

How to organise a hustings

A hustings is a meeting where election candidates can address potential voters. These are relatively easy to organise, as during an election campaign, most candidates are keen to have as many opportunities as possible to speak directly to voters.

Types of hustings

There are two types of hustings: selective and non-selective.

- A non-selective hustings is one that **doesn't** provide a benefit to any particular candidate or party. In general, if all eligible candidates are invited to speak, your hustings should be classed as non-selective.
- A selective hustings is one which **does** provide a benefit to a particular candidate or party. For example, if only candidates representing parties that support PR were invited to speak, your hustings should be classed as selective.

The most important difference between the two types of hustings is how electoral spending rules apply.

- A non-selective hustings is exempt from electoral spending regulation; you will not need to declare spending if your hustings is non-selective.
- A selective hustings is subject to electoral spending rules, you can find more information on the [Electoral Commission website](#).

Unless you have an impartial reason to exclude one or more candidates from a hustings, we recommend organising a non-selective hustings and inviting all candidates to participate. If a candidate has been invited but they cannot make the event, this is still a non-selective hustings. If this is the case, it should be explained at the event that xxx candidate was invited but was unable to attend.

Inviting candidates

First things first, you need to make sure that as many candidates as possible are available to attend. Send out an invitation as soon as you can and agree a date when they're available. Offer two or three dates, at least a few weeks in the future, to allow yourself time to organise. Hopefully, at least one of them will suit most invitees.

Unfortunately, there is no single place to find the contact details for electoral candidates. Different parties announce candidates in different ways, and there is a little bit of detective work to be done to find out who they are and how to get in touch with them. Check your local press for details, as they will publish a full list of candidates who are standing.



Firstly, once Parliament is dissolved for an election, MPs officially no longer have access to their parliamentary email addresses. If your current MP is running again, the best way to get in touch is through their constituency office. MPs usually have their own website with full contact details, or check the parliament website [here](#).

You may already know the names of the candidates standing in your constituency. If so, a quick internet search should unearth an email address for them. Similar to MPs, many candidates will have their own website with contact details provided.

If not, local party branches should have an online presence with contact details or even an office that you can visit. If all else fails, Twitter can be a good way of getting in touch, though responses may be mixed.

Example invitation email:

Subject: Make Votes Matter hustings in [Location]

Dear xxx, [use full name]

Make Votes Matter is planning a non-selective hustings for the general election and would like to invite you to attend. For information, Make Votes Matter is a cross-party campaign for proportional representation and will not be endorsing specific parties or candidates.

The dates we are looking at are either xx, xxth or xxth xxxxbber in the evening. Can you confirm which day(s) you would prefer?

We will be inviting candidates from each of the following parties:

Conservative

Labour

Liberal Democrats

Brexit Party

Green Party

etc.

[Amend as necessary, add names of candidates if you know them]

We will confirm a venue and further details closer to the time.

Thanks and we look forward to seeing you soon.

Best regards

[Add name]

Booking a venue

Once you have a confirmed date, you can book a venue.

For a hustings, you ideally want a large, easily accessible room with good acoustics, that can seat people comfortably. You will also need at least one microphone with PA system; which may be included in the cost of room hire or can be hired at an additional charge.

Some pubs, bars and cafes have private rooms that they will let you use free of charge (whereas those that do charge are often expensive). If no free venue is available, another option is to pay to hire a room or hall. This cost can usually be covered at the meeting by inviting small donations. If you plan on doing this, nominate a volunteer to take the donation bucket or envelope around the whole audience.

Community centres, churches and Quakers' Meeting Houses offer very affordable hourly rates. [Netmums' Halls for Hire](#) lists cheap venues all over the country. Local knowledge can help you find great, unadvertised venues too. The best and cheapest are often unlisted - so it's worth asking around to find out which venues local party branches and community groups use for their meetings.

Publicising your event

Once all the details have been confirmed, you can start publicising your event.

If you wish, you can set up an online event to "sell" free tickets and help publicise your hustings. Ticket sales sites such as [Eventbrite](#) or [TicketTailor](#) are very simple to use and don't charge for free event listings. By having a free, ticketed event you can keep track of how many people are planning to come, whether you need to promote it more to fill the venue or even change to a larger room if demand is very high. You can also invite people to offer donations to help cover the costs of the event. It's often a good idea to create a parallel Facebook event and invite people to it, linking to the ticketing site you're using.

Note: when tickets are free, it is more likely that some people won't show up. It's usually safe to offer more tickets than the overall room capacity by about 25%. Use your judgement, ticketing sites are quite flexible and you can change the number of tickets on offer if necessary.

Ways to promote your event as widely as possible:

- Email team@makevotesmatter.org.uk with the full details so that we can mailout to our supporters in your area.
- Ask the candidates to email their party members (this will probably be the single most impactful thing)
- Contact local press and ask them to publicise in advance/come along
- Share on Facebook, Twitter and other social media

- Promote it at street stalls
- Put up flyers in local businesses, shops and cafes

Event format

A hustings can be done in any format you wish. The key principles are that voters should be able to ask questions to each of the candidates and that the candidates should have a roughly equal amount of time to speak.

Candidates will usually ask about the format of the hustings beforehand so that they can prepare. Let them know the structure and timings of the event as soon as you can so that they can plan ahead. This helps the event to go more smoothly and makes sure less time is wasted trying to decide what happens next.

Decide on a chair-person

This would ideally be someone neutral, with no affiliation to any particular party or candidate represented. The chair-person should not be seen to show bias (either positive or negative) to any particular candidate or party, nor contribute their own opinion to the discussion. They also need to be confident in asking candidates to stop talking when their time is up, and managing questions from the audience.

It's important that the audience can hear the speakers, including the chair-person. At least one microphone should be provided, which can be passed from person to person without difficulty. Ideally, each speaker would have their own microphone, but this isn't always realistic.

The chair-person should do a short welcome at the beginning, state who they are, that the event has been organised by Make Votes Matter volunteers, explain the format of the meeting and introduce each of the candidates. Remember that some of the audience members may never have been to a hustings before and may not know who each candidate is. Be sure to make it very clear what their name is, which party they are standing for, and how long they have to speak.

Opening statements

It's good practice to allow each candidate to give an opening statement setting out their key policies. Each one should have the same amount of time (3 minutes is a good length) which should be timed and strictly enforced to show fairness to each speaker.

To help speakers keep to time, a volunteer at the front of the audience could have a small sign or piece of paper with "1 minute left" or "30 seconds to go" which they hold up at the appropriate moment. Make sure that it's legible from a distance so that the speaker can easily read it.

Traditional panel format

For a traditional panel hustings, there is usually a long table at the front of the room where all candidates can sit comfortably next to each other and be seen by the audience. The chair-person might sit in the centre of them or choose to sit to one side so that they can see the whole panel clearly.

Managing questions in a panel format

After the opening statements, you can turn to questions from the audience. You can either have audience members raise their hand to ask a question or take written questions as people arrive and sort them into themes.

If you decide to ask audience members to write their questions down, hand out slips of paper as they arrive and ask them to return them before the event starts. During the welcome from the chair and the candidates' opening statements, one or two volunteers could sort through the questions and group them into similar topics (some questions will be repeated). One of the volunteers can then read out the questions to the panellists. By doing this, questions are shorter and more succinct, more audience members get their question raised and more topics can be covered. Make sure that there's at least one question about Proportional Representation!

The best way to manage questions (whether directly from the audience or in writing) is by posing several questions at a time (usually three) and ask the candidates to answer all three questions. This is quite a standard practice and the speakers will probably jot down each question as it's being asked so that they can properly answer each one.

You should still be timing each speaker's response so that they each get a fair amount of time to speak. You may not wish to interrupt a speaker full flow; one way to manage timing is at the end of a set of responses when you could ask the person that has spoken the most to shorten their answers for the next round of questions.

Round table format

An alternative format is a round table. This is more informal than a traditional panel hustings and means voters can have more in-depth conversations with candidates. It's also less intimidating for participants who may not want to ask their question in front of a large audience.

Candidates make their opening statements as before, but audience members are seated around tables (one for each candidate present). The candidates spend a set amount of time (15-20 minutes is good) at each table answering questions from voters then they move on to the next table to answer questions from that group, until all candidates have visited all tables.



You can put a sheet of suggested questions on the table to help with the conversation (make sure that at least one of them is about PR!) or let the audience members choose their own.

Closing statement

To wrap up the event, the chair-person should ask each candidate to make a closing statement. This should be short: 1 minute to 1 minute 30 seconds.

Thank them all for coming, thank the audience and remind them of the election date.

If the closing date hasn't yet passed, tell the audience to register to vote and encourage those around them to do the same.

Invite attendees to donate as they leave to cover the event costs.

After the event

Contact your local press to let them know how the event went. Send a good quality, high-res photo of all the candidates together (in the interest of fairness) with the event details and a short description of what was said. It's great to include verbatim quotes from the candidates, and try to include ones that mention PR!