

# HOW TO ORGANISE A HUSTINGS

## – LEGALLY AND EFFECTIVELY



*National Renters' Hustings at Rent Freedom Day, Westminster, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2015*

### **Why organise a hustings?**

A hustings is an event where candidates from each political party debate in front of an audience. In the run up to the 2015 General Election, hustings offer a chance for voters to see their prospective MP, ask questions, and form a view of who they want to represent them. For housing campaigns like ours, they offer a chance to force candidates to think seriously about housing and develop credible positions on housing policy issues – and a way of stoking the local debate around housing and raising awareness of the issues among the public.

### **The most important thing to know about hustings before organising one**

Hustings have a legal status, which candidates care about a lot, so it's essential to get the legal stuff right. This is easy to achieve as long as you do a few basic things, which we outline in point 4 below. If you don't tick all the legal boxes, then the event will not be considered a legal hustings and any costs involved will be included in individual candidates' campaign costs – which are capped. Candidates will be more likely to decline to attend an event you run which is not a legal hustings, so it won't be effective.

Now you know that, you can start organising.

#### **I. A word of advice**

Make it a “housing” hustings, rather than a “renting” one, because that will attract a larger audience and you will be able to get other organisations to help you promote it.

## 2. Organise by constituency – not local authority

If you're a group set up for a local borough or city council, be aware that there are likely to be at least two parliamentary constituencies covered by the local authority – and even some that straddle more than one local authority.

Hustings are supposed to pit candidates against their immediate rivals, so pick a constituency in which to organise a hustings. Assuming you can only organise one, normally you would pick a marginal seat, but you may have local reasons to pick another, either because of a local issue or a high profile candidate.

If you can organise a hustings for more than one constituency that's great, but this is where working with other organisations will really make a difference as they will be able to help.

## 3. Book a room now

The General Election is less than three months away – 7<sup>th</sup> May. In the final month of the campaign, things will get frenetic and it will be difficult to put housing on the agenda when you're competing with other issues for the attention of candidates and the public. We recommend aiming for a date at the end of March or the first half of April. That means you have less than two months to organise it.

**Where:** Contact local schools and churches, etc., to see if any will allow you to use a hall for free or at a discount. If you don't have the means to hire a venue, please contact Generation Rent and we will endeavour to help (but we can't promise anything). Check the venue has microphones and speakers of some description so that the audience is able to hear what the speakers are saying.

**When:** To maximise the audience, organise the hustings for a weekend or early evening. Two hours is the longest you can reasonably expect to hold the candidates' and voters' attention.

It's not an issue when the incumbent MP is standing down, but be aware that Parliament will be sitting up to 30<sup>th</sup> March, so MPs may be in Westminster between Monday and Thursday until then.

## 4. Invite all candidates

Hustings organisers have to be seen as neutral so, legally, all candidates will need to be invited, unless there is a non-partisan reason for excluding anybody. If you're worried about giving a platform to racism, etc., you can issue a set of values to invitees, requesting that they sign up to it and making their attendance conditional on their agreement to this. Please be aware that anything too restrictive may put off too many candidates, putting the hustings on shakier legal ground.

The Wikipedia page for the constituency is the best place to find candidate names and a quick internet search may uncover candidates' contact details.

Candidates are not official until about three weeks before polling day, so there may be people who emerge closer to the event. Ensure that such candidates have a means of contacting you by including your contact details on any online/printed publicity materials.

## 5. Contact all relevant groups

You'll need an audience and there are various local networks who can spread information about the event:

- Radio
- Newspapers
- Magazines

- Local blogs, Facebook groups and twitter accounts
- Other local housing campaigns
- Tenants' organisations
- National groups PricedOut, Yes to Homes and Generation Rent will be able to notify local supporters who would be interested in attending
- Citizens Advice Bureaux
- Trade union branches
- Schools and colleges
- Places of worship
- If you produce flyers consider distributing them to shops, cafes, pubs and GP surgeries.

## 6. Appoint a Chair

The Chair of the event has a few roles:

1. Explaining the structure of the event
2. Ensuring all the candidates get a fair hearing
3. Shutting up candidates who speak too much
4. Shutting up audience members who try to dominate proceedings

Try to choose a Chair who will have the strengths to do this. Try to ensure it's not someone identified with a political party. You might find a locally respected religious figure, headteacher or voluntary group leader willing to chair the event. Or you can do it yourself!

## 7. Running the event

Here's how the hustings should unfold on the day:

- Ask people to sign in on attendance, ideally with their email address so you can contact them again in future.
- Have the Chair call the meeting to order and explain the procedure. Ask people to keep questions short and comments courteous
- The Chair invites each speaker (in random order) to give a short speech. Usually 2 minutes, but make sure it's fair to all. The Chair could introduce this by asking each candidate, "In 2 minutes, tell us why we should vote for you"
- The Chair then takes questions from the floor. A simple way to do so is as follows:
  - Call an audience member to ask a question
  - Then ask if anyone else has a related question
  - Take two related questions
  - Put all the questions to the panel of candidates
  - Make sure all candidates have a chance to respond.
  - Shut up candidates if they waffle.
  - Then start again calling for another question. (It's OK if it's on the same subject as the previous round, as long as it develops the debate rather than repeats it.)
- Repeat until towards the end of the event, where the Chair calls for each candidate to make a 2 minute closing speech, usually in the reverse order from the opening speeches.
- The Chair thanks the audience, organisers and candidates and tells everyone to go home.

It's OK to plant questions from the floor and we would encourage that.

This is only one, standard way of running a Hustings, you can be more innovative and interesting but whatever you do you must treat the candidates fairly.

Take photos and tweet your event using hashtags like #GE2015 and #UKHousing. We'll try to use your photos in encouraging other renter/housing activism.

#### **8. TELL US!**

Let us know if you're running a hustings and we will add it to a list of Housing Hustings on our web page and promote it on social media, etc. You can contact us at [info@generationrent.org](mailto:info@generationrent.org).

Whatever you do have fun! Elections are the only time when politicians truly listen and the more powerful your voice is, the more leverage renters will have with them after the election.

**Good luck!**