2024 GENERAL ELECTION: HUSTINGS GUIDE

Briefing from Humanists UK, June 2024

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by 120,000 members and supporters and over 115 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group.

HUSTINGS GUIDE

What are hustings?

A husting is a public meeting where people can listen to and ask questions of the Prospective Parliamentary Candidates standing for election in their constituency. They provide a valuable opportunity for political debate on neutral territory and a forum where members of the public can raise important issues. Hustings are nonpartisan and do not constitute an official, regulated part of an election, therefore there is no limit to the number of hustings held and no standard form for hustings.

What can a hustings achieve?

The primary objective of a hustings is to identify where a candidate stands on certain issues. International or foreign policy and Humanist issues can be overlooked during general election campaigns, so a hustings meeting focused on the objectives of humanism can prove a valuable way in which to raise such issues. While it is unlikely that you will change the mind of a candidate at a hustings event, these meetings give our organisations and individuals an opportunity to influence the future thinking of both the candidates and the other members of the audience who, by virtue of their presence at the meeting, are likely to be politically conscious. Hustings, therefore, present an invaluable opportunity to place an issue on the local agenda and to engage people in the work of Humanists UK.

How to organise a hustings

Contact the candidates

First, you need to find out who the candidates in your constituency are. You will find full listings of the Party Parliamentary Candidates on each of the party websites — web addresses for the major UK national parties are given below:

Conservative Party
https://conservatives.com/
Green Party
https://greenparty.org.uk/
Labour Party
https://labour.org.uk/
Liberal Democrats
https://www.libdems.org.uk/
Plaid Cymru
https://www.plaid.cymru/
Reform UK
https://www.reformparty.uk/
Scottish National Party
https://www.snp.org/

Webpages for the major Northern Ireland parties are:
Alliance Party
https://www.allianceparty.org/
Democratic Unionist Party
https://www.mydup.com/
Green Party of Northern Ireland
http://www.greenpartyni.org/
Sinn Fein
https://www.sinnfein.ie/
Social Democratic and Labour Party
http://www.sdlp.ie/
Ulster Unionist Party
https://www.uup.org/

Planning

As with the organisation of any event, planning in advance is very important. Ideally, you should pencil in a date for the meeting and provisionally book a venue before the election is called. You can then write to the candidates informing them that you are planning to hold a hustings event, explaining the aims of the meeting, giving them the provisional date, time, and potential location, and inviting them to participate. It is particularly important to act quickly now that the election has actually been called, as candidates and their election agents will quickly become very busy.
It might also help to give your hustings meeting a title or a theme, for example:

- Humanist hustings
- Human rights hustings
- Religion or belief hustings
- Education hustings

Make sure you give the title and full details of the event (including which other candidates are being invited) to the candidates well in advance to give them time to prepare. Hustings events usually focus on domestic policy issues so candidates will often welcome the opportunity to discuss local humanist issues and policies. It is also important to decide well in advance who will chair the meeting. It is crucial that the Chair is not involved or identified with any particular political party. It is also important that they will be able to chair the meeting effectively and firmly, ensuring that speakers stick to time limits and focus on the questions asked.

Who to invite?

- You should aim to invite the major parties standing in your constituency. However, consideration should be given to the following factors:
- If there are a large number of candidates standing in your constituency, it may be wise to invite only the candidates representing the main political parties, otherwise, the meeting could become unmanageable and time for questions limited.
- The impact that the participation of extremist candidates may have on the meeting, such as discouraging other candidates from attending, or the potential for disruption during the meeting. If a candidate refuses or is unable to attend, you may wish to offer them the opportunity to provide a short statement to be read out at the beginning of the meeting.

More tips

- Sunday evening is a popular time to hold a husting, ideally during the three weeks immediately preceding the election.
- Make sure you choose a suitable venue with full disability access. A public address system and roving microphones can also be of benefit (but make sure there is a hearing loop in place).
- It can be helpful to have a couple of 'stewards' on standby during the meeting to offer any assistance required, such as passing around the roving microphones for questions.
- Check if any other hustings meetings are being held in the constituency so that you can avoid a scheduling clash. Any of the campaign offices of the main political parties should be able to provide you with this information.

Publicity

Now that the election has been called, try to publicise the meeting as widely as possible. Act fast – make some posters in advance, and draw up a list of all the public places where details of the hustings can be advertised. This will enable you to act as quickly as possible once you confirm your speakers. When you also confirm the date of the hustings with the candidates, let them know how and where you have publicised the meeting. They may also wish to publicise it themselves through their
campaign office. Send a brief notice about the hustings to local newspapers and radio stations, giving as much notice as possible and including contact numbers and email addresses for further details.

Format

It is important to decide the format of the meeting in advance. Some points to consider are:

- How will you handle questions? You may wish to ask for questions to be submitted in writing before the meeting or, alternatively, you may be happy to take questions from the floor on the day.
- If submitted in advance, will you group the questions according to the topic?
- If you decide to take questions from the floor, will you line up the first question in advance to get things moving?
- Will you apply a time limit to each question, and to each speaker? If so, how long will you

allow? How will you time each contribution?
- Will you ask candidates to respond in the same order for every question? If not, ensure you rotate the order fairly.

However, you decide to run your meeting, brief the candidates on the format beforehand.

Suggested format

- Welcome by Chair and a brief explanation of how the meeting will run (including 'housekeeping' announcements such as the location of fire exits)
- Brief introduction of each candidate by Chair
- Short opening statement by each candidate (3 – 4 minutes)
- Questions from the floor – allowing each candidate to answer (a maximum of 2 minutes for each question)
- Brief closing remarks from each candidate (3 – 4 minutes)
- Closing remarks by Chair (thanking the candidates and the audience for their participation)

Ideas for places to publicise your hustings

- Public libraries
- Post offices
- Places of worship
- Community centers/notice boards
- Shop windows/supermarkets
- Doctors'/dentists' surgeries
- Local newspaper listings
- Local internet bulletin boards and websites such as Facebook, Meetup, Twitters,

When making their welcoming remarks, it is also advisable for the Chair to explain to the audience how the meeting will run. In addition to answering questions posed by the audience, each candidate should also be given the opportunity to make brief introductory and closing remarks.

What to ask?

When asking a question, first and foremost, it is important to ensure that it is clear and concise. Each question should focus on one issue only – a short introductory statement can help to set the scene. It is also important to remember that, while candidates can be expected to have a general understanding of humanist issues; elections are usually fought and won on domestic issues. It is unfair to expect them to have detailed knowledge of complex equalities issues!

Follow-up

If a candidate is evasive and does not really answer the question, do not be afraid to seek further clarification. If you remain unsatisfied, ask the candidate if they would be willing to send you a written response after the meeting.

Let us know how your meeting went, especially if a candidate makes a commitment to a particular issue or to joining the APPHG, as this will enable us to follow-up with them, should they be elected.

What else can you do?

If your group does not have the capacity to organise a husting on its own, it may be possible to band together with other local, like-minded civil society organisations. Local Amnesty International, Oxfam, or Friends of the Earth groups can make excellent partners. You could even look into the possibility of working with local religious groups to hold a more generic meeting on issues of religion or belief. Alternatively, you and other members of your group could participate in a hustings meeting that is already taking place. Local newspapers normally carry listings of hustings events, as will community notice boards and local libraries. Churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues sometimes host hustings events so it is worth checking their websites or notice boards. The local campaign offices of the candidates should also be able to provide you with this information.

If you attend an 'external' hustings meeting, it can sometimes be helpful to make contact with the organisers in advance to discuss the question you plan to ask. This way you can reassure them that your question is relevant and will add value to the meeting, and you are more likely to get called to speak. General election campaigns are a great time to engage with the public, as people are more receptive during these periods. However, holding or attending a hustings meeting is not the only way to get Humanists UK's messages across during the election campaign.

You can also:

Write to your local candidates and publish their responses on websites or in newsletters.
Write to the local press – letters pages are one of the most widely read sections of a newspaper. Politicians monitor them closely to get a feel for local opinion, and to gain an understanding of which issues are of particular concern to their constituents.
Air your views on one of the many websites set up specifically for the election.
Contribute to debate through local radio phone-ins.

Other resources

Write to your local candidates on key humanist issues: https://humanists.uk/action/ge2024/
Humanists UK's website: https://humanism.org.uk/
Humanists International website: https://humanists.international/

For more details, information, and evidence, contact campaigns@humanists.uk.