Engagement and communication - Guidance overview

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

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This APP provides guidance to police officers and staff responsible for releasing police-held information to the public. This includes direct release and media engagement. The APP refers to these individuals as communications officers but includes press officers, media officers and other terms used by forces.

The APP has been informed by:

- His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS). (2025). **An inspection of the police response to the public disorder in July and August 2024: Tranche 2**
- HMICFRS. (2024). **An inspection into activism and impartiality in policing**
- College of Policing. (2023). **Independent external review of Lancashire Constabulary's operational response to reported missing person Nicola Bulley**
- College of Policing and National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). (2023). **National police response to the Hillsborough Families Report**
- Home Office. (2022). **Manchester Arena Inquiry Volume 2: Emergency response**
- The Children's Society. (2022). **Child exploitation and abuse: An appropriate language guide**
- Society of Editors, Crime Reporters Association and Media Lawyers Association. (2024). **Police and the media – repairing the relationship report**
- Greater Manchester Combined Authority. (2018). **The Kerslake Report: An independent review into the preparedness for, and emergency response to, the Manchester Arena attack on 22nd May 2017**

This APP promotes the importance of consistent decision-making in the release of public information across policing, to maintain public trust and confidence. This APP recognises that forces are operationally independent and may be required, at times, to make risk-based decisions informed by unique local factors.

Definitions and terms

Critical incident: Any incident where the effectiveness of the police response is likely to have a significant impact on the confidence of the victim, their family and/or the community.

Digital desk: Social media moderation unit in a force contact centre.

Disinformation: Purposefully false content that was created with the intent to mislead, cause harm and deceive.

Gross misconduct: A breach of the Standards of Professional Behaviour that is so serious as to justify dismissal.

Heads of communication: Leads the corporate communications function and may also be known as a director. Decisions may be delegated to a nominated deputy where the head of communications is unavailable.

High-profile or sensitive investigations: Judged by the unique circumstances. This includes investigations involving serious crimes, investigations into celebrities or prominent public figures, security, terrorism or major incidents.

If asked: Responding to a question reactively, if requested, in a media context.

Information disorder: Collective term covering misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

Local resilience forum: Local resilience forums are multi-agency partnerships made up of representatives from local public services, including the emergency services, local authorities, the NHS, the Environment Agency and others.

Major incident: An event or situation with a range of serious consequences, which requires special arrangements to be implemented by one or more emergency responder agencies.

Malinformation: Information rooted in truth, but exaggerated, taken out of context or used to cause harm.

Misconduct: A breach of the Standards of Professional Behaviour that is so serious as to justify disciplinary action.

Misinformation: Content that is false, is misleading or has been taken out of context by accident, and was never intended to cause harm.

PESO: Paid, earned, shared and owned channels used in public communications.

Playbook: In a social media context, a comprehensive guidebook and living document that outlines an organisation's social media strategy. A playbook serves as a framework for teams to consistently execute content, engagement and other social media activities aligned with overall strategy.

Social media management platform (SMMP): Third-party software tool that centralises and streamlines social media efforts across multiple platforms.

Trauma-informed communication: Recognising that trauma can affect how people understand and respond to information. Communicating in ways that promote psychological safety, trust and choice, and minimise the risk of re-traumatisation.

Communication principles

Open justice

The **Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Media Protocol** defines the principle of open justice as an essential element of the rule of law in England and Wales. It is an important feature of our criminal justice system that it is generally transparent and administered in public. It is open to public scrutiny, except for any agreed reporting restrictions.

Privacy

The police service has a duty to safeguard the confidentiality and integrity of the information it holds and the rights of individuals to privacy. This duty must be balanced against the need to be open and transparent.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy is an essential aspect of the British policing model and is well established in the UK as 'policing by consent'. The more that the public supports the police by providing information or being involved in policing activities, the better policing can prevent or resolve crime and keep communities safe. Being fair, respectful, open and transparent in communications can motivate the public to cooperate with the police and respect the law.

Open, accurate and lawful

- Be open, transparent and ethical, in line with the **Code of Ethics**.
- Be lawful, necessary and proportionate, in line with relevant legal frameworks.
- Ensure that all information is accurate and verified.
- Correct errors proactively to maintain trust and integrity.
- Tackle misinformation and disinformation proactively, where this has an impact on public safety and the pursuit of justice.
- Consider disclosure obligations prior to release, ensuring nothing is shared that could compromise ongoing investigations, legal proceedings, operational integrity or the rights of individuals.

Clear, timely and consistent

- Be clear, using simple, straightforward and accessible language that is free from jargon.
- Where technical terms must be used, ensure that their meaning is understood.
- Deliver consistent and coordinated messaging that avoids giving mixed messages to the public.
- Be purposeful, with a clear and justifiable policing objective.
- Be agile and responsive, providing regular and timely updates, especially during major and critical incidents.

Inclusive, impartial and audience-focused

- Maintain impartiality, using neutral, unbiased language when describing people, events and situations. Ensure that communications are free from victim-blaming language.
- Be inclusive, using language and channels that are accessible to people with different protected characteristics and different cultural, linguistic or technological backgrounds.
- Be accessible, providing for two-way engagement with communities, stakeholders and the media.
- Be audience-focused, tailoring communications to meet the specific needs, concerns and expectations of different groups.
- Always consider the wishes and rights of victims, including the family of deceased victims, with consideration given to children, young people and vulnerable adults.
- Practice trauma-informed communications.

Tags

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