



College of  
Policing

# Guidance on Relationships with the Media

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APP Reference Material

# Contents

1	Introduction.....	3
2	Key principles.....	4
3	Engaging with the media.....	5
4	Exclusives.....	10
5	Conclusion.....	12

# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This document provides police officers and staff with guidance on managing the relationship between the police service and the media.
- 1.2 This guidance should be considered by forces alongside their own media and communications policies. It has been produced to ensure greater consistency between forces and in response to the Leveson Inquiry findings.
- 1.3 It remains the responsibility of individual forces to ensure that their interactions and relationships with all media representatives are professional, transparent and capable of withstanding scrutiny.

## 2 Key principles

- 2.1 Legitimacy is an essential aspect of the British policing model, based on consent. The press and other forms of media play an important part in assuring police legitimacy and protecting the public interest.
- 2.2 Police interaction with the media should be guided by a legitimate policing purpose, which is one related to the core values and standards of policing, set out in the Statement of Mission and Values.
- 2.3 The relationship between police and media should be undertaken in a manner which lives up to the highest standards of impartiality and integrity.
- 2.4 The police service has a duty to safeguard the confidentiality and integrity of information, which must be balanced against the duty to be open and transparent wherever possible.

## 3 Engaging with the media

3.1 The media has a significant role in holding policing to account and informing the public about the work of the police service. There is an obligation on the police service to engage with the media, both to communicate what the police are trying to do strategically and, at an operational level, to engage the public in fighting crime. Examples include making appeals for information and for the identification of suspects and witnesses.

### 3.2 Who should speak?

3.2.1 Officers and staff are encouraged to speak to the media about matters for which they are responsible, in accordance with their organisation's procedures and guidance. They should be open, honest and approachable.

As a simple rule, police officers and staff should ask: 'am I the person responsible for communicating about this issue and is there a policing purpose for doing so?' If the answer to both parts of this question is 'yes', they should go ahead.

### 3.3 Role of the press office

3.3.1 A press office is there to offer professional advice and support. As well as being a specialist resource to engage, inform and meet the considerable demand for information from modern media, it has a specialist role to play in a police operation or investigation, where an effective communications strategy is a critical aspect of success.

### 3.4 Meeting with and talking to journalists

3.4.1 Police officers and staff should be fair, accurate, relevant and timely in providing information. The basis of a conversation should be clearly established between both parties before information is exchanged.

3.4.2 Journalists and their sources may use 'speaking terms' to establish the basis for a briefing or conversation. Definitions vary, but the police service will generally use the following terms:

- **On the record** – means all that is said can be reported, quoted and attributed. Where possible, all conversations should be on this basis and it should always be assumed that a conversation is on the record unless expressly agreed otherwise in advance.
- **Non-reportable briefing** – this phrase covers a background briefing which is not to be reported. It can be used to provide further context around an 'on the record' statement.
- **Embargoed briefing** – means content of the briefing can be reported, but not until a specific event or time.

3.4.3 It is important to be aware that there are a range of terms for describing the use to which briefings and comments can be put. Speaking terms are sometimes misunderstood or used interchangeably. For this reason it is always important to make sure both parties share the same understanding before exchanging information and to make a record of this.

3.4.4 The ability to converse informally and frankly on an unattributable basis where appropriate is generally uncontroversial. For example, the Chatham House Rule is used by a range of organisations to allow speaker anonymity, encourage openness and information sharing.

There will be occasions when it may be appropriate for police officers or staff to speak on these terms to clarify or illustrate a point, for example, to guide media away from an inaccurate story. Any such occasions should be authorised and recorded. The principle that police officers and staff should speak on matters for which they are responsible and where there is a policing purpose for doing so should apply.

- 3.4.5 In circumstances where policy or organisational matters may be on the agenda for discussion, it is good practice for a press officer also to be present.
- 3.4.6 If the matter being spoken about goes beyond force level and concerns national policing, advice can be obtained from the College of Policing press office (on national standards, policy, guidance) or the ACPO press office (if an operational issue). Contact can be facilitated through a force press office.
- 3.4.7 Where an officer or member of staff meets with a journalist, takes part in an interview or provides information verbally or in writing about a matter for which they are responsible, a note of the meeting or disclosure should be recorded in a diary or pocket book.
- 3.4.8 Chief officers should record all contact with the media where policing matters are discussed. A record of contact should be made to the effect that communication has taken place and the subject matter of that communication. Informal or chance meetings where work-related issues are not discussed need not be recorded.

### 3.5 Personal information

- 3.5.1 There is nothing to prevent police forces from naming an arrested person where there is a policing purpose for doing so. The media will often identify and name an arrested person without assistance from the police. Individuals themselves have the right to inform others of their arrest.
- 3.5.2 Police forces must balance an individual's right to respect for a private and family life, the rights of publishers to freedom of expression and the rights of defendants to a fair trial. Decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis but, save in clearly identified circumstances, or where legal restrictions apply, the names or identifying details of those who are arrested or suspected of a crime should not be released by police forces to the press or the public. Such circumstances include a threat to life, the prevention or detection of crime or a matter of public interest and confidence. This approach aims to support consistency and avoid undesirable variance which can confuse press and public.
- 3.5.3 A decision to release the name of an arrested person should be made at a chief officer level and a record made of the reason for releasing the information. Forces may provide non-identifiable information such as the age, gender, offence and a general location of arrest.
- 3.5.4 Personal information about witnesses or victims should not be disclosed without assurance that there are no legal restrictions which apply and should be done in agreement with witnesses or victims. Where no agreement can be reached, there must be a public interest reason for releasing that information.



3.5.5 At the point of charge, the release of information can include the name, address, occupation and charge details for an adult and should be released where no legal restrictions apply. The Crown Prosecution Service has advised that if there are circumstances where an individual is not named at point of charge, that decision should be taken in conjunction with them.

## 3.6 Notifiable associations

3.6.1 If you have a relationship with a specific journalist on a personal basis outside of your role as a police officer or member of police staff (such as a relative or close friend), details should be logged within your force in accordance with local policy and procedure.

## 4 Exclusives

- 4.1 Media organisations should be treated in a fair and equal manner. This means that once in the public domain, information released by the police should be available to all. Where a media organisation generates an 'exclusive', their right to share information in confidence with the police should be respected. It may be appropriate for the police to work with a particular media organisation on an issue (such as with a local paper campaigning against a local crime issue), but the same opportunities should also be available to other media organisations.
- 4.2 On some occasions it may be necessary to delay the release of information to the media to ensure that resources are in place to respond to public feedback. For example, an appeal for witnesses or information, where officers need to be immediately available to respond to arrest named suspects.
- 4.3 It may be beneficial to take the press on operations. If this is done, it should be in a manner which avoids favouritism and forces should consider 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.

There are further risks to consider. The following questions should be answered prior to agreeing to take the press on operations. Could the venture:

- interfere with an individual's right to a fair trial and privacy?
- cause unnecessary distress or harassment to those being investigated, their family or innocent members of the community?
- jeopardise future police operations or reveal covert police tactics?

If the operation results in an arrest, reference should be made to paragraphs 3.5.1 to 3.5.3.

- 4.4 It should be remembered that media access to private premises is at the discretion of the owner, legitimate occupier or some other person who can legally authorise access. Media access to private premises is something for the media to negotiate, not the police.

## 5 Conclusion

- 5.1 This guidance does not provide answers to every situation but sets an approach and ethos which will help police officers and staff establish a productive and effective relationship with the media.
- 5.2 Maintaining this common standard may require different actions by forces, appropriate to the specific circumstances. Police officers and staff should use common sense and always be clear why they are doing something and how it may be perceived by others.
- 5.3 A robust, open and transparent relationship between the police and the media is vital in a democratic society. The police service should strive for an open, professional and strong relationship with the media and expect to be held to account on behalf of the public.

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