



ASSOCIATION OF
CHIEF POLICE OFFICERS

Interim ACPO Guidance for Relationships with the Media

The Association of Chief Police Officers has agreed to this guidance being circulated to, and adopted by, Police Forces in England, Wales & Northern Ireland.

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Document information

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Author	Colette Paul/Oliver Cattermole
Force/Organisation	ACPO
ACPO Business Area	Presidential BA
Contact details	020 7084 8945
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This guidance has been produced by the ACPO Presidential Business Area and has been approved by Chief Constables' Council in April 2012. The purpose of this guidance is to provide a framework for police officers and staff with an interim approach on the relationship of the police service with the media, in all of its forms. It will be updated according to legislative and policy changes and re-published as required.

Any queries relating to this document should be directed to either the author detailed above or the ACPO Programme Support Office on 020 7084 8958/8959.

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1. SECTION 1 – INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This guidance provides police officers and staff with interim guidelines on the relationship of the police service with the media, in all of its forms.
- 1.2 These guidelines should be considered by forces alongside their own media and communications policies. They support existing ACPO guidance including the ACPO Communications Advisory Group (2010) guidelines. They will be reviewed in the light of findings from the Leveson Inquiry and following the election of Police and Crime Commissioners in November 2012.
- 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. SECTION 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. SECTION 3 – RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

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

Who should speak?

- 3.2 Officers and staff are encouraged to speak to the media about factual matters which relate to their role. They should be open, honest and approachable.

Role of the press office

- 3.3 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.

Meeting with and talking to journalists

- 3.4 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.

- 3.5 Journalists and their sources may use 'speaking terms' to establish the basis for a conversation. Definitions vary, but in general:
- On the record – means that a journalist can report, quote and name their source. 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.
 - Background / guidance – means that information provided can be reported without it being attributed to a source, whether named or not. This is sometimes used to provide further context around an on the record statement.
 - Off the record – means that use of information provided is restricted altogether. Occasionally there may be a legitimate reason for an off the record conversation or briefing to take place, such as where news reporting may have an impact on a current investigation or as a means of preventing inaccuracies or misunderstanding.
- 3.6 It is important to be aware that speaking terms are sometimes misunderstood or used interchangeably. For this reason it is always important to clarify how they will apply before exchanging information.
- 3.7 Personal information about suspects, witnesses or victims should not be disclosed without assurance that there are no legal restrictions which apply.
- 3.8 It is good practice, where possible, to have a press officer present when meeting or speaking with a journalist privately. If this is not possible police officers or staff should consider asking their press office if they can provide other assistance to help them prepare.
- 3.9 If the matter being spoken about goes beyond force level and concerns national policing then advice can be obtained from the ACPO Press Office.
- 3.10 Forces should ensure that any allegations of improper disclosure of information are assessed and proportionate action taken. Where an officer or member of staff meets in private with a journalist, or provides information verbally about a matter they are responsible for, a note of the meeting or disclosure should be recorded in a diary or pocket book.
- 3.11 If a police officer or member of staff shares information in a public forum, such as a public meeting, or through the internet or a social media feed such as Twitter, no additional record is necessary.
- 3.12 Where an officer or member of staff speaks to the media, either on or off the record, about a significant operational or organisational matter, a record of the conversation should be made.

4. SECTION 4 – INTEGRITY

- 4.1 It is essential to the standards of integrity demanded of the police service that police officers and staff should recognise and avoid or respond appropriately to potential conflicts of interest. These can be understood as situations where there may be competing obligations or interests to those which relate to the legitimate policing purpose for engaging with the media.
- 4.2 Where a police officer or member of staff has a family or personal relationship with a member of the media outside of their professional policing role, it should be disclosed and recorded under a force notifiable associate policy.
- 4.3 Officers and staff should not drink alcohol on duty.
- 4.4 Police officers and staff who are off duty should behave in a manner which does not discredit the police service or undermine public confidence.
- 4.5 Any gift or hospitality must be recorded in accordance with force policy.

- 4.6 Police officers and staff have a clear duty to report to a line manager any corrupt practice or perception of corruption (eg offer of reward for information, any unacceptable level of hospitality, or seeking to engender an inappropriate relationship).

5. SECTION 5 – CHALLENGE INACCURACIES

- 5.1 The media have a responsibility to produce accurate and balanced reporting. Where possible, it is good practice to challenge inaccuracies or lack of balance. There are a number of ways of doing this and a Press Office will be able to provide advice.
- 5.2 If a mistake has been made by an officer or member of staff and misinformation has been given to the media it is important to correct that quickly to ensure accurate reporting. Again a Press Office will be able to advise how to go about this.

6. SECTION 6 – EXCLUSIVES

- 6.1 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), where it serves a policing purpose to do so. All media organisations have the right to consideration for such opportunities.
- 6.2 On some occasions it may be necessary to briefly delay the release of information to the media to ensure that resources are in place to respond to public feed back, for example an appeal for witnesses or information, where officers need to be immediately available to respond to arrest named suspects.

7. SECTION 7 – GOOD NEWS STORIES

- 7.1 Police officers and staff should seek to identify opportunities to communicate proactively about the force, their work and policing in general. Information can be communicated internally, to the public, with partners and through social networks. Legitimacy and public confidence in policing can be supported through positive news stories as well as reactive responses to news. In particular, stories may be found where members of the public have helped police achieve good results and can provide an opportunity for a force to thank the public in return. It is good practice to bring matters to the attention of Press Office in good time.

8. SECTION 8 – COVERT TACTICS

- 8.1 Covert tactics, including those referred to in evidence, are successful because they are covert. It is unhelpful to future operations to draw attention to tactics in press interviews.

9. SECTION 9 – SOCIAL NETWORKING

- 9.1 Forces will have their own social networking policy or guidance but the same rules and ethos that apply for dealing with the traditional media also apply to the use of social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Social media channels can have benefits as a way to start conversations, build communities of interest, engage with the public and provide information. Professionally, Facebook can be useful to provide more information than Tweeting alone and photographs/video clips can be added. Police officers and staff should be aware of the danger of material being used out of context.

- 9.2 It is important to note that constraints apply even to the private use of Facebook by serving police officers and staff. Personal information that could impact on a police employees' professional reputation or that of their police force should not be shared. Additionally, cases or work related issues should not be discussed on private accounts via Facebook, LinkedIn or any other social media.

10. SECTION 10 – THE QUICK CHECK

- 10.1 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.
- 10.2 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.
- 10.3 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.

10.4 To summarise

- P**repare well
- R**ecord made when necessary
- E**xpect to be recorded so behave accordingly
- S**eek advice when needed
- S**hare information for policing purposes if right to do so