
Special Notice 19/00

Friday 22 September 2000

A new policy for relations with the media



**METROPOLITAN
POLICE**

■ **A new policy for relations with the media**

When I launched my policing pledge for Londoners I made it clear that we needed to improve our relationship with the media. As an organisation we have so many good stories to tell but far too many fail to reach the viewers, listeners and readers or those who report on the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS).

We therefore, need to take a new approach to our working with the media by developing more effective and positive relationships with journalists. This is a job for us all, not just the Directorate of Public Affairs (DPA).

Over the years, I have seen the Met become increasingly cautious in its media relations and become far too reactive. **This cautiousness can breed suspicion and contempt, while an open approach tends to breed confidence and respect.** If we are to gain the goodwill, confidence and support of the general public and achieve our aim of making London a safer place, we need to re-engage with the media and seize every opportunity to be much more proactive.

I want to see Metropolitan Police officers and civil staff representing the Service through the media, speaking up about their achievements, correcting inaccuracies and just as importantly, explaining why things may not have gone as we would have liked.

Our policy

The public has a huge interest in law and order issues and the media pays significant attention to matters that involve policing and crime and therefore we must be both proactive and reactive.

By being proactive we intend to gain maximum media coverage and understanding of MPS policies, actions and decisions.

By being reactive we set out to put the MPS point of view to the media when asked to respond to a situation or issue in which we are involved or have an interest.

It is our policy to be open and honest in dealing with the media and respond to their enquiries within their deadlines as far as possible. We will tell the media things which:

- are in the best interests of the public to know about;
- help to show the public the way in which the police go about their work; and
- help to build public confidence in the police.

We have a duty to let the media know things that should be in the public domain. In the course of our work we gather information which can be released to the media for policing purposes, such as crime and road accident prevention. However, in doing so we need to balance the policing benefit against protecting the rights of any individual or victim and ensuring the successful conclusion of any investigation.

Providing information and talking to the media

Our aim must be for staff to provide the media with factual information about incidents, cases, investigations or issues they are involved in, providing that an embargo would not be broken or disclosure would compromise an investigation, operation or the judicial process.

There will be situations when it would be inappropriate for officers and civil staff to comment, *such as with issues of security, terrorism and other critical incidents*, where there are procedures in place and/or a dedicated spokesperson will be appointed.

However, as a general rule, unless specific instructions exist the principles are:

Operational information

- Inspectors and above are authorised to speak to the media about their own areas of responsibility.
- Where appropriate, officers below the rank of inspector may speak to the media but only with the approval of a senior officer.

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Support staff and general matters

- Support staff should only talk about their role in a specific investigation or operation with the agreement of the officer-in-charge.
- Heads of civil staff branches or departments should determine at what level it would be appropriate for their own staff to comment.
- **General matters such as personnel, financial costs, contracts, matters of commercial sensitivity and so on should be referred to the lead support department.**

Policy matters

- Any media requests for information or comment regarding Metwide issues, policy matters or events that could bring the Service into disrepute or dispute should be referred to operational command unit (OCU) senior management, branch or departmental heads, the local DPA press office or 24 hour Press Bureau at Scotland Yard.

Implementation

Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) officers, chief superintendents and detective chief superintendents in charge of OCUs, and heads of branches and departments, must ensure that officers under their command are fully briefed as to the extent to which factual information may be supplied and by whom.

When confidence and trust is established there may be occasions when **senior officers** will feel able to talk to reporters on an 'off the record' basis – *dealing with matters not for public disclosure, explaining reasons for maintaining confidentiality and specifying what might be published.*

It will be for OCU commanders and heads of branches to decide at what levels within their own areas of responsibility such discretion may be exercised. If there is any doubt about this, advice **must** be sought from the DPA or enquiries referred direct to them.

This approach in dealing with the media will involve risks, disappointments and anxieties, but officers who act and speak in good faith may be assured of my support. I fully accept that if these measures are to succeed some mistakes will be made in the process. But I will not tolerate any officer who discloses information to the media for financial gain or favour. They can expect to be dealt with through the criminal or disciplinary process.

Supply of information to the Press Bureau and local Directorate of Public Affairs press officers

I would like to see the flow of information to the DPA speeded-up. On many occasions points of fact can be dealt with at a lower level and it is not necessary for OCU commanders or investigating officers to be contacted. If there are legitimate reasons why information should not be disclosed to the media, press officers should be informed.

Those officers who speak direct to reporters should always tell the DPA. This will allow for statements to be prepared to deal with any follow-up enquiries following publication or broadcast.

Database of lines to take

The DPA has put together a database of 'lines to take' on current issues and subjects. These can be found on the DPA Intranet site.

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Liaison with the local press

Many borough OCUs have their own dedicated press liaison officers whose role it is to brief local newspapers. I would encourage officers who have dealt with cases or issues that would benefit from local media coverage to tell their OCU press liaison officer.

Taking the media on police operations

I am keen to see more media being taken along on police operations. This will give a good insight into policing and how we are tackling crime. Officers planning such operations should always consider the media as part of their overall strategy. The ultimate decision will rest with OCU commanders, but it is important that the DPA are consulted and the appropriate guidelines followed.

Electronic media

Many people access our website, including the media who use it to obtain news and research material. I would ask those OCUs who have their own sites to ensure that information is current and regularly updated.

Training

I want to see this new policy being re-enforced at every level. Basic training should touch on the general concept of the new policy, while intermediate and higher training should stress the advantages to be derived from the avoidance of unnecessary secrecy and the achievement of mutual trust between the Service and the media.

Those officers whose role may involve giving broadcast media interviews should contact their local DPA press office about specific training courses.

Press identification card

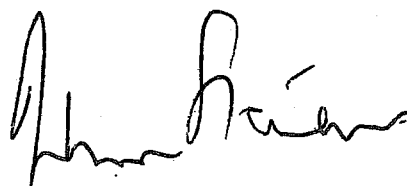
The bona fide media should carry a 'press identification card' that is recognised by ACPO. The card does not carry an automatic right of access to scenes of incident or authority to pass police lines. However, I would encourage officers to be helpful to cardholders and where possible try to accommodate their needs.

Foreign journalists based in London may not hold the ACPO press card, but the same level of co-operation should be extended to them.

Making progress

The success of this policy will depend on everyone being more open and flexible with the media. At times, this will be challenging, but I am keen to see it progressed and implemented at every level throughout the Service.

I look forward to seeing the results.



John Stevens
Commissioner