

Elections and hustings

a guide for meetings and individuals



This briefing is to help area and local meetings decide whether to hold hustings during elections, and to provide information for those who do.

It provides advice on who to invite and how to plan a hustings.

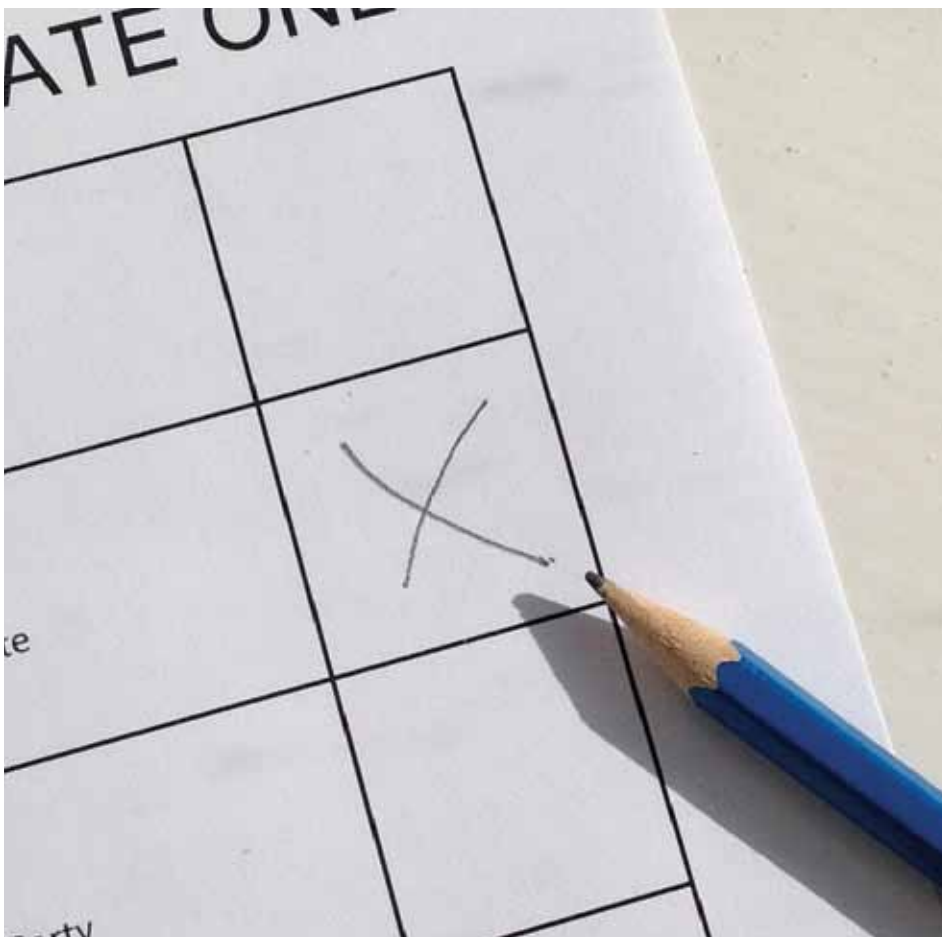
A hustings is when candidates for an election gather together to take questions from an audience. It is a chance for members of the public to find out more about the candidates, their parties and their policies. Holding a hustings is a good way to encourage participation in elections.

If your meeting has its own premises, or is able to use the building normally used for meeting for worship for other events, it may be a good public place for a hustings debate. It can be a valuable way to demonstrate Quaker values in the world.

Even if you decide not to hold a hustings, you may find the information in this briefing useful for discussing upcoming elections within your meeting.

Remember your responsibilities as a citizen for the conduct of local, national and international affairs. Do not shrink from the time and effort your involvement may demand.

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For more information or additional copies, contact Jessica Metheringham using the contact details on page 4.

A large print edition is also available; please contact publications@quaker.org.uk or call 020 7663 1162.

How to hold hustings

Hustings are a way to raise awareness of an election. It is a chance for voters to hear directly from the candidates and to make up their minds about who to vote for.

Who to invite

If you are holding a hustings, you should invite every political party or independent candidate.

You can decide not to invite particular candidates, but only if you have a clear objective reason that you are prepared to make public. That reason may be that the individual or party is likely to obtain very few votes, or that there are a very large number of candidates and it is impracticable to invite all of them. Simply disagreeing with the political views of one of the parties or candidates is not sufficient reason not to invite them to the hustings. (See the examples to the right.)

If you do not invite every political party or independent candidate, and you do not have what the Electoral Commission judges to be “an objective reason for not doing so”, your event may count as a donation to those parties or candidates who were invited. If the cost is above £50 then it would need to be recorded by those candidates as a political donation from the Quaker meeting. Because charities are not permitted to make donations to political parties, this may affect your charitable status.

Disagreeing with a candidate or political party

The meeting may decide that it strongly disagrees with a particular party or candidate. At the 2009 elections to the European Parliament some churches decided not to invite BNP candidates to hustings on the grounds that their inclusion would create a hostile atmosphere. However, in some cases this was challenged by other groups or candidates as being unfair.

If a candidate has views that are strongly opposed by other candidates, then inviting them to take part in a hustings debate can be a very effective method of rebutting those arguments. This is an issue for meetings to consider individually.

For many area and local meetings organising hustings this issue does not arise, either because there is no candidate standing who holds views in such clear opposition to Quaker values, or because such a candidate is unlikely to be successful (see Example 1). If you do find yourself in such a situation, Example 2 may be helpful. If you need specific advice, contact Jessica Metheringham, Parliamentary Engagement Officer for Britain Yearly Meeting (contact details on page 4).

The Electoral Commission

In all cases judgements on whether a hustings has been run correctly are made by the Electoral Commission, the regulatory body responsible for ensuring fair elections. Visit www.electoralcommission.org.uk for more information.

Being a member of a political party

Some Quakers are also members of political parties. Although this should not prevent you from helping to organise a hustings, be aware that a central purpose of a hustings is to allow voters to hear a wide range of views. Be very careful not to give the mistaken impression that Quakers in general favour one party or candidate.

Example 1: excluding candidates because of past election results

If there are ten candidates for one seat, you may consider inviting only the four or five candidates most likely to be successful. You could therefore choose to invite only candidates from the parties that got more than five or ten per cent of the votes at the last elections of the same type for the same area. Electoral Commission guidance states that this approach would be considered fair.

However, you should let the audience know that there are other candidates standing, who they are, and why they haven't been invited. You could also ask them to be in the audience.

Example 2: excluding a candidate because of potential disruption to the hustings

You may not wish to invite a candidate who has made public statements that you consider to be unambiguously racist. You may feel called to highlight the Quaker testimony to equality and state that these views are clearly in direct opposition to Quaker values and practices. You might also feel that to invite this candidate could cause disruption to the hustings.

However, if the candidate had made the comments some time ago, or the comments had been interpreted by some as not being racist, excluding this candidate from the hustings would almost certainly be perceived as unfair, and the event considered a donation to other candidates.

Running a fair hustings

It is important that every candidate taking part in a hustings feels that they have been treated fairly. Make sure that every candidate gets the same amount of time to speak, and that they are all invited to answer each question. If candidates are expected to ask each other questions or challenge each other's answers, make sure they are aware of this. If candidates wish to respond to specific points made by the audience or the other candidates, give them time to do so, but be aware of how much time is spent on individual questions.

A hustings should be chaired by someone who is able to be fair and even-handed, who does not know any of the candidates well, and who is able to manage a large audience. Ideally, this would be someone from within your meeting. Do not choose someone who is an active member of any political party to chair a hustings.

Your audience

Be aware that some members of the audience may be passionate about a particular subject. Ask the audience not to shout out questions without being asked and not to repeat questions that have already been answered. To ensure that questions come from all parts of the audience, deliberately call on a diverse mix of people. Some people are very good at being picked out of audiences, so make an effort to call on those who look less experienced at asking questions. Publicising the event widely will help to ensure a larger and more diverse audience.

You may consider telling local journalists about how Quakers are holding this hustings in order to encourage participation in the election, and inviting them to cover the event. If you do, ensure that the candidates are aware of this. If journalists arrive without advising you first, try to speak to the candidates to let them know. For specific press queries, contact Anne van Stavereen, Media Relations Officer for Britain Yearly Meeting (contact details overleaf).

Things to remember

- All hustings should be held during the six-week period running up to the election. This period is known as Purdah.
- Make sure that you publicise the event. Although hustings take place during Purdah, you can arrange them in advance.
- Include in your publicity a sentence explaining that the hustings is being arranged by your Quaker meeting. It would be useful to say why you are holding it – whether it's because you wish to promote political discussion, increase awareness of the election, or encourage voters to get to know the candidates.
- Ensure that candidates are aware of any local journalists invited.
- When you introduce the candidates taking part, make sure you mention any other candidates not present.
- Reiterate that a hustings is an opportunity for voters to hear from the candidates, not to promote any particular point of view. Make sure that all candidates get an equal chance to put their point of view across.

Example schedule

General Election Hustings...

Quaker Meeting House
Thursday 24 April 2014, 7pm until 8pm
Chair: Area Meeting Clerk

Invited candidates:

- Labour Party (the current MP, with 39% of the vote at the last election)
- Conservative Party (33% of the vote)
- Liberal Democrats (22% of the vote)

Invited to be in the audience:

- Green Party (4% of the vote)
- UKIP (2% of the vote)

Different types of election

Different elections call for different approaches, and often more than one type of election is happening at the same time in different parts of Britain. If you decide to hold a hustings in your meeting house make sure that you are aware of the different elections that may be happening in the area.

Westminster

There are 650 MPs in parliament, elected by first-past-the-post in single-member constituencies. Many MPs are in safe seats, but hustings are still very useful. These are the elections most people are aware of, and receive the most media attention. Westminster elections, known as general elections, now happen every five years, although it is still possible for one to happen before that. A number of different groups may organise hustings for these elections.

Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly

Both of these devolved legislatures are made up of constituency members and list members. The voters therefore have two votes, one for the constituency they live in and one for the list of parties. Ask the constituency candidate to attend the hustings first, although they may suggest that a list candidate attend if they happen to be busy that night.

European Parliament

Candidates are elected on a party list system from UK regions. This means that each political party publishes a list of candidates for each region and voters choose one of the political party lists. Voters aren't able to choose individual candidates from these party lists. European elections happen every five years.

Referendums

A hustings may also be appropriate for a referendum. However, as it is an idea rather than a candidate that is being promoted, it is particularly important that any hustings enable a real debate with opposing views.

Local government elections

Also known as local council elections, these can be arranged in a number of ways. There are three main factors to be aware of:

- whether all councillors are elected in one election held at a four-year interval, or whether some councillors are elected in smaller elections two or three elections out of four (commonly called "elections by thirds")
- whether councillors are elected from individual wards, or whether some councillors represent double-sized wards in pairs or triple-sized wards in groups of three
- whether the councillors are elected by first-past-the-post (one vote is one cross in one box) or by single transferable vote (ranking preferences).

When organising hustings for local government elections, be aware that there may be multiple candidates from each party and multiple seats available. Also be aware that local council arrangements can change, so people may not live in the same ward or vote for the same councillors they voted for previously.

Got a question about holding a hustings?

Jessica Metheringham is Parliamentary Engagement Officer for Quakers in Britain.



Email jessicam@quaker.org.uk or phone 020 7663 1107.

Got a question about media involvement?

Anne van Staveren is Media Relations Officer for Quakers in Britain.



Email annev@quaker.org.uk or phone 020 7663 1048.