

Urgent message: maintaining a proper relationship with our media

Dear colleagues

As you will be aware, the police service nationally is under intense scrutiny in a number of areas, including how we manage relationships with the media.

In Suffolk, we are fortunate enough to have a strong local media, which is broadly supportive of our efforts to keep the county safe but also vigorous in holding us to account.

We enjoy a positive relationship with our local media, based on being open and honest and only withholding information when we must.

However, a number of incidents over the past few days, coupled with the current national background, have made me concerned that there are individuals within our organisation who are confused about this relationship - and are passing information to the media in a way which is both unprofessional and damaging.

Our press office has been responding to a number of media queries, where journalists have been passed information which should not be in the public domain.

This includes details from confidential Police Authority papers as well as data, including names, of staff whose posts are subject of our on-going work to make efficiencies.

This is an unacceptable situation.

As you know, we are in the midst of having to radically re-organise our service in the face of the toughest financial challenge.

Our work to make the savings needed over the next four years involves looking at posts right across the Constabulary – and we aim to ensure that decisions affecting these posts are communicated in a sensitive manner to the right people at the right time, using the most appropriate means.

This important work is being undermined by individuals who, it appears, would rather have their colleagues read or hear about developments affecting them through the local media.

At a time when, nationally, our service is under scrutiny for its relationships with the media – and just days after the HMIC has finished an integrity review in our force – it is frustrating in the extreme that this situation has arisen.

To be clear: there are no circumstances under which unauthorised information should be disclosed. It is a disciplinary offence.

We need a positive relationship with the media – but it must remain transparent and professional at all times.

I have spoken to representatives of the Police Federation, Unison and the Superintendents' Association. All share my concern and support my views on this issue – and have added their comments at the end of my message.

All officers and staff should ensure that they inform the press office of any interview requests they receive from the local media – and seek guidance from press office staff on media policy matters.

ACPO has recently issued some new guidelines for managing media relationships, which the Deputy Chief Constable is currently examining with our communications team. These guidelines will be published in due course to assist you.

Finally, please remember that everyone in our organisation has a duty to report corrupt, dishonest or unethical behaviour by officers or staff to Professional Standards – and that this can be done, in confidence, via the on-line confidential reporting section on the Intranet.

Simon Ash
Chief Constable

Matt Gould, Chair of Suffolk Police Federation, said: "Following the Chief Constable's comments today, the Suffolk Police Federation wish to record that they endorse his views. We should all avoid inappropriate disclosure to the press.

"Individuals are at risk of alienating their colleagues and becoming subject of discipline investigation should they disclose unauthorised information. Members are reminded they can and should raise issues of concern with Federation Officers."

Alan Caton, from the Superintendents' Association, said: "We are at a time of great change in the police service both locally and nationally and it is quite right that we consult with our staff about these changes.

"However, much of these discussions are around options for efficiency savings and are only proposals for chief officers and the Police Authority to consider.

"We do not believe it helps with these discussions if these proposals reach the public domain before final decisions on both the future structure and savings are made, and we fully support the Chief Constable in his stance".

Mavis Hurst, from UNISON, said:

“Unison agree with the sentiments of the chief constable. We believe this is not the way forward in these difficult times. It is not fair that colleagues hear about potential job losses via the press.”