

The Irish in Britain guide to organising a hustings

What is a hustings?

Hustings are a great way to find out the views of candidates at election time. These are open meetings where voters can question and witness a debate between candidates. Usually held in churches and community centres, it is up to local interest groups and activists to organise them. They can take a few basic forms:

- Question Time style panel Q&A with ensuing lively debate
- Traditional hustings with long introductory statements and fewer questions
- ‘Speed dating’ events where candidates rotate around tables representing different policy areas/interests

The first step to organising a hustings

Contact the candidates you would like to invite to inform them of your plans. As soon you know the final date for the election you can then make a formal invitation. Parliamentary candidates are busy people, so it is preferable to request their time as early as possible. You should also be clear about your intentions for the format of the husting and how long it will last.

Charities cannot support or oppose any political party and, although you can limit the number of candidates who appear, it is advisable to not exclude just one political party.

Working with a partner

Partnering with a group could prove advantageous. Irish community organisations have a wide agenda and could have co-operative relationships with many groups. This will reduce the workload on you and the candidates will of course want to meet as many different people and interests at a single time.

If your club represents a large area, it may be more prudent to hold a husting with candidates from just one constituency. Adding more speakers may not be practical and candidates will be less enthusiastic about addressing people who cannot vote for them.

Preparing for the event

As you prepare for the event, it is important to choose an appropriate venue. Central, convenient locations with adequate access for the disabled are the best kind. It also needs to be large enough to hold your expected audience, but not so large it would seem cold if sparsely filled.

A raised platform for the speakers and host is a good idea but not essential. Microphones and a PA system may be necessary for a large venue. The room needs to be well lit and heated.

Questions

It is best to prepare some questions in advance. One question often leads to another and could be the way to get things going. Alternatively, you could pre-plan all the questions, or opt for something in between, like writing some questions and asking audience members to choose which one they want to ask.

Advertising your hustings event

In order to fill your chosen venue, you will need a marketing campaign to spread the word. Try using:

- Social media
- community notice boards
- local papers – ask a reporter to attend
- radio stations
- newsletters
- flyers and posters

But as with many things, word of mouth may prove the most effective. If the local paper does not attend the hustings, you may wish to send the key statements and photographs to them.

People you will need to run a successful hustings

Apart from the candidates and the audience a few other roles need to be filled. A **chairperson** who is seen as impartial can think on their feet, control candidates and the audience in a firm but fair manner is essential. The chairperson should also introduce the candidates and offer opening and closing remarks.

The chairperson will need to be especially firm if you decide to allow the audience to ask unprompted questions.

Stewards are needed to help people access refreshments, welcome people and provide security if necessary. If you are particularly worried about security notify the police that you are holding a hustings beforehand.

After the hustings

It is appropriate to write to the candidates thanking them and hope for a productive relationship in the future.