



How to run a successful MP Visit

The following note is based on a short presentation given by Ian Geary, Public Affairs Adviser, The Salvation Army, to the ERSA Communications and Political Insights Network.

Bill Shankly, the former manager of Liverpool FC, is reputed to have been asked the reason behind his team's notable success. He is said to have replied '*We do the simple things well*'. Running a successful MP visit is about 'doing the simple things well'

The Salvation Army and MP Visits

Running an MP visit is a key element of The Salvation Army's public affairs activity. We aim to connect MPs, Government Ministers and civil servants with our Corps (churches) and frontline services. This is a powerful means to build relationship and influence public policy.

Pointers

When planning a visit there are some basic 'big picture' questions to ask.

Rationale and aims

It is important to have clear reasons for the visit, i.e. why you are inviting that particular MP and then what it is that you specifically hope to gain from the visit? The aims could include anything from building links within a constituency to more direct lobbying of an MP or Minister.

Shaping the visit

Having made these decisions, it is then a case of planning the visit around the key objectives. Decide which elements of a project you wish to highlight and which to skip over in line with the reasons for inviting the MP. You may wish to consider other features such as do you want to leave time to have a direct policy discussion? If so, who else needs to be there?

Focus on the essentials

Generally, it is unlikely to get more than an hour of an MP's time. Given this constraint it is good to know what the key objectives of your visit are. If you're pushed for time you can ensure you cover them rather than being bound by a set schedule.

Once you are satisfied you have answered these questions and are clear about your approach, and have a visit firmed up in the diary, you can then drill down into focussing on some more practical considerations. The following checklist may prove a helpful guide:

- Is a briefing required?
- Construct a central planning document which includes all key details. This would include the location, date and time of visit, biographical background of the MP, schedule for the day, additional relevant information and reference to a number of policy issues you wish to raise with the visitor. See ERSA's toolkit for template briefing: www.ersa.org.uk/empday19.
- Ensure you take a photograph of the visit. It has been said that '*If there isn't a photograph it didn't happen*'. Decide the most timely point to take the photograph

- How will you approach the media angle? Will you invite national/local press? Will your media team produce a press release?
- Think about the context. Your staff may or may not be used to interacting with an MP. Judge what assistance you need to offer. Try to 'de-mystify' the aura of meeting a person who is viewed to be important.

Important considerations for the MP

- They need to know where they will be going to and when they need to be there.
- They need to know who they are meeting, why and have their contact details.
- They may not have read the briefing. Their assistants may have done so, however this may not always be the case. Do not assume they have.
- MP's staff are important; do be courteous to them, as they are the 'gatekeeper'.

Logistics

- Some things are in your control, others are not. A couple of days before the visit go through your planning document and work through the check-list of what needs to be in place.
- MPs' need to meet 'real' people. Ensure they meet service users and staff on the visit. It is good to have a well-planned schedule but if it is over-choreographed it can look inauthentic.

Follow Up

- Ensure you follow up with the MP after the visit ie write a thank you letter including more information on your organisation and seek a discussion about a particular issue or offer an additional invitation

Relationship

Public Affairs is about building good relationships, taking a long-term view of activities and good communication. Evaluating the impact of a MP visit will not be a scientific exercise, but you can reflect upon the response of the MP, the relationship between the MP and local staff/service users, tangible outcomes and information gleaned as result of the visit.

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