

UK General Election – 2015

Hustings / Election Meetings

Guidance and Advice

For congregations and church groups based in Scottish constituencies

A General Election for the UK Parliament will take place on Thursday 7 May.

Scottish constituencies will elect Members of Parliament, who will be their representatives at Westminster.

Devolution has meant that many of the important political issues affecting Scotland are now decided in Holyrood – but the UK Parliament still has a great deal of relevance and authority for people in Scotland, and of course for people across the UK as a whole.

This briefing is designed for Scottish church groups who are planning an election meeting or hustings, where candidates or representatives of the political parties standing answer questions and participate in a public debate.

As Christians we are called to play our part in building God's kingdom. One way we can offer our support is to encourage open and respectful debate about the decision voters will be facing in May. Churches are often seen as a neutral space, and so can provide an impartial opportunity for political debate. Christians are citizens too, and many will have views which have been shaped by their faith on current issues, and so a church's election meeting can be a chance for members of your congregation to ask Parliamentary Candidates the questions which matter to them. For more resources on election issues visit the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office website.
<http://www.actsparl.org/resources/election-materials/uk-general-election-2015.aspx>

It can be easiest if you get a small group of people together to help with planning. Election meetings can work well if they are organised ecumenically or with other community organisations – so think about involving other people in your constituency.

You might be working on your own, or as part of a group which has run election meetings for years – either way you can find out if someone else is already planning an event in your constituency, and register your event, or just connect with others; a special website has been set up where you can link up and advertise your event - <http://ctbielections.org.uk/>

When should we hold our meeting?

Pick a time which you think will get most people attending; sometimes immediately after or before a Church service can work as you already have a large potential audience – but think about whether people will want to stay, and be careful that you don't give out an impression that your event is only for your members.

We recommend that you don't hold your event in the last couple of days before the election, but instead plan it at least a week or more beforehand. This is because people coming to an event may then want time to think about what they have heard or do more of their own reading and research before deciding who to vote for. There will also be a proportion of postal voters who will receive their ballots a couple of weeks before May 7th – and may well be voting early.

Who should run the meeting?

Ask someone who can act as Chair or Moderator for the event – but make sure that they are respected as fair and impartial, and that no-one can say they are connected with a party or candidate. They must also be able to conduct the meeting firmly, and be well-briefed about how the event will run.

Which candidates should be invited?

You should normally invite all of the candidates standing in your constituency.

You should be able to find out their names and contact details by asking the local authorities' electoral services department (ask for the office of the Returning Officer), or from the websites / offices of the political parties. Nominations for candidates close on Thursday 9 April 2015.

However, you might decide that you don't want to invite all of the candidates (perhaps there are dozens of candidates which would make an event impossible to run). If you have impartial reasons not to invite all of the candidates, you don't have to invite them all.

In this case, you should:

- be able to give impartial reasons why you have not invited particular candidates or parties. You should be prepared to explain your reasons to candidates or parties you haven't invited
- make sure that candidates or parties you invite represent a reasonable variety of view, 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 representative
- inform the audience at the meeting of candidates or parties standing who haven't been invited.

Impartial reasons may emerge from the following considerations:

- 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
- resources and other practicalities constraining numbers of invitees
- security or public safety concerns

You cannot decide not to invite a candidate because you don't agree with their views or policies. This is not an impartial reason!

Some churches have made statements and have policies about the unacceptability of some parties; you may want to take these into account and not give these parties a platform. If you choose not to invite all the candidates because you oppose their views then you must refer to the Electoral Commission guidelines on selective hustings. www.electoralcommission.org.uk

When should we invite candidates?

Now! Or as soon as you have fixed a date and venue. Once the election campaign gets underway at the end of March, candidates and agents will be very busy campaigning, so getting in touch as soon as possible when they might be hectic would be a good idea.

What if a candidate doesn't respond, declines, boycotts or fails to turn up?

For organisers, this can be very irritating! But if you anticipate how you will handle the situation before you arise then you will be better prepared.

Non-response –you might need to follow-up on your invitation if you haven't heard, especially for main national parties which have a significant chance of success, either locally or nationally.

Declines – if a candidate has declined to attend (if they have another commitment, for example) you don't have to worry about whether your event is still impartial or not – it is, it is the invitation which counts. If it is one of the main national parties, think about whether you would be happy to have a spokesperson from them take part or make a statement at the start of the event, explaining why the candidate is not able to make it?

Boycotts – some parties have a policy of not sharing a platform with other parties, as it is felt this conveys a degree of legitimacy on them. If you find that because party X is standing, candidates from Y and Z will not turn up then what will your planning group do? Be prepared to consider not holding an event if it would not be of benefit to the community.

No-shows – clearly this would be disappointing for the planning group and the audience; but also possibly the candidate who had forgotten. Elections can be very busy times, so minimise the unexpected by keeping in touch with candidates, share phone numbers, and confirm all the arrangements a couple of days before the event.

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 – and at the earliest practical opportunity.

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, schools, 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.

And don't forget you can register your event at <http://ctbielections.org.uk/>

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.

Translation – does your community have a link with people who use another language such as Gaelic or British Sign Language? Could you run the hustings with translation or in a language other than English?

How do we run the meeting?

This is up to the local planning group, it might help to talk about election meetings and other events you've been to before.

You might want to think about the following structure:

- Welcome by the meeting Moderator, including a description of how the meeting will be conducted.
- A short introduction of all of the candidates by name and party (and reading out any apologies).
- Each candidate speaks in turn for 2 minutes.
- Questions from the floor, allowing each candidate to respond (with a time-limit).
- Each candidate can sum up for a further 2 minutes.
- Moderator thanks audience and participants.

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.

You might want to think about how to take questions.

If they come from the floor, questioners may need to be kept in check by the Moderator – people have come to hear the candidate, not them!

An important subject you may want to think about relates to devolution – as issues such as health, education and justice are devolved, how you will handle a question which might refer to NHS or school reforms in England, or even on Scottish Government policy. You should ensure that your Moderator is well-briefed so that he or she can manage the discussion – in order that there is a lively and interesting event, but also to ensure that everyone understands what role their new MP will have with regard to Scottish and UK policy making. You might want to brief your Moderator to say something about this in her or his opening remarks, and ask that questions reflect reserved (Westminster) issues rather than devolved (Holyrood) ones.

Or you could invite questions to be submitted in advance and selected by the planning group, to ensure that a good spread of issues are covered, and ones which reflect the responsibilities of the UK Parliament.

Other options you could try:

- Have a 'themed' hustings on a current topic or issue – say poverty, the environment, peace or wellbeing.
- Run a 'speed-dating' session, where candidates have 10 minutes around a table with groups of voters before swapping to the next table – so they can have a face-to-face conversation with the electorate and not debate one another.

And finally...

If you have any questions please get in touch, we'd be happy to talk things through with you.

Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office

info@actsparl.org

0131 220 0246

www.actsparl.org

@actsparl

And please let us know how you got on!

Any suggestions will be used by the churches for the next election, in May 2016, which will be for the Scottish Parliament.

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.

And at the Electoral Commission www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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 Moderator 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.