

AVON AND SOMERSET POLICE

Media Protocol

Restricted

Media Protocol

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Our mission is to make the communities we serve feel safe, be safe, and have the highest level of confidence in our policing service.

Public confidence is significantly influenced – positively and negatively - by what our communities see, hear and read through the media. And in this era of 24-hour-newsrooms, social media, community websites, and “citizen journalists”, the flow of news is instantaneous and fast moving.

That means we too have to move swiftly. Through these media channels, combined with the continuing use of other more traditional routes – such as direct face-to-face and printed communications, we need to be as responsive and creative as possible in reaching and influencing public opinion. Timing is all, and once on the back foot it’s often very difficult to regain control of the agenda.

The extent to which the media affects public opinion should not be underestimated. There is no doubt that they remain an extremely powerful means of communicating with a wide audience in a swift and timely manner

Our over-riding principles - in the interests of public confidence and reassurance – of being open, honest and accountable are at the heart of our Media Protocol and set the framework for our work alongside the media.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

We know that people turn to our website for factual and accurate information when they hear or read about an incident through other sources. We also know that if the information still isn’t there when they try a second time we’ve probably lost them.

The importance of swiftly updating the website with details of incidents as or even before they are released to the general media cannot be over-stated if we are to exercise some management over the details, tone and manner in which an incident is reported to the public. We should be seen as a reliable source of information and the “factual” version of events.

Social Networking Sites

Communications via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the like are used widely by print and broadcast journalists. They also afford us an opportunity for early engagement with key audiences, particularly during a major or critical incident. A separate protocol exists concerning the force’s monitoring and use of social networking sites from a communications perspective.

3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Our work with the media is governed by a range of legislation and the legal basis for this protocol is drawn from:

- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

- Police Act 1997
- Crime and Disorder Act 1998
- Data Protection Act 1998
- Sex Offenders Act 1997
- Contempt of Court Act 1981
- Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974
- Children Act 1989
- Common Law.

Additionally, the protocol draws heavily upon the ACPO CAG (Association of Chief Police Officers Communications Advisory Group) guidelines.

Common sense, honest and integrity at all times

It is important to note that all of our dealings with the media must be approached with a high degree of integrity. Current ACPO Guidance for dealing with the media states:

"There is an expectation that you, as police officers and staff, have integrity, but if you make mistakes you will be supported as long as you have been transparent and honest. However, a robust approach will be taken to those who inappropriately leak or who have inappropriate relationships with the media and are not transparent in the purpose or content of their meetings with the media."

4. OUR BASIC OPERATING PRINCIPLES

A number of basic principles underpin our approach to our media relations, namely:

- **Openness, honesty and accountability** - We will be as open, honest and accountable as possible, within relevant legal constraints and also bearing in mind operational policing considerations.
- **Accuracy** - We will proactively issue accurate information to the media/public in as timely a manner as possible, as long as there is a legitimate purpose for doing so including:
 - assistance with identifying offenders/witnesses
 - assistance with locating a vulnerable missing person
 - public warning about a dangerous person who should not be approached
 - reassurance to the public, and a deterrent to other would-be offenders, that we are bringing offenders to justice by proactively publicising the arrest and charging of people, and informing the media of forthcoming court cases
 - raise awareness of crime prevention messages to reduce the risk of other people becoming victims of crime
 - public warning of any incident which may disrupt their daily lives (ie major road collision or gas leak which needs an area to be cordoned off)
 - counter/dispel/correct any misinformation in the public domain
 - highlight the positive, proactive, policing work which takes place in support of the front-line operational activities, all aimed to make our communities safer.
- **Spokesperson** - Wherever possible, and subject to operational policing demands, we will put forward a relevant spokesperson of appropriate rank/knowledge/expertise to provide a public face to any given incident.
- **Clarity** - We will not lie or in any other way seek to deliberately mislead the media. However we will be robust in our responses where there is an operational or investigative basis to do so, and reserve our right not to respond if there is a possibility of jigsaw identification of individuals or crucial lines of investigation

- **Exclusives** - We do not routinely offer exclusives to individual media, as this only serves to alienate and antagonise the wider media. The general rule is that we give everything we can to all relevant media at the same time. But there will be occasions, usually based on geographic considerations or the specialised nature of a certain operation, when some media will be proactively targeted ahead of others. We will respect the exclusivity of a journalist who comes to us with a story, allowing them the opportunity to publish/broadcast that story, with our response, before we proactively offer it to any other media outlets (although we will, of course, provide the response if other journalists approach us before the first caller has had chance to run the story).
- **Nature of our response** - "No Comment" is not an option under any circumstances; we will always provide a comment from a named officer.
- **Officers and the media** - All members of staff are ambassadors for the force, its image and reputation. Quotes from local officers or 'specialists' carry far more credence than quotes attributed to unknown figures at Police HQ and the Corporate Communications Team are there to help facilitate this. However, if a direct approach is made by a journalist you should take simple precautions and exercise caution before responding. Members of staff are authorised to talk to the media about routine police matters which are relevant to their daily duties; but, for example, a motorway patrol officer would not be expected to take part in a media interview and represent the force's view on the legalisation of a particular drug. It is always advisable to call the Corporate Communications Team for guidance and support *before* giving a response.
- **Deadlines** - We will make every effort to meet media deadlines. However, operational policing concerns will always take priority and it may be possible in some cases that we do not meet media deadlines.
- **Two week rule** – Following direct feedback from multiple media, we will not proactively issue an appeal/story that is more than two weeks old, unless there are exceptional circumstances including:
 - a sexual offence which have happened some time ago, but in which the victim has only had the confidence to come forward within the past two weeks.
 - an assault where there is not enough initial information for us to be able to draft even a basic appeal, and where the victim has been unconscious/unable to provide us with even the most basic details.

Many media outlets will not run a story more than two weeks old, because it is simply too old. To avoid this, officers should consider the media, including social media, as an important tool in their investigative options from the outset.

- **Update appeals and the two week rule** - If an image is being released, or some new information disclosed about a historic unsolved incident, this is acceptable as long as an initial release was made within the two week period. This becomes an "update" rather than the first mention of an incident.
- **Sensitive & reputationally damaging issues** - Force-wide, or local reputationally damaging, issues which require a force 'stance' or policy, should be routinely referred to the Corporate Communications Department.
- **Relationship with the media** - Our expectation is that we are treated with professional courtesy and respect, and provided with enough details about a story to allow us to give a properly informed response. Most importantly, we expect to be given every reasonable opportunity and enough time to exercise a right-of-reply to every story

- **Professional, friendly and interested** - Corporate Communications staff are expected to be professional, friendly and interested in all their interactions with the media.

5. OFF THE RECORD OR 'GUIDANCE'

Journalists will inevitably ask, at some stage, for additional information or details which they promise not attribute to you, or for "guidance" or other "off the record" information.

There are occasions when off-record information or guidance has been provided, under very specific circumstances, which has been beneficial to the force, either by a journalist delaying the publication of a story (where such publication may, for example, jeopardise an imminent arrest), change the tone/approach taken towards a story by a journalist, or even deter them from running the story at all.

The decision to give guidance or off the record information must be based on knowledge of the media organisation and, most importantly, the integrity and trustworthiness of the journalist. Only Corporate Communications Officers, in consultation with the Head of Corporate Communications, will speak to any journalist 'off the record'.

6. NAMING PEOPLE

There is a rapidly growing tendency for media to name victims and suspects at the earliest possible time. Whilst we do not to issue nor confirm a name pre-charge, this will not always prevent the media from publishing the details.

Even after one media organisation has gone public with a name, we will maintain our general approach as outlined below. This removes the potential for the media to claim the usual defence of privilege on the basis that they've been supplied with information by someone else should an individual challenge the media for naming them or potentially breaching Human Rights or Contempt of Court legislation.

Victims of crime

The identities of the victims of crime are not routinely divulged proactively to the media. Nor are they confirmed if put to us by the media. The obvious exception to this rule is where the victim or their family agree to speak to the media to help reinforce the witness appeal and to support the investigation.

Fatalities

Decisions on naming deceased – be they murder victims or victims of road traffic collisions – are taken in consultation with the relevant Senior Investigation Officer and/or Family Liaison Officer.

We usually allow at least 24 hours before issuing/confirming a name, in order to allow time for relevant next of kin to be appropriately informed by properly trained police officers. After that 24 hours, we would still consider delaying confirmation of a name if those relevant next of kin have not yet been reached.

Suspects/Offenders

We do not routinely disclose, nor confirm, the identity of individuals who have been arrested in connection with an enquiry. There are exceptions to this rule, where a situation could arise in which a number of other individuals could be clearly implicated if more specific details about the suspect are not divulged.

We do normally name an individual if and when that person has been charged with a criminal offence.

7. PHOTOGRAPHS

Our approach to issuing photographs of convicted/wanted people is broadly in line with the ACPO CAG guidelines, and based on the need for a legitimate policing purpose, proportionality, and considerations of the Data Protection and Human Rights Acts.

Convicted People

If someone is convicted of a crime and given a custodial sentence, we will issue a photograph.

An obvious exception to this rule is where the publication of a photograph could lead to the identification of a juvenile victim of crime, particularly in relation to sexual offences.

Photographs can be issued upon conviction and pre-sentence, if the likelihood of a custodial sentence being imposed is extremely high. Where there is a strong element of doubt, the photograph will be withheld until sentence.

Suspended prison sentences do not fall into this category, because the person made the subject of the sentence is still in the community. The release of conviction photographs following requests from magazines and documentaries for use in features/programmes due for publication/broadcast many months after the conviction is not generally considered to be proportionate.

Wanted People

All other reasonable means of tracing an individual should have been used, where practical, before their image is issued to the media/put on the force website.

Where identification issues exist (Code D, Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984), the CPS should be consulted before an image is released.

8. PRE-TRIAL BRIEFINGS

We will consider pre-trial briefings in advance of the conclusion of a significant court case to encourage more informed reporting by the media and prevent the steps of the court scramble for a police reaction at the end of a case.

Such briefings are very tightly controlled and usually involve embargoed interviews with the Senior Investigating Officer, images of key evidence/exhibits, an outline of the case and any specific peculiarities, access to relevant experts (eg perhaps a ballistics expert, forensic expert etc).

They are only considered when there are clear beneficial outcomes for the force in allowing the media to cover a case from a far more informed point of view and helping the public to get a more realistic picture of the full scope and extent of police investigation.

Clearly, there are risks involved in giving the media access to such information before a trial, and such briefings must be robustly managed, with properly accredited journalists signing legally-binding indemnity forms.

9. MEDIA ATTENDING POLICE RAIDS

The media will often jump at the chance to accompany the police on raids. When considering such opportunities, we need to think about whether:

- The project addresses matters which are in the public interest

- It is likely to inform or reassure the public
- It will help prevent or detect crime.

These need to be balanced against potential risks. For example, could the media attendance:

- Interfere with an individual's right to a fair trial or privacy
- Cause distress or harassment to those being investigated or to innocent members of the public
- Jeopardise future police operations.

Most risks can be managed in advance by agreement. We have a clear written agreement based on ACPO CAG guidance which determines the roles and responsibilities of all involved, and requires the media to confirm that they have appropriate public liability insurance.

10. POOLED ARRANGEMENTS

There are occasions when it is more appropriate for an interview opportunity or event to be organised on a pooled basis, rather than be open to every interested journalist. On these occasions, attendance is usually restricted to, at most, one TV crew, one radio journalist and one print journalist, plus their photographer.

It is usual practice, in order to avoid accusations of showing unfair favour to one particular outlet, for the media to be asked to decide among themselves who will make up the pool.

If they cannot decide, or if a decision is taken to restrict the pool even tighter, or if it is likely that the scenario would attract significant national as well as regional demand, it is common practice among police forces for the Press Association to be used as the "pooled" media, and for PA to supply all the others (usually waiving their usual fees).

11. DOCUMENTARIES

We are very selective about the documentaries in which we agree to participate. We do not get involved in "quick fire" police video compilation or "reality" TV programmes.

All other documentary requests are judged on their own merits for the contribution they make to increasing public understanding and awareness of a positive policing purpose.

Where it is considered that there may be benefits to the force in taking part in a documentary, the prospective makers are asked to provide comprehensive details about their proposal. The broadcast commissioner is also a material factor in our final decision.

Should it be decided to proceed, a standard but detailed legal agreement, drawn up by the force's Director of Legal Services and signed by the Head of Corporate Communications and a senior representative of the broadcasting organisation, has to be in place before filming starts.

The agreement also makes provision for the force to have a preview of the programme and the makers are required to give an undertaking that clips containing factual inaccuracies, covert operational tactics, non-disclosable identities of individuals etc be removed from the programme before it is broadcast.

12. KIDNAP

There is a long-standing agreement between ACPO and the media which sets guidelines for the implementation of a voluntary news blackout in cases of kidnap where certain conditions apply. This agreement is known as Operation Media.

It is dependent upon early and close liaison being established and maintained between the relevant Detective Chief Superintendent and the Head/Deputy Head of Corporate Communications. Failure to instigate Operation Media at the first opportunity may result in poor news management with potentially disastrous results.

13. CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS SERVICE TO THE MEDIA AND THE ORGANISATION

Working hours

The Corporate Communications Department is staffed between 07.30hrs and 18.00hrs, Monday to Friday. The lines are open to media calls between 08.00hrs and 17.30hrs.

Outside of these hours, journalists are encouraged to contact the Force Incident Manager (FIM) in the first instance.

Out of hours duty press officer service

We operate an out-of-hours mobile phone, which allows journalists to contact the on-call Media Relations Officer directly.

This number is for major incidents/emergencies and on-going incidents only. It is not for routine follow-up enquiries, statistical enquiries, non-urgent interview requests or anything else of a non-emergency nature.

The number is given to selected journalists/media organisations on the basis that they agree not to abuse the service.

Extended 24/7 emergency and critical incident cover

We do not have enough officers to provide an extended comprehensive round-the-clock service unless required on an exceptional basis during a critical incident.

In the event of a critical incident/major emergency, the Corporate Communications Department has a Critical Incident Plan which will be implemented.

AND FINALLY

A few other points to bear in mind...

- A major incident or significant crime trend will not just require a "media relations" reactive response. It may be appropriate to employ proactive PR tactics to help alleviate community tension and increase public reassurance, alongside the more obvious 'front line' communications activity.
- The Corporate Communications Department should be engaged at the earliest possible opportunity on any issue likely to attract media/public attention. Time is of the essence if we are to remain in control of managing the media coverage of the incident and our response to it.
- It is important to brief Corporate Communications as fully as possible. The team are there to advise and support officers across the force, and provide a substantial buffer between the investigation / incident

team and the media. The advice we give, and strategy we propose, is only ever as effective as the information we have to work with. Our suggested approach may well change if we are made aware of the full picture.

- Remember: there is at least one MRO available, 24 hours a day, 365 days per year, to provide any media handling/communications advice to police officers and staff in support of their operational activities.
- Think of the media as a powerful tool but remember, we have an element of control over the "on" switch, but very little control over the "off" switch.
- If the absence of information from us, the media will search something out for themselves. It is better to adopt a proactive media approach where we set the agenda than to be on the back foot playing catch up.

Contact Corporate Communications:

Media line: 01275 816350

Duty press officer out of hours: 07919 693752

Outlook: \Corporate Communications or #Corporate communications Department

Email: Corporatecommunicationsdepartment@avonandsomerset.police.uk

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