



*Local Government Association*

# giving social work a voice

how to improve social workers'  
relationship with the media



# foreword

For those of us who work with or support social workers, it is perhaps easy to forget that the majority of the general public will have no reason to come into contact with them in the course of their daily lives. People who don't need the care and help offered by children's and adults' services have very little reason to think about the vital job that social workers do, and may not understand it.

Almost everyone has personal experience of teachers, doctors and nurses, and when one of these professionals makes a mistake, or is negligent, the public can use their own knowledge of their work to keep the incident in context. Keeping a sense of perspective about the role of social workers depends on increasing people's understanding of their job in a similar way, and the media is one way of doing that.

Creating a greater public understanding of what social workers do should encourage appreciation of the job, boosting morale and helping councils across the country retain their best staff and attract quality new recruits. Tackling recruitment and retention problems will ease the pressure on all staff and, importantly, help them to do the best they can to protect the children and adults that they are responsible for.

If, sadly, something goes wrong involving the care of children or vulnerable adults, it is politicians and senior staff who must face the media. But there are opportunities for those on the front line to help explain the profession on a day-to-day basis. This leaflet has been written by the media relations team for the Local Government Association Group to offer some general tips to lead members and directors of children's and adults' services on how to increase and improve the contact between social work teams and journalists and spread some of the good news about social work.



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# dealing with journalists

In the same way that there are misconceptions about social workers, journalists are also often misunderstood. The majority are fair-minded professionals whose job is to tell interesting stories. Ideally, a relationship can be established where both sides benefit: the journalist getting access to stories about real-life people and the council getting the opportunity to showcase some of the achievements of its staff. Handling the media is not something for social workers to deal with directly – the relationship is best managed via a council's communications team – but councillors and senior officers have a part to play. Here are some thoughts for how best you can contribute:

- **strike up a professional relationship with the journalist.** By meeting with a journalist face-to-face you can ensure that there is a mutual understanding of how you will deal with each other and what the ground rules are. Journalists value their contacts and should avoid upsetting someone who is useful to them because they have too much to lose;
- **ensure that there is a benefit for both sides.** Journalists will never run a story just because you want them to. There has to be something newsworthy or interesting enough in what you share with them to give them a good piece, then you are justified in expecting some of your own messages to come across as well. Find out what they want;
- **be honest about what the journalist can expect and what you can provide.** It is best to be open about the limitations you face in terms of allowing them access or providing them with information. If you are secretive they may think you are hiding something, whereas they will understand you placing restrictions on them if there are issues of confidentiality involved or if legal action is pending, for example;
- **take firm action if they abuse your trust.** Having met a journalist face-to-face and dealt openly with them, you have every right to go back to them and complain if you feel you or your department has been misrepresented, or if your trust has been abused. If you don't get a satisfactory answer, consider contacting their editor with your concerns or, as a last resort, denying them cooperation in future. Newspapers are regulated by the Press Complaints Commission and broadcasters by Ofcom;
- **always liaise with your press team and, in crisis situations, with the LGA media team.** Your communications team will have an overview of the relationships that your council has with a range of local, national and trade journalists. They will be able to advise on which journalists have proved trustworthy, which to avoid and which are likely to achieve the best coverage for the story you want to tell. If your council is about to be at the centre of a bad news story relating to children's or adults' services which is likely to reach the national media, it is always worth keeping the LGA's media team informed about what's happening and how you plan to respond so that it can help make sure your messages reach the right journalists. The team will also be happy to try to promote your best stories of success.

However good your relationship is with a particular journalist or publication, it would be unrealistic to expect the media to ignore stories of failure involving social workers. When something goes wrong with the care of a child or vulnerable adult the situation is often shocking and journalists will cover it as a valid news story, but previous articles about social work successes should give readers or viewers a context in which to place that particular incident.

# supporting your social workers

Social workers are always busy and it is understandable that dealing with journalists may not be high on their list of priorities. Getting more involved with the media is not easy to do and each council will have its own circumstances to take into account. However, cooperating with the media can pay dividends for your social work teams by giving them a reason to hold their heads up and be proud about what they do, as well as encouraging other people to consider social work as a career. Your press team will also be able to help with the following tips for giving your social workers the confidence to deal with journalists:

- **explain why talking to journalists helps them.** Social workers will need to be motivated to go to the effort of communicating with journalists and will not necessarily see it as part of their job. Explain that it is about making sure that people know about the hard work they do and the difference they make to people's lives;
- **offer someone to accompany them.** A more senior social worker or a member of your press team could sit in on the interview or shadow any conversations which take place. The social worker should then feel reassured that they have a witness if they later believe that they have been taken out of context. The companion can intervene if the journalist tries to go beyond agreed boundaries or asks inappropriate questions;
- **reassure them they have your backing.** Staff will need to feel they are protected from any come-back if they get involved with a journalist. Let them know that they will not be held responsible for the way in which the story is reported. It may be appropriate to agree that they can speak anonymously;

- **look into whether there is enough time in their schedule.** All social workers are very busy and often under a lot of pressure. Demonstrate how seriously you take media work by discussing with them the extra time it will take up and how some of their workload can be eased to make space for it;
- **accept that they will express their own opinions.** While it is clearly advisable to use enthusiastic and dedicated staff to speak to journalists, they cannot be expected just to repeat corporate messages – and it would be a pointless exercise if they did. Accept that they will express their own views about the challenges of the job and how they manage personal stresses and strains.

One of the best ways to show your social workers the benefits of speaking to journalists is to lead by example. If lead members and directors of children's and adults' services are confident enough to do media interviews, staff will see the results and you can speak from personal experience about the process. Getting positive coverage of good work by social workers is a great tool for raising morale.



# legal issues

The important rules relating to confidentiality and personal privacy for the people that children's and adults' services work with are sometimes seen as immovable obstacles to doing any form of media work. The care of vulnerable children and adults is one of the most complex and difficult areas of work that councils undertake and every authority will have to make its own assessment of which cases can be shared with journalists and in what way. It is not possible to offer blanket legal advice for this area of council work, but there are some commonly used approaches which can be explored with your legal team to prevent all the good work done in this area from going unreported:

- **journalists can be required to keep names and locations secret;**
- **broadcasters may have to agree to disguise people's faces and voices;**
- **it may be appropriate to explore whether someone who children's or adults' services has finished working with will sign away their right to confidentiality. This is more likely to be after a gap of several years.**

Responsible journalists are aware of and will respect the need to abide by rules relating to court cases, active legal proceedings and anonymity for children and vulnerable adults. Good journalists will share your concerns that rules are not breached and should be willing to cooperate to find solutions to delicate situations.

The LGA media team provides a 24 hour service via 020 7664 3333



One of the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force was a new programme of action on public understanding of social work, creating greater openness about the profession. This leaflet has been endorsed by



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The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 400 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.