

Media Guide for Districts



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Making Use of the Media

This pack was first issued in 1998 with the aim of giving groups, districts and regions the materials they need to raise their profile in the local media. It was revised in 2005 and 2008.

I have put this pack together with my experiences of working as a journalist. I can't guarantee that every group will have the same experience with every newspaper, but the basics are the same everywhere so it should provide guidance.

If you have any particular problems or concerns, or if you come upon a situation you cannot deal with, you can contact head office, or feel free to ring me direct.

I hope this has been useful.

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The Basics

There's one word, above all others, that sums up what will get you printed in the local paper: local.

Newspapers – and local radio and television – are ONLY ever interested in things relating to their circulation area. Mostly they won't be interested in what's going on even in the next town if they don't sell papers there.

That may mean you have to do a little work. I've occasionally produced three copies of the same press release just to persuade the media that the story is really local to them. It's annoying, but it's worth the effort.

On the same theme, make sure that it's immediately clear that you are local. Get the name of the town or district right at the top of the press release, and repeat it often. If you're on the phone, say immediately that you are from the local group; journalists have to deal with a lot of PR people phoning from the other side of the country, and they'll have a lot more time for you if you're a genuinely local person with a genuine local story.

My experience of local media is that they are usually desperate for news. And the reporters are also often overworked. If you supply them with the information they need in the form that they need it, they will write about you gratefully.

People have occasionally suggested to me that they can't get publicity into their local paper because the paper is anti-Woodcraft Folk. Although I don't rule it out, I find it very hard to believe. Most local media don't have the time or the energy to make that sort of distinction. Their only criteria are that you are local and that you are, in some way, newsworthy. Of course a single journalist might decide they don't like you. If you strike out with one reporter, just try another one.

The Press Release

This is the most basic and easiest way of passing information to journalists. It is widely used by everyone from community groups to companies, MPs and government departments. In most cases it will work better than a telephone call, because it will give the reporter all the information that s/he needs to start work on a story, in an easy-to-use form.

The wording of a good release will often look almost exactly the same as a story printed in a paper, but it can contain additional information to help the reporter, such as contact numbers, background information about the Woodcraft Folk, and anything else that is relevant.

If you have time, send the release to anyone you think might possibly be interested, including local radio and TV, free weekly papers, etc. The worst that they can do is ignore it, and you may be surprised at where the interest comes from.

Writing press releases

The secret to writing a press release that will get used is to have the same values as the reporter who will be reading it. This means:

- Make it local
- Make it clear
- Make sure all the necessary information is included

How to set it out

There is a press release template that I can e-mail to you on request.

However, you need to bear two things in mind:

- 1) The release must look local. Put the name of your group or district directly underneath the header. If your group has a name that will be unfamiliar to the reporter, like Soapsud Elfins, grit your teeth and use something else, like Ealing District.
- 2) See the section below about distribution of press releases by e-mail. You may decide it's better to forgo the pretty logo and send it in plain text. If you decide to do that, make sure you begin with the words "Press Release".

Whatever method you use, the following will apply:

- Put the date on your release and begin with a headline that summarises the story.
- Write in short paragraphs. In a newspaper you'll see that usually each paragraph is only one sentence long. This is because the columns are very narrow and a longer paragraph would look very cumbersome.
- Answer the four important questions – what, who, why and when. Whatever your subject, these questions will need to be covered.
- Get the local connection in early (sorry, have I said that before?) Reporters wade through numerous irrelevant releases. Make sure yours stands out as immediately relevant.
- Get the news in early. Don't begin with a three-paragraph description of what the Woodcraft Folk is and then add as an afterthought what it is that you're doing.
- Use quotes. Look at any newspaper story which is more than a couple of paragraphs long and you will find that somebody has been quoted directly.
- Write in the third person, i.e. say "Oxford Woodcraft Folk is raising money for..." rather than "We are raising money for..." Pretend you're a disinterested reporter describing the news.
- Keep it short. If your release exceeds two pages, it's too long.
- Think news – the more novel or unexpected the way you present an event, the more likely you are to attract someone's attention.
- Think pictures – if the picture is good enough, it won't matter if there isn't much of a story. If you have a visual event, send a press release to the picture desk as well as the news desk. But refer to the section below about deadlines.
- As the Folk may be unfamiliar (and even if you've dealt with the media before, you may not get the same journalist), put in some background. One convention for this is to put a separate section on the bottom marked "Notes for editors". A possible version of this is included on the template, though you may want to add some material about your own district.
- Put a web address – yours if you have one and/or the national Folk address www.woodcraft.org.uk – on the bottom. Newspapers are increasingly printing them, and it at least gives the reporter another source of information.
- Last, but definitely not least, always include contact details. Use mobile phone numbers wherever possible. If you aren't able to be contacted at work, consider putting another person's name on the release – reporters hate having to call back in the evening and may not bother.

When to write a press release

- Before an event, not after. It's not news afterwards...
- ... Except if, for instance, you want announce how much you raised, how many people attended, etc. But don't write an epic at this point. It will be ignored.
- Do not bombard a media organisation with press releases, but be frequent enough to be recognised from one time to the next.
- Leaving enough time for newspapers to print the story in advance of the event and organise a photographer if required (see "deadlines" below).

How to issue a press release

Nowadays, the normal method is by e-mail. Call the organisation and ask for the e-mail address of the newsdesk (and the picture desk if appropriate). If you have had contact with an individual reporter in the past, you may want to send it directly to their e-mail, but you should be certain that the reporter is working that day. And unless you're trying to give a friendly reporter an exclusive on some hot story, it's probably best to send a copy to the newsdesk address as well. As a general rule, the more people who receive it, the better.

If you send your release to several different media organisations simultaneously, always enter their e-mail addresses under Bcc so that they won't see who else has received it. (In Outlook, click the arrow next to the "options" button and then click on Bcc to bring up that field).

The subject line should contain the words "press release" and something to attract the attention of the newsdesk. So my (unsurprising) suggestion would be that it contains something LOCAL. This could mean that it says simply "Cheltenham Woodcraft Folk Press Release", or it could mean that you write a short headline, i.e. "Press Release: Young Romanians come to camp in Cheltenham".

If you're sending your release as an attachment, in the body of the e-mail, always give a one-line summary of what the press release is about, something like:

"Please find attached a press release about a group of young Romanians taking part in a camp in Cheltenham next week. If you have any problem opening the attachment please contact me on 07777 123456."

You may choose to write your press release directly into the body of the e-mail. It may not look quite so pretty, but it will make the e-mail much, much smaller, and it will be immediately accessible to the reporter, which can often be worthwhile. It's really up to you which you are most comfortable with.

Deadlines

A general rule is, the earlier the better. If you contact the media organisation far enough ahead of the event, you have a good chance of doubling your publicity by getting one story about what you're planning and another afterwards saying what happened.

Weekly newspapers: You should aim to contact them an absolute minimum of a week in advance of the event. Remember that the paper is put together over the course of the whole week, and by the day before publication, they're only interested in front page news. Photographers will also often need more than a week's notice.

Daily newspapers: Allow three to four days for stories and longer if possible for photographs. If your story is aimed at a specialist section that only appears once a week, allow at least a week before the date of publication.

Radio and television: Although their deadlines can be much shorter for important news, for run-of-the-mill stories you should still assume three to four days.

If you're telephoning and your news isn't urgent, remember that you'll get a better response if you avoid calling when the reporters are on deadline. Don't call a weekly paper on the day

before it's published; for daily evening papers, call after 12 noon; for morning papers, call in the late morning or early afternoon. Avoid weekends entirely.

What's worth publicising

You can send a press releases for a camp – even if there's nothing special about the camp, if you're camping locally they make colourful photographs, particularly during the holidays when there are no photos coming from schools.

You can also publicise a particularly interesting group session, if you have a visitor, or you're all dressing up, or you're doing something in the community or, well, almost anything. But you obviously can only do this a limited number of times in a year – once a term is probably enough.

If you are starting a campaign, you may well produce a whole series of press releases reporting how things are going. International links also may work – though beware the curse of the non-local story. At a recent camp for which I did publicity, the photographer for the local paper refused to take a single picture of the Hungarian and Romanian delegations and stuck entirely to the local children.

Finally, there's a whole other area that you can exploit – carefully – and that's national stories made local.

The best example of this was the numerous stories that groups got into their local papers about the loss of the DfES grant. It wasn't a local story per se, but with a careful angle and a quote from a local person, it was made one.

There may be other national news stories not even related to the Folk on which your youngsters have a view, or have done some work. One thing that local papers regularly do is take a national story and ring a few local people to get comments on it. Why not ring them instead?

Listings

If you are planning an event open to the public, make sure you send it to the listings page, which simply prints a calendar of upcoming events. Local radio stations also announce events on air.

Listings are usually not handled by news reporters; there may be a listings editor, or it may fall to a sub-editor or a secretary. The listings page of a paper probably will include an e-mail address to which you can send entries, or you can phone to find out.

Make sure that all the necessary details are on the note: What, where, when, why, etc.

Always include a contact phone number. That way if something's missing it can be rectified.

Also, reporters and photographers often scan the listings in search of stories or photogenic events. If you don't want your phone number printed in the paper or read on air, mark it clearly "not for publication".

Don't assume that your event will make it to the listings page just because you've issued a press release to the newsdesk. Send it to the listings editor as well.

Making use of our greatest asset – our young people

There are two ways of attracting the interest of a newspaper: by being very adult, professional and efficient; or by deliberately being the opposite of that and making use of the young people in the group to get the publicity.

If you have articulate, enthusiastic youngsters in your group then get them to phone instead of you. It's very hard for a reporter to say no to a child on the phone. Ask them to write the press release or draw pictures to go with it. If it's obviously been written by a child, it miraculously no

longer needs to be correctly spelt and written in good grammar. Just make sure your phone number is on the bottom in case there are any questions.

Remember the local thing. If you quote a child in a press release, where possible give their name, age, the road or area they live in and the school they attend. But see the section on "Ethics and Child Protection" later in this document.

Doing the media's jobs for them

If you're away from your own region, at a camp or on a demonstration, etc., it's highly unlikely that you'll get a reporter or photographer to come and see you, so you have to do it yourself.

Remember that news isn't news after it's happened, especially for daily papers. So on an exchange in Finland, I lined up young people from each of the two districts we had with us and then phoned the appropriate papers and offered them immediate interviews over the phone. We got articles in both papers that were printed before we got home.

If you can manage it, arrange to send digital photographs as well. Phone the picture desk and ask them for the best e-mail address; they may also give you instructions on the size and type of photos they like. Again, see the "Ethics and Child Protection" section.

Here are the basic rules of news photography, as best I understand them without being a photographer:

- Pictures without people in them are never, ever used, however pretty your banner/totem/campsite may be. Always have people in the foreground of your picture.
- On the other hand, much as it may be nice to take a picture of the whole group, papers rarely use them either. In most cases, two or three people is all you need in a single shot.
- Go for action photos rather than people smiling at the camera – children putting up a tent, doing craftwork, playing games, whatever.
- Identify all the people in the picture clearly in the caption and make sure it's clear who is who.
- Unless you're taking a head shot of a single person, choose primarily landscape shots; pictures must be placed across a number of columns of text, and portrait shots tend to be either too small or too large. Of course if you have the facilities, you can offer the paper both and let them choose.

Other ways in

We've already talked about making a national issue local. Here are a couple of other ideas on how to get into the media:

Check out the paper or radio station for regular features, columns, etc., and then push to get included. Contact the features editor and tell them it's the 20th anniversary of your district or you're going to Venturer Camp, or whatever will interest them.

Make use of the letters page. It's a way of getting your view across without too much tinkering with your words and it's a particularly well-read part of the paper. Some papers, also, have trouble filling their letters pages (I worked on one paper where almost all the letters were anonymous – because they were written by the reporters).

If you're based on an estate or in a village, the paper may have a local stringer who's paid by the word to provide community news about things like WIs, church groups, baton twirlers, etc. Their phone number or e-mail address is usually printed in the paper. It's fairly easy to get into this section, but it's usually only of use for reporting things after they've happened; and it doesn't work for photos.

And don't forget the listings section.

That word "local"

Just a little aside that may sound like it contradicts everything I've just said, but it doesn't:

Don't use the word "local"

If you look in your paper, you won't see it there, because everything in a local paper is local by definition. Only on television does the headline in the Walford Gazette say "Local man arrested". In real life it says "Walford man arrested", or simply "Man arrested".

Your press release should say "Cambridge children protest against withdrawal of grant" or "Ealing youngsters enjoy themselves at camp."

Dealing with "hostile" inquiries

This section includes any inquiry, which is not immediately obvious to you as good publicity. This could include a complaint to the paper about the behaviour of children (or adults), adverse comments made by someone from outside, such as a councillor or teacher, problems with the hall you meet in, etc. Most groups will never have to deal with this, but here are a few thoughts in case you do:

- Don't panic. Most inquiries are not as hostile as they seem. They are not initiated by the reporter, and since s/he has bothered to contact you, it seems likely that s/he really wants to get both sides of the story.
- Don't get hostile yourself. The reporter is only doing her/his job.
- Only in the most extreme circumstances will you get a paper to drop a story, and they certainly won't do it because it's bad publicity for you. What's more, the harder you try, the more determined they'll probably be to run it. So in most cases it's better not to try to get the story dropped but rather to concentrate on mitigating the damage.
- Don't get pressured into making a comment before you know the facts. Tell the reporter you will call them back. But check when their deadline is.
- ...Then, don't miss the deadline or ignore the story and hope it goes away. Nothing looks worse than a line that says you "refused to comment."
- Remember that you are on the record from the moment you start speaking to the reporter, provided they have identified themselves properly. A reporter will generally respect a request to speak off the record, but only if you state clearly that you are off the record BEFORE you start. You cannot say something and then add: "Oh, by the way, that was off the record." Do not overuse speaking off the record or you'll just look like you're trying to evade the question.
- If you don't know what to say, seek help. Call Head Office or a senior officer for advice, or call me.

What if a report is wrong

With the honourable exception of the Guardian, newspapers are not keen on printing corrections, and very loath indeed to print apologies.

However if basic, important details are wrong – such as the date/time/place of an upcoming event, or a phone number – they will generally print a correction. Some, to save face, will find a different way to say the same thing, so it doesn't look like a correction at all.

Before you make a fool of yourself, make sure the information you provided was correct and clear in the first place. If it was your fault, you may still get the information corrected, but try apologising first.

If your name is wrong or you have been misquoted but the changes have not actually affected the tone of what you were saying, you will probably have to grin and bear it.

If you have been badly misquoted or misunderstood, feel free to complain. Begin with a call to the news editor before tackling the editor. How much success you have will probably depend on the paper and the situation. Very often you will be told to write to the letters page. This is not always a bad option: at least you can be sure the words are your own.

If you are complaining to the editor, head your letter/e-mail "not for publication", otherwise you may end up on the letters page by accident. The editor should reply to any complaint made in writing.

If you are still not happy, there are official channels you can go down, but these are difficult and not always successful. Seek advice from Head Office first.

Ethics and Child Protection

There are two sides to this issue: the ethical framework within which the media work and the steps that you take to protect the children in your care. Both of these can clash with a) the reporter's desire to get the story and b) your desire to get publicity.

There are no hard and fast rules. I would recommend that you discuss this issue within your district and come up with a policy that you consider appropriate.

Issues for the media:

News organisations have different policies on the interviewing and photographing of children. National media often require parental consent; local papers may be more lax and consider that group leaders are acting in loco parentis and this is sufficient. If a paper requires parental consent, the reporter or photo editor will tell you that when making the appointment.

There are no rules on this subject, but a number of guidelines exist. The Press Complaints Commission editor's code states that "a child under 16 must not be interviewed or photographed on issues concerning their own or another child's welfare unless a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult consents." UNICEF's principles for ethical reporting on children say that when a child is interviewed the journalist must "obtain permission from the child and his or her guardian", if possible in writing.

The International Federation of Journalists guidelines and principles for reporting on issues involving children, have a slightly different slant, however. They state that reporters should "give children, where possible, the right of access to media to express their own opinions

without inducement of any kind." When it comes to photographs they state that these should be obtained "where possible ... with the knowledge and consent of children OR a responsible adult, guardian or carer." (my capitalisation)

Issues for Woodcraft leaders:

There has been a move among some schools in recent years to refuse to give the full names of children who are photographed. Some newspapers, in response, have refused to print pictures without names. All of which obviously benefits nobody.

One of the concerns of schools is that a child could be subject to a court order protecting him or her from an abusive adult, or simply that the child has been taken away from an abusive parent by the other parent, and by identifying that child you put him or her in danger. This is obviously a rarity, but it has happened. One way round this is to seek standing permission from parents/guardians for a child to appear in the media, perhaps by adding a question to a contact form when the child first joins the group, or to a camp health form. That is what we did for Global Village, and only one parent refused consent.

If a photographer or reporter turns up without prior arrangement, demand to see their press card and if necessary make a phone call to check their identity. The national press card scheme provides a verification hotline to check the credentials of journalists; the number is on the back of the card. Not all news organisations issue these cards, however, and you may have to check directly with the media organisation the person claims to work for.

Policy History

October 2008: Policy approved by General Council