Risk control
Managing Open Days

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Introduction

Successful open days are recognised as a pivotal component of university recruitment and engagement strategies. These events provide prospective students and their families with the opportunity to experience campus life, explore academic offerings, and interact with faculty, staff, and current students. Open days have a significant influence on applicants' decisions and contribute to shaping the institution's reputation.

Given that open days may extend over several days and attract large numbers of visitors onto university campuses, the planning and management processes must be both thorough and efficient. The inherent risks—from crowd control and emergency incidents to logistical challenges and security issues—necessitate a systematic approach to risk identification, assessment, and mitigation. This document offers external guidance on best practices in the areas of event planning, communication, risk assessment, and operational management, ensuring that open days are conducted in accordance with legal obligations and best practice standards.

Event Planning

The planning of open days demands coordinated efforts across multiple university departments. Early in the process, it is essential to define roles and responsibilities so that all units—ranging from admissions and estates to security and accessibility services—operate in unison. Regular planning sessions, supported by updated contact lists and clearly defined objectives, help maintain a high level of coordination throughout the preparation phase.

The planning process integrates several core elements that include the selection of a suitable venue; the development of detailed risk assessments; the implementation of comprehensive crowd and traffic management strategies; and the establishment of robust emergency procedures tailored to the campus environment. Accessibility and inclusion measures form a critical part of the plan, not only fulfilling the legal requirements of the Equality Act 2010 but also ensuring that all visitors experience an inclusive event. Moreover, security considerations – especially in line with the requirements of Martyn's Law[1] – must be addressed through appropriate risk assessments and measures. The guidance emphasises that regular meetings and structured post-event debriefs are essential components of a culture of continuous improvement.

Venue Selection

Selecting an appropriate venue is foundational to the success of an open day. The facility must accommodate the anticipated number of visitors, support a variety of activities (such as registration, presentations, exhibitions, and informal gatherings), and facilitate safe circulation and emergency evacuation.

Accessibility remains a paramount criterion. Venues must be assessed to ensure they provide clear, step-free access, are equipped with accessible toilets, and are well connected with public transport options and on-site parking facilities (including Blue Badge parking). In addition, it is imperative that emergency access routes remain unobstructed to allow prompt response by emergency services. A detailed site inspection, carried out in collaboration with estates, accessibility, and safety teams, will identify potential issues well in advance of the event.

Crowd Management

Effective crowd management is essential for maintaining safety and ensuring a positive visitor experience. Forecasting visitor numbers through analysis of pre-registrations and historical attendance data allows planners to accurately predict peak periods and potential pressure points.

The campus should be divided into clearly defined zones that cater to specific activities such as lectures, exhibitions, and catering areas. Clear and professionally designed signage, complemented by floor markers and directional cues, supports orderly movement of visitors. The deployment of trained stewards and volunteers at strategic junctions minimises the risk of congestion. In high-traffic areas, the implementation of one-way systems, along with the use of real-time monitoring via CCTV or staff observations, ensures that any emerging issues are addressed swiftly.

Pre-Event Information for Stakeholders

Timely and clear communication with all stakeholders is integral to the effective running of open days. Prospective visitors should receive a comprehensive event schedule detailing session timings, locations, and any special accessibility provisions. Campus maps that highlight accessible routes, essential facilities (such as restrooms and quiet areas), and other key landmarks should be distributed in advance.

Detailed logistical information regarding public transport options, parking arrangements (with specifics on Blue Badge parking), and any available shuttle services should be provided well ahead of the event. Additionally, pre-event materials should outline recommended preparations, including appropriate attire for inclement weather and the requirement to carry necessary identification and registration confirmations.

For external agencies and third parties—such as emergency service providers and local authorities—comprehensive site maps, clearly marked access routes, and updated contact information for key coordinators should be distributed. Multiple communication channels (such as email bulletins, updates via the university's intranet, and printed guides) can be used to ensure that all concerned parties are fully informed.

Communications

Robust communication systems are vital for the smooth operation of large-scale events. The event plan should incorporate established communication channels to ensure that information regarding the event is disseminated effectively across all levels. Designated communication leads should maintain real-time connectivity among operational teams using dependable platforms, such as mobile applications, two-way radios, and public address systems.

Regular briefing sessions for all members involved in the event should be used to ensure that standard operating procedures remain current and that any updates or changes to protocols are clearly communicated. Such measures are critical to ensuring that communication remains dynamic and responsive in the event of an emergency or unforeseen circumstance.

Risk Assessments

Risk assessments represent the cornerstone of safe event planning and should be performed in accordance with the Health and Safety Executive's five-step process[2]:

1. **Identify hazards**
   All potential hazards should be systematically identified, including structural risks from temporary installations and challenges posed by adverse weather conditions in outdoor areas.
2. **Determine who may be harmed and how**
   The analysis should identify the potential impact of each hazard on all groups involved—visitors, staff, and volunteers—with particular attention given to those requiring additional support or accommodations.
3. **Evaluate risks and implement controls**
   Each identified hazard should be evaluated based on its likelihood and potential severity. Appropriate measures—such as the installation of physical barriers in congested areas or enhanced signage indicating emergency exits—should then be implemented.
4. **Record findings and actions**
   Detailed documentation of the risk assessments, along with the control measures implemented, should be maintained.

Such records serve as a reference for compliance purposes and as a foundation for improvements in future events.

5. **Review and update regularly**
   Risk assessments should be treated as living documents. Being subject to continuous review and updated in response to changes in conditions or emerging risks during the event help in this process.

Through the rigorous application of these steps, the institution can ensure that safety remains paramount at all times.

Accessibility and Inclusion

Ensuring accessibility and inclusion is both a legal requirement under the Equality Act 2010 and a core institutional value. All venues and event spaces should be assessed to ensure they provide step-free access and a continuous network of accessible routes throughout the campus. In addition, essential facilities—such as accessible toilets and clearly identified signage—should be made available to support all visitors.

A range of supportive measures should be integrated into the planning process. Such measures might include the use of hearing loops, the provision of British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters during large gatherings, and the dissemination of information in alternative formats (for example, large print, Braille, or digital versions). Further, arrangements for assistance dogs—such as designated relief areas and water stations—should be clearly indicated in venue layouts.

The inclusion of quiet rooms and sensory-friendly spaces should be emphasised to accommodate neurodivergent visitors. Standardised procedures for providing personal assistance should be developed, and comprehensive training in disability awareness should be provided for all staff and volunteers. Oversight of these measures should be assigned to a dedicated Accessibility Lead, ensuring that considerations for accessibility are managed effectively from planning through event execution.

Managing Increased Attendance

Large-scale open days can place significant demands on campus infrastructure and logistical systems. Pre-registration data should be used to accurately forecast attendance numbers and identify potential congestion points. Measures such as staggered arrival times should be implemented to disperse visitor arrivals and reduce congestion.

Real-time monitoring techniques, including digital signage and mobile alerts, should be employed to track visitor

density and inform adaptive crowd management responses. Adequate staffing devoted to crowd control and visitor guidance should be ensured so that emerging issues can be addressed promptly. Additionally, transportation logistics—including parking management, public transport connectivity, and shuttle service coordination—should be carefully planned to support the efficient handling of increased attendance.

Security and Martyn's Law[1]

Security planning should follow the principles of Martyn's Law (Protect Duty). Comprehensive terrorism risk assessments should be conducted and proportionate security measures implemented. These measures may include deploying visible security personnel, using CCTV surveillance, and, where needed, implementing bag checks. It is important that these steps do not detract from the overall welcoming atmosphere of the event.

Regular training in counter-terrorism awareness and emergency response protocols should be provided for all personnel involved. Coordination with local law enforcement and counter-terrorism advisors should be maintained to ensure that security protocols are reviewed regularly and adapted to the prevailing threat environment, thereby maintaining public confidence.

Emergency Services and Local Authorities

Effective coordination with external emergency services and local authorities should be established well in advance of the event. Prior to the open day, notifications should be sent to police, fire, and ambulance services along with comprehensive site maps, clear access routes, and updated contact details for designated liaison officers. A robust command-and-control structure should be established to streamline communication during emergencies.

Local councils and community representatives should be informed especially if the event is expected to impact local traffic or public transport services. In certain situations, an Event Notification Form should be submitted to the local Safety Advisory Group (SAG) to confirm that all regulatory and community considerations have been addressed.

Post-Event Reviews

Following the conclusion of an open day, a structured post-event review should be conducted with all key stakeholders to capture lessons learned and identify areas for improvement. Detailed analyses of incident logs, near-miss reports, and comprehensive feedback from staff and visitors should be undertaken to inform future planning processes.

The recommendations arising from these reviews should be documented and integrated into updated risk assessments, operational manuals, and training programs. This cycle of continuous improvement will enhance the safety and effectiveness of future events and reinforce the commitment to operational excellence.

Relevant Legislation and Guidance

The planning and execution of open days should adhere to established statutory requirements and best practice guidelines. Key legislative instruments include the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, and the Equality Act 2010. Additional statutory requirements are provided by the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007, along with the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 (referred to as Martyn's Law).

Supplementary guidance should be obtained from sources such as HSE's Event Safety Guidance[3], The Purple Guide[4], and USHA Guidance[5]. These resources collectively support the development and implementation of robust risk management practices for large-scale, public-facing events.

Conclusion

The successful delivery of university open days should be based on meticulous planning, coordinated execution, and an unwavering commitment to continuous improvement. By integrating comprehensive risk assessments, strategic communication methodologies, effective crowd management, stringent security measures, and proactive accessibility initiatives, institutions can create events that are engaging, safe, and inclusive. This guidance document serves as a resource for best practices in the planning and execution of open days.

References

1. Martyn's Law – The Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 - https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2025/04/03/martyns-law-factsheet/

2. HSE – Managing Risks and Risk Assessment at Work - https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/index.htm

3. HSE Event safety guidance - https://www.hse.gov.uk/event-safety/

4. The Purple Guide - https://www.thepurpleguide.co.uk/

5. USHA guidance (main website) - https://www.usha.org.uk/

Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

Get in touch

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