



Equipping Christians
for the 2017 NI Elections

Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2017 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 exciting challenge of holding a hustings for the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly Elections

www.engage17.org.uk



@engage_17







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 FEBURARY	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 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

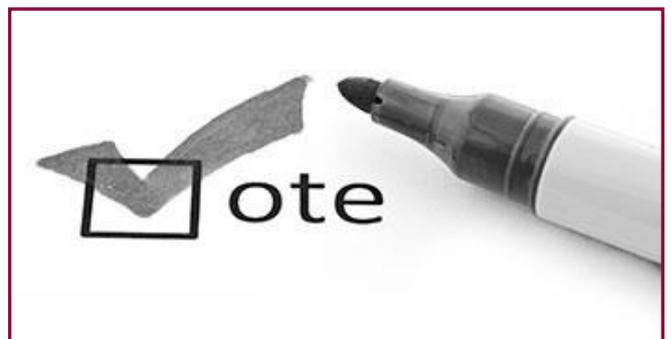
Charity number: 1066963 | Scottish Charity number: SC038911



Often at the time of an Election there is a vast overload of information. We can be overwhelmed with leaflets, endless campaigning from message boards to twitter adverts to door-knocking from candidates and political parties. There is far too much information to take in. Hustings provide an opportunity to cut to the chase and find out what candidates' priorities would be if elected and what they really think about what matters to us.

What is a hustings?

A hustings is simply a meeting at which candidates in an election address potential voters. It might be easier to think of a hustings as a 'Question Time' event, akin to the BBC topical affairs programme. It is a fantastic 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 a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) and what they would seek to do if elected.



Why hold a hustings – five quick reasons

1. Church hustings are a great opportunity for the local church to reach out and to serve local communities, providing people with the opportunity to put specific questions to all the candidates at the same time, comparing and contrasting their answers.
2. They provide a simple forum in which to raise issues of particular concern to Christians which candidates might not otherwise be asked about.
3. They give people the time to consider candidates as individuals and assess their personal strengths and weaknesses first-hand.
4. They create an opportunity for local churches to begin to build relationships with those who will be elected to represent them.
5. Church hustings send an important message even before any questions have been asked by reminding aspiring politicians that the church is not irrelevant but, as a key part of civil society, is deserving of respect.

When to hold a hustings

The Assembly Election campaign will really get going from 26 January when the Northern Ireland Assembly dissolves, before **polling day on 2 March**. It is also worth avoiding holding a hustings in the week immediately prior to polling day. Candidates may be less willing to attend in this period, though of course public interest in the election will then be at its highest due to the imminence of the election!



The Assembly Election process

Everyone in Northern Ireland is represented by 5 MLAs spread across 18 constituencies, resulting in a total of 90 MLAs. When you enter the polling booth you will be presented with a ballot paper containing a list of names supplied by the parties competing for the five seats in your constituency. Parties are able to put forward as many candidates as they like per constituency. In order to cast your vote, you will need

to rank the candidates in order of preference – you can rank as many or as few candidates as you like. Seats are then awarded in proportion to the number of votes cast.

Rules about who to invite

The best way to obtain contact details of local prospective candidates and their election agents – election agents ensure the proper management of each candidates' campaign – is via the local or central offices of the political parties (you will find more information in Appendix 1). Independent or minor candidates may also be standing in your constituency, so do keep an eye on the media for mention of them.

Once the campaign is underway, all candidates will be extremely busy. It is wise to contact the candidates as soon as possible for their provisional acceptance and to consult your main local candidates on possible time and date options.

Rules continued: types of hustings

Your hustings is likely to fall into one of two categories – 'selective' or 'non-selective'.

A selective hustings – one to which you selectively invite candidates or parties without an objective or impartial reason for doing so – is likely to be a regulated event in which case spending on the hustings must be monitored and should not exceed the limit. **As a church it is very unlikely that you will fall under this category.**

99.9% of hustings run by a church will be 'non-selective' hustings. A non-selective hustings is an event which would not reasonably be regarded as intended to influence voters to vote for or

against political parties or categories of candidates – including political parties or categories of candidates who support or oppose particular policies or issues. **A non-selective hustings does not require you to register with the Electoral Commission, nor will your spending be regulated.**

The simplest way to ensure your hustings is non-selective – and the advice given by the Electoral Commission – is to invite all the relevant candidates in the area or all political parties campaigning in the election and allow those attending an equal opportunity to participate. Of course, this may not always be practical, in which case it is imperative that you have impartial or objective reasons for not inviting certain candidates or parties.

The following is some good practice regarding non-selective hustings which should be followed:

- You should be able to give impartial or objective reasons (see below) for not inviting a particular candidate or party and be prepared to explain this to a party or candidate who queries your decision.
- You should ensure that the candidates or parties you invite represent a range of views from across the political spectrum.
- You should allow ample and equal opportunity for each party or candidate to contribute by answering questions and, where appropriate, responding to points made against them by other candidates.
- You should inform those present at your hustings if there are any parties or candidates who have not been invited.

The following is useful guidance regarding what does or does not constitute an impartial or objective reason not to invite a particular candidate or party:

- Crucially, simply disagreeing with the political views of a party or candidate does not qualify as an impartial or objective reason not to invite them.
- It may be impractical to invite all candidates or parties and you may decide to restrict your hustings based on some of the following examples:
 - the prominence of candidates or parties locally
 - the composition of elected representatives in your area at a local or national level
 - the result of recent election results in the area (you may wish, for example, to only invite parties or candidates where the party received more than 5-10% of the vote in a recent election)
 - security concerns over the presence of certain parties or candidates which may increase the chance of public disorder (NB. the reason you give in such circumstances must still be impartial or objective and unlikely to be perceived generally as unfair)

Rules continued: campaign contribution?

It is important to note that unless you have an impartial or objective reason for not inviting all candidates, as outlined above, your hustings will inadvertently be considered a selective hustings. In such a scenario (where your hustings may therefore be interpreted as promoting a particular candidate or party), your hustings may count as a campaign contribution to those parties or candidates who participate. This would need to be recorded by these parties or candidates as a political donation or contribution from the organiser. Charities are not permitted to give preferential treatment or make donations to political parties and to do so may affect your charitable status.

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

If you follow the guidance above you should not run into any trouble – this advice is here to help you, not daunt you! If you have concerns about this, please contact CARE for further advice.

If in doubt, please visit www.charitycommissionni.org.uk, www.electoralcommission.org.uk and www.eoni.org.uk. You can also contact The Electoral Commission Office in Northern Ireland directly by emailing infonorthernireland@electoralcommission.org.uk



What if a candidate doesn't wish to attend?

A candidate from a mainstream party should be pleased to have an opportunity to connect with voters who are, fundamentally, potential supporters. If the candidate declines or seems reluctant, it is likely to be for one of the following reasons:

1. They may underestimate the significance of your hustings

In order to avoid this it is vital to convey that attending your hustings will not be a poor use of a candidate's time by making this clear in your initial contact with the candidate or party. Be sure to mention the size of your church congregation and any community initiatives you are involved with. It would also be very helpful to stress the relationships you have with other churches and the wider locality, and that the event is being promoted widely. For more information on this, please see Appendix 2.

2. They may be reluctant to commit to attending until other parties are on board

If a candidate or party sounds unsure about attending or has declined to do so, you should politely inform them that the hustings will go ahead without them and that other candidates or parties are attending. It is unlikely they will be content for a hustings to take place without their views being heard and they are therefore likely to decide to attend.

3. They may not be free on the date of your hustings

In this instance, again, politely inform them that the hustings is proceeding and that other parties will be represented. This may result in their availability changing. If they are really unable to make it and the date you have chosen is immovable, you should make it clear to the candidate who is unable to attend that you are proceeding with the hustings. You should also make it very clear to the other candidates as well as making an announcement to this effect at the beginning of your hustings. With several candidates to choose from it should be possible for a party to send someone to your hustings; however, if this is not possible, one option may be for the candidate or party to send a representative who may be a councillor or another party spokesperson; however, this may not sit well with other candidates.

Your venue

Your church building will more than likely be perfectly sufficient for holding a hustings. If your church building is smaller an alternative location can probably be found through collaboration with other churches in your area. Remember, this is an act of service and you want to make it as easy as possible for candidates and the public to attend.

Be sure to have practical provision and organisation in hand. This includes considering the following:

- **Parking**
- Access to the venue for the elderly and disabled
- **Capacity** of the venue (from past experience, you may need room for as many as 200-300 people)
- **Acoustics** – people need to be able to hear and be heard; microphones for candidates and attendees with questions are usually a good idea
- **Facilities** – make sure your chosen location can accommodate a large number of people (e.g. toilets, light refreshments, etc.)



Your Chair

Chairing a hustings can be a challenging proposition so for this election CARE has produced a dedicated 'Chairpersons Guide' which contains all the information you will need to run a helpful and effective hustings. Visit www.engage17.org.uk/church for more information.

What do you care about?

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. Church-based hustings provide a forum for asking questions that if Christians don't, no one else will.

Do bear in mind that questions should primarily be focused on areas which are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Aspects of matters over which power has been 'transferred' to the Assembly include: health and social services, aspects of equal opportunities policy, justice and policing (which includes, for example, some decisions concerning abortion).

To help you consider which issues you might wish to cover, please visit www.engage17.org.uk where you will find much more information including briefings and suggested questions to ask.



Getting the message out

An effective publicity strategy is vital – people cannot come if they do not know the meeting is taking place. You must invest time to mobilise your own congregation to attend the hustings as well as getting support from other local churches – this should be your primary aim.

You will probably wish to consider any and all of the information below, though it is by no means an exhaustive list – use your imagination!

Design

Try to design a simple eye-catching poster, image or theme for your hustings. A consistent design across paper, online, social media and other platforms will help your event look more professional and will attract candidates, voters and the media (more on the media below).

Use church newsletters, bulletins, magazines, notice boards – anything! – to spread the word within your church and as many other churches in your area as possible. Be sure to engage with Christian organisations and charities in your local area too.

If you have the resources and have already advertised widely amongst your key group of congregation and local churches, do try to reach out further still. Post information elsewhere – libraries, community centres, village halls, shopping centres, council chambers, etc. – in order to help spread the word and increase the size of your hustings.

Media

Use the media to reach an even wider audience. If possible, you may wish to include an advert for your hustings in local newspapers or write a letter for publication.

Try to engage with local and regional radio stations – there may even be a local Christian radio station who might be interested in either advertising your hustings or conducting an interview with you prior to your hustings.

Local media may wish to attend the hustings so you should try and keep them informed about the details of the event. If they wish to interview you, don't be afraid – make the most of the opportunity. You should inform candidates if you know there will be journalists present.



Digital media

The internet provides numerous free publicity options and gives great freedom to tweak and update information whilst instantly informing a large number of people.

Use emails, set up a twitter account or use your existing one to spread the word. Create a Facebook page or event to market the event still further; for a small fee you can even advertise your hustings through Facebook.

Why not write to local newspapers to introduce yourself and ask if you can provide blogs or articles?

Ultimately, make sure that everyone who is involved with the event tells as many people as possible, through as many channels as possible, in as many dynamic ways as possible!

Don't be daunted; be creative!

Appendix 1 – Party Contact Details

The following are contact details for the main political parties currently represented in Northern Ireland at a national level. You will be able to obtain details of your local party office who should be contacted to identify their candidate in your constituency. Please note that the list below is not exhaustive and that there will be other smaller parties standing too. Simply Googling your constituency, region or the names of parties will also generate a wealth of useful information!

A model letter can be found in Appendix 2 which can be used as a guide when writing to the party.

Democratic Unionist Party
91 Dundela Avenue
Belfast
BT4 3BU
Tel: 028 9047 1155
Email: info@mydup.com
www.mydup.com

Sinn Féin
53 Falls Road
Belfast
BT12 4PD
Tel: 028 9034 7350
Email: admin@sinnfein.ie
www.sinnfein.ie

Social Democrat and
Labour Party
121 Ormeau Road
Belfast
BT7 1SH
Tel: 028 9024 7700
Email: info@sdlp.ie
www.sdlp.ie

Ulster Unionist Party
Strandtown Hall
2-4 Belmont Road
Belfast
BT4 2AN
Tel: 028 9047 4630
Email: uup@uup.org
www.uup.org

Alliance Party of Northern
Ireland
88 University Street
Belfast
BT7 1HE
Tel: 028 9032 4274
Email:
alliance@allianceparty.org
www.allianceparty.org

Traditional Unionist Voice
38 Henry Street
Ballymena
BT42 3AH
Tel: 028 2564 0250
www.tuv.org.uk

Green Party in Northern
Ireland
76 Abbey Street
Bangor
BT20 4JB
Tel: 028 9145 9110
Email:
info@greenpartyni.org
www.greenpartyni.org

UKIP
Email: office@ukipni.com,
secretary@ukipni.com
www.ukipni.com,

Appendix 2 – Model Invitation

Before sending the model invitation below, you should contact the parties (it will be most efficient to telephone) using the details provided in Appendix 1. You will need to ask for the details of your local party to where an invitation to a hustings in your constituency should be sent and also determine to whom it should be addressed. Ask for an email address and telephone number.

You can personalise the example letter below. It is advisable to post or email this invitation before following it up with a telephone call some time later to ensure your request has been received. It should be noted that this is merely an example and should be rewritten to reflect your individual context.

Example letter

Dear

I am writing to invite you to the NAME OF CHURCH Assembly Hustings at TIME on DATE at FULL ADDRESS.

NAME OF CHURCH is a growing church with a congregation of APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF people which has been based in the centre of NAME OF TOWN for the last 10 years. We run a debt advice service, a pensioner's lunch club and host a number of local youth projects as well as providing an extensive children and young people's programme on Sundays. Our services are provided to any and all – people who attend church on a Sunday and people who don't.

We are very much engaged with community initiatives across the city and are well networked with other church and civil society organisations in the local area. We will be promoting the hustings across the CONSTITUENCY OR REGION and amongst our own contacts and expect our hustings to be well attended.

I very much look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 3 – Glossary of terms and Election Law

Issuance of the Writ and Notice of Election

These are the legal steps taken to authorise the holding of an election.

Close of Nominations

Nominations open at the Notice of the Election. As soon as possible after nominations close, the Returning Officer will publish a Statement of Persons Nominated, although most candidates will have declared their intention to stand well before that time. They can therefore be invited to a hustings before the nomination is made.

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 hustings. If publisher and printer are the same person, you should enter the full name and address twice. The publisher will normally be yourself as the hustings organiser. The law considers photocopying to be a form of printing, so if you use a copy shop or other commercial printers, their name should be shown; for non-commercial printing, your own name and address should be filled in.

Disturbing Election Meetings

Under section 97 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, it is an offence for anyone to disturb a public elections meeting, especially 'in a disorderly manner for the purpose of preventing the transaction of business'. 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. Referring to this provision may even 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.

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