

Family Liaison Officers – media input session notes

Whatever our personal views of the media, there's no escaping the fact that they have a massive influence on how the force is regarded by the public - and so how we work with them is crucial.

One of the main reasons we give information and interviews to the media is to get an appeal out quickly, so we hopefully get information back that helps us apprehend the offender. The media can help us reach a lot of people in a very short space of time. And save us a lot of time. They can also help us to reassure a lot of people.

Appeals and reassurance are both crucial during a major investigation, on which you could well be working as an FLO.

Where do the media get their information from?

The force
Other emergency services
Witnesses
Family
Friends
Colleagues/employers
Schools

Given the list above, it is important that the family appreciate that not everything they read, see or hear will have been issued by the force, although we will try to 'manage' what's reported, especially if there is an on-going investigation.

How we issue the information to the media

Force Newsline (01785 232525) – updated by the force press office and Duty Officers, and regularly accessed by the media.

Press releases/written statements – in a major investigation these are written and issued by a force press officer, in close liaison with the Senior Investigating Officer, and usually with reference to the FLO and family.

Interviews with SIO.

Press conferences, sometimes including family members.

Media 'facilities'/photo-calls.

NB: FLOs should *only* issue media statements/comments if authorised to do so by the SIO.

Where the press office/r fits in

There is a force press officer on-call at all times.

With a murder or other major investigation, it is highly likely that the press officer will be called to the incident room and work very closely with the management team.

The press officer will be briefed on the inquiry, what the media have been told/reported so far, and what questions the media are asking.

The press officer will attend briefings, and try to identify suitable issues for publicity/potential media pitfalls.

One of the first questions the press officer will ask is 'Who's the FLO?', and will want to make early contact and exchange contact details.

One of the FLO's earliest and regular contacts should be the press officer, to see what information has been issued publicly, and to get copies of press releases to share with the family.

Press releases

Tend to follow a pattern:

1. Confirmation of basic facts - body, location, post mortem arrangements, etc.
2. More re inquiry/team and details of victim. The inquest procedure means that the victim's personal details will very quickly be a matter of public record, which is why the force releases them. However, such details are never released until after next of kin are aware of the death and formal identification has been carried out. A press release at this stage is likely to lead to media interest in the family, if there is none already.
3. Post mortem results and cause of death (though not full details if this could compromise the investigation). Only issued after family told.
4. Depending on nature of the inquiry, daily updates, quotes from SIO and more details about the victim to keep the case in the media and public's eye.
5. 'Anniversary' re-appeals/reconstructions – one week, month, year, etc.
6. Funeral details and media plans/family's wishes.
7. In the longer term, the SIO, press office and FLO should consider media interest in the full inquest. The press office will also work with SIO to prepare media material and statements to issue post-trial, which might include working with family to write a statement on their behalf.

How the FLO can support the media strategy

In issuing information to the media, the SIO has to balance the needs of the investigation with effects on family. The media strategy will very much depend on the support or otherwise of the family. Assuming that there *is* family support, the FLO will work to maintain this, and to encourage a partnership approach to working with the media.

The family might wish to hold a press conference, or to be seen to be doing something to help the media, but this needs to be managed as part of the media strategy. In some cases it might be useful for the family to stay out of media spotlight until the SIO sees advantage in them speaking publicly.

The FLO should keep the family updated about force press releases - but for their *information*, rather than their approval. It is important that the family does not change the SIO's carefully considered words, or something that might harm a line of inquiry.

Not everything in a press release will necessarily be supported by the family, eg revelation of a sexual motive, but the FLO will need to explain the reasons why such detail needs to be released

– perhaps to illustrate the severity of the crime, focus public's minds, warn other potential victims, public safety message.

If the family insists on talking to the media direct, without force support, the FLO should try to feed back what they say, so that the SIO and press officer can prepare for any criticism or issues not already covered by the existing media strategy.

NB: It is *very* important that the family do not comment on key developments like arrest or charge, or during the court case, as this could be prejudicial to a fair trial.

Some practical media considerations for the FLO

Help the SIO/press officer get names/nicknames right.

Photos - give the family an opportunity to issue one *they* would like used, rather than one the media gets from another source.

Antecedents/interests/pen profile - can all help to generate publicity.

Are there any 'tricky' family circumstances/disputes the press office needs to know about, to avoid upsetting the family? Married/divorced? Children? Partners?

The FLO might be asked to help the family write a 'tribute' statement, to issue via the press office. Encourage them to pay tribute to the victim, to say how much they will be missed, and how they as a family have been affected by the death. Use language the family would use.

Media at the family's address

Remember - the media can HELP an inquiry.

Be professional, not personal. Don't be drawn/pressured into talking to media. Consult the SIO/press office first.

Don't assume the family's wishes about the talking to the media, and avoid leading questions –

If they don't want to talk, let the press office know and perhaps suggest to the family that they issue a statement/tribute via the force. This can include a *request* for the family to be left alone.

Consider pinning a polite note to the family's front door, eg *"We do not wish to speak direct to the media at this very difficult time. Family statements will be issued via Staffordshire Police press office, tel 01785 234864. Thank you."*

Press conferences

Always planned, and SIO's key messages are usually scripted, with potential questions and answers worked through in advance with press officer.

If the family takes part, conference would be organised and ordered in a way to suit them – eg family could read statement then leave, before SIO takes questions.

The press officer could have an advance 'run-through' with the family, and could help them write a statement, or write it for them.

The FLO will usually be best placed to advise the SIO and press officer on which family member would be the most appropriate spokesperson.

Immediately following a press conference, some media will request 'one-to-one' interviews with a family member. 'Pooled' interviews can help to ease any pressure - ie one TV crew, one radio station and one newspaper conduct the interviews, on the agreement the material is shared with other media.