



## SCPO Briefing Paper

### Referendum on Scottish Independence: Hustings Guidance

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#### Introduction

Churches, congregations and local Churches Together groups have been involved in arranging community meetings (sometimes called hustings) during election campaigns for more than 40 years. These are usually held in the months and weeks leading up to polling day, and are an opportunity for candidates to present their ideas and answer questions from each other and the public.

The referendum on Scottish independence on Thursday 18 September is now drawing closer, and many local church groups will once again be thinking about how they might offer a safe and neutral space where important issues about Scotland's future might be heard. This guidance note is designed for people who are considering arranging or running an event.

#### First things first

You are strongly recommended to read the relevant guidance from the Office of Scottish Charity Regulation (OSCR) and the Electoral Commission on the referendum and activities by charities. You should understand what they are recommending and be aware that engaging in any form of political debate by third parties needs to be scrupulously fair and balanced.

OSCR Referendum Guidance:

[http://www.oscr.org.uk/media/433188/2013-07-22\\_referendum\\_guidance\\_for\\_publication\\_final.pdf](http://www.oscr.org.uk/media/433188/2013-07-22_referendum_guidance_for_publication_final.pdf)

Electoral Commission Referendums Guidance:

<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/party-or-campaigner/campaigners-in-referendums#Guidance>

Electoral Commission Hustings Guidance (issued in the context of election meetings, but still helpful in some respects to the Scottish referendum):

[http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/105946/sp-hustings-rp-npc-ca.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/105946/sp-hustings-rp-npc-ca.pdf)

Churches in Scotland have adopted a position of impartiality or neutrality on the referendum question; it is generally recognised that the membership of all churches will include people with different views, and that there is no clear direction in the Churches' common tradition or teaching on this issue. There has been some recent exploration of the theology and ethics involved, but as far as a referendum meeting goes, it is important that they reflect the Churches' non-alignment

and objectivity; ideally they should be spaces which allows the wider community to understand more of the issues and an opportunity to demonstrate a shared Christian commitment to the common good through positive civic participation.

### **How to start**

These meetings work best when they are organised ecumenically. Not only does it share the burden of planning, it widens the potential audience and is a great symbol of Christian unity, working together to try to understand and engage with political issues, where often there can be so much disagreement!

Start by forming a planning group; this might be under the banner of your local Churches Together group, or if that is not possible it could be better to set up a special organising group made up of representatives of local churches. You may also want to think about inviting other faith or belief groups to be part of this. Call a meeting of the group as soon as possible, to start making decisions on the following questions.

### **What geographic area should we cover?**

In Parliamentary elections, it is often appropriate to work with churches and candidates in the same constituency area. But as the Scottish referendum is a national question constituencies do not hold the same importance. Instead you could hold a neighbourhood hustings involving just a village or neighbourhood, or do a city or local authority wide one; whichever feels most appropriate to you.

### **When should the meeting be held?**

The referendum is on 18 September, but postal votes will be sent to voters who have requested them around three weeks before – so people may be beginning to vote from around 28 August.

We therefore recommend that your election meeting should take place before the end of August. This should also allow people attending the opportunity to continue to reflect on what they have heard and the chance to find out more information before having to make a decision.

It doesn't really matter what day or time the meeting takes place, it may depend on what suits your local community best. In past elections many hustings have taken place on a Sunday evening, sometimes following a short ecumenical service (though do make sure that the referendum meeting is open to all, whether or not they are church-goers).

### **Who should run the meeting?**

Try to identify a respected and impartial person from within your community to chair the meeting. It is vital that they are not identified or connected with either of the campaign groups, and they need to be able to manage the meeting firmly, ensuring a whole range of views are heard.

You should contact your Chair as soon as possible and find suitable dates. They will need to be well-briefed on how the meeting will be run; you should also share a copy of this and the OSCR and Electoral Commission guidance with them.

## Who should speak at the meeting?

This may depend how the local group wishes to plan the event.

Our recommendation is that you should ask one or two persons from Better Together and the same number from Yes Scotland to represent the two campaign groups. At the time of writing (March 2014) the Electoral Commission had not designated these groups as the 'official' campaigns but it is expected to do so in due course.

You could do this by asking a local politician, such as a Councillor, MSP or MP, or by approaching the national Yes Scotland and Better Together campaigns for a speaker.

<u>Better Together political parties</u>	<u>Yes Scotland political parties</u>
Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	Scottish Green Party
Scottish Labour Party	Scottish National Party
Scottish Liberal Democrats	Scottish Socialist Party

An alternative might be to have a civic rather than a political engagement; to have speakers representing groups such as local businesses, schools, voluntary groups or community associations. One problem with this approach might be that the individuals chosen to represent these groups may have strong personal opinions on the referendum result, and you might inadvertently find all your speakers supporting Yes or No.

A compromise might be to have two main political speakers, and then a 'front bench' of four or five local people who might be invited two or three times throughout the event to put a question or comment from their context or experience.

Or you might want to do something really different; this is fine too, and you are encouraged to be creative – though remember that the need for a balanced debate should underpin any format the hustings might take. In the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections one hustings operated a 'speed dating' style event, with candidates making their pitch to a small group of voters for a few minutes before moving on to another table. Basically, the idea of these events is to run something which helps people to engage in the issues and that an outside observer could see was objective and fair. So think about your audience, what they might be used to and what they might enjoy! If you do try something imaginative or radical, please do let us know about it so we can share news of it for future elections.

## How should we publicise the meeting?

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 paper and radio station to advertise the event. And think about using social media and websites to spread the word. Notify the speakers 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 public meetings to which everyone is welcome and that the Churches are impartial and not involved in either campaign.

16 and 17 year olds will be able to vote in the referendum; you might want to consider approaching local schools, further education colleges and projects working with young people to invite them to come and take part in the meeting.

### **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 all people 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 at the event. 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 and refreshments - 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.

Posters and Publicity – the Church should be seen as a neutral space, but for the event you might want to consider allowing the different campaigns to put up posters or have a stall; it is essential that parity is given to both sides.

### **How should the meeting be run?**

This is up to the planning group. Unlike a Parliamentary election where there could be several candidates, the referendum choice is either yes or no.

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 of the campaign representatives by the Chair
- Short statement by each candidate (up to ten minutes)
- Questions from the floor, allowing each candidate to respond
- Summing up from each campaign (up to five minutes)

The Chair (or a steward) may want to time the statements to ensure both sides have a balanced opportunity to speak. You might want to have a time keeper at the back of the room who can hold up a card when the speaker has one minute left, and another when the time is up. Past events have also used bells or buzzers to indicate when speakers had exceeded their allocated time; you decide what level of formality you would like to go for.

The Chair should also try to ensure that both candidates are given an equal opportunity to answer questions from the floor – and not let one (or both) just keep on talking until they run out of steam!

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; some groups in the past have set up an email address or had a box at the door of the church for a few weeks running up to the event. You may choose to ask people to bring their questions written down and submit them on the evening; 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. If you do want to take questions from the floor, try to encourage a diverse range of people to have their say; a mixture of young and old, men and women, white and black or minority ethnic and so on.

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 questioners may need to be kept in check by the Chair - people have come to hear about the referendum, and not individuals with a hobby horse!

Over the past months many Scottish Churches have published resources and reports related to the referendum. It might be appropriate for the questions to reflect some of the concerns or aspirations raised there. It could, for example, be used to stimulate discussion before the event, or summarised and made available to the audience on the evening, to assist in the consideration of the question.

One resource which the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office has been involved in is the running of *Imagining Scotland's Future* on behalf of the Church of Scotland. A series of community consultations around Scotland in 2013 has been written up and published in a report called *Our Vision* available on the Church of Scotland website:

[http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/19243/our\\_vision.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0019/19243/our_vision.pdf)

[http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/speak\\_out/politics\\_and\\_government/articles/imagining\\_scotlands\\_future](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/speak_out/politics_and_government/articles/imagining_scotlands_future)

You might also want to highlight at the start or end of the meeting how to register to vote, which is especially important for young people who might not have got on the electoral roll, or if people have recently moved. The About My Vote website gives clear instructions on how to register ([www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk)), the deadline for registration for the referendum is 2 September.

## Checklist

- ✓ Form the planning group and arrange a meeting and how you will keep in contact.
- ✓ Canvass for dates and identify a suitable time.
- ✓ Contact representatives from the campaigns and invite them to speak, and chase up until you have confirmed speakers.
- ✓ Check availability for venues, and once chosen confirm the booking and make sure that it is accessible for wheelchair users, people with hearing aids and how the sound system works. Decide the layout of the room, where the speakers will sit and so on.
- ✓ Identify a Chair and confirm the date and venue when known. Keep him or her fully informed about preparations and how the meeting should be run. Appoint a timekeeper with stopwatch and cards if required.
- ✓ Ask for volunteer stewards to help set up and clear away, to welcome the audience, serve refreshments, support how you want the questions to be asked.
- ✓ Produce posters and information to advertise your event. Contact all the churches and other community groups, speak to local media and publicise on social media to local people.

## And finally...

If you have any questions or would like some advice, or just to talk through with someone how an event might be run, please contact us at the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office on 0131 220 0246 or 0131 220 0305 or email [info@actsparl.org](mailto:info@actsparl.org)

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.