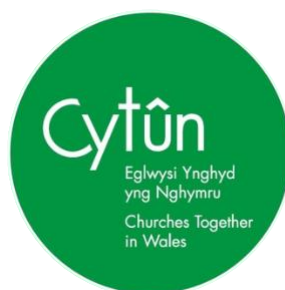


How to Host a Hustings



Updated February 2021
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Introduction

Elections are scheduled to take place in England, Wales and Scotland on Thursday 6 May 2021.

You can find out which elections are happening in your area at <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/upcoming-elections>

You can read **why it's good for churches in 2021 to host a hustings** at <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/?p=9472>

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Form a coordinating group

These meetings work well as an ecumenical endeavour, so it is well worth making use of the existing connections your congregation has with other church groups. You might have a local Cytûn or Churches Together group. If not, aim to contact as many churches as possible in your constituency to see if you can work together, and call a meeting as soon as possible. You might also want to invite members of other faith groups or civic organisations to take part in the process. In your research, you might find that another group is already organising a hustings, to which you can offer your assistance rather than duplicating what others are already doing.

Forming a small coordinating group of people will help ensure a smooth delivery of all the tasks that need to happen, once relevant skills and experience have been considered and tasks have been shared out. In 2021, most hustings will be online, so you should make sure that your coordinating group includes people who have some experience of organising and hosting online events.

Having the hustings online may well increase the engagement of those in the local neighbourhoods, through live streaming to people's homes and also allowing the material to be accessed later for those who miss the live event.

The rules around holding a hustings event

Churches are charities and so are regulated by the Charity Commission in England and Wales and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) in Scotland.

During election periods, campaigning activities are also regulated by the Electoral Commission. Hustings are legitimate activities for churches during this period.

The same considerations apply to hustings for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections as for the Mayoral, local, Assembly and Parliamentary elections. The Commissioners' electoral areas are geographically large, so for these hustings, it is particularly important to coordinate your intentions well in advance with other churches, faith groups or organisations, to avoid clashes or duplication.

If you are intending to hold hustings for multiple elections, you should hold them separately.

The Electoral Commission's guidance on hosting a husting can be found at <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/are-you-holding-a-hustings>.

Charity law – Scotland: <https://www.oscr.org.uk/guidance-and-forms/managing-a-charity-guidance/campaigning-on-political-issues-faqs/>

Charity law – England and Wales:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/speaking-out-guidance-on-campaigning-and-political-activity-by-charities-cc9>

Setting a date

Your event can take place any time between now and polling day.

Ultimately the date will depend on a number of factors including the availability of candidates. It is always worth contacting the candidates as early as possible to begin discussing dates.

In particular, please note that due to the potential need to consider and monitor emergency Covid-19 legislation, the Welsh Senedd will be dissolved only seven days prior to polling day (i.e. on 29 April), and the Scottish Parliament will be dissolved on the day before polling day (i.e. on 5 May). This means that candidates who are a sitting MS or MSP will be juggling campaigning with any parliamentary responsibilities related to Covid-19 issues. (All other normal parliamentary activity should finish by the end of March).

Legislation has been passed to enable these elections to be postponed by up to six months if the pandemic necessitates. It is better, however, to start organising now and have to postpone the date than to wait and see and then find that you do not have sufficient time to organise an event properly.

We are expecting that many more people will apply for a postal vote this year, which will avoid in-person voting in a polling place/polling station. Postal votes are usually sent to voters who request them around two weeks before polling day. Many people complete their postal ballot as soon as it arrives.

For these reasons, our recommendation is that you aim to hold your event in the week beginning Monday 19 April, or earlier.

Experience from previous years shows that candidates often respond positively to invitations to in-person meetings held on Sunday evenings. With meetings largely being held virtually this year, there might be more willingness to try other evenings.

Choosing a form of hustings

There are a number of forms that your hustings could take. Here are some suggestions which would work in-person or online, with slight adjustment:

Option A – Traditional hustings

These meetings take a 'question time' format, where candidates are invited to respond to questions from the audience.

You might want to consider the following structure:

- Brief introduction of the candidates by name and party, read by the chair
- Short statement by each candidate (a couple of minutes each at most)
- Questions from the audience on issues relevant to the election being held, allowing each candidate to respond
- Final few sentences from each candidate.

Bearing in mind that you could have many candidates, you will need to ensure that statements and answers are kept strictly to time. You will probably want to have someone with a stopwatch who can notify the speaker that their time is nearly up (e.g. '30 seconds to go') and again when time is up. Online video conferencing platforms such as Zoom allow the 'host' of the meeting to mute speakers should they fail to stop when their time is up (this rule should be applied to all speakers fairly).

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. People from all sections of the community should be encouraged to attend and to participate.

Decide how you want to handle questions – should questions be submitted beforehand to ensure that a range of topics is covered, or are you happy simply to take questions from the audience? If so, you should explain the rules if someone wants to ask a question and how they can do this. If running online hustings, you could ask people to submit questions which the chair or another designated person could read out via a service such as [Sli.do](https://www.sli.do/), or if you subscribe to a Zoom Video Webinar subscription, a Q&A feature is built in.

Whatever you decide, this should be made clear to the audience at the start of the meeting. Also decide whether you will allow supplementary questions to be asked: remember that even if each of six candidates is given just two minutes to answer, each question will take twelve minutes. The chair or moderator could pose several questions at a time. Questioners may also need to be kept in check by the chair – people have come to hear the candidates, not the audience!

Option B – Speed hustings

Based on a "speed dating" format, this type of hustings enables a dialogue to take place between candidates and the audience. It would take the following format:

The audience is distributed into online breakout rooms (such as those available on Zoom), with each breakout room allocated a candidate and a facilitator. Candidates can make a short introductory statement and

then respond to questions from the group before moving on to the next group, after a set amount of time.

Having spoken with all of the breakout rooms, the candidates are each invited to sum up with a short statement to the whole audience at the end of the evening.

One quirk of this is that the candidates don't get to hear what the other candidates are saying, which could result in some repetition of answers.

Option C – 'People's politics' election meeting

Whereas traditional hustings place the emphasis on hearing from politicians and parties, a 'People's Politics' event begins by hearing from those whose voices are not often heard within the political discourse before asking candidates to respond.

The event would take the following format:

- Identify individuals or representatives from groups who are often marginalised within society: this might be someone from a homeless shelter or users of a food bank, groups with learning disabilities, young carers, asylum seekers or any others that might be applicable to your local context and to the election being held who are willing to share their stories (up to three people is ideal).
- At the event, have the Chair introduce the format, the candidates and those who have been invited to share their story.
- The first person shares their three-minute story then poses a question that they would like the candidates to answer.
- Each of the candidates in turn responds to what they have heard and attempts to answer the question. This should be a three-way

conversation between the Chair, the person sharing their story and the candidate. It is not a dialogue between the candidates.

- Once all the candidates have done this, the Chair will thank them and thank the person who has shared their story, before inviting the next person to share their story.
- Once all the stories have been heard, and responses from candidates given, the Chair has the option to ask all the speakers to take further questions from the audience (time permitting).

Much of the success of this event relies on facilitating individuals to share their stories. For some of those individuals, this may be an intimidating process: ideally you should spend time with them in advance ensuring that they are comfortable with the format and what is expected of them. Some may wish to read their story from notes, or for someone else to read on their behalf. For others, speaking for three minutes may be difficult and in these instances an interview approach between the Chair and the storyteller might be more appropriate.

Knowing what question to ask the candidates may also be difficult for those sharing their story. If this is the case, you may need to help them think about the question in advance. The question does not need to be complicated and often simple, open questions such as “If elected, what would you do to address this issue?” can be very powerful.

The second significant part of the process involves facilitating the discussion between each candidate and the storyteller. In this instance, it is important that the Chair ensures that both individuals are allowed a fair contribution and that they do so in a measured and constructive way. This should be explained to participants in advance of the event.

Option D – Interview Series

Instead of trying to organise a public event, this idea would see a well-briefed moderator interviewing each of the candidates; they would ask the same or similar questions and would give each candidate the same amount of time (say around 15 minutes). The interviews would be recorded at a time to suit the individual candidates. Once they have been recorded, they should be stitched into a single video then uploaded to YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook or another suitable platform, making sure each candidate is fairly presented, that they have all been able to answer the same questions and are all given the same amount of video time to speak.

The moderator would need to be prepared to think carefully about the questions and would need to ensure every candidate is represented fairly and accurately, and that no-one is getting more or less publicity. The coordination group would also need to put energy into ensuring publicity for the video is circulated widely.

Variations

A singular-focus issue can work well for local authority elections hustings. For example, you could organise a hustings where the focus is on transport and building cycling infrastructure or greening your local area.

Taking your hustings online

It is important early on to make some initial decisions about the format and the platform through which the event will be held. Potential online platforms include: Zoom, Meetings, Google Meet, Go To Meeting, and Microsoft Teams among others. There are different costs involved for each, and free options are also possible. This section outlines three potential formats, but it is worth considering the feasibility of each suggestion for your own context, since a hybrid (or a completely alternative format) might be best suited.

Option 1 – A live, all-online meeting

Perhaps the simplest option, and likely the most familiar to church communities, is to host an online meeting. This can be conducted in much the same manner as a traditional in-person hustings would be; with the Chair or another designated person acting as the technical host and the candidates 'pinned' or so they remain in the focus of the audience's screen, like a panel. Questions can be submitted by the audience through the chat function, Q&A features, [Sli.do](#), or, if the Chair is comfortable, through spoken contributions (the would-be questioner should raise a virtual hand to indicate this).

The technical host has control over muting participants and should be ready to exercise that power if necessary.

Option 2 – Livestreaming an in-person panel

If local regulations and restrictions allow, you may wish to use a slightly adapted online meeting, whereby the candidates and the Chair are present in person (e.g. in a church building) and join the audience in an

online meeting. Think of BBC's Question Time with its virtual audience. As with option 1, questions from the audience can be submitted through the chat function. Candidates may be more comfortable with this format, and the conversation may be more fluid as candidates are addressed in person.

With these options it is worth considering the following:

- **Numbers:** How many people will attend? And does the online platform that you are using have a limit on the number of participants allowed in a given meeting?
- **Subscriptions and time limits:** Do you need a subscription or membership for your chosen online platform? For example, on Zoom Meetings, the host will require a paid account to run a meeting longer than 40 minutes, so consider if there is a paid church or community account you can use or purchase. If moving online allows you to collaborate across a bigger area, it may be possible to pool resources for a more professional or effective event.
- **Streaming:** With some added complexity, it is possible to stream online meetings to platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. This way, you could solely include the panel on your video conferencing call, and everyone else watches via these other platforms, and submits a question via the live comments on the platform, which is monitored by a moderator and reported back to the Chair.
- **Facilities:** If considering a hybrid approach, do you have a building set up with filming or live-streaming facilities and a reliable internet connection?
- **Registration:** How widely do you want your event to be shared? You may wish to create a registration page for your event, to allow

people to register to receive the meeting details. This will allow greater security, as you can control the sharing of your meeting password. Registration pages can be made on [Eventbrite](#) or other websites can provide registration pages easily.

- **Hosting:** Appointing a coordinator or moderator to act as a technical host is essential. This person can manage the attendees, monitor a chat function, respond to any IT issues and keep on top of questions or comments. This allows the chair to focus on managing the meeting and engaging with the candidates.
- **Time-keeping:** Creating a schedule that the host and coordinator are aware of will help to ensure your event has pace, and that all candidates are given equal time to speak. Make sure that candidates are aware how long the meeting will be, and outline this for the attendees at the beginning. If you plan to take audience questions, make sure you outline how these will be submitted – through the chat feature, etc. – and when they will be addressed.
- **Online etiquette:** Though many of us are now entirely acclimatised to online life, it is worth agreeing ahead of time a set of house rules to share with attendees at the beginning of a meeting. This could take into account remaining muted or sending messages via the chat function.
- **Accessibility:** Some online platforms have captioning functions that can be used to improve the accessibility of meetings. If you choose to share recordings of your meeting, or produce a pre-recorded resource, consider subtitling it to ensure it can be used by as many members of your community as possible.
- **Translation:** You may also want to consider translating the hustings into an additional language that is used by the intended audience or panel members.

In Wales, it is good practice to consider simultaneous spoken translation (available on Zoom and some other platforms). The translator should be competent and politically neutral. Unless a suitably qualified volunteer is available, this should be budgeted for. Translation will enable those candidates who wish to speak in Welsh to do so and still be immediately understood by everyone. Equally, the moderator needs to be able to field questions in both Welsh and English.

- **Security:** Depending on the circulation of your meeting's details, you may have security issues with unexpected attendees or indecent messages. Ensuring you have a moderator who can respond quickly by removing people or posts if necessary will help to manage this. Alongside house rules, you may wish to agree an 'action plan' on how they will manage a security breach, to minimise disruption. A 'waiting room' setup means that each person can be vetted by a technical host before entering the main video conferencing area.
- **Recording and permission:** You may choose to record your meeting and upload it for sharing with people who were not able to attend. If you are intending to share recordings of any meetings, ensure you make this clear, and allow people to turn off their camera and microphone if they are not comfortable being recorded.

Option 3 – Share pre-recorded clips

This option would involve the organisers either conducting a series of separate interviews, or sending all the candidates the same questions and ask them to video-record their responses and then the church can post them online. Perhaps a church leader may also like to add a

comment reflecting on faith, the democratic context and the current context. Give each participant a time limit for their answer or comment, with an understanding that this will be strictly adhered to by the editor.

This may be a very useful option if there are a large number of candidates, or in areas with unreliable internet connection that might make hosting an online meeting difficult.

Appointing a Chair

To ensure that a range of views and opinions are heard during the debate, you should identify and approach a respected and impartial person from the community to chair the meeting.

This could be a church figure, a community leader, or someone else who is comfortable speaking in public and keeping things moving and on-topic.

They should not belong to or be on record as supporting a political party.

It is also important that they are able to conduct the meeting firmly, and are well briefed about how the event will run.

You could consider holding a technical rehearsal before the event. This would allow for any unexpected technical glitches or considerations to be addressed before the meeting goes live.

Someone with experience conducting online gatherings, or with an understanding of the platform on which the meeting is to be held, could be particularly useful.

Inviting candidates

There may be a number of elections occurring on the same day in your area, so you will need to decide which one(s) you will host a hustings for. If you are unsure which elections are relevant for your neighbourhood, you can have a look here - [Upcoming elections | Electoral Commission](#).

The deadline for nominating candidates for all of the elections is Thursday 8 April. After this point, the returning officer for the respective elections will publish a list of candidates for each election.

You will then be able to contact them through the political parties locally or nationally, via social media or candidates' own websites should they have them.

If you want to get in touch before this time, you can use www.democraticdashboard.com to find out who is currently known to be standing in your area.

You should ask each candidate for the name, phone number and email address of the candidate's election agent so you can keep in touch in the run-up to the event.

At elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd, voters are represented by a constituency Member, elected by first-past-the-post, as well as several regional Members, who are elected on a proportional representation system.

Some smaller parties might not put up constituency candidates, but instead only stand for the regional seats.

If you are organising hustings in Scotland or Wales, you should decide if you want to invite only the local constituency candidates, or instead have representatives of all the parties standing in the constituency and region – try to think what is likely to be most useful for your area and is in the best interests of fair public debate.

Do we have to invite all the candidates?

No – but if you don't, you must have an objective, impartial reason for not including all of them.

The simplest approach is to invite all the relevant candidates in the area or all political parties campaigning in the election and allow all those attending an equal opportunity to participate.

However, this may not always be practical. For example, there may be so many candidates or parties standing that a meeting would be hard to manage – this is especially true for local council elections and the regional lists in the Welsh Senedd and Scottish Parliament, where a number of seats may be up for election. If you decide not to invite all candidates, there are some good-practice recommendations you should follow to ensure your hustings is genuinely not promoting particular candidates or parties more than others.

These include:

- Being 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. If you didn't wish to invite a candidate because you don't agree with their policies, this would not be an impartial reason. Neither would

inviting or not inviting a candidate because of their actual or perceived religious affiliation. Whilst this may sometimes be legitimate under charity law, it has consequences for candidates under electoral law, as spending on such hustings may count as election expenditure. In this situation, the amount spent needs to be divided by the number of candidates: if it is over £50 each then the candidates need to be notified to include it in their returns to the Electoral Commission. You should consult the Electoral Commission's guidelines on organising a Selective Hustings (see <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/are-you-holding-a-hustings/selective-hustings>) as this will be subject to regulation. You may be required to register with the Commission and ensure that the candidates that you do invite declare your support for them. For these reasons, it is recommended that you invite all candidates, unless there is an impartial reason for you doing so. Impartial reasons may include:

- Local prominence of some parties or candidates over others
 - The number of elected representatives of that party at the local or national level
 - Recent election results in the area
 - Resources and other practicalities constraining the number of invitees
 - Security concerns.
- Making sure that candidates or parties you invite represent a reasonable variety of views, from different parts of the political spectrum – for local elections or the regional lists in the Welsh Senedd or Scottish Parliament, each party should be invited to choose a single candidate, even though multiple candidates from that party are standing in the election.

- Allowing 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.
- Informing the audience at the meeting of candidates or parties standing who have not been invited. It is good practice to invite such candidates to submit a short, written statement (of the same length as the opening statements of parties who are present) to be read out by the chair at the start of the meeting.

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

For organisers, this can be very irritating. In the first instance, try to find a date which all your invited candidates can make – and try to be flexible if things go awry!

- Non-response – If you do not get a response, you need to follow up on your invitations. Keep chasing and try to get an email address and telephone number for the candidate and their election agent so you can keep in touch.
- Declines – if a candidate has declined to attend (due to another commitment, for example) you don't have to worry about whether your event is impartial, since it is the invitation which counts. If it is a candidate of one of the main national parties, think about whether you would be happy to have a different party spokesperson take part. In the case of a constituency hustings for the Welsh Senedd or Scottish Parliament, it would be reasonable to allow the party concerned to nominate one of its regional list candidates as a substitute. You may wish to make a statement at the start of the event, explaining why the candidate is not able to make it. It is good practice to invite such candidates to submit a short, written statement (of the same length as the opening statements of parties who are present) to be read out by the chair at the start of the meeting.
- 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, what should your planning group do?

Be prepared to consider holding a different event or not holding an event if it will not be of benefit to the community.

- No-shows – clearly this would be disappointing for the planning group and the audience, but also for a candidate who has 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.

Publicising the event

Try to get publicity for the meeting out to as many people and in as many ways as possible – and at the earliest opportunity.

You will need to decide on the security of your hustings depending on the platform you choose to use. You may choose to advertise an Eventbrite or sign-up link that will provide details closer to the date.

Contact all the churches in the local area, asking them to share the hustings with their congregation through their newsletters, social media or services.

If possible, get a member of each congregation to take responsibility for publicising it within their own church.

Whilst it is worth focusing on prioritising online promotion, you may wish to consider how less technologically literate members of the community will be made aware of, and can be assisted in accessing, the meeting.

Some platforms allow you to hear the audio of a meeting by calling from a telephone. You may also wish to appoint someone to ensure the event is as accessible as possible.

You could also ask local media to advertise the event. A simple document (stating What, When, Where, Who and Why) can be sent to local newspapers and radio stations, but don't forget to notify the candidates first.

If you choose to record the event (first gaining candidates and audience permission for any recording), you could also post the video online and let people know about where to find it.

Checklists and contacts

- ❑ Form planning group
- ❑ If necessary. decide which election(s) you will feature
- ❑ Research who the candidates are in your area
- ❑ Decide on a format / platform
- ❑ Set date, time and venue
- ❑ Invite candidates and chase up responses
- ❑ Find your a) chair and b) online meeting coordinator
- ❑ Publicise event (registration page, invitation link etc) and ask for question submissions
- ❑ Have a practice run and technical rehearsal

This guidance has been prepared by the [Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office](#), [Cytûn – Churches Together in Wales](#) and the [Joint Public Issues Team](#).

We would love to know how you decided to hold your event, who attended, what questions were asked and especially if you tried a new kind of format for engagement.

Send us pictures too (with the permission of those involved).

We also would like to know how this guidance was useful and what should be added or changed for future publications.

If you have questions, suggestions or comments please write to:

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