

MEDIA RELATIONS

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO ENGAGING EFFECTIVELY WITH THE MEDIA

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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ENGAGE WITH THE MEDIA?

- News stories are one of the most reliable ways of communicating your key messages and project vision and aim for the Town, through a local reliable news source that reaches a large audience
- Local media is one of the single most trusted sources of information – so the stories it prints, publishes, or broadcast will influence the thinking of a wide range of communities and stakeholders
- Journalists can become powerful advocates, but also formidable critics
- The chances are, the press will cover your project in some form. Engaging with them proactively, and building those relationships, enables you to control the angle, tone and topic
- This guidance will help you prepare, deliver and proactively engage with the journalists



MANAGING THE MEDIA: INTRODUCTION

This guidance will take you through the key ingredients you need to deliver effective, compelling communications through the press that drive your message to your intended audience. This guidance will take you through the key stages.

PREPARATION: This stage is vital when it comes to communications; you must consider building relationships and developing your key message before you put any work into action.

DELIVERY: Putting preparation into action.



PREPARATION: INTERNAL

Before you engage with journalists or the media, it is important that you have considered and actioned the following items internally:

- **Identify and understand** the internal process and protocols - this will help you to manage your communications, and respond to a journalist in a timely manner. You should also consider crisis mitigation plans and work with the appropriate internal teams. If you do not have a crisis mitigation plan or protocol in place, you will need to work with the appropriate internal teams to develop one.
- **Prepare key messages**, frequently asked questions and lines to take that you could use for immediate issue or response. These should be periodically reviewed and updated to reflect the project's life cycle.
- **Build relationships** with journalists early to help reduce the chances of negative sentiment and to help you reclaim your narrative should negative sentiment arise.



PREPARATION: BUILDING THOSE RELATIONSHIPS...



It's beneficial to identify and reach out to the relevant journalist, as they ultimately release the narrative you have communicated to them. Displaying your vision to develop understanding amongst your key audiences is key to building positive relationships.

1 IDENTIFICATION: BUILDING A MEDIA LIST

- Identify the publications and journalists who speak to your key audiences.
- Gather insight on their interests through recent stories and use this to establish if they'll be interested.
- This shows you care about their work and understand how your project fits into that.
- Internally agree on who will be the relationship owner.

2 STAY IN TOUCH

- Keep journalists abreast of clear facts and figures to best engage the audience and develop understanding.
- Journalists are famously time-poor, so don't assume prior knowledge.
- Be honest about your objectives.
- Manage expectations and don't over-promise.

3 BUILD AND MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS

- Relationships can be maintained from continued engagement, long-term support and primarily, understanding + transparency.
- You may already have existing relationships in place that can be utilised from TIP or Business Case Stages.
- If approached by the press, stakeholders can be vocal advocates or critics. Positive, well-informed stakeholder relationships also help keep media stories positive.

PREPARATION: FORMAT OF MAIN PIECE

Think about the form your main piece will take depending on the type of information you are providing.

BIG NEWS: PRESS RELEASE

For major milestones, programme changes, planned community outreach or consultations and VIP visits, press releases are best format to use. More on this on page 11.



PROFILE-RAISING: THOUGHT PIECE, LETTER TO EDITOR OR INTERVIEW*

If you want to raise awareness of your project and its benefits, press outlets are often open to a more personal piece. This goes down best when you are responding to current news, but it's not essential if you've got something interesting to say. If you want to raise the profile of a new key leader, this could take the form of an interview which you can use to get closer to the outlet's readership.

*You should pitch these ideas with the outlet you have in mind prior to sending them. If it's possible to speak to the relevant journalist in advance, you should do that. If not, then pitching with a simple 'teaser' summary capturing the key points will usually be enough.

PREPARATION: PRESS PACK

Supply a Press Pack to editors and journalists alongside your main release. This should include information to support your story including:

ESSENTIAL

- Public-facing documents (e.g., project brochure)
- FAQs
- Previous press cuttings and releases
- Public-facing maps or designs
- Logos / branding
- Agreed brand photos and images
- Information on key contacts within your organisation, including names of any agreed spokespeople.



HELPFUL

- Quotes from key project spokespeople or third-party advocates
- Case studies or feature stories
- Benefits-focused visuals (e.g., fast facts)
- Videos and animations

Note: There are different ways to provide your press pack to journalists. Some organisations provide this as an attachment, but this can be problematic if it includes rich content such as images, animations and design files. We recommend creating a press page on your website containing all of these assets, and providing a link in your covering email, which can be downloaded by the media as desired.

PREPARATION: STEPS TO CONSIDER AHEAD OF DELIVERY

Note: Although proactively engaging the press can seem daunting, it enables you to manage your message in the media. This is usually your safest strategy, because it fills a hole that critics, opponents or campaign groups could otherwise fill. It also demonstrates your willingness to be transparent and cooperative, which builds relationships with the media whose independent views can influence those who read their commentary.

Before you approach the press, make sure you have the right plans and documents in place to both maximise your message and be ready for unexpected questions that could arise.

REACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

● CRISIS MITIGATION PLANS

Agreeing a plan in advance to deal with any issues that arise will enable you to act quickly. This will mitigate that risk throughout this whole process. If you want to you know more about crisis planning, request support via your Town Coordinator.

● PRESS PACK

Supply this to editors and journalists alongside your main release. This should include information to support your story.

PROACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

● REACTIVE LINES TO TAKE

This document deals with the thornier issues you might get asked either by the press or in reaction to your piece. These questions might be to do with wider national or regional strategies and announcements, technical elements of your proposals, environmental considerations or engagement with communities.

To prepare your 'lines to take', you should first hold a 'lines to take' workshop: invite representatives from all disciplines who could speak to specific issues. Brainstorm ideas and discuss answers in the session, then write up answers and circulate to each team to check.

● MAIN RELEASE

Think about the form the main story will take, depending on the type of information you are providing. This could be:

- A press release
- A thought-piece or letter to the editor
- An interview

DELIVERY: PROACTIVE PRESS ENGAGEMENT



Below is model that can help you to plan and implement an press engagement plan.

1 PREPARE

- Identify those publications that are genuinely interested in the stories that you pitch. This can be done by looking at their scope of work, ensuring interests are shared from the offset.
- Prepare the reasons behind your work, with the main aims and why this will be of interest to your identified target.
- Gain an understanding of what they're looking for, as this will enable you to meet their goals, as well as your own – creating mutually beneficial relationship.

2 ISSUE RELEASE

- Once a suitable target has been identified, prior to sending release, think about including:
 - A covering note, which explains your vision. Allow this to include fast facts, maps, infographics and statistics.
 - This in turn, enables the journalist to understand the work at a deeper level prior to reading the release.

3 FOLLOW UP COMMUNICATIONS

- Listen to the queries and be transparent. This can be done by producing FAQ's which would've been produced, as part of your 'reactive communications' stage.
- Stay on top of any major changes to the press release team and contact details.
- You could create a communication line for queries, which can be logged in a document, which should be monitored.

PRESS RELEASES: THE KEY INGREDIENTS

Press releases are by far the most common means of conveying key information to an editor, journalist or publication. Unlike a thought-piece, letter to the editor or interview, press releases can be sent to any and all publications.

Do not expect a press release to be published verbatim. While publications often do this, the key function of a release is to inform and update the press or the public. So journalists may choose to use this information as part of a wider story, or write their own article about your story based on the release.



PRESS RELEASES: THE KEY INGREDIENTS

The key is, it should be a concise and factual briefing sheet that tells the full story.

Make sure you include these ingredients:



THE HEADLINE

Match-funding total and breakdown.



FIRST PARAGRAPH

Your opening sentence is your opportunity to 'sell' the story – and its importance. Try to summarise the story in 10-15 words.



THE MAIN BODY

These 3-4 paragraphs should tell the story. Avoid unnecessary 'filler' content and consider bullet points to cover the key facts and themes.



QUOTE

A quote from a key spokesperson in your organisation should bring the 'human' aspect into the story. Who does your project help? How? Note: if writing this on behalf of the spokesperson, make sure you secure sign-off before finalising!



THE 'KICKER

This is your reader's 'reward' for getting to the end of the story. Provide something valuable – that could be a revelation (about next steps, for example) or a call to action.



BOILERPLATE

This contains important background information about your organisation or project. It is your 'business card', so make it count.

DEALING WITH NEGATIVE PRESS

Despite the preparation outlined and putting these steps into action, the risk of negative press remains. You should follow the steps outlined below if/when this happens.

WAYS TO MAINTAIN AND MITIGATE THE RISK OF CRISIS:

- Follow your crisis mitigation protocol closely. This should include actionable responses to foreseeable issues and/or issues that have arisen already.
- If negative stories are published, it's crucial that you take accountability and reiterate your vision with facts and key messages, subsequently providing transparency.
- Coordinate with your response with the key internal stakeholders including: MPs or Town Deal Board members.



- Use your 'lines to take' document and key messages outlining your objectives and plans to answer open-ended questions which could catch you out.
- If asked something you do not have the answer to, do not make it up. It's ok to say you do not know, as long as you can provide reasons for this and provide information on when you will know. Make sure that your audiences know how they can receive updates.
- Be sympathetic yet factual. If there are grievances already shared, show compassion but stick to your core message.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS TO CONSIDER

Whilst recognising editors and journalists as an important part of your media narrative, they are not the only people you need to consider when building relationships and targeting your messages. You can further information in our Engaging through Delivery guide.

Stakeholders within the town present both risks and opportunities. The press may approach high-profile or publicly connected stakeholders for a quote, so it's important that they are on-side and on-message. You can manage this through regular engagement, which ensures there is a clear understanding and transparency throughout the engagement process.

STAKEHOLDERS TO CONSIDER:



Councillors
(ward/parish/committees) need to be considered



Journalists



Community groups



Heritage groups



Business Groups



Environmental groups

KEY TAKEAWAYS

This document has provided you with the necessary guidance to plan, prepare, and deliver proactive engagement with journalists, and the steps to follow if negative press is published about a project.

SOME KEY TAKEAWAYS INCLUDE:

- Proactive engagement with journalists can help mitigate risk and help build long-standing relationships
- Ensure that you and the Communications teams are prepared in the eventuality a negative story is released on one of the projects
- Build relationships to raise a positive narrative and context around the project, its significance and the need
- Prepare key messages, holding statements and lines to take in advance



USEFUL LINKS

[Evidence of Engagement Guide](#)

[MHCLG Stage 2 Business Case Guidance](#)

[Guide to the Implications of the new Green Book for the Towns Fund](#)

[Stakeholder Engagement Plan Guidance](#)

[HM Treasury Project Business Case Guidance](#)

[Engaging with Businesses Guidance](#)

[Engaging Younger Audiences Guidance](#)

[Social Value 101](#)

[Guide to Good Community Engagement](#)

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Visit the [Town's Fund website](#) for more stakeholder engagement resources

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