



## Organising an Election Hustings

With an election looming, you may be thinking about organising a public meeting at which you can quiz your local candidates. Traditionally known as a “hustings” they are often organised by churches, local organisations and others in the run up to elections as a way to find out the various candidates’ views before people decide who to vote for.

Friends of the Earth is not proposing a major national push for hustings at this election – they take a lot of work and there are other ways of influencing elections. However, they can be boost your profile locally, and a well attended hustings will show the eventual MP that there is a significant level of support for the issues raised. This check list is designed to help you decide if you can organise such an event.

### The Check list

1. **When will the election be and when should we hold the hustings?**
2. **Do we need our own hustings, or should we partner with other groups?**
3. **Our local group covers three constituencies, can we combine them?**
4. **What do we do about fringe candidates?**
5. **OK we’ll do it – what do we need to do next?**

### When will the election be and when should hold a hustings?

Oh if only we knew....but the chances are even Gordon Brown doesn’t know the answer to this yet. Rumour has it that his favoured date is 6<sup>th</sup> May – but rest assured that would change if he believed it would improve his prospects. March has also been floated (because it avoids the need for a pre-election budget in hard financial times) but 6<sup>th</sup> May remains favourite.

There is no one “right” time to hold a hustings. Ideally it would be during the election period, 4-6 weeks before the day itself. However, candidates will be very busy at this time, so you may have more luck a few weeks earlier before the rush starts.

Flexibility is key though – getting at least three busy people in a room at possibly the busiest time of their lives will be tricky, you will need to negotiate over dates. Think who you most want to be there, and remember if you get two people fixed, it will help persuade the third – who probably will not want to be missing. If you still end up with a gap, ask if a local councillor, or campaign manager can stand in for them. In the very worst case, they may provide a statement you can read out.

### Do we need our own hustings, or should we partner with other groups?

Again, there is no right answer. From our point of view, it is good to keep the focus on environmental issues as much as we can – some alliances may lead to a wider agenda being covered (perhaps including development matters too). On the other hand, the hustings needs to show the candidates there is a decent

level of support on the issues by having a good audience and teaming up with others can boost your turnout. It also reduces the workload if you can share it with another group. Some groups (a local church Christian Aid group for example) may help to get a venue too.

It is also important to consider the candidates – they will be trying to cover all subjects and meet as many voters as possible, so will not be keen to do one environmental hustings for us, then another with the local Greenpeace group, and another a few days later with WWF. If you have several such meetings being organised, all groups may struggle to get all candidates to agree to come.

We do know there will be some events organised by a coalition organised by the Green Alliance – we are not directly involved in this but have promised to send details of these meetings to local groups where ever they are happening – this information will follow when we have it.

### **Our local group covers three constituencies, can we combine them?**

While not impossible, this isn't recommended. For a start, you may already have 3 or 4 speakers – add another constituency and your panel may get unmanageable. Second, at this crucial time, the candidates want to be meeting *their* voters, not those from the seat next door.

If you are in this situation, and have to choose one seat to work in, you may want to think about which contests are the closest, which candidates are best placed and what you already know about them, whether it is more helpful to you to put pressure long-established candidates, or introduce yourself to new ones.

### **What do we do about fringe candidates?**

Electoral law does **not** require you to invite all candidates, so you can decide what is most appropriate. The law does require the cost of any meeting which favours one candidate to be counted as election expenses for that candidate, and these expenses are limited. However so long as hustings meetings do not favour one candidate there is no legal compulsion to invite them all.

You may want to keep to mainstream parties, or those who have got sizeable votes before. Or you may feel that certain fringe candidates should be invited despite not having a track record of getting many votes in the election. The Green Party are an obvious example of this (given how central these issues are to their philosophy) but certain independent candidates may be too. But candidates who appear to be seeking publicity without any real hope of being elected, or those who hold extreme views you do not wish to publicise do not have to be invited.

### **OK we'll do it – what do we need to do next?**

Move quickly. Contact local networks to decide on coalition or not, approach candidates with dates, and get a venue fixed. You'll need to book an independent chairman for the meeting too (or choose someone from the group). Later you need to think about publicising it, and after that, what questions you are going to ask the candidates - but for now get the basics done.