
EXPLORE

FAITH
&
POLITICS 2017

Guidance on holding local election meetings
with a difference

Council Elections 2017

This is a resource created by the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office (SCPO) in collaboration with the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) which represents the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church.

As Christians we are called to play our part in building God's kingdom. One way we can do this is to encourage open and respectful debate on the decision that voters will be facing in May 2017.

Churches are often seen as a neutral space, and so can provide an impartial opportunity for political debate. Christians are citizens too, and many will have views which have been shaped by their faith on current issues.



Two representatives from the Church of Scotland's National Youth Assembly exploring how faith might inform how we do politics.

This is a briefing designed for church groups who are planning an election meeting in their ward - so that they can engage their local council candidates on issues they see as important and be involved in a wider public debate.

In particular the Church has a unique role in providing a space to enable individuals and groups who are often on the margins of society but are most directly impacted by political decisions to have their voices heard. This resource seeks to encourage this by equipping congregations to host a hustings with a difference, a hustings where these individuals share their stories and we and our political representatives listen.

The event would provide an opportunity for local council candidates to respond to these stories. And for voters and politicians to reflect on some of the issues within each ward. It is our belief that through the process of hearing, seeing and engaging with people's stories, we can all work to care for those in need and in doing so show our care and love for God.

The following pages contain a detailed 'How To' guide to equip groups to organise their own election meeting. This is followed by an action plan, to guarantee that every issue is covered.

A church's election meeting can be a chance for congregation members to ask their local candidates the questions that matter to them. For more resources on election issues you can visit the following websites:

- www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/
- <http://www.scpo.scot/>
- www.churchofscotland.org.uk/speak_out
- www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/views-of-the-church/government-and-politics
- www.urc.org.uk/mission/church-and-society.html

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This is a guide only. Please feel free to adapt.

The Meeting

The aim of the meeting is to ensure that we all fully understand the needs of our communities, particularly the needs of those who are most marginalised. Enabling this this resource suggests giving those groups and individuals within each ward a voice, so that they will be heard by their local candidates. To strengthen local democratic involvement, each church group should attract as many people from their ward to the meeting as possible. Meetings will vary but as a rough guide you should expect them to last about two hours.

The Chairperson

Each church group should appoint a Chairperson; preferably a person who is respected within the ward and at the same time politically neutral and independent. He/she should also be able to lead an event in election time with possibly strong-minded participants.

The Format

The format of the meeting is slightly different from a conventional hustings. Rather than the public coming to listen to their local candidates, the event begins with local candidates listening to members of the public and their experiences.

To begin the Chairperson of the meeting will introduce the event and its format before inviting the first person to come and share their story. This person will have 3 minutes to share their story before posing a question that they would like the local candidate to answer (try to make sure that every person asks a different question linked to one of the themes raised by the people sharing their experiences).

Once they have done this the Chairperson will then ask each of the candidates in turn to come up and discuss what they have heard and answer the question that had been posed. Each candidate will be given three minutes to answer this before returning to their seat. This should be a three way conversation between the Chairperson, the person sharing their story and the candidate. It is not a dialogue between the candidates.

Once all the candidates had done this the Chairperson will thank them and thank the person who has shared their story. The Chairperson will then invite the next person to share their story.

This process, consisting of a story followed by the responses from local candidates etc., will happen three times. Each of these three times will last no more than 30 minutes making an hour and a half in total.

Once all the stories have been heard, and responses from candidates given, the Chairperson has the option to ask all the speakers to come to the front of the stage and take questions from the audience (time permitting).

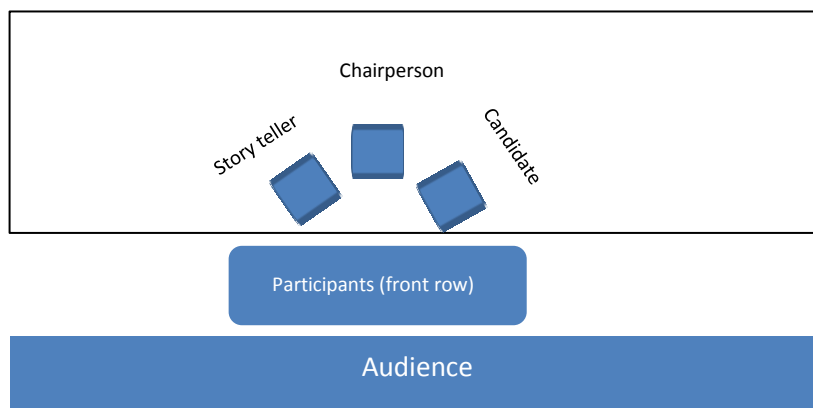
Following this the Chairperson will thank the speakers, thank the audience, and close the event to a close.

Timings (example)

Segment	Maximum Timings
Welcome and introduction	18:00 – 18:05
Issue 1 - Story	18:05 – 18:10
Issue 1 - responses	18:10 – 18:35
Issue 2 - Story	18:35 – 18:40
Issue 2 - responses	18:40 – 19:05
Issue 3 - Story	19:05 – 19:10
Issue 3 - responses	19:10 – 19:35
Questions from audience	19:35 – 19:45
Closing	19:45

Room Layout (example)

Centre of the stage there will be seating for the Chairperson, the person sharing their story and an additional chair for the candidate when they are invited to come and join the conversation. The participants will sit at the first row in front of the audience.



Helping individuals to share their story

Much of the success of this event relies on facilitating individuals to share their stories. For some of those individuals this may be an intimidating process and if possible you should spend time with them beforehand ensuring that they are comfortable with the format and have what they wish to say prepared. Some may wish to have their story written down in advance. For others speaking for three minutes may be difficult and in these instances an interview approach between the Chairperson and the story teller may be advisable.

Knowing what question to ask the candidates may also be difficult for those sharing their story. If this is the case you may need to help them think about the question in advance. The question does not need to be complicated and often simple questions such as “if elected what would you do to address this issue?” can be very powerful.

The second significant part of the process involves facilitating the discussion between the candidates and the story teller. In this instance it is important that the Chairperson ensures that both individuals are allowed a fair contribution and that they do so in a measured and constructive way. It may be worth going through this with the participants in advance of the event.

The Venue

The meeting should take place within the boundaries of the specific ward. The ideal is to have a venue in the midst of an area where people live who are normally not heard during campaigns and who are less involved in politics. The venue should be a safe place and accessible, both literally and figuratively speaking, for everyone. Please make also sure the venue is fully equipped (e.g. microphones, lights, etc.)

Audience and Publicity

The event should be open to all, but especially focussed on people living within your ward. We recommend seeking as much local publicity for the event as possible. Each church group should create their own poster (please ask the SCPO office for an example, if needed), including information on the theme, venue, date, time and speakers. Posters should be displayed in public areas, such as your church, shops, libraries and other public venues.

Catering

It is up to the local church group to decide whether or not to provide refreshments.

Date

The church group should set a date for the meeting. We recommend a date between six and two weeks before the Election Day (4 May 2017).

Budget

Each church group should take care of its own budget and funding. We are unable to offer any financial assistance for these events.

Important questions:

Who should be organising the meeting?

The local church group should have the lead before and during the meeting. In order to be well organised, the church group should appoint a project manager. The project manager will be the main point of contact and he/she will have overall responsibility. The project manager will delegate the tasks that have to be done (refer to the 'action plan' at the end of this document).

Which themes should be chosen?

The aim of this project is to focus on voices which are normally not heard during campaigns. The major issues vary from council area to council area and from ward to ward. Based on what's happening within their own local ward, the group should make a list of subjects which fits within the aim of the event. Subsequently, the group should decide which issue is the most important within their ward. This issue will be the leading theme for the meeting. N.B. make sure the issue involved is a devolved issue within the jurisdiction of the local council.

Who should be invited to participate?

Those sharing their stories

The local church group would need to identify three different individuals who might be willing and able to share their stories. These should be individuals known to the group who have lived experience or have dealt with the issues involved. Please make sure that the individuals differ as much as possible (e.g. age, gender, (un)employed, student). Each individual should have a different question for their local candidates, linked to one of the themes.

Candidates of political parties

Which candidates should be invited at the event is something that requires careful thought. You should normally invite all of the candidates standing in your constituency; however the proposed format of the event is quite time-consuming. Therefore while it is important to have a good spread of different parties, it is also accepted that inviting too many different parties would make the event cumbersome.

The timings given provide room for five candidates; but it is up to the local church group to decide how many candidates they want to invite. Whatever your decision it is important that any choice must be impartial and justifiable. The church group should have reasonable grounds for the choice made (e.g. current seats in the council, parties standing in your ward, etc.). Even the semblance of a political preference should be avoided at all time

Impartial reasons may emerge from the following considerations:

- local prominence of some parties or candidates over others
- the number of elected representatives at the local or national level
- recent election results in the area
- resources and other practicalities constraining numbers of invitees
- security or public safety concerns

You cannot decide omit a candidate because you don't agree with their views or policies. This is not an impartial reason.

What are the boundaries of my ward?

Please visit the website of your local council. Most councils provide a map of the wards within their area.

How do I know if an issue is a local government issue or not?

Below are some websites that provide information on the responsibilities of local government in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

England: <https://www.gov.uk/understand-how-your-council-works/types-of-council>

Scotland: <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Government/local-government/localg/whatLGdoes>

Wales: <http://www.assembly.wales/en/abthome/role-of-assembly-how-it-works/Pages/governance-of-wales.aspx>

Northern-Ireland: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/local-councils>

What is the role of SCPO & JPIT during the process?

The main objective of the resource is to explore the possibilities for the church to support the ongoing democratic process. We therefore encourage churches to be involved with the democratic process within their own local community.

During the project, we can answer questions and offer help where needed. After the elections, we would like to document the meetings to learn from the experiences for future events. If each church group could send a short report of the meeting and the whole process this would be very much appreciated.

Contact details

All reports and enquiries can be sent to Chloe Clemmons: chloe.clemmons@scpo.scot.

Action plan

	Task	Who's responsible?	Done?
Before event	Form working group responsible for organise the event		
	Book Venue - Layout - Microphones		
	Find experts / story tellers		
	Identify and invite your local council candidates		
	Advertising / publicity		
	Catering		
	First Aid		
On the day	Setting up venue		
	Stewarding		
	First Aid		
	Catering		
	Chairing the event		
	Hosting representatives / speakers		
After the day	Publicity		
	Write to us and let us know how it went.		