

Statement from the Voscur Board concerning hustings for the Bristol Mayoral elections

The Voscur trustees strongly believe that engaging in the political decision making process in the city is a key component of our Voice and Influence role.

On that basis Voscur have organised Hustings for the forthcoming elections for the Mayor as well as the Police and Crime Commissioner and a special hustings for the council leaders of the four main political parties.

Our hustings and events are always organised from a position of political neutrality and within the guidance laid down by the regulatory framework.

The Board has taken a view that in order to ensure there is adequate time to allow each candidate a fair chance to answer questions and a reasonable opportunity to respond to points raised by other candidates Voscur should restrict invitations to the main parties contesting and any independents that have established a clear and substantial level of support.

This decision was based on advice given by the Electoral Commission in relation to the running of time limited non-selective hustings.

When Voscur ran the Bristol West hustings during the general election last year it was agreed that no candidate achieving less than a 3% threshold of the local popular vote should be invited, to ensure we only invited candidates that had a realistic chance of winning. Voscur will employ the same criteria for the forthcoming Mayoral Hustings event.

This was a difficult decision to make, but we recognise the limited amount of time people are willing to commit to such events and in practical terms, based on our past experience and feedback Voscur has to ensure enough time in the 2 hours for robust debate and in-depth answers to key questions posed by the VCS audience.

The Voscur Board sought guidance from the Electoral Commission, via the Situations and Procedures manual entitled "Hustings events" (section 6 Holding a Local hustings event with candidates) and the Charities Commission Guidance document entitled "Charities, Elections and Referendums" to inform its view and to ensure its decision and practice was impartial and genuinely non-promotional.

In order to meet this threshold the Electoral Commission advise that when holding hustings "it may not be practical to invite every candidate standing in a given constituency".

The Electoral Commission go on to state that "If you do decide not to invite all candidates there are some good practice recommendations you should follow which include:

- Be able to give objective reasons why you have not invited particular candidates and explain your reasons to candidates you have not invited.
- Make sure the candidates you invite represent a reasonable variety of views, from different parts of the political spectrum
- Be transparent in your publicity for the hustings.
- 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
- Inform the audience at the meeting of candidates standing who haven't been invited (Electoral Commission Hustings events guidance 2016)

The Charities Commission gives specific guidance in relation to hosting public meetings /hustings with political parties in order to debate key issues that the Charity is campaigning on, or has an interest in as long as they do not encourage support for any one political party. The Commission goes on to state further that “....inviting candidates from a wide spectrum can be difficult to achieve in practice. It does not mean that all parties have to be represented every time a charity does any work which engages with political parties. The trustees should make a decision based on whether such engagement would further or hinder the interests of the charity. For example, an event may be more manageable and more focused if all minority parties are excluded. However a charity would have to have very strong reasons for deciding not to invite a mainstream political party.”

(Guidance Charities, Elections and Referendums Charity Commission July 2014)

We will inform the audience at the Mayoral Hustings of candidates standing including those who have not been invited, and publish the list of all of the candidates on our Mayoral Hustings Website page and display this list at the event.

In addition we will allow candidates to display leaflets on the main reception desk of the hustings event as long as they are not offensive or defamatory.