



West Midlands Police

Press Office



*'Dealing with
the Media'*

WEST MIDLANDS POLICE

PRESS & PUBLIC RELATIONS DEPT.

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THE POLICE AND THE MEDIA

The media have a powerful influence on public opinion and can prove a useful and effective ally in gaining understanding and support.

Lack of information often leads to unfounded speculation, inaccuracy and misunderstanding.

The effect of the media is formidable and should be used to work to our advantage. We cannot complain about poor coverage if we are not spreading the word about the many positive stories and achievements occurring every day in the West Midlands. Spreading the message is up to you.

Letting the public know about crime through the media encourages awareness and reminds people of the need for crime prevention. It also helps reduce unrealistic fear of crime which is often fanned by false rumours and unfounded speculation.

The police have to be able to match increasing pressure from the media and respond positively and professionally to calls for information.

Remember - an appeal for help in a local newspaper or on regional TV knocks on thousands of doors for you.

This booklet sets out basic guidelines about talking to the media on a wide range of issues. But remember - if in doubt leave it out and contact the Press and Public Relations Department for advice.

It is important to remember the need for a sensible and professional working relationship with the media. Promoting a positive image of the Force is up to each and every one of us.

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- ALWAYS:**
- * Ask journalists to repeat your quotes.
 - * Explain the reasons why information cannot be released.
 - * Refer questions on Force policy or Police Authority matters to the Press and Public Relations Department.

- NEVER:**
- * Say "No Comment".
 - * Give "off the record" comments.
 - * Be drawn into giving comment or opinion on matters outside your knowledge - stick to the FACTS.
 - * Give information which could compromise judicial proceedings either in criminal or disciplinary matters.

- REMEMBER:**
- * As a general rule officers of the rank of Inspector and above are responsible for giving information to the media on operational matters.
 - * The Press and Public Relations Department is here to help. We have press offices in Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton and every division and department has its own nominated press officer to offer advice and assistance.
 - * Although dealing with the media can be demanding and time-consuming, publicity can bring a swift response and considerably shorten your investigation.
 - * Whilst this booklet gives advice on specific incidents it should be read in conjunction with P7 of the Policy and Procedure Manual regarding press and media liaison.

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WHAT THE MEDIA WILL WANT TO KNOW

Checklist:-

- * **An outline** of the incident - (excluding information which may be crucial to an investigation, eg, the exact words used.)
- * **Where** the incident happened and, if applicable, the type of property involved, ie, flat, shop, house.
- * **When** the incident occurred - the time, day and date.
- * **Who** was involved, ie, names (if agreed), ages, occupations, addresses, relationships to victims/accused/witness.
- * **How** the incident happened.
- * **Ages and occupation** of the accused, the area where they live, full details of the charges, whether they have been kept in custody or granted bail, what court they will be appearing at and when. (Do not release names or full addresses until after any court appearance.)
- * **Contact** numbers in cases of appeals for witnesses.
- * **Descriptions** of offenders.
- * **Other information** such as vehicles used, injuries, the name of the hospital victims were taken to, a condition check, amounts of cash stolen. Do not forget newspapers will want photographs of murder victims or people involved in serious RTAs.

ACCIDENTS (see also Road Traffic Accidents)

Personal details of people injured or involved in accidents can be released after relatives have been informed unless there are sensitive reasons to withhold them. If a person does not want their name and address disclosed to the media this should be respected. Do not give opinions about the cause of an accident.

AMOUNTS OF CASH STOLEN

Amounts of cash stolen should be released unless there are **compelling** reasons not to, but this should be the exception. Such exceptions may be where a large amount of money is stolen from small financial premises or from an individual which may make them feel vulnerable to similar attacks.

ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

As a general rule do not publicise the activities of animal rights activists. Often the organisations themselves will contact the media direct and give them details. In these cases the incident should be confirmed but backed up by a request not to publicise.

If the incident involves public safety such as contamination of foods, the Press and Public Relations Department should be informed immediately.

ARSONS AND FIRES

Full details of fires may be released. If arson is suspected this should be made clear (after taking advice from the officer in charge of the investigation) and appeals made for help. Details of anyone killed or injured in a fire can be released once formal identification has taken place and relatives have been informed.

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ARRESTS AND CHARGES (SUB-JUDICE)

Under the 1981 Contempt of Court Act, a case becomes active upon an arrest or the issue of a warrant or summons. There is then a legal responsibility on journalists not to publish or broadcast details which may prejudice a jury. Therefore officers must specify whether a person has been arrested or has attended a police station voluntarily.

Once a case is active, nothing should be released which would create a substantial risk of prejudice. But do not hide behind the sub-judice rule - nothing should be released which identifies a suspect, but the main facts of the matter can be released to the media.

Once charged, the media will want to know the ages and occupations of the accused, the area where they live, full details of the charges, if they are in custody or on bail, what court they will be appearing at and the circumstances leading up to the arrest. Do not release names or full addresses (never release house numbers) until after any court appearance.

ASSAULTS

In the case of assaults on police the identity of the officer is normally given to the media unless there are specific objections. In serious cases the press will usually request a photograph of the injured officer, but this will only be given with the agreement of the officer or a member of their family.

In cases of assault on members of the public, the identity of victims should not be disclosed unless the victim has given their permission.

BOGUS OFFICIALS

Media reports about bogus officials alert members of the public to be on their guard. Where possible give details of the road where the offence took place to raise awareness in the area and appeal for witnesses. If the road name will clearly identify a vulnerable victim, use the name of the nearest main road instead. Take the opportunity wherever possible to pass on crime prevention advice to householders.

BOMB HOAXES

Bomb hoaxes are not passed to the media but can be confirmed if asked. Generally the media do not report details of bomb hoaxes to avoid further nuisance calls and generating fear. In the event of someone being arrested for making hoax calls, inform the Press and Public Relations Department so a press release can be prepared.

BRAVERY

Examples of bravery make good reading. If officers or members of the public have been involved in acts of heroism inform the Press and Public Relations Department as soon as possible so a press release can be prepared. Do not give names of victims in cases involving attempted suicides.

CAUTIONING

Do not give the identity of anyone cautioned for an offence. Instead refer to the fact that "a man" or "a woman" was cautioned.

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COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE POLICE

Queries regarding complaints against the police should be referred to the Press and Public Relations Department who will liaise with Complaints and Discipline to prepare a statement.

CONTAMINATION OF FOODS

No details should be released until a statement has been agreed by the Detective Chief Superintendent (Crime Operations) in conjunction with the Press and Public Relations Department. Officers should only release details contained in the statement and further queries should be referred to the Press Office.

COUNTERFEIT MONEY

As with other types of fraud, alerting the public via the media can help put them on their guard. NCIS have issued strict guidelines covering the release of such information and advice should be sought from the Press and Public Relations Department **before** speaking to the media.

CRIME

Details of general crimes, eg, burglary, robberies, criminal damage, should be given as fully as possible but victims' personal details should only be released with their permission. The road name where the incident took place should be highlighted to alert people living nearby and appeal for witnesses. Do not go into details about the precise method of entry in cases of burglary. Serious crime attracting a lot of media attention should be referred to the Press and Public Relations Department.

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DESCRIPTIONS

Only mention someone's race if it is strictly relevant ie, descriptions. Avoid using words which may be considered offensive eg, half-caste or coloured. Instead use 'mixed race', 'black' and 'Asian'.

DISORDER

Public order incidents can be released with details of how the disorder started, how many people were involved, any damage caused and any injuries to police officers. Give brief details of people charged ie, ages, the area where they live, charges and court dates.

ESCAPES

Prison escapes should be referred to the Home Office although brief details such as what the sentence was being served for and the town where the escapee is from may be confirmed. Full personal details should not be released.

Escapes from police custody should be given on request and include details including where the escape took place, when it happened and if the escapee is considered dangerous. Do not give specific details about how the escape itself took place. The name of the escapee should not be released unless the escape occurred **after** a court appearance. For guidance contact the Press and Public Relations Department.

EXPLOSIONS

It is not up to the police to divulge the cause of a non-criminal explosion and the media should be referred to the appropriate bodies for explanations.

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Explosions involving possible criminal offences should be referred to the Press and Public Relations Department immediately.

FIREARMS

The identity of firearms officers involved in incidents should not be released. Although the type of weapon can be divulged, nothing should be released about tactics, methods of entry or specialist equipment and skills. Do not give the location of the firearms unit. Questions from the media about incidents involving firearms should be referred to the Press and Public Relations Department.

FRAUD

As with general crime, information about fraud alerts the public and puts them on their guard. But do not divulge the exact modus operandi which may lead to 'copycat' crimes.

INTERVIEWS

The Press and Public Relations Department should be contacted in cases involving Force policy.

KERB CRAWLING

Publicity has been shown to reduce the problem of kerb crawling in blighted areas and should be seen as a positive tool when launching crackdowns. Enquiries about specific individuals arrested for kerb crawling should be referred to the Press and Public Relations Department.

KIDNAPPING

In cases of abduction or kidnap where a life may be at risk, the media may be asked to impose a news blackout. This requires the endorsement of the Chief Constable or Deputy Chief Constable and such incidents should be referred

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immediately to Detective Chief Superintendent (Crime Operations), who will also liaise with the Force Public Relations Officer.

MISSING PERSONS

Publicity often works in the case of missing people and should be uppermost in officers' minds. Misper files should be endorsed by CIU before being passed to the Press Office for a release to be prepared. If possible provide a photograph as a description alone is often vague. If the case involves a juvenile, the parents or next of kin's consent should be obtained before any details are released. Cases involving children in care have to be endorsed by the Social Services. The permission of a judge has to be obtained before publicising missing Wards of Court. When a publicised misper returns, let the Press and Public Relations Department know as soon as possible so they can tell the media.

MURDER

Officers should refer to the matter as a "suspicious death" until a murder enquiry is confirmed by the senior investigating officer. A murder enquiry will attract a large number of reporters to the scene so the Press and Public Relations Department should be contacted as early as possible to prepare a holding statement and possibly arrange for a press officer to attend. Details of injuries and any other information should only be released at the discretion of the senior investigating officer. The victim's identity should only be released after relatives have been informed and formal identification has taken place.

POLICY

As a general rule, officers should confine themselves to the facts of an incident - who, what, where, when, why and how. Do not give personal opinions. Queries relating to policy should normally be passed to a senior officer or the Press and Public Relations Department. Do not comment on Police Authority matters until **after** any meeting.

PRESS CONFERENCES

Requests to hold press conferences should be made to the Head of News at the Press and Public Relations Department, Police Headquarters, where there is a purpose-built press conference room. They should only be called for major incidents otherwise they risk being devalued. **Always** seek advice from the Press and Public Relations Department before arranging such a conference.

PRISONERS' PHOTOGRAPHS

Permission for the release of prisoners' photographs for wanted or convicted people must be given by an officer of ACPO rank via the Press and Public Relations Department.

PURSUITS

Details of police pursuits can be released to the media. Confirm a vehicle was being followed by police or a pursuit took place (ie, involving high speed). Do not give specific details about how a resulting accident occurred but confirm a full investigation will be carried out. In the event of a serious accident or a death, the matter should be referred to the Press and Public Relations Department.

RAPE/SEXUAL ASSAULT

Nothing should be released to identify a victim but some personal details such as age and whether they have children can be included. Details surrounding the assault can be released but do not go into degrading descriptions of the sex attack itself. Officers should refer only to 'a rape', 'an indecent assault' or 'a serious sexual assault'.

RESCUES OR ATTEMPTED RESCUES

Details can be released after relatives have been informed. But care should be taken in cases involving attempted suicides - use 'fell' not 'jumped' and 'taken ill' not 'suffering from a drugs overdose'.

ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS

The personal details of people involved in road accidents can be released to the media after relatives have been informed unless there are compelling or sensitive reasons to withhold them (do not release house numbers). Details of the accident should be given but do not apportion blame. Tell the Press and Public Relations Department so they can alert the local media about traffic problems. In cases of fatal road accidents, identities should only be confirmed after formal identification has taken place.

SIEGES

The Press and Public Relations Department should be informed as soon as possible and, if appropriate, a press officer will be sent to the scene to set up a media reception point. If possible, the press officer will organise a vantage point where the media can watch from a safe distance. This discourages reporters attempting to break through police cordons and interfering with the operation.

SUB-JUDICE (SEE ARRESTS AND CHARGES)

SUICIDES/SUDDEN DEATHS

Details can be released of where and when a body was found and who discovered it. Avoid talking about possible injuries until after the post mortem. Release the identity only after relatives have been informed and the body has been formally identified. Do not give personal opinions as to the cause of death - that is for the Coroner to decide. In suspected suicides it is safe to say "At this stage there appear to be no suspicious circumstances and we are not looking for anyone else".

TELEXES

The Press Office's News Desk works mainly from telexes so it is vital that any information **not** to be released to the media is clearly marked. Information on the telex should include ages, occupations, full details of the incident, extent of any injuries and the hospital any victim was taken to. Try to highlight details which are newsworthy - eg, if the victim is eight months pregnant, say so. The gender of victims occasionally needs to be made clear and so does a woman's title (Miss/Mrs). If you are appealing for witnesses make sure you provide an external telephone number for members of the public to ring.

VICTIMS (IDENTITY OF)

In criminal cases the identity of the victim should be withheld unless they have agreed to publicity. But it is important for the victim to be given the choice. Many victims want to tell their story and a touching "human interest" tale will attract

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far more sympathy than an anonymous piece about "a man" or "a woman". 'Telling the story' often helps victims get over the experience. The more publicity a story gets the more it provokes a response from members of the public - witnesses as well as offers of help.

If a victim requests anonymity, this should be respected. But full details about the incident itself should be released, including the road where it happened to alert local residents and appeal for witnesses. Care should be taken not to release details which might 'piece together' the victim's identity, ie, saying the attack took place "outside the victim's home in Road".

In the case of sudden deaths which are likely to attract media attention, relatives should be made aware that the victim's name and address may be given upon request to the media. If there are objections officers should point out that details will be made public through an inquest.

If there is any doubt the matter should be referred to the Press and Public Relations Department.

YOUNG OFFENDERS

The identity of young offenders, aged 17 and under, should not be released nor should any information likely to lead to their identification such as the school they attend. In cases involving Wards of Court the permission of a judge must be obtained before any information is released.

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GENERAL ADVICE

- * If you give a reporter details of an incident which may have wider implications contact the Press and Public Relations Department as soon as possible so they can deal with follow-up enquiries.
- * There should be no exclusive on crime. If you give a story about a crime to one reporter give it upon request to all of them. But journalists' enquiries about non-crime matters should be treated individually. It is unfair to pass on their story to other reporters.
- * Avoid jargon, eg, talk about "a man" or "a woman" rather than "the IP". Your target audience should be an intelligent 16-year-old.
- * Use deadlines to your own advantage. If you miss them you will lose an important opportunity to ask the public for help or put forward the Force's viewpoint.
- * If you cannot answer a question say so and take a note so you can get back to the reporter.
- * If you are appealing for help or you have a newsworthy incident remember the media may want to interview someone. Have someone available to answer follow-up questions and carry out interviews.
- * Remember the Press and Public Relations Department is here to help you. The office is staffed by experienced personnel who can give you help and guidance on any media related issue. Use them.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
The Police and the Media	1
Tips to Remember	2
What the Media will want to know	3
Accidents (see also Road Accidents)	4
Amounts of Cash Stolen	4
Animal Rights Activists	4
Arsons and Fires	4
Arrests and Charges	5
Assaults	5
Bogus Officials	6
Bomb Hoaxes	6
Bravery	6
Cautioning	6
Complaints against the Police	7
Contamination of Food	7
Counterfeit Money	7
Crime	7
Descriptions	8
Disorder	8
Escapes	8
Explosions	8
Firearms	9
Fraud	9
Interviews	9
Kerb Crawling	9
Kidnapping	9
Missing Persons	10
Murder	10
Policy	11
Press Conferences	11
Prisoners' photographs	11
Pursuits	11
Rape/Sexual Assault	12
Rescues/Attempted Rescues	12
Road Traffic Accidents	12
Sieges	12
Sub-Judice (see Arrests and Charges)	13
Suicides/Sudden Deaths	13
Telexes	13
Victims (Identity of)	13
Young Offenders	14
General Advice	15