



Equipping Christians
for the 2017 NI Elections

Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2017 Chairperson's Guide

The information in this guide will help you to take up the exciting challenge of chairing a location Question Time event in the build up to the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections.

www.engage17.org.uk

 @engage_17







2017 Northern Ireland Assembly Election – Key Dates

26 JANUARY	dissolution of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2 FEBRUARY	one month until polling day
10 FEBRUARY	deadline to register to vote by post
10 FEBRUARY	deadline to register to vote by proxy
14 FEBRUARY	deadline to register to vote
24/26 FEBRUARY	the final weekend before polling day: try to hold you hustings before this date
2 MARCH	polling day

Useful websites

Charity Commission NI	https://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk/
Electoral Commission	http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/
Electoral Office NI	http://www.eoni.org.uk/
About My Vote	http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/

engage17 is an initiative from Christian Public Policy charity CARE Northern Ireland to promote active engagement in the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly Election. It provides a range of resources to enable Christian thinking about important issues and voter participation.



The Northern Ireland Assembly election provides an opportunity for the church to host an informative and enlightening event to help electors to choose how to place their votes. In order to ensure that the correct candidates are invited, the system of election used for your region needs to be understood. For the Northern Ireland Assembly election, PR-STV is the electoral system used.

What makes a good chairperson?

The chairperson of a Question Time event fulfils a crucial function for ensuring a successful event. They should be appointed as an independent arbiter of challenging political debate. Therefore, the chairperson should be someone who is not intimidated by political figures and not too close to any one of the candidates. Ideally, they should be someone with an active interest in politics and should be a resident of the local constituency or region. Often they are members of the community who have served in some sort of service role (e.g. magistrate, charity leader, church minister, business executive). They must not have stood as a candidate for a political party represented at the event.



How to prepare

The chairperson's preparation should include reading informed summaries of the party manifestos and ideally, brief research on the candidates recorded opinions (a simple Google search with the candidate's name and where they come from). If the sitting members are standing again then there should be plenty of records of their views on major issues, usually on their own website. The chairperson should also communicate with all of the invited candidates to explain that they will be allowed a 90 second closing speech. When the candidates are all present you might like to draw names out of a hat to discover the running order of the final speeches.

Choosing the questions

There are two categories of question that will be asked at the event: Firstly, questions that concern party policy (usually covered in the manifesto) and secondly, questions of a personal 'conscience' nature. The latter questions are important as they may illicit answers about significant issues otherwise ignored. Such live events are unique in allowing the candidates to give their view in front of a sizeable crowd of voters. After listening to a candidate's response, the chairperson should be prepared to go back to them for a clarification for the audience's benefit (e.g. But it says in your party's manifesto...)



Selecting the range of topics to be tackled during the event is important. In this election it is crucial that the issues discussed are those that are relevant to the powers of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Our election website, engage17 has some helpful information on some of the issues which are at stake.

A balance should be kept between questions selected in advance and an opportunity towards the end to ask other questions from the floor. The event is best organised by giving the audience the opportunity to write questions down and hand them in to your team of assistants when they arrive. This could be done using question cards (see appendix 1) and calling people to ask their own question or simply on pieces of paper with the chairperson asking the question. Ensure that you select the questions by checking them against the topics on your list. In this way you both involve the audience and also ensure a wide-ranging debate. One of your assistants can always submit a question if a topic is missed. The questions should all have been submitted 10 minutes before the event commences.

Opening the event

At the beginning of the event, it is important to introduce yourself and to thank the church for their welcome and hospitality. Hopefully, they will have done a wonderful job in providing refreshments and making everyone feel thoroughly at home. Then each candidate should introduce themselves and name the party they are representing (if any). The chairperson should then lay down the ground rules for the event.

A brief introductory comment could be:

'Why are we here this evening? We are here to ask the candidates important questions so that their answers will help us when we come to vote on March 2nd. Tonight is about the electors of <constituency name> and our desire to find the best possible people to represent us in the Northern Ireland Assembly. We pray that more of the truth will be discovered this evening and that we will all return home wiser than we are beforehand.'



Questioning the candidates

Then ask the first selected question. If you are asking it, make it short and easy to understand. If it has been submitted but it's a little tortuous, then summarise it (e.g. Which education policies would best equip our young people for the challenges of the workplace today? Or: How can the health service provide the most effective care for elderly people?) Ensure a variety of conscience and party issues and try not to let one issue dominate the evening- the audience needs to hear across the range of issues. Ask the candidates to give their response and bear in mind what their party's policy is just in case of a direct conflict. If the answer is too vague ask a simple 'yes or no' follow-up question. If the candidate waffles or goes on too long, interrupt politely (e.g. 'We must move on now' or 'I'll have to hurry you'). Remember, the event is primarily for the benefit of the voters not the candidates. Change the order of responses so that they all get the opportunity to answer first- it is often hard answering last after four candidates have covered most of the ground. Then go back to audience for one supplementary question. Be clear that it must be related to the topic under discussion. Your assistants should go to the selected questioner with a roving microphone.

If all the main topics have been covered, you might like to ask for further questions from the floor. This can be the most demanding part of the evening! Firstly, state clearly that you want to cover new territory not return to the areas already addressed. Again, you might need to summarise their question if it is convoluted. Remember to keep an ear open for questions that are not covered by this parliament/assembly. Occasionally, a questioner has an obscure 'hobby horse' question that is of little interest to anyone but themselves- you may need to rule it out, gently but firmly.

When you have reached the point ten minutes before the end of the event conclude the questions and ask each candidate in turn to give their final speech. **USE A TIMER**. Hopefully they will have a prepared talk that will have practiced but that might be wishful thinking. It is important that they have the same length of time.

Finally, conclude with thanks to the candidates and their parties, your assistants, the hosting church and the audience for their questions and interest.



Guide to event running order

7:15pm	Doors open, refreshments are served, audience given question cards or slips of paper to submit questions by assistants
7:45pm	Refreshments stop being served, candidates' draw for order of closing speeches is held (with witnesses)
7:50pm	Question submissions now closed and Chairperson selects questions
8:00pm	Event starts with welcome and thanks to hosts
8:05pm	Candidates introduce themselves briefly
8:10pm	Opening remarks and first question
9:00pm	Questions opened up to the floor
9:20pm	Candidates' closing speeches
9:30pm	Closing remarks

Chairperson's Checklist

- 1) Check that the candidates have been confirmed and know about the 90 second closing speech
- 2) Read summaries of the party manifestos
- 3) Work out the list of topics to be covered by questions in advance
- 4) Appoint assistants and ensure roving microphone
- 5) Remember to bring a timer
- 6) Have candidates' names written on cards in large writing to place in front of them

7) Prepare question cards for question submissions and brief assistants about their use

Appendix

Appendix 1: Question Cards

The best kind of hustings work on the 'Question Time' model based on the weekly BBC topical debate programme. Rather than the Chairperson reading out questions from the front, individuals are invited by the Chair to ask their questions.

As people arrive at the hustings, give out a pen and piece of paper or card. Ask them to write out their full name and a question they would like to ask – both their name and their question should be written out twice. Once they have done so, the card should be cut in two, with one copy being kept by the questioner and the other copy going to the Chair.

The Chair should then select which questions should be put to candidates by saying e.g. 'Our next question comes from Jane Smith', whereupon Jane Smith should stand and ask her question.

This structure helps to encourage engagement between the audience, the Chair and the candidates whilst retaining some control of the structure and direction of the evening.

Example Question Card

QUESTION CARD	QUESTION CARD
Please hand this half to a steward	Please keep this half for yourself
Full name: John Smith	Full name: John Smith
Question: Do you support the current levels of protection which are in place to stop children stumbling across harmful content online? If so, why? If not, why not and what further measures would you support and work for if elected?	Question: Do you support the current levels of protection which are in place to stop children stumbling across harmful content online? If so, why? If not, why not and what further measures would you support and work for if elected?
	<i>If your name is called by the Chair, please be prepared to stand and clearly ask your question exactly as written on this card.</i>

engage17 is an initiative from Christian Public Policy charity CARE Northern Ireland to promote active engagement in the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly Election. It provides a range of resources to enable Christian thinking about important issues and voter participation.

www.engage17.org.uk | www.care.org.uk

