

STATES OF JERSEY



HUSTINGS FILMING (P.49/2022): COMMENTS

Presented to the States on 22nd April 2022
by the Privileges and Procedures Committee

STATES GREFFE

COMMENTS

The Privileges and Procedures Committee acknowledges that, historically, hustings meetings have been physical events, usually at a Parish Hall. The Committee has always been very keen to improve the level of participation and engagement by the public in the elections process. The original intention behind the proposed changes was to try and broaden the reach of these valuable events and not to replace them. It was always envisaged that the traditional ‘in person’ events would be held, but that the online hustings would provide a filmed record so that those unable to attend in person could still participate and be able to view candidates’ performances after the event.

Having considered the matter, however, the Committee recognises that there is concern amongst Members about the proposals as they stand. In that regard, Committee has explored alternative options that could offer both physical and online hustings events, although it should be noted that there is a considerable cost implication should the Assembly decide that **all** hustings events should be filmed.

Physical hustings

Previously vote.je has filmed one hustings event for each of the Connétables and Deputies elections and also each of the Senatorial Parish hustings. The films have then been uploaded to vote.je the day after the hustings so that those unable to attend could view the events. If the Assembly considers it appropriate, the Committee believes that a sensible offering would be to film each Connétable hustings event (12 max.) and film one Deputy hustings per constituency (9 max.). The Deputy candidates might plan to organise a hustings event for each Parish in that constituency (e.g. St. Ouen, St. Mary and St. Peter) but the Committee considers that it would be more cost effective to film one event where this is the case. In that regard, there will need to be agreement between candidates as to which event they wish to have filmed.

The indicative costs for the filmed hustings events range from £26,250-£30,000 which is based on 21 x filmed hustings events and an uploaded video file after the event. These costs may vary depending on the venues used and the number of candidates at each event.

Online hustings

The Committee is also currently exploring the possibility of running online-only hustings events in addition to any in-person events organised by candidates. The aim is to keep the costs to a minimum perhaps by using a venue which is free of charge or by using MS Teams online meeting software which is already used by the States of Jersey. It is proposed that the events will be chaired by an experienced facilitator who would provide consistency in how the events are managed, thereby ensuring parity for all candidates. Furthermore, the public would be able to submit questions in advance of the events which will allow for there to be a greater breadth of topics covered.

Questions raised by Deputy Maçon

In his proposition, Deputy Maçon raises a number of questions. For completeness, the Committee provides the following responses which cover any preparations for both online and physical hustings events:

- *There is no explanation offered as to how questions will be vetted to ensure, for example, questions are from the registered voters in the designated district. Further there is no guidelines as to how candidates can change any of the rules governing this.*

The proposed online hustings would deal with questions in the same way as traditional events. Members of the audience – whether participating live in the venue or remotely – will be advised that questions are invited from constituents and priority will be given to those from the relevant constituency or Parish. As with the traditional format, this is a matter of trust, and in the same way that the public expects honest answers from candidates, questioners are expected to be honest about where they live. In addition to this, it is worth remembering that any elected Member of the States Assembly will deal with topics that affect all Islanders so it is natural to expect that Islanders living outside of the candidates’ constituency will take an interest in their viewpoint on Island-wide matters.

The plans for these hustings do not come with a set of ‘rules’ - it is entirely the choice of the candidate as to whether they wish to participate. The Committee simply wishes to offer as many opportunities as possible to the electorate to engage with the election process and find out which candidates have views aligned with their own.

- *How are planted questions to be dealt with?*

Such questions could equally arise in a traditional setting. Vetting of questions was a concern raised by the Procureur of St. Clement in advance of the 2021 Connétable by-election hustings which were run as a hybrid online event. Questions were vetted, and the Procureur was content with how the event was managed by Vote.je. On that occasion, those submitting questions were asked to do so in advance of the meeting by email or telephone. They were also required to indicate where they lived within the district. For the proposed online events, candidates could also require questioners to declare their political party affiliations if appropriate.

Candidates and elected representatives should expect to face public scrutiny and be prepared to answer to the electorate. It would be difficult to reject questions without very good reason, but candidates can refuse to answer questions if they wish.

- *What are the rules governing electronic devices whereby candidates can receive answers to questions from those asking them in real time?*

Unless candidates require electronic devices for accessibility purposes, e.g. to enable communication of their answers, it is suggested that devices are switched off or in flight-mode to minimise disruption during the event and as a simple matter of courtesy to the audience and to other candidates. In addition to this, candidates should be mindful that it will be apparent to the viewing audience if they are seen to be reading out answers and that the public are likely to make their own judgment of any candidate who chooses to do this. As in previous hustings, the order in which candidates will be asked to respond to questions will be rotated to ensure fairness and prevent one single candidate from always being the first to answer. It is not intended to provide candidates with questions in advance of the event.

As noted previously, there are no event ‘rules’ as such. The intention is that the suggested format is fair and reasonable for candidates and constituents alike.

- *How will individuals who don't have access to the Internet be able to participate in a meaningful way?*

Anyone without internet access can submit a question to candidates in advance by contacting the States Greffe by telephone. A similar system was used for the hustings held prior to the June 2021 by-election for Connétable of St. Clement. All the questions received were then fed into a spreadsheet and selected at random during the event; there was even a specific period allocated for younger voters to ask questions. Following the hustings, the video recording of the event was made available for parishioners without internet access to view on-demand at the Parish Hall.

Conclusion

The Committee wishes to reiterate that candidates can arrange in-person hustings if they wish so that members of the voting public who are not comfortable with a digital offering are able to attend alternative events and still question candidates. Deputy Maçon’s proposal asks that those events also be filmed. The Assembly needs to decide whether it will be necessary to film 21- 26 such events in addition to the proposed 21 online hustings (which will be recorded and available for viewing by Islanders) and whether this would equate to the best use of public money, given that the online options have a low cost and allow broader participation by the public, whereas the filming of all of the in-person events will add an additional £26,000+ to the vote.je campaign expenditure and require additional funds to meet this unforeseen expense.

Comment under Standing Order 37A

This comment was not provided to the Greffier of the States before 12.00 p.m. on 21st April 2022 as a quorum of the Committee had not approved the comment by that time.