

Organising events and responding to requests for VIP Visits:

Guidance for council staff

1. Events and openings

Council-organised events, or the facilitation of events organised by others, provide vital positive publicity for the council. However, they can also provide positive publicity for the individuals featured or for the political parties or causes they represent. With this in mind, it is important that we are consistent, even-handed and politically neutral in our approach.

If you are considering hosting an event or facilitating a VIP visit, you should inform the communications team of the details at the earliest opportunity. If required, the department can offer advice about *whether* to host the event. It will always be appropriate to seek the department's advice if the purpose of the event or visit is to gain publicity (rather than a private visit which is not promoted).

Once notified the communications team will:

- Identify an officer within the department to handle any relevant publicity issues.
- Offer advice on the production of any supporting materials required.

If you are the visit or event organiser you will be responsible for:

- The logistics and management of the visit or event, and the officer(s) who will act as host for any VIPs.
- Informing and/or inviting relevant services/people of the event or visit. This may include executive directors/directors and cabinet members or ward councillors.

Who to invite

It will nearly always be appropriate to invite the Mayor of Ealing to any significant event or opening.

- The council leader should also be invited to events that are of borough-wide importance, particularly where they relate to policy issues and council decisions rather than civic matters. Where the council leader is unavailable it is appropriate to invite the deputy leader. In these circumstances the leaders of the other parties should also be invited.
- It will nearly always be appropriate to invite the cabinet portfolio holder to events to launch a new service.
- If the event is of ward-level importance, as opposed to borough-wide, it will be appropriate to invite all three ward councillors (regardless of the political party they are affiliated to).

- Invitees should meet objective and consistent criteria, especially if they have known party political connections. For example, if an event is targeted at the business community, invitees should be business people selected using objective criteria; they should not be only the business associates of one party political group.

Who not to invite

- Politicians who do not have a clear relevance to the visit/event either by virtue of their position e.g. the council leader or geographical mandate e.g. being a ward councillor.
- Any candidates (or individuals you know to be prospective candidates) for election to political office in their capacity as candidates. It may however be appropriate to invite them in another official capacity that is directly related to the event, but you must make it very clear they are invited in that capacity. For example a member of the board of governors at a school where there's an event.
- Invitees suggested by councillors simply because they've been suggested by a councillor. Always apply objective criteria to justify an invitation.

2. VIP visits

You may receive requests from VIPs for visits to the borough. These often involve visits to council buildings/facilities and meetings with councillors and/or council staff.

Visitors likely to be considered to be VIPs, include:

- MPs
- Government ministers and senior civil servants
- Chief Executives of partner organisations
- Delegations from other local authorities

You do not have to agree to requests, but it is important that you are objective and consistent in your response to requests.

When considering a request, you should take into account:

- Has the requestor given clear objectives for their visit? Are these objectives in line with the council's strategic objectives?
- Will the visit help build positive relationships with an important audience and/or boost the council's reputation in a positive way?
- Will declining to host the visit damage an important relationship or the council's reputation?
- Will agreeing to the request involve a significant amount of work for council officers? If yes, can this be justified with reference to the council's strategic objectives and actually resourced?

- Is the visit 'party political'? The council cannot allocate resources to activity that could be considered to promote the interests of any individual political party.

If the VIP visitor is a Government minister, or the event is of borough-wide significance, it will usually be appropriate to invite the leader of the council, the chief executive and relevant executive director, and/or the appropriate cabinet portfolio holder and leaders of the opposition. It may also be appropriate to invite the MP in whose constituency the visit/ event is taking place, the shadow portfolio holders and local ward councillors.

For certain events of a London-wide nature or where the visitor is the Mayor of London or another person from London regional government or with a political responsibility for London, the relevant GLA member should usually be invited. However, special consideration will need to be given to this in the run-up to the GLA elections – when the Mayor and GLA member are likely to be candidates.

3. Photo opportunities

- Photo opportunities are set up with the specific purpose of attracting media coverage for a story or for taking photographs to illustrate a story in one of the council's own publications.
- Photo opportunities can take place at events or be set up separately in their own right.
- Standalone photo opportunities that are not a part of a larger event should only be organised by, or in consultation with, the communications team.
- Communications will advise on who should be in the photograph and whether any media should be invited.
- The council representative photographed will normally be the relevant cabinet member or the leader of the council.
- Everyone in the photograph should meet objective and consistent criteria. They should only be included to help illustrate the story, for example they might be service users, residents, businesses or partner organisations. The reason for inviting each person to take part should be clear and must not be political.

General

These general guidelines are intended to help ensure that council officers organising events, openings and visits avoid accusations of political bias, and that the criteria applied for organising them are appropriate, consistent and obvious.

The guidelines must be treated as a starting point. Officers need to exercise common sense in thinking through and organising each individual event, opening visit or photo opportunity.

Different and specific rules will apply during a pre-election period. At these times, separate guidance will be issued by the Director of Legal and Democratic Services.