

Communications strategy

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 23 October 2013 Updated 15 April 2021

Written by College of Policing

9 mins read

The way in which investigators manage communications will have a significant effect on the investigation they are conducting. The main purpose of this strategy is to communicate or receive information which assists investigators to progress their enquiries. This can be achieved through **internal communications** by using colleagues and partners within the criminal justice system and through **external communications** by using partner agencies and community networks.

Benefits

Effective communication can result in:

- crucial evidence being identified
- new witnesses being discovered
- important information coming to light
- people being eliminated from the investigation
- suspects being identified
- prevention of inappropriate disclosure and reputational risk

Sources of advice

Suggested contacts:

- force press office and media advisers
- community equality advisers
- crime reduction advisers
- local community leaders and councillors representative of the whole community
- community groups or forums
- lesbian and gay associations

- youth leaders and social services departments
- neighbourhood policing teams
- partner agencies

Investigators should take advice from internal and external advisers, particularly in areas involving the media, community impact, and equality, diversity and human rights issues. The force press office should also be consulted. This should ensure that an appropriate level of information exchange is established. The investigator can then focus on the investigation, while ensuring that community reassurance and links to community intelligence are maintained.

Internal communications

There are a number of methods for communicating internally. An investigator may try to develop material to progress their investigation by informal discussions with colleagues or, more formally, by creating an entry on a daily briefing sheet. This may include requesting information or assistance to identify likely suspects from descriptions, the modus operandi (MO) or the unusual clothing worn by a suspect or witness.

Types of internal briefing

- entries on internal bulletins (electronic briefing or paper systems)
- daily or extended briefing parades
- force newspaper, intranet systems or video briefings
- posters
- individual briefings to senior officers, community beat officers, local intelligence, custody officers and staff

Formal briefings

These may be undertaken, depending on the nature and complexity of the investigation and the numbers of resources being deployed. During the lifetime of an investigation, briefing sessions should be held at the start or end of the day, or weekly, depending on the requirements of the investigation. All briefings should be planned and structured in a similar way. This provides opportunities to exchange information which will help the investigator obtain a clear update on progress and assist in identifying lines of enquiry.

A dedicated briefing officer should be used in serious and complex enquiries to ensure consistency.

Regular feedback should be obtained on the style, content and effectiveness of briefings to ensure that they are providing the best means of sharing information and reaching the intended audience.

Factors to consider

- Location – fitness for purpose, briefing or conference rooms.
- Timing and frequency.
- Notification – attendees such as initial investigators, analysts, crime scene investigators, intelligence officers, enquiry teams, community beat officers, supervisors, single points of contact, community equality advisers, crime reduction advisers.
- Facilities – video, overhead projectors, flip charts, analyst’s charts, telephones, PowerPoint presentation facilities, tape recorders.
- Record keeping – maintain records, retain briefing sheets (Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996 (CPIA) considerations).
- Staff required – such as a loggist, secretary, shorthand writer.
- Objective – intended outcome of the briefing or debriefing.
- Structure – discussion points, main lines of enquiry, developments, opportunities, threats.
- Distractions – such as mobile phones and pagers.

Briefing models

- [the IIMARCH model](#)
- SAFCOM
- [the national briefing model](#)

SAFCOM

S – Situation	What is the problem?	<p>What is the situation or problem?</p> <p>The officer needs to be able to give a clear and factual outline.</p>
----------------------	----------------------	---

A – Aim	What is my aim?	<p>What is the officer's aim in addressing the situation?</p> <p>The officer requires a clear aim. How can an operation be planned without a clear idea of what it is supposed to achieve?</p>
F – Factors	What are all the factors that make up or contribute to this problem?	<p>This is a risk assessment.</p> <p>The officer needs to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what factors may affect the operation? • what steps need to be taken to reduce risk, if that is possible? • what resources will be required?
C – Choices	What are the various solutions?	<p>The officer is expected to examine all possible ways of addressing the situation and conduct an assessment/analysis of each method.</p>

<p>O – Options</p>	<p>What is my preferred option?</p>	<p>Having examined the available choices, the officer needs to decide on the preferred option and be able to explain their choice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it effective? • Is it proportionate? • Does it represent best value? • Is it achievable?
<p>M – Monitoring</p>	<p>How will the preferred option be monitored in order to ensure the aim is achieved?</p>	<p>The officer needs to have a method of monitoring whether the preferred option is achieving the aim.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will success be measured? • Mobile phones, contact telephone numbers and loud hailers. • Will all communications go through the operational commander or the control room?

External communications

It is essential that investigators use the media to develop new lines of enquiry. The individual who speaks to the media should be the person with the best knowledge of the investigation.

Media strategy

All officers should be familiar with the local force media guidelines and at the beginning of an investigation be given clear instructions about where to direct media enquiries.

Where the nature of an investigation indicates that there are likely to be high levels of media attention, investigators should, at the earliest opportunity, inform the force press officer. The press officer can then develop a preliminary media strategy (dealing with [fast-track considerations](#)) and a full media strategy (including [press conferences](#) and [media appeals](#)) if required.

Early notification is particularly important in cases which include ACPO definitions of hate crime. In less high-profile cases, such as volume crime, investigators may manage local media coverage themselves. Advice and guidance can be obtained from the force press office.

Legal issues

Investigators must ensure that a copy of all material released to the media in the course of an investigation is retained for disclosure purposes, in accordance with the CPIA. Investigators and press officers should be aware of the implications of the [Contempt of Court Act 1981](#) which, in broad terms, forbids the inclusion of any material in the media which may prejudice a fair trial.

Fast-track considerations

During the early stages of the investigation, a preliminary media strategy may just be a case of issuing a holding statement pending further developments.

Suggested content of holding statement

This will vary depending on the circumstances of a particular investigation, but may include confirmatory information such as:

- the police are currently investigating an incident
- the general location of the offence
- initial indications of the nature of the offence (for example, whether a death is being treated as suspicious)
- if a death has occurred, the arrangements for a post-mortem examination to be carried out
- whether an incident room has been set up, giving the contact telephone numbers
- an initial appeal for witnesses and/or information

Timing

In all circumstances, care should be taken to ensure that the content or timing of a media release is appropriate in the circumstances and will not cause offence to the victim, their family and friends or the wider community. The victim and family should be made aware of a media release prior to its taking place.

Victims should be asked if they agree to their details being released to the press, although it must be stressed that the press may obtain them from sources other than the police.

Press office

The press office, in consultation with the investigating officer, can assist the investigation by:

- handling routine media enquiries
- drafting press releases for approval by the investigating officer
- dealing with routine press briefings
- organising press conferences and other interviews
- liaising with other agencies involved in the investigation to coordinate a joint media response (for example, social services, education or health authorities)

In high-profile investigations, the force press office can be tasked with monitoring and retrieving all news coverage of the incident including appropriate internet sites, for example, newsgroups or special interest groups.

Press conferences

A holding statement released early in an investigation will lead the media to expect that further information will be released at a later date. This expectation can be controlled by giving the media information about the timing and location of future press conferences and the name of the officer who will be conducting them.

Provided that timeframes are reasonable, there is a likelihood that the media will be sympathetic to the victim, their family and the overall aims of the investigation. Regular press briefings will assist this process. In cases where a victim or members of their family or friends are required to make an appeal, they should be involved in the planning process where possible.

If any information that is copyrighted is released to the press (for example, photographs, plans) the owners of that copyright should be clearly identified to the recipients.

Media appeals

There may be a number of reasons why the investigator would wish to use the media in an investigation. Examples include:

- identifying the offender(s)
- locating the suspect(s)
- identifying victim(s)
- witness appeals
- reassuring or warning the public

Media channels

Investigators should consider using the following methods to reach groups that may have information about an offence:

- newspapers
- television
- radio
- Crimestoppers
- posters
- Teletext
- trade journals
- internet and social media
- Wi-Fi hotspots
- hotlines
- sporting events

Adequate facilities should be available to deal with the response. after an appeal has been made. If a caller feels that they are not being dealt with efficiently, they may ring off and not call back.

The first opportunity to obtain information may be the only opportunity.

Identifying the offender

In some investigations it may be appropriate to make an appeal through the media to try and identify the offender, using for example:

- CCTV footage
- photographs
- video
- electronic facial imaging techniques
- artist's impressions

If electronic facial imaging techniques or artist's impressions are going to be used, care should be taken about the reliability or credibility of the witness who provided the description.

In some cases offenders closely monitor the media for coverage of an offence. Further information on behavioural analysis can be obtained from the National Crime Agency (NCA) [Major Crime Investigative Support](#), which can assist in making direct appeals to suspects.

For further information see:

- [APP on media relations](#)
- [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 code D, Part 3, para 3.28 – 3.29](#)
- [ACPO \(2009\) Facial Identification Guidance](#)

Locating the suspect

If a suspect has been positively identified but their location is unknown, a media appeal may help to locate them. Investigators should, however, make every effort to ensure that the integrity of any future identification procedure is not compromised. In this situation the investigator is advised to consult the force press officer, a force solicitor and the Crown Prosecution Service. There are a number of different types of appeal available to investigators.

Any appeal should be authorised by an officer of ACPO rank. Where identification is not based on photographic evidence, care should be taken to ensure that descriptions are precise and credible to avoid a mistaken identification.

Witness appeals

Media appeals can assist the investigation in identifying witnesses. Appeals should, however, be carefully considered and coordinated to create the maximum opportunity for reaching potential

witnesses.

Investigators should target appeals at the sections of the community most likely to have witnessed the offence or other significant event. Targeting witnesses could be based on factors such as their employment, leisure activities or residence. The media channels used should be those most likely to reach the target group.

Rewards

In every case where the media or other organisations are considering issuing a reward for information, it is important to make an assessment of the opportunities and threats that a reward may create.

This is a proactive tactic often used to trawl for witnesses when other lines of enquiry have been exhausted, but it has the potential to generate inaccurate, misleading or false information that may undermine a case if not managed properly.

For further information see [The Journal of Homicide and Major Incident Investigation, Volume 7 Issue 1, Spring 2011, Offering Monetary Rewards: A Useful Investigative Tactic when Trawling for Witnesses.](#)

Reassuring and warning the public

Crimes cause concern to the community, and especially to the most vulnerable members of society. The public become particularly concerned where a crime is of a violent or sexual nature and the offender is still at large and may strike again.

Through careful use of the media, the investigator must strike a balance between reassuring the public that every effort is being made to identify and locate the suspect, while warning the public of the danger associated with an offender still being at large. They can also offer sensible, preventive steps that members of the public can take to avoid becoming a victim.

Tags

Investigation