

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY – OPERATION SUMAC

UPDATED – 17 DECEMBER 2006

Introduction

This communication strategy had been developed to support Suffolk Constabulary's investigation into the murder of five women who worked as prostitutes in the red light area of Ipswich – Gemma Adams, Tania Nicol, Paula Clennell, Annette Nicholls and Anneli Alderton.

These five linked murder enquiries – generic operational name, Operation Sumac – have attracted massive public and media interest. However, this interest provides the Constabulary with a valuable opportunity to communicate its messages to the public in a managed way, creating a vital flow of information from the public to the police in response to appeals.

As such, all communication channels should be utilised to ensure the authorised Suffolk Constabulary messages reach as many people as possible, in order to maximise the information flow into the enquiry teams.

However, it is recognised that this publicity is likely to have an adverse effect on the fear of crime in Suffolk, which may have longer-term implications that need to be addressed in the fullness of time.

Aims

The aims of this document reflect and support the Gold Strategy. The three key communication aims are to:

- Assist the enquiry teams in identifying the offender(s), and gathering information/witnesses, by issuing targeted appeals.
- Prevent re-offending/reduce the danger to other potential victims, through issuing information about the incidents supported by strong public safety advice and targeted warnings to vulnerable women.
- Maintain confidence in Suffolk Constabulary, and its ability to successfully investigate these crimes, through ensuring communication is handled in a professional, managed way.

There is also the longer-term corporate communication aim of assisting in the return to normality in Suffolk and to provide information/reassurance messages to local people in order to reduce the fear of crime (supporting the Reassurance Strategy).

Underlying Principles

The nature of this operation means that the communication strategy will have to be very flexible in order to adapt to the fast-changing situation.

As such, this is a strategic guidance, which may be subject to change at short notice, with the tactical decisions on implementing the communications strategy being reviewed and agreed between Gold, the OIOC and the Corporate Communication Manager.

However, the underlying principles which underpin this strategy are already laid out in the Suffolk Major Incident Media Strategy, as well as the Suffolk Constabulary Corporate Communication Strategy and Media Liaison Strategy.

The key principles are that Suffolk Constabulary will be honest and open in its dealings with the media/public.

The intention is to ensure all information is accurate, consistent and co-ordinated through Corporate Communications (the media cell). Information will be provided in a timely fashion and in an accessible format (plain English).

Communication will be treated as an integral part of the Gold management and investigation process.

Where practical, every effort should be made to put out information pro-actively, rather than issuing reactive information in response to queries. This will allow the Force to maintain the initiative in their handling, rather than being forced on to the back foot.

By being proactive, the Force to build a relationship with the media. The media will be more supportive of an enquiry team who they trust and are demonstrating they will be open about the investigation.

Similarly, the Force must respond quickly and robustly to any inaccuracies. The media are more likely to be responsible in their reporting, if they trust the organisation.

Phases of Media Handling

At the time of updating this strategy, the enquiry has just completed the first phase in its media handling – effectively getting full details of the five murders, with accompanying warnings and appeals, in response to almost overwhelming media demand.

We are currently entering the second phase, which is to provide more focussed, targeted media briefings, in a far more controlled/managed fashion. A more structured approach is being taken to the media access to the spokespersons, with a much more restricted time allocation for face-to-face briefings.

Access is now focussed round the main daily press conference, at 11am, which is followed by interviews. There are also very limited opportunities for media interviews (aimed at radio/TV) during early morning and evening.

This basic structure is being supported by specific media opportunities, such as reconstructions, stop checks, searches and access to other enquiry officers.

As the media interest wanes, we will review and probably further restrict access – based on the media demand and our ability to provide meaningful daily updates about the enquiry. During this third phase, the challenge will be to keep the enquiry in the public eye, to ensure a response to any new appeals for information.

Media Leads

The current media leads (spokespersons) for Operation Sumac are:

Gold - ACC Jacqui Cheer

OIOC - Detective Chief Superintendent Stewart Gull

Other key staff (such as the Chief Constable, Chief Supt John Fletcher and Det-Supt Andy Henwood as deputy OIOC) also have a role in dealing with media queries, following agreement/consultation with Gold and the OIOC.

Wider Issues

Arrangements are in place to deal with media queries/public interest on other wider policing issues – such as the resilience of the Force, its capacity to deal with major incidents, the amalgamations debate and HMIC baseline assessment. This includes the use of Chief Officers to address the issues and, through liaison with ACPO Press Office, utilising senior police officers from other Forces (especially those with specific ACPO portfolios) to address the issues. This allows the enquiry team to focus their efforts on communication which supports their investigation.

Internal Communications

A key target audience is our own staff, as well as (increasingly) the staff from other Forces who are in Suffolk on mutual aid. Regular updates about the investigation are being circulated to all Suffolk staff by e-mail and being placed on the Intranet. All press releases are also being placed on the Intranet and Internet.

Consideration is currently being given to creating some form of paper-based newsletter, to provide officers on mutual aid (who do not have access to the e-mail and Intranet) with updates. However, it is recognised that there could be security issues with such a publication.

Recovery Phase

In the longer term, while there may be a continued need for on-going publicity/appeals with reference to the investigation, there will be a need for communication work aimed at reducing the fear of crime and providing public reassurance.

This work will obviously be carried out in conjunction with the actions from the Prevention and Reassurance Strategy drawn up by Chief-Sup Fletcher.

Proactive work has already begun, with the distribution of safety leaflets, personal safety alarms and attendance of senior staff at public meetings, as well as the setting up of a multi-agency Gold Group at Ipswich.

Similarly, on the media side, it has been stressed that one of our key aims is to solve these murders and return Suffolk to normality – to make Suffolk safe again.

Review Period

This strategy lays down the tone and broad tenets underpinning the communication activity being carried out in support of Operation Sumac. The individual actions to achieve the strategic aims will be reviewed and agreed on a daily basis with Gold, the OIOC and the Corporate Communications Manager (as communication lead).

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