a timekeeper in the front row whose only task is to time replies. They put their hand up when the time is up and the microphone moves onto the next candidate. Or they can hold a yellow then a red flag up if you want to give them warning.

In particular, it is important to keep questioners short. They often need to be cut short. So, if using a roving microphone, don't give the it to the questioner, keep it and withdraw it if necessary. It is at the Chair's discretion as to whether to allow a supplementary question.

At the end offer the candidates 2 minutes each in reverse order to say what they want before closing.

Further Guidance

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland are to launch an election website at www.churcheselection.org.uk.

There have been no relevant changes to election law since 2015, and CTBI guidance from that year is still available at <http://ctbielections.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Planning-a-Hustings-meeting-2015.pdf>

The Churches Legislation Advisory Service offered a two page summary of the relevant legal context of non-selective hustings, which we have made available at the diocesan website at <http://www.salisbury.anglican.org/>

The Joint Public Issues Team from the Free Churches group has published a reflection on some issues to consider in the 2017 General Election at <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Election-bible-reflections-final1.pdf>. Other denominations may publish some guidance over the next few days. These materials do not support a 'Church' view or party line, but aim to help Christians engage with a range of important issues facing our country, however they may decide to vote.

Potential issues

- Climate change – action to deliver the UK's ratification of the Paris Agreement
- Brexit and our future relations with the rest of Europe
- UK poverty
- Universal Credit and increased demand on foodbanks
- Employment / wages
- Economy / who really pays in austerity?
- Transport issues
- NHS
- Social care of older people
- Land use – food / oil production / housing / tourism. Once it's gone it's gone.
- Small businesses
- Middle East – Syria
- Immigration – welcoming migrants
- Global poverty, health, water etc
- Should we vote for the party or a good constituency MP?
- Prison reform / crime

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