

Topic Overview: Hustings events

Factsheet for parties, candidates, agents and hustings organisers

Updated March 2010

This guidance will help you decide whether or not a hustings event you are organising or attending may need to comply with election spending rules.

What is a hustings?

Hustings events are meetings where election candidates debate policies and answer questions from the audience.

They are often held by organisations such as local community groups so that voters can ask candidates about issues important to them.

I am organising a hustings. Are there election spending rules I need to be aware of?

There are limits on how much can be spent by candidates on promoting their election. These limits include spending on public events which:

- the candidate attends, and
- promote electoral success for that candidate

If someone else has paid the costs of the event, this would be a donation to the candidate or candidates.

In our view, you will **not** be affected by these rules if:

- you have invited all the candidates in the constituency to attend – even if not all of them actually turn up, **or**
- your hustings is only open to members of your organisation

My event will be open to the public, and I won't be inviting all candidates. What rules apply?

If an event is open to the public and is run in a way that genuinely does not promote the electoral success of particular candidates, we consider that it should not count towards any candidate's election expenses or as third party expenditure under the Representation of the People Act 1983.

However, if the event does in fact promote the success of a candidate or candidates, the relevant costs may count as a donation from the organiser to those candidates. The amount would also count towards the candidates' expenses limits.

'Promoting' includes doing so by criticising other candidates.

The simplest way to show that a hustings is genuine is to invite all known candidates in the relevant area.

However, we recognise that this may not be practical – for example, there may be so many candidates standing in a constituency that the meeting would be difficult to manage, or some candidates may clearly be frivolous.

If you as the organiser of the event decide not to invite all the known candidates, our guidance below sets out the steps we recommend that you take to show that your hustings is genuinely non-promotional.

You should:

- be able to give objective reasons why you have not invited particular candidates. These may include local prominence, elected representatives at local level or recent election results in the area. These reasons should not be based on subjective matters, such as your views of the policies of a party or candidate. You should be prepared to explain your reasons to candidates who have not been invited.
- make sure that the candidates you invite represent a reasonable variety of views from different parts of the political spectrum.
- be transparent in your publicity and at the meeting about the organisation(s) arranging and funding the event, and the reasons for holding it.
- allow each candidate attending a fair chance to answer questions and, where appropriate, a reasonable opportunity to respond to points

made against them by other candidates.

We also recommend that at the meeting you inform the audience about any candidates known to be standing who have not been invited.

If you think your event may be promoting one or more candidates, you should let the candidates or their agents know this in advance, and provide them with details of the likely costs.

I am holding a national hustings event. I am inviting parties, rather than candidates. What rules apply?

Parties also have limits on spending on events. If you are holding a hustings event involving parties, you should follow the guidance above to decide whether your event may need to count towards the costs of the parties invited and as a donation.

I am a candidate. How do I know if I need to declare the costs of a hustings?

If you think that a hustings has been organised in a way that is promoting your candidacy, you should ask the organiser if they have followed our guidance above.

If the event is actually promoting your candidacy, an appropriate proportion of the costs of the event counts towards your election expenses and as a donation from the organiser.

Where can I get further advice?

If you have any questions about spending at elections or would like more information, please contact us on 020 7271 0616, www.electoralcommission.org.uk or pef@electoralcommission.org.uk, or at:

Party and Election Finance
The Electoral Commission
Trevelyan House
London
SW1P 2HW

You can also contact one of our devolved offices:

Scotland Office
38 Thistle Street
Edinburgh EH2 1EN
Tel: 0131 225 0200
Fax: 0131 225 0205
Textphone: 18001 0131 225 0200
infoscotland@electoralcommission.org.uk

Wales Office
Caradog House
1-6 Saint Andrews Place
Cardiff CF10 3BE
Tel: 029 2034 6800
Fax: 029 2034 6805
Textphone: 18001 029 2034 6800
infowales@electoralcommission.org.uk

Northern Ireland Office
Seatem House
28-32 Alfred Street
Belfast BT2 8EN
Tel: 028 9089 4020
Fax: 028 9089 4026
Textphone: 18001 028 9089 4020
infonorthernireland@electoralcommission.org.uk