How to organise a hustings

Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2011
INTRODUCTION

When it comes to an election, perhaps the only guarantee is that we, the voters, will face a deluge of information from candidates and political parties. From leaflets to TV, YouTube to Twitter there will be a steady stream of manifestos, interviews, adverts and news. For many people this information is unhelpful. What they really want is an opportunity to hear candidates answer questions in person and explain what their priorities would be if elected.

A FANTASTIC OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CHURCH

The Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2011 provides a fantastic opportunity for the local Church! In many parts of Northern Ireland, churches are a focal point for community and are best placed to organise and host a hustings. Such an event provides that all-important opportunity for local people to question candidates about a wide-range of issues and hear them talk about their values, why they want to be an MLA and what they would prioritise if elected.

WHY HOLD A HUSTINGS?

- It constitutes an important community service, providing residents with the opportunity to put specific questions to all the candidates at the same time, comparing and contrasting their answers;
- It provides a forum to raise issues of particular concern to Christians which candidates might not otherwise be asked about;
- Candidates can be assessed as individuals and personal strengths and weaknesses identified;
- It creates an opportunity for local church(es) to begin to build relationships with the politician who will be elected to represent them.

Could your church make the most of this opportunity and organise an election forum for people in your local community?

CARE’s HUSTINGS GUIDE

The information in this guide will help you organise and host a hustings. In the pages that follow you will find everything you need to know in order to organise the event. We hope you will find this guide helpful and pray you will take up the challenge of holding a hustings for the Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2011.
HOLDING A HUSTINGS – THE PRACTICALITIES

PLANNING

The first step is to set up a planning team, which will meet a number of times before the election is called. Much of the work needs to be done well in advance so you need to start planning now!

The best timing for a hustings is usually one evening in the last full week before polling day – 5 May 2011 (see the section below, Staying Within the Law). This is the time that public interest in the election is highest, and also allows plenty of time for pre-event publicity. However, with campaigning likely to begin from the 25 March, it is entirely reasonable to hold a hustings any time from this date.

You may want to join forces with other churches in the constituency and hold a joint hustings. This is likely to increase the impact of your hustings and is also good for fostering church unity. Sometimes an area will cover more than one constituency, in which case it is advisable to hold more than one meeting, and invite each set of candidates separately.

CANDIDATES

The best way to obtain contact details of local candidates and their election agents is via the local or central offices of the political parties. A full listing of national and local offices of all the main parties is available on the Make the Cross Count 2011 web site. (www.makethecrosscount2011.net/northernireland)

It is wise to contact the candidates as soon as possible for their provisional acceptance of a date and venue. Consult your main local candidates on possible time and date options. Independent or minor party candidates may also be standing in your area, so do keep an eye on the media for mention of them.

Who to Invite?

Please note that it is important to invite all candidates to attend hustings events. Registered charities, including many churches, are entitled to withhold invitations from those candidates or parties who hold views which are in contravention of the organisation’s objects, or whose presence or views are likely to increase the chance of public disorder or of alienating the charity’s supporters. However, if you do this there may be implications for the declaration of candidates’ election expenses as the law governing...
elections treats election forums and hustings events as campaign expenses if only some of the candidates have been invited. If you have concerns about this, please contact CARE for further advice.

Charities and churches are encouraged to discuss the question of which candidates to invite at a Parish or Church Council meeting. A formal decision not to invite a particular candidate (or candidates) should be clearly minuted.

If in doubt, please visit the relevant section of the Charity Commission and Electoral Commission websites.

If a candidate declines to attend, do try and find out the reason why. You may be able to accommodate their concerns. If a sitting MLA refuses to share a platform with other candidates, we would suggest that you raise the following points with him or her:

1. **The meeting will go ahead with or without all candidates present:** Candidates may be hoping that a meeting will not take place if they do not attend, but few will be willing to let their opponents have a free run without them. To cancel a meeting because one candidate refuses to attend would allow each candidate to have an unfair veto over other candidates.

2. **Meetings are part of our parliamentary democracy, which all candidates should support:** Candidates sometimes argue that they do not want to provide a platform for their opponents, yet democracy is all about providing platforms for alternative candidates to seek support.

3. **Candidates should be prepared to explain why they are standing:** Public meetings are one of the few occasions where electors can see their choice of candidates face to face.

Start to develop links with those parties with offices in your constituency straight away. Indicate that you hope their candidate will come to your hustings event.

**Close of Nominations:** The Northern Ireland Assembly list of candidates will be published on the Electoral Office website either on the afternoon of 7 April or on 8 April, although information on candidates may also be available from your local Returning Officer who can be contacted through your Local Council’s office.

However, most candidates will have declared their intention to stand well before that time and can therefore be invited to an election hustings before the nomination is made. Ensure to contact any new candidates as quickly as possible, and confirm with each of the existing candidates (by phone if possible) that they will be able to attend.
VENUE

There are a number of factors that you may wish to consider when choosing a venue. These include:

- Convenience of location (e.g. transport-wise);
- Parking spaces;
- Familiarity of venue: People are more likely to come if they know they can find the venue;
- Capacity: Past experience has shown average attendance of 150, and up to 300-400;
- Acoustics: You will need a PA system for candidates, and ideally a floor microphone for questioners;
- Facilities: Toilets and perhaps tea/coffee making facilities;
- Access for the elderly and disabled is essential;
- Cost of hiring the venue;
- Neutral territory: the candidates should feel comfortable at the venue – in some circumstances it may therefore be preferable not to use a church.

PERSONNEL

The Chair is a key appointment. He or she will need to look after the candidates as they arrive, and to convene and chair the meeting. It is a good idea to find someone who is well-known and respected in the community (ministers or other church workers; head-teachers or teachers; Citizens Advice Bureau staff; local radio presenters; local justices of the peace; lawyers etc). They must be without known party political affiliations and likely to chair a meeting with a good, positive atmosphere. The Chair must also be firm and authoritative, so that he or she will be able to enforce time limits for speakers and questioners, and quell any disturbances that may arise.

Stewards will also be required to make the audience feel welcome and to direct people to their seats. One steward per fifty people expected to attend would be a reasonable guide to numbers.

PUBLICITY

An effective publicity strategy is vital to the success of any public meeting. People cannot come if they do not know that the meeting is on! Your publicity strategy could include:

Informing churches and local Christian organisations:
- Church newsletters, Bulletins, Magazines
- Notice-boards in churches, halls, etc
- Announcements in services or meetings
- Christian bookshops
Using community facilities to display posters etc:
- Post Offices
- Libraries
- Community centres
- Shops and shopping centres
- Council chambers

(Please note the legal requirements for election posters - see below).

Using the local media:

Your local community can often be reached very efficiently through the local press and radio stations. If advertising would be helpful and affordable, you could consider a ‘display’ type box in a local newspaper or write a letter to the local newspaper. Some media outlets, especially radio stations, may run a local events service.

The local media may want to attend the forum, and so they should be sent a press release or a publicity poster. They may also wish to interview the Meeting Organiser about the event – do grasp the opportunity! The media also tend to be influenced by “image”, so a striking news release or poster format is a good idea.

Using new media
The internet provides numerous free publicity opportunities – use email, Twitter, blogs or YouTube to advertise the event. Make sure local churches advertise the event on their websites. Be creative in your attempts to tell people about the event!

CHOOSING ISSUES FOR THE HUSTINGS

It is best to canvas opinion from a range of sources about the questions which people want to be asked at the hustings. The agreed issues and the related questions can either be put by the chairman or asked from the floor. It is best to have at least a minimum number of questions ready to be asked.

As this will be a forum run by a church or number of churches, it is quite appropriate for the questions to focus on issues held particularly dear by Christians and which candidates may not have encountered elsewhere. Indeed, by asking faith-related questions candidates are encouraged to think beyond some of the issues which they or their party believe are important to the electorate.
Do bear in mind that questions should primarily be focused on areas which are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Transferred matters (those matters over which the Assembly have full legislative and executive authority) include:

- Agriculture and rural development
- Culture, arts and leisure
- Education
- Employment and learning
- Enterprise, trade and investment
- Environment
- Finance and personnel
- Health, social services and public safety
- Justice
- Regional development (including transport)
- Social development (including housing)

Please note that Justice – including decisions about abortion – is a new area of responsibility for the Assembly since the last election and includes criminal law, policing, prosecution, public order, courts, prisons and probation.

Non-devolved areas include:

- Defence
- Foreign Policy
- Tax-raising powers

**SUGGESTED FORMAT FOR THE MEETING**

**STRUCTURE**

The chair introduces each candidate by name and party, with an indication of whether they are or have been in office, or hold any Local Government or other position. The candidates should have the opportunity, either at the start or at the end of the meeting to speak for about three minutes uninterrupted on their candidacy and priorities. The main structure of the evening is usually in question and answer format, and someone should be ready to be called by the chairman to break the ice and ask the first question.

There are many issues that people will wish to raise at the forum, and to avoid lengthy digressions down one path, we recommend that one general question is asked on an issue, with just one supplementary question allowed.

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1 There is no full list of transferred matters explicitly defined by the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The list above consists of those matters which have been grouped into the responsibilities of the Northern Ireland Executive ministers.
before the meeting moves on. An hour and a half is probably the optimum length for the meeting; after this, people begin to lose concentration.

There is an advantage in being the last candidate to respond to a question, in that a candidate is able to hear and comment on other responses. Therefore do ensure that they are rotated, with the first responder to the first question becoming the last responder to the second question and so on.

TIMING

Time-keeping ought to be strict: both candidates and questioners may be tempted to start making long speeches! We suggest that each candidate should be allowed three minutes to answer a question. It is a good idea to appoint a time-keeper to sit in a position visible from the platform and indicate to candidates with a card or a light when there is one minute left of their time and when their time is up. Advise candidates of these time limits beforehand so that they can prepare concise answers! Questioners should also be encouraged to be brief!

Being Creative?

There are various ways to be creative:

- Serve refreshments afterwards; this gives the audience an opportunity to meet the candidates one-to-one;
- Use PowerPoint to display the questions;
- Include a humorous question that will help identify the personality of the candidate;
- Host a hustings with a special (but not exclusive) focus on young people, particularly inviting those voting for the first time at this election and those who will vote for the first time in 2015 in order to help prepare them for the responsibilities of citizenship. Do tell your local newspaper(!);
- Make a short vox pop style video (2-3 mins) in your local community in the days leading up to the hustings. Ask people to state the issue(s) that matter to them in the Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2011. Play this video at the beginning of the forum.

READ THE SMALL PRINT: Staying within the law

Activities relating to National Elections are comprehensively covered by legislation, and this section is intended to make you aware of the main relevant points rather than to daunt you!
Most electoral law is contained in the Representation of the People Acts 1983 and 2000, and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Most of the provisions are common sense, and past experience shows that problems in these areas do not generally arise.

**Election Timetable**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 March</td>
<td>Likely date from when campaigning will commence; a hustings could be held anytime from now to the Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/8 April</td>
<td>List of candidates published on Electoral Office website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 May</td>
<td>Suggested final day for holding a hustings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 May</td>
<td>Polling Day</td>
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**Publications – Posters, Flyers, etc**

The Representation of the People Act 1983 (Section 110) states that ‘any Bill, Placard or Poster having reference to the Election’ must carry the name and address of the Publisher and Printer. This includes any poster or leaflet advertising the election forum. If publisher and printer are the same person, you should enter the full name and address twice. The publisher will normally be you as the forum organiser. The law considers photocopying to be a form of printing, so if you use a copy shop or other commercial printer, their name should be shown; for non-commercial printing, your own name and address should be shown.

**Disturbing Election meetings**

It is an offence for anyone to disturb a public Election meeting, especially ‘in a disorderly manner for the purpose of preventing the transaction of business.’ (RPA 1983, section 97).

We recommend therefore that you make clear at the beginning of the meeting that, since a range of issues will need to be discussed, anyone trying to dwell indefinitely on one subject will fall foul of this statute. To refer to this provision may help to maintain order! You may also like to inform the local police of your meeting, either as a courtesy or a request for their attendance.

**Conclusion**

A hustings event is a fantastic opportunity for the church to serve its local community and build relationships with the future Member of the Legislative Assembly. We hope this guide will inspire you to host an event in your constituency and will provide all the information you need.

If you have further questions please contact our election team: