

Referendum hustings

a guide for meetings and individuals



This briefing is to help area and local meetings consider what they can do during a referendum, and to provide information for those who wish to hold events.

It provides advice on whom to invite and how to plan events during a referendum.

A hustings for a referendum is a public meeting at which an audience asks questions of those representing the different options. The key difference between a hustings for an election and a referendum is that in an election the audience is deciding which of several individual candidates to vote for, while in a referendum the debate is focused on a single question.

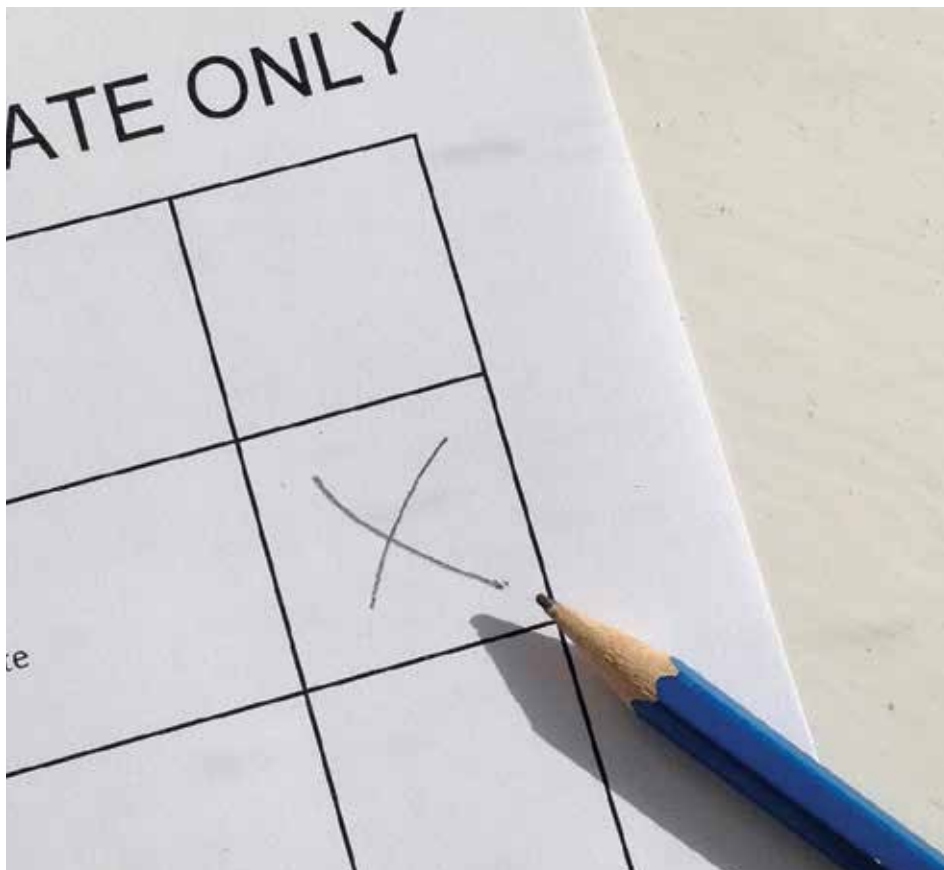
Holding events for a referendum lets voters hear from each side of the debate, helping them to make up their minds about how to cast their vote.

All events must be open and fair. Hosting a hustings, a talk or another sort of event is a good way to encourage participation in the referendum.

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. It can be a valuable way to demonstrate Quaker values in the world.

“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.”

Advices & queries 34



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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 a referendum hustings

Events are a way to raise awareness of the referendum. It is a chance for voters to hear from representatives from both sides and to make up their minds about how to cast their vote.

Who to invite

If you are holding a referendum hustings, you must ensure that both sides are treated equally. This means:

1. You must invite the same number of people to represent each side of the debate. You could invite two speakers from each side, or just one. (Three speakers from each side would probably be too many, and would mean that the event would take a long time.)
2. The speakers should have broadly similar levels of experience. It wouldn't be fair for one side of the debate to be represented by an MP, and the other side to be represented by someone who has no experience of public speaking. It isn't necessary for the speakers to have exactly the same qualifications – for example, an MEP and the leader of the local council might be a good match.

There may be multiple groups campaigning on each side of the debate. The Electoral Commission will designate one campaign from each side as the "official" campaign. A local referendum hustings doesn't need to invite representatives from the official campaigns, although you can if you wish. If you have one speaker but not another, you could ask the official campaigns if they could recommend someone. You could also try contacting local councillors, other faith bodies, or community groups.

If your event doesn't treat both sides equally, it may count as a donation towards one of the campaigns. If the cost of putting on the event (including the nominal cost of hiring the room) is above £50 then it would need to be recorded by that campaign as a political donation from the Quaker meeting. Because charities are not permitted to make donations to political parties, this would cause problems for the meeting.

The Electoral Commission

In all cases judgement on whether a hustings has been run fairly is made by the Electoral Commission, the regulatory body responsible for ensuring fair electoral process. Visit www.electoralcommission.org.uk for more information.

Being a member of a political party

Some Friends are also members of political parties. Although this should not prevent you from helping with some of the hustings organisation, 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 speaker in particular. If one of the speakers is a Quaker, make sure that the other speaker (or speakers) is aware and is happy with this.

Hiring a room to a political party or campaign group

If your meeting hires out rooms, you may be approached by a political party or campaign group wishing to use the space during the official campaigning period. There is no problem with this, provided that you are hiring the rooms under the same terms and conditions as usual. You should not provide rooms for free to one political group unless you also offer to provide free rooms to other political groups.

What sort of event do you want to hold?

Example one: focusing on particular themes (using pre-selected questions)

You could ask questions about a specific topic or topics. Perhaps your meeting has a concern around sustainability and you want to focus on the environment, climate change and food production. Or perhaps you are peace group and you wish to ask about the militarisation of the EU and the role it has played in peace-making.

Using this model it would be usual to choose the questions in advance. It is essential that the speakers are happy with the questions, and that the questions would not be seen to benefit either the Leave or Remain campaigns. Ask the speakers to confirm that they are happy with the wording of all of the questions at least a week before the event.

Example two: a Quaker conversation

This approach places the hustings in the context of worship sharing or creative listening. Each contribution is set in silence, and the audience is asked to discern the right way for them to use their vote.

This model is better suited to smaller groups, because including silence is likely to mean less time for questions.

Example three: a friendly chat over a cup of tea

Perhaps instead of a debate, your meeting would prefer a drop-in coffee morning? Quakers could discuss their concerns with others. You could invite neighbouring faith groups or other community organisations.

Running the event fairly

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

The hustings should be chaired by someone who is able to be fair and even-handed, who is not closely associated with either side of the debate, and who is able to manage a large audience. Ideally, this would be someone from your meeting.

Your audience

Be aware that some members of the audience may be passionate about the debate. Ask the audience not to shout out questions without being asked and not to repeat questions which 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 wish to consider inviting local journalists to cover the hustings. If you do, ensure that the speakers are aware of this. If journalists arrive without advising you first, try to let the speakers know. For specific press queries, contact Anne van Staveren, Media Relations Officer for Britain Yearly Meeting (see page 4).

Things to remember

- Referendum hustings should be held during the official campaigning period.
- Make sure that you publicise the event. Although hustings take place during the official campaigning period before the referendum, you can arrange them beforehand.
- Include in your publicity a sentence explaining that the event is being arranged by the Quaker meeting. It would be useful to say why you are holding it – whether because you wish to promote political discussion, to increase awareness of the referendum, or to encourage voters to get to know some of the issues involved in the referendum debate.
- There may be a number of different campaign groups on either side. The Electoral Commission will officially designate one campaign from each side of the debate to be the “official” campaign.
- Ensure that speakers are aware of any local journalists invited.
- Reiterate that a referendum hustings is an opportunity for voters to hear from both sides of the debate. Make sure that all speakers get an equal chance to put their point of view across.
- Make sure that you have plenty of people to help you run the event, and that everyone knows what they are doing on the night.

Example schedule

EU Referendum Hustings...

Quaker Meeting House
Thursday 21 April 2016, 7pm until 8:30
Chair: Area Meeting Clerk

Invited speakers in favour of remaining in the EU:

- A well-known local councillor (experienced speaker)
- A sixth form student (not very experienced speaker)

Invited speakers in favour of leaving the EU:

- A lecturer from the local university (experienced speaker)
- A local resident suggested by the Neighbourhood Watch group (not very experienced speaker)

Are other elections happening at the same time?

Although referendums are generally scheduled to not coincide with other elections, there may be other elections happening shortly before or afterwards. For example, the referendum on membership of the EU will be held on 23 June 2016, while elections for the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and local government across England will be held on 5 May 2016.

If you decide to hold a hustings in your meeting house then make sure that you are aware of the different elections which may be happening or have recently happened.

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 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.

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 those 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

Local council elections 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 that they did before.

There may also be elections for directly elected mayors, or for Police and Crime Commissioners.

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.