February 2015

Briefing

General Election 2015: Hustings guide for local groups

A useful guide for planning pre-election events in your constituency

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1) It’s all kicking off: the General Election 2015

2015 is not 2010

Everyone always says this, but the General Election on 7 May is the least predictable for a generation. This time that’s actually true…

Five years of coalition, the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote, the rise of UKIP, the surge of the Greens, the dominance of the SNP in Scotland, and mistrust in & despair of the Westminster elite have all conspired to fundamentally shift the dynamics of UK politics in a manner barely anyone saw coming.

And then there’s the impact of austerity, the economic ‘recovery’, the NHS reorganisation, and even the seismic shifts in Greece and Spain. The list of turbulent electoral factors is almost endless.

How are the Westminster parties shaping up?

In recent elections both Conservatives and Labour have prioritised a tiny number of swing voters in marginal constituencies, relying on their core supporters to do the rest. This time they simply can’t afford to do that.

For more than 40 years we’ve seen that the wellbeing of people and planet go hand in hand – and it’s been the inspiration for our campaigns. Together with thousands of people like you we’ve secured safer food and water, defended wildlife and natural habitats, championed the move to clean energy and acted to keep our climate stable. Be a Friend of the Earth – see things differently.
All the polls – which should be taken with a tablespoon of salt - indicate no single party will be able to command an overall majority on May 8. But it remains a racing certainty that either the Conservatives or Labour will be the party with the most votes and therefore will form the next Government, possibly as part of a coalition, possibly not.

**What does this mean for the environment?**

All this political turbulence and fragility presents an opportunity to advance the environment – both specific policies and the wider ‘green’ agenda – in UK politics. In certain seats, for instance those where fracking is proposed, the environment can very likely be a key electoral battle ground.

**2) Hustings: What are they and why might I organise one?**

**What is a hustings?**

A ‘hustings’ is a meeting in the run up to an election where candidates or parties debate policies and answer questions from the audience. Usually they are held in the constituency and feature all the local candidates. Sometimes they are ‘national’ hustings on a particular issue featuring party representatives.

Hustings are usually arranged by local organisations, such as community groups or churches, so that voters can ask candidates or party representatives about issues that are important to them ahead of the election.

You aren't restricted to a particular format. You could for instance have a ‘Question Time’ style debate where, in addition to local candidates on the panel, you might have a speaker with particular expertise in the topics, such as a campaigner from Friends of the Earth head office.

**Why might I organise one?**

Organising a hustings is a brilliant way to forge stronger links with other groups in your area, to build relationships with politicians present and future, to boost the profile of your own campaigning and to potentially recruit new members.

Hustings are also a good opportunity to pressure candidates to commit to particular positions on which – in theory at least – they can be held to account should they achieve office.

Hustings are arguably most useful for flushing out the positions of candidates in order that voters can better inform their electoral choices.

A well prepared set of questions, with a knowledgeable audience, a confident chair and local press in attendance can produce an excellent event with real outcomes.

With social media use now commonplace, your hustings can reach a potential audience far wider than those in the room. This can occasionally turn local events national, if something sufficiently interesting happens… But try not to have unrealistic expectations of scooping a national story; usually candidates – certainly from the major parties – are well briefed not to deviate from the party line.
Candidates will of course be expected to take positions on the issues of most importance locally, and this is often the most fruitful element of the debate.

What are the risks?

Hustings can be a lot of work! (see checklist below). Before you embark on organising one, you need to be clear what you want the outcome to be and to have decided that a hustings is the best way to achieve it.

Consider other options first. Letters to the paper, surveys of the candidates and engineered social media storms can all be just as effective at achieving your aims and require far less work.

There is also the risk that you will learn little you didn’t know already! A well planned event and a confident, articulate chair can usually mitigate this though.

Staying within the law

Before you organise an event, it is essential that you read the Electoral Commission advice on hustings. They are the regulators of election law and we all need to follow their guidance.

The passing of the 2014 Lobbying Act means hustings may now qualify as ‘regulated activity’ and be subject to spending limits and other restrictions. While we think that in the vast majority of cases, a well organized and politically impartial hustings will not be subject to regulation under the new law, it is important that you are informed.

But please don’t be worried or put off! As the guidance sets out “In many cases, spending on hustings will not be regulated… because an impartial hustings will not reasonably be regarded as intended to influence voters.”

If you have any questions with regard to the advice or the Lobbying Act in general, please see our briefing here or contact the Activism Hotline on localgroups@foe.co.uk or 020 7490 0210

3) The Check list

1. 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?

1. When should we hold a hustings?

There is no “right” time to hold a hustings. Ideally it would be 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.

There probably isn't a 'best' night of the week to hold a hustings, but make sure you avoid clashing with local events that might compete with your potential audience.

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

Again, there is no right answer. 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 may help to get a venue too.

Have a think about what issues are most resonant in your constituency. If air pollution or cold homes has been a big issue you might want to partner with a health group or an organisation representing vulnerable communities.

Also have a think about who in your local community you want to reach out to and work more closely with. Showing that an unusual range of people are interested in the environment will have much more impact than 'the usual suspects'. Is this the time to approach your local Mosque or the Women's Institutes?

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.

3. 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.

4. 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. However, you need to have impartial reasons why you have not invited
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particular candidates or parties and you should be prepared to explain your reasons to candidates or parties you haven’t invited. The electoral commission guidance states that

“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 concerns

Impartial reasons do not include reasons such as your views on the policies of a candidate or party.”

It can be difficult to have a meaningful debate if there are lots of candidates on a panel so it is definitely worth thinking about how many candidates is practical in relation to the aims of your meeting.

ADVICE: Friends of the Earth is happy to discuss the options with you and share what has worked well for other groups to inform your decision. Please contact the Activism Hotline before inviting speakers if you would like advice: localgroups@foe.co.uk or 020 7490 0210.

One final and very important point to note: as a social justice organisation, Friends of the Earth wants to avoid giving a platform to racist, sexist, homophobic and other prejudiced views. If you are concerned about candidates on that basis we would be happy to discuss through your options before you invite candidates.

5. OK we'll do it – what do we need to do next?

Move quickly.

1. Contact local networks to decide on a coalition or not.
2. Approach candidates with dates.
3. Book a venue.
4. Decide on a chair.

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.