

## PRACTICE NOTE 35

# WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

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### Introduction

The media has an ongoing fascination with adoption and fostering. Both are topics which provide classic human-interest stories touching, as they do, on the issues of identity, family and personal relationships. With an estimated minimum of one in ten people affected by adoption, directly or indirectly, in the UK, the media are also guaranteed an audience keen to consume such stories.

As well as debating the general issues and individual cases, there is also an increasing tendency within media to criticise the role of social workers. Decisions made in the adoption and fostering process are used to illustrate the concept of “political correctness” (acting on political beliefs rather than following good practice). This has, of course, been aggravated by comment from the present and the last governments. The accusations are usually prompted by a specific case or ruling. These can range from public complaints by prospective adopters who have been turned down to judicial criticism of a particular placement decision/agency. Unfortunately these stories only serve to fuel the misconceptions that surround adoption and fostering, thereby making the need for clear and balanced reporting all the more necessary.

BAAF believes that it is in everybody’s interests for agencies to work with the media to promote understanding of the complex issues about adoption and fostering and that this, in turn, will help to educate and inform the general public. Refusing to comment on a case in the public arena can be unhelpful and does nothing to correct misinformation. We recommend, therefore, that each agency or organisation has a clear policy on dealing with the media so that it is prepared for media attention and can also, where appropriate, be proactive.

The attention of the press is unlikely to diminish and, indeed, we would not wish it to do so when it can be immensely effectively in helping to recruit foster carers and adoptive parents. It is crucial that, wherever possible, we work constructively and professionally with the media to promote our work.

### Working with your Press Office

Local authorities and larger voluntary agencies have Press Offices and, although calls from journalists may come directly to the Adoption and Fostering Unit, it is always helpful to liaise with a Press Officer. In fact many organisations insist that comment should come only from the Press Office, so be clear in advance about whether you are authorised to make statements on behalf of your agency.

Press Officers have experience of dealing with the media and can help you formulate a response or answer questions directly. If you are aware of any forthcoming cases that may provoke media attention, do let your Press Office know in advance, so that it can help you prepare a statement.

### Confidentiality

Be aware at all times of the issue of confidentiality. Information about adoptive families, foster carers and children must be released only *with their consent*. Before agreeing consent it is important that all parties are aware of the possible repercussions of having their face, name and personal experiences in the media. For children in particular the consequences can be great. Even limited local publicity may put them at risk of renewed contact with birth parents and could single them out among their peer group or at school. While some children may cope well with this, it might be more difficult for others. The media may want individual cases and stories to illustrate a point but these should never be provided at the expense of the families concerned.

### Working proactively with the media

#### General

Proactive media work means contacting the press to promote your own services, events and opinions. A good example of proactivity would be publicising a recruitment drive for foster carers or adoptive parents (during National Adoption Week or Foster Care Fortnight, for example). Local media, in particular, can be very useful in publicising initiatives such as these. They help raise awareness among

their (and your) audience and encourage involvement. Try to get to know your local reporters (newspaper, radio and TV) and who the right contact is for either social affairs or family issues.

The most obvious and effective way of being pro-active is to issue a media release. But before you write a release (see guidelines later) it is helpful to examine some areas in detail and ask yourself what you want to achieve.

### **Preparing to write a Media Release**

- *What do you want to say?* Not such a silly question. Too often the media receive information that lacks clarity and is confusing. You need to think clearly about what exactly you are publicising and why. Be clear about why people should know about it and how they can get involved.
- *Who is your audience?* Are you targeting all people who live in the region or a certain section of the population? Do you want your message to reach Black and minority ethnic groups? Older carers? Prospective adopters? Knowing your target audience will help you find the right media. If, for example, you want to contact Asian or African-Caribbean communities then radio stations and newspapers by, about and for these communities should be on your list and given special attention such as a follow-up call.

Think around the subject in terms of where you issue the release. There may be other media besides local radio, TV and newspapers that might be interested. National media with an interest in the subject matter do sometimes cover regional stories – either as an introduction to a general discussion of the issues or because the story itself is worthy.

- *Will your spokespeople be available?* The media do not usually use only a Media Release to produce their story (although some newspapers on a small budget may sometimes copy directly from the Release). Many will want a quote from somebody at your organisation involved with the story/project/new initiative in order to make their report more individual. Ensure that you are launching/promoting your service when there are staff around to answer calls; otherwise you could lose vital opportunities. You must be prepared for follow-up and have the nominated spokespeople available at the contact numbers quoted in the Release.
- *What about timing?* You will need to issue the Media Release at a time appropriate to that medium. If, for example, you are approaching a weekly newspaper, it is no good sending them the Release the day that they publish. It will arrive too late for publication and will be considered old news by the date of the next edition. The best time for a weekly newspaper is usually in the middle of the cycle i.e. about four days before publication. Find out publishing dates for weekly newspapers in your area.

If, however, you are publicising an information evening or a recruitment drive, you will need to let your audience know well in advance. For evening and daily papers, allow a week's notice.

The best time to fax a Media Release to daily newspapers and radio/TV stations is early in the morning. Most evening newspapers have been written by approximately 2.00pm so contact them about 10.00am. Do not issue media releases on Friday afternoons, weekends and public holidays.

Radio and TV news and current affairs programmes decide in the morning what they will be covering, though this could change throughout the day. Magazine programmes plan further in advance so notify them 3-4 days ahead. You can never be guaranteed coverage. Priorities change depending on the news and if a major story breaks you may find your interview shelved. While this is disappointing it is no reflection on the merits of your story or the quality of what you have to say.

- *Take follow up action.* Newspaper offices are busy places and faxes or letters can get hidden under a mound of other correspondence. It's important, therefore, that somebody follows up a Media Release with a telephone call. The purpose of the call is not only to check that the Newsdesk has received the Release but also to sell the story so the caller needs to be somebody who has a clear idea of the aims of the project. Selling a story is quite a skill and there will be some staff who are better at this than others. Call early in the day and not near the deadline when the journalist will be under pressure and therefore less able to talk or listen.

- *Can you stage an event?* If you are launching a project or scheme it helps to have an event to mark it. This could be an official launch, opening or reception, perhaps with a local celebrity (MP, footballer, etc). These are useful for journalists because as well as providing an image for TV coverage or a photograph, all the key people are in one place. Even a small event can still provide an excellent photo opportunity.
- *What about photographs?* Think about photo opportunities. Do you have a large image of your organisation's name or logo? Is there a simple image that sums up the project or service you are promoting? This will be what the press journalist is interested in – a single picture which conveys the message. Hire your own photographer as well. It's always worth circulating your photographs to national media that have an interest in the subject (such as *Community Care*, *The Voice*, etc). They are often in need of photographs but cannot send a photographer to events in the regions. Send them quickly and they might just use them.

But remember that the picture must be appealing and interesting. It is very unlikely that a cheque handover, for example, will be published. Many regional press have taken a decision no to use such images any more as readers find them boring. But a picture showing where the money will go and who it will benefit may be of interest to them. Always try and ensure that the photographs are of good quality. If they are of families and children, they should try to show the relationships and capture the personalities of the children. Groups of black and white people should be well lit so that the contrast between people is apparent and everyone in the photograph can be seen clearly.

### **What makes a good Media Release?**

- A contact name and number at the top of the page (including, if possible, an out of hours contact number) so the journalist can come back to someone directly if they need more information.
- Date of release at the top of the page. The date should be the same date as journalists receive it, otherwise it will be considered old news.
- Who the Release should go to needs to be clearly marked at the top of the page i.e. Newsdesk, Features, etc. Preferably it should be addressed to a named person or their title i.e. News Editor or Social Affairs Correspondent.
- A good strong headline which mentions the local area where the scheme or project is to be launched will make an impact. It should be dynamic and to the point – ideally, less than ten words.
- The first paragraph must explain the headline and highlight the main news points clearly and vividly. It should answer the five “Ws” – who, when, what, where and why. All your key facts should be here including, of course, your organisation's name which must not be buried away further down the Release. There is no need to go into minute detail, the journalist can always contact you to get more information.
- The Release should have a tone of dynamism and immediacy about it so choose your words carefully. It must refer to an immediate event, denote action and supply new information. It should not read like a report but rather a call to action. You are, after all, hoping the journalist will act on it.
- You must always remain objective and professional in a Media Release. If you blatantly use the Release to sing your praises it will not be taken seriously. You can be positive about your initiative while still being realistic and objective.
- The main points need to be early on in the Release, with the less important information further down. When editors edit, they edit from the bottom up so the most crucial facts should be near the top.
- The style in which the Release is written needs to be punchy and clear. Avoid using jargon – words like “placement” can mean very little to people without a child care background. Very few Media Releases are copied directly by the journalist. They are usually rewritten, after the reporter has spoken to someone and gleaned more information, but the content needs to arouse their interest in the first place.
- Include a quote from a senior member of staff endorsing the project, welcoming the changes, etc.
- Use A4 paper with your organisation's letterhead at the top.
- Try and keep the Release to one side only.
- The contact name and number should appear again at the bottom of the Release along with further details of your organisation i.e. what your aims are.

- Circulate to other members of staff so that they know what is being said and are fully informed.
- Some Releases – such as advanced text of a speech – can be embargoed (an embargo prohibits use of the material before a certain time). If you do embargo ensure that this is clearly marked. State the date and time the embargo ends.

## **Reacting to the media**

### **General**

Reactive media work involves responding to external events such as court cases, government statements on adoption and fostering or individual cases. The regional media will want a spokesperson in their area to explain the implications of the case for local people. You will not always be aware that a statement is about to be made or a ruling announced and the first you may know of it is when you start receiving calls from the media. Such work, therefore is hard to plan for and control, but not impossible.

Voluntary adoption agencies need to identify what the story is from their point of view and how they can contribute to the debate. If a case makes the news involving a child looked after by the local authority they may still be contacted to give a broader perspective. This may mean concentrating on the issues – standards and practice, etc – rather than the individual case.

### **Guidelines**

- Do not be pressurised by a journalist into making a statement or doing an interview until you have as much information as possible. If you are not sure what your response or position is, think it through and check with your Press Officer or a senior member of staff before you phone the journalist back. It is better to have a well-thought out accurate response rather than a sloppy, inaccurate reply that could cause damage to the organisation.

It is best if you can identify a spokesperson – preferably a senior member of staff – who can deal with all the calls. This prevents other staff being drawn into making comments and ensures consistency. The spokesperson must be confident about what he or she is saying. Ideally, therefore, it needs to be someone involved with the relevant area of work. They should have enough background knowledge and experience to meet challenging, additional questions.

Rehearsal for such situations is very valuable. Time put aside to consider possible scenarios and likely responses with a Press Officer or a member of staff is time well invested. There are professional media training services but you may also want to undertake some less formal role-playing. Watching or listening to a tape of yourself being interviewed allows you to identify your weaknesses in a safe environment before you embark on the real thing.

- It is generally not wise to comment on individual cases about which you have no details but you can talk about the issues the case raises. Saying “no comment” is inadvisable as it can be interpreted as an admission of guilt or agreement. Journalists may try to tempt you to say more about the specifics of a case but confidentiality should not be broken as this may have implications for the children involved as well as other parties.
- If you have time to prepare a statement this can be extremely useful for reading or faxing to the media. The statement needs to address all the points raised and be attributed to a senior member of staff within the organisation. Preparing a written statement means that you do not have to repeat yourself and the press receives a consistent quote.
- Although you may disagree with the ruling or statement, try not to criticise individuals or bodies but relate your statements to legislation (e.g. “what Mr X says is not currently the legal position”) or experience (e.g. “This is likely to affect children in \*\*\*\*shire by...”) instead. This avoids personalising the issues. It is always useful to point to the implications of the proposals for your client group. Localise your response where possible e.g. “We agree with the proposals because we want what’s best for the children of \*\*\*\*\*shire”.

There is one hypothetical scenario at the end of this Practice Note which illustrates methods and ways of reacting to media criticism.

## **Case studies**

Reporters are always interested in talking to people whose lives are directly affected by adoption and fostering. These personal testimonies can graphically illustrate how the subject matter impacts on individuals and families. It is very useful therefore to have a “bank” of people willing to talk to the media positively about their experiences. They should include families from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and a variety of carers (i.e. single carers, married couples, carers of older children). Some people may be willing to talk to the media but do not want to be identified. These carers can still help by participating in radio interviews and talking to journalists that agree not to reveal identifying information.

It is vital that your organisation keeps control of the details of people willing to be interviewed. If you are approached by a reporter wanting to interview a foster carer, for example, take their details and ask what kind of report they are aiming to write. Pass this information on to your “case study” and allow them to decide whether they are willing to be interviewed. Do not pass on their number directly to the press without permission. A local authority or voluntary adoption agency has a great deal of confidential information which should be protected and treated with respect. The consequences of inappropriate details given to the press could be disastrous and hurtful for all the parties involved.

Spokespeople and “case studies” need to be fully informed about the programmes that approach them. There may be some situations that will be confrontational on a specific issue and the individual may not feel willing or able to stand up to this kind of situation. The impact of having to defend your life and beliefs can be considerable and all who are asked to participate in programmes where they might encounter hostility should think clearly about their choices. Adoption and fostering are subjects that provoke passionate and emotional debate.

Balancing the needs of the media and the rights of the individual is a delicate matter, but it is in everybody’s interest to strive to do this. Articles are much livelier when they contain personal experiences and are likely to have a bigger impact on readers, viewers or listeners. A bad experience with the media can not only be upsetting for the individual or family concerned but may also prevent them from taking part in any future press work.

## **Being interviewed**

### **General**

If you want to establish a good relationship with the media, then do try, wherever possible, to respond positively to requests for interviews. If they know they can rely on you they will come back to you again.

Before you start thinking about what you are going to say in the interview itself there are other preparations you can make. Find out who will be conducting the interview, who the other guests will be (if it’s for radio or TV) and, of course most importantly, what the interview will be about. Research the programme as much as you can. Some debate programmes, can be hostile to “expert” guests. You may decide that in this forum the points you want to make would not be taken seriously and it would therefore be inappropriate for you to attend. It might be that you know another guest and are familiar with their arguments; this will help in your preparation. Ask for a list of questions in advance of the interview.

Prepare for the interview by thinking about the three key points you want to make. You will probably want to highlight more than three but focussing your messages is a useful exercise in identifying the most important aspects of what you want to say. Try to avoid speaking in jargon. Some journalists are extremely well informed about social services issues and others are not; this may mean explaining some very basic information such as what fostering is and how it works. A hypothetical “case study” can help in this. People are able to relate to issues much more easily if they are personalised.

If the interview is for a newspaper, assume it starts from the moment you pick the phone up. Say only what you want to say, don’t be tempted to fill silences by talking. Try not to talk “off the record” (giving information on the understanding that it is non-attributable); it is not a legally binding term and while it may not be honourable to print something told off the record it is not illegal.

If the interview is for radio or TV, record it and play it back. Ask colleagues for honest feedback – what they think worked well and what was not so effective. This will help you prepare for the next time. Collective debriefs after handling a big story are always useful in looking at areas for improvement. A debrief should be a forum for everyone to consider and review how they worked. You may find, for example, that no-one informed the receptionist where to direct media calls. This is valuable learning for the future.

## **Interviews on radio**

### **General**

When listeners are unable to see you they can only form a judgement by what you say, so your choice of words becomes crucial. Most radio interviews take place either in the studio or “down the line” i.e. on the telephone. If it is at all possible, go to the studio. Being face-to-face with your interviewer is better than talking down a telephone line; it will help put you at ease and the quality of the output will be improved. There is also less likelihood of technical failure. The vast majority of radio interviews are conducted live.

### **Guidelines**

- Find out in advance whether the interview is going to be live or recorded. It’s also useful to know the name of the person interviewing you so you can reply to them on first name terms.
- Listen to the programme, if you can, so you know what kind of show it is and whether its style is relaxed, humorous or confrontational.
- Have your three key points on a list in front of you and keep returning to them if necessary. Aim to have communicated all three points by the end of the interview.
- Speak clearly and concisely. Try to stay calm and sound authoritative. Don’t include too much information in one answer otherwise listeners will not be able to follow your train of thought.
- If you make a mistake or slip, correct it as soon as possible. Say, “Just to clarify that, what we mean is...”
- Try not to pause or be over-ponderous. Nothing is more lethal on the radio than “dead air” i.e. no sound.
- Remember, you don’t have to answer the question being put to you, you can use it to say what you want to say. For example, a good answer to the question, “Aren’t you over-reacting to this statement?” would be, “Well our objections to what is being said are a, b and c.” You have made your point without getting bogged down in discussing what the right level of reaction is.
- Be firm when necessary. If you don’t want to answer a question say why and move on to another point.
- If the interview is recorded and you’re not happy with an answer, stop and say you would like to do it again. It’s in the radio station’s interest to get the best response from you.
- If you are not in the studio then ensure you are in a quiet room. It will be distracting for you and the listener if there are phones ringing in the background and the sound of doors opening and closing.
- Tape the interview and play it back. It’s hard to judge at the time how the interview is going but by listening to yourself you may find that you over-use a certain word or sound hesitant. You will know what to correct for the next interview.

## **Interviews on TV**

### **General**

TV interviews are more likely to be recorded than live. Many, however, are recorded “as live”, which means that they won’t be edited. It’s always safest to assume that you have only one “take” (one chance to get it right while the cameras are rolling). Because television is such a visual medium there is a danger that the viewer can be distracted by how you look and not listen to what you are saying.

As always it’s important to be succinct and clear. The added pressure with television is that you need to pay particular attention to your appearance.

### **Guidelines**

- Find out what the first question will be. You can then mentally prepare the answer in your head and ease yourself into the interview.

- Wear clothes in which you feel comfortable. They should be smart but not overwhelming. Avoid clothes with patterns or very bright colours and keep jewellery to a minimum. Black and white checks, for example, can look fuzzy on a TV screen and distort the picture; generally black and white can look rather boring. A splash of colour (perhaps a tie or scarf) can lift the picture and improve your appearance.
- You may not wear make-up but under studio lights even the most vibrant and glowing individual can look washed out. Some programmes will whisk you into the make-up department but this is not always the case. If you suspect you are going to be on TV it is wise to have make-up, particularly foundation, with you.
- Look at the interviewer when you are answering the questions. It's hard when you're in a studio full of cameras but the idea is that you are having a one-to-one conversation with the presenter.
- Be relaxed in your body language. This is not easy if you are feeling tense but the viewer wants to see someone calm and assured. Smiling or looking over-solemn can also look suspicious. It's best to look serious, unless, of course, the story is a light-hearted one.
- Take deep breaths in the run up to the interview and before you speak this will help your voice control and relax your breathing.
- Remember that the camera will be on you throughout the interview (and in some cases prior to it) so control your facial expressions at all times otherwise you may be caught grimacing or laughing inappropriately.

## Conclusion

It is important to remember that the vast majority of journalists want to produce a clear and balanced report. It is one of your roles to help them understand all the issues involved. Clashes over confidentiality and sensationalising stories are unlikely to ever disappear. But you can work professionally with the media by communicating your message as clearly as possible.

It is often said that good public relations revolves around three key rules – be prepared, be prepared, and be prepared. Good preparation and planning not only reduce anxiety but are vital for producing consistent and coherent messages. Crisis situations and the unexpected will always arise but defined procedures and thoughtful, calm reactions will lead to positive coverage and help defuse the situation. Every interaction with the media is different but if you are clear about what *you* want to say (and not what *they* want you to say) then each offers a valuable opportunity.

## Case Study 1

### Scenario

Mr and Mrs A were assessed to adopt. During the assessment process the social worker had concerns about the parenting skills of both applicants which she raised with them. Despite this, these fears continued during the assessment. Nevertheless, Mr and Mrs A were asked to undertake a medical. When they asked if Mrs A's obesity would be a problem they were told that it would be so only if it affected her ability to parent. The medical was undertaken and both Mr and Mrs A passed. At the adoption panel, the social worker was questioned about her reservations and responded honestly. As a result of her concerns, shared by the panel, it was recommended that their application be turned down. This decision was endorsed by the decision-maker. Mr and Mrs A were informed of the decision and the reasons why they were unsuccessful. However, they believe they were refused because of Mrs A's obesity and have contacted the local press to complain. A local journalist is preparing a story under the headline "Too fat to adopt?"

### Response

This is a difficult situation because to tell the full story would be to break confidentiality but it is a complaint and you should be seen to address it fully while supporting the decision.

### Be fully informed

Read the relevant file and talk to the social worker concerned. You need to know the details.

### Field a senior spokesperson

The Director of Social Services or the Director of the agency is likely to have been the decision-maker in this process and if he/she is available they should talk to the media directly or be quoted in your response.

### Defend yourself but be open

If, as in this case, you feel the decision was based on full information and taken after due consideration, it is important that you support the panel's recommendation emphasising their expertise and role. Be

open about the formal complaints procedure and what action Mr and Mrs A can take next. You need to be clear that your agency treats complaints seriously and is fair.

**Correct factual errors and explain the legal situation**

In this situation this would involve explaining why a medical is necessary and that it is a statutory requirement. Explain why and when morbid obesity might be a risk to an applicant's chances of success.

**Talk about the needs of the child**

It is important to move away from the adult's point of view and put the process into context. Explain that there are many factors involved in deciding whether someone is suitable to adopt a child. Emphasise the needs of the child and how important it is to ensure that any decision made for children in care has to be the right one for life. While it's useful to acknowledge Mr and Mrs A's point of view and their understandable disappointment, point out that adoption is a service for children, not adults.

**Explain your restrictions**

It is helpful for the public to know under what restraints you are working. Explain that you cannot comment on individual cases as that would be breaking confidentiality but that the assessment was very thorough and you are satisfied the decision was the correct one. You are in essence hinting that there is more going on than meets the eye and you may want to state that frequently what applicants cite publicly as the reason for their rejection may not be the case. It is also worth pointing out that the applicants will have a copy of the agency's letter explaining the reasons for their decision.

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**Resources**

**Organisations**

**The Media Trust**

3-6 Alfred Place

London WC1E 7EB.

Tel: 0171 637 4747

Helps build partnerships between the media and the voluntary sector.

**Institute of Public Relations**

The Old Trading House

15 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0PR.

Tel: 0171 253 5151

Supplies information and publications on public relations.

**Publications**

Gregory A (ed), *Public Relations in Practice*, Kogan Page, 1996.

Available from Institute of Public Relations.

Richards P, *Be Your Own Spin Doctor: A practical guide to using the media*, Take That, 1998.

Tel: 01423 507545

White S, Evans P, Mihill C, Tysoe M, *Hitting the Headlines: A practical guide to the media*, British Psychological Society (BPS Books), 1993.

Available from the British Psychological Society

St. Andrews House, Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR

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*Thank you to BAAF colleagues for their help and to Penny Thompson and Jonathan Hepworth for their valuable contributions.*

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