

# UK Churches and the General Election

## Planning a Hustings Meeting

Are you considering organising a hustings meeting? For the past 35 years churches across the country have joined together to run hustings – public meetings where people can listen to and ask questions of their election candidates who hope to represent them in the UK Parliament. Meetings sponsored by the churches help to provide opportunities for genuine political debate on neutral territory.

This guidance offers information and advice on how to plan such a meeting locally. Our suggestions are based on the experiences of people who have organised hustings in the past.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) is co-ordinating a list of all election meetings, to help ensure that there is no duplication within a constituency. If you are interested in holding a meeting, please visit [www.churcheselection.org.uk](http://www.churcheselection.org.uk) to register your interest and fill in details.

Please note that in registering an event you need to confirm that it is being organised by churches or church-based organisations (including if in collaboration with other organisations).

Once the election has been called, further resources will be added to the website giving information about a range of issues which could be raised at the meeting.

### When will the election happen?

The latest date that the general election can take place is 3 June 2010. Many political analysts are predicting that the election will be held on 6 May. However the election could be called at any time and if you can start planning as soon as possible you will be well prepared when a date is announced.

### First steps

These meetings work best when they are organised ecumenically, so the first thing to do is to form a local ecumenical planning group. This could be under the auspices of your local Churches Together group, but if that is not possible it is better to set up a special organising group made up of representatives from different churches rather than to act as a single church or denomination. Contact as many churches as possible in your constituency to see if you can work together. Consider whether you also want to invite members of other faiths to take part in the process. Call a meeting of this group as soon as possible.

### What happens if someone else in my constituency also registers an interest in organising a hustings meeting?

The system enables you to view the contact details of other individuals and groups that are interested in organising a meeting, so that you can get in touch and plan to act together.

### What area should we cover?

Ideally there should be one churches election meeting in each constituency, but life is rarely that simple. Some ecumenical bodies may only cover part of a constituency, whilst others may straddle several, e.g.:

- If *Churches Together in Smalltown* is part of the *Smalltown and Westfield* constituency, try joining up with *Westfield* churches to organise a meeting to cover the whole constituency.
- Alternatively if the town is divided into two constituencies, *Smalltown West* and *Smalltown East*, set up planning groups to organise two separate meetings, one for each constituency, so that you are only dealing with one set of candidates at a time.
- If you live in one of the very large constituencies it might in the end be more practical to organise two meetings at different ends of the constituency.

## When should the meeting be held?

In the past, candidates have responded well to meetings held on a Sunday evening within the two weeks before polling day. If you choose a Sunday, the meeting could be held after an ecumenical evening service, but you should make it clear that the meeting is open to all - church attenders or otherwise.

Don't worry if you can't hold the meeting on a Sunday evening. Consider possible dates and try to choose an earlier rather than a later date. Pencil in a date before the election, and then confirm it once the election has been announced.

Remember to update your entry on the website [www.churcheselection.org.uk](http://www.churcheselection.org.uk) with your date, time and venue details as soon you have them. You can email [election@ctbi.org.uk](mailto:election@ctbi.org.uk) with any queries.

## Who should run the meeting?

Try to identify a respected and impartial person from your community to chair the meeting. This could be a church figure, a professional or community leader. It is vital that the Chair is not identified or connected with a political party. It is also important that s/he is able to conduct the meeting firmly, ensuring that a whole range of views are heard. Contact your chosen Chair before the election is called in order to get their provisional agreement, then confirm dates with them once the election date is known. They will need to be well-briefed (particularly on the timing of the contributions, see below) so a face-to-face meeting might be helpful. It might also be useful to give them a copy of this guidance and other relevant material.

## How do we find the candidates?

Most constituency parties have already identified their candidates for the election. Details of candidates are available on the major parties' websites.

Conservative Party candidates:

<http://www.conservatives.com/People/Prospective%20Parliamentary%20Candidates.aspx?by=Constituency>

Labour Party candidates: <http://www.labour.org.uk/ppc/constituencies/>

Liberal Democrat Party candidates: [http://www.libdems.org.uk/in\\_your\\_area.aspx](http://www.libdems.org.uk/in_your_area.aspx)

Plaid Cymru candidates: <http://www.plaidcymru.org/content.php?nID=564;IID=1>

Scottish National Party candidates: <http://www.snp.org/people/candidates/Westminster>

For other parties, information can be found at [www.theyworkforyou.com](http://www.theyworkforyou.com). Alternatively, contact the political parties' national offices to find out if a party has a local organisation in your constituency which will be able to identify your local candidate. Many candidates will have their own website.

Contact the candidates with an initial invitation, explaining the aims of the meeting and mentioning the provisional time and date. This should then be confirmed swiftly after the election is called, with details of the other candidates who are being invited (see below).

You can find out details of any other candidates from your local Returning Officer once nominations have closed. Deadlines for valid nominations are fixed and will be stated in the Notice of Election published by the (Acting) Returning Officer. Contact your local authority for details. Once the election has been called, the candidates and their election agents are very busy, so move quickly and ring them with invitations or confirmation of the meetings.

## Do we have to invite all the candidates?

You are not obliged by law to invite them to your meeting. It has generally been the Churches' policy to suggest inviting all candidates in the interests of freedom of speech unless you consider that it might cause a breach of the peace to do so. However, some Churches have made statements on the unacceptability of particular extremist and racist parties and you may wish to take these into account and not give such views a platform. Please see box for more information.

A list of national church statements (including Church of England, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the United Reformed Church and The Salvation Army), plus regional and local ecumenical statements is available at: [www.methodist.org.uk/extremism](http://www.methodist.org.uk/extremism) and click "church statements"

The CTBI pamphlet *Racial Justice and the Ballot Box* is available at [www.ctbi.org.uk/CBA/265](http://www.ctbi.org.uk/CBA/265)

Similarly some candidates may refuse to appear alongside extremist candidates, or there may be fears that the presence of an extremist candidate may skew the focus of the meeting. A decision should be taken locally as to whether any candidate should not be invited.

If you have any doubts about who to invite you should discuss these with your local ecumenical group and contact your Constituency Returning Officer via your local authority, or the Electoral Commission <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/> for advice.

From the point of view of electoral law there is nothing preventing you from excluding certain candidates but this may have implications for those candidates who do attend. If an event is seen as promoting the election of a particular candidate it would need to be considered and included in that candidate's election expenses. In organising the meeting you should notify the candidates of the costs that you have incurred in arranging the meeting so that these can be apportioned as donations between those candidates who do attend.

See the Electoral Commission's *Guidance on Hustings Events* at [http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/electoral\\_commission\\_pdf\\_file/0008/79910/2009\\_09\\_11\\_Hustings\\_Topic\\_Overview\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0008/79910/2009_09_11_Hustings_Topic_Overview_FINAL.pdf) or contact them on 020 7271 0616 or [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk) as soon as possible for help in identifying and complying with the rules that apply to your event.

### **What if a candidate refuses to attend?**

Once you know who you are inviting, contact the candidates, stating who else has been invited to the meeting. If a candidate is invited and refuses or is unable to attend, you should give their apologies at the start of the meeting. They may wish to provide a short statement to be read out. It is up to the organizing group together with the chair to decide on this.

### **How should we publicise the meeting?**

Once the election has been called, try to get publicity for the meeting out to as many people and in as many ways as possible.

Contact all the churches in the local area, asking them to put up posters and to put details of the meeting in their weekly notice sheet. If possible, get members of each denomination or church 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 offices, community centres, shop windows, church members' windows. You can also ask the local media to advertise the event. Notify the candidates that you will be doing this, and send out a press release in advance. The press release can be very simple (stating What, When, Where, Who and Why) and should be sent to local newspapers and radio stations. Remember to include contact telephone numbers and email addresses so they can find out further details. It is important to stress that these meetings are not campaigning events, although churches and Christian bodies may be actively campaigning on particular issues on other occasions.

Decide how to make good use of electronic media to help your publicity, e.g. blogs, social networking sites.

You may wish to inform the Police that a meeting is being held.

## What about the venue?

You might decide to hold the meeting in one of the local churches, or in another building that is more convenient. Wherever the meeting is held, it should be easy to find, accessible to people with disabilities including wheelchair users and, if at all possible, have a hearing loop.

**Sound** - It is important to have a public address system. Check this in advance, and then make someone responsible for it on the night. A 'floor' microphone (and someone to run around with it) will make it much easier to take questions or comments from the audience, which are a vital part of the process.

**Stewards** - Decide how many stewards you will need to welcome and assist people. Decide whether you be serving tea and coffee. Try to get volunteers from a range of churches.

## Running the meeting...

It is up to the planning group to decide the timetable for the meeting. You might want to consider the following structure:

- Welcome by the Chair, who also describes the way in which the meeting is to be conducted
- Brief introduction by the Chair of the candidates by name and party
- Short statement by each candidate (a couple of minutes)
- Questions from the floor, allowing each candidate to respond
- Final few sentences from each candidate

Remember that you may have 5 or more candidates present. You will need to ensure that statements and answers are kept strictly to time. If your Chair does not want to control the meeting *and* keep an eye on their stopwatch, you could have someone at the back of the room holding up a card when the speaker is one minute from the end, and again when their time is up.

Resources available on the website [www.churcheselection.org.uk](http://www.churcheselection.org.uk) suggest a wide range of issues and questions which could be raised at the meeting. These could be used to stimulate discussion before the event, or could be summarised and made available to the audience on the evening.

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, so people from all sections of the community should be encouraged to attend and to participate.

Decide how you want to handle questions: Do you want people from the audience to submit them in writing to the Chair at the start of the meeting or as it progresses? You may wish to collect questions in advance of the meeting, so that a good spread of issues is covered. This will mean speedy sorting through the questions while the candidates are being introduced. Or are you happy to take questions from the floor? Whatever you decide, this should be made very clear to the audience at the start of the meeting.

There may be some issues where it is appropriate for a supplementary question to be asked – especially where a general question might be followed up by a more specific one. However, be aware that even if each of five candidates is given just two minutes to answer, each question will take ten minutes.

Questioners may need to be kept in check by the Chair – people have come to hear the candidate, not them!

## Checklist

	Before the election is called	Once the election has been called
Website	Register your plans so far on <a href="http://www.churcheselection.org.uk">www.churcheselection.org.uk</a>	Update your entry on the website giving a firm date, time and venue for your constituency meeting.
Planning Group	Contact the Churches Together Group/ other churches in your constituency. Form a planning group, and have at least one initial meeting. Draw up list of tasks	Regular meetings/contact
Date	Pencil in a likely date (or dates) for the meeting	Confirm the date
Candidates	Identify the candidates for the main parties and contact them, inviting them in principle to the election meeting	Once nominations have closed, get hold of the final list of candidates. Contact those you are inviting by phone asap to confirm or invite them. Brief them on the timetable (including strict time limits)
Venue	Identify a venue and check availability	Confirm booking. Check out sound system, and identify someone to run it on the night. Decide where the candidates will sit and if they need name/party labels in front of them
Chairing	Identify someone to chair and liaise with them	Confirm the date. Brief the Chair fully on timetable. Appoint a timekeeper with stopwatch and card if required.
Stewards	Recruit potential stewards	Brief stewards on welcoming/serving refreshments. Photocopy briefing on issues for audience if required.
Publicity	Discuss and plan your publicity	Produce posters/ information for display Contact other churches in the area Identify other places for posters Send press release to local media

## And finally...

Please let us know how you got on!

Any suggestions will be used by the churches for the next election campaign.

Thank you for your interest in organising an election meeting. We hope that it will be successful, and will provide a valuable opportunity for the political debate and reflection necessary for true democratic participation.

Further information and help can be found at [www.churcheselection.org.uk](http://www.churcheselection.org.uk)

And at the Electoral Commission [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

For information about material produced specifically for constituencies in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland contact:

- Cytûn [www.cytun.org.uk/](http://www.cytun.org.uk/)
- Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office [www.actsparl.org](http://www.actsparl.org)
- [www.irishchurches.org](http://www.irishchurches.org)

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