**Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership**

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Communications and Media Protocol

**Communications and Media Protocol**

1. **Introduction**
   1. This Communication and Media Protocol is for Statutory Safeguarding Partners and Relevant Agencies involved in the protection and safeguarding of children and young people. This may also include matters which interface with the Herefordshire Adults Safeguarding Board or Community Safety Partnership.
   2. Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) works together with representatives from relevant agencies that have a statutory responsibility to work in partnership to protect the children, young people and their families of Herefordshire.
   3. Relevant agencies include Herefordshire Council, Wye Valley NHS Trust, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health Care Trust, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Clinical Commissioning Group, National Probation Service, Community Rehabilitation Company, West Mercia Ambulance Service, West Mercia Women’s Aid, Herefordshire Schools and Colleges, West Mercia Police, CAFCASS, NHS England and West Mercia Youth Justice Service.
   4. This Protocol is designed to provide specialist advice and guidance to those involved in safeguarding and children at a time of public and/or media interest is given to the case.
2. **Scope**
   1. When dealing with children’s safeguarding issues, the following protocols applies to Senior Officers, Managers and frontline practitioners of all statutory safeguarding partners and relevant agencies of the HSCP. This includes volunteers, schools, governors and elected members.
3. **Background**
   1. Safeguarding children is everyone’s responsibility and as so many organisations and agencies are involved in achieving this in Herefordshire, it is important that there is a robust protocol to ensure all messages issued to the local press or social media are consistently managed well and are of good quality.
   2. By its very nature a safeguarding issue can attract a high level of public interest, particularly if the subject is a child or if the conduct of a particular organisation is in doubt or under scrutiny. Issues can involve some of the most vulnerable people in society and can challenge an organisation’s procedures, systems and training during a time of intense public focus.
   3. Whilst the majority of journalists will adopt a challenging but fair approach to a given alert, press and media attention can be intrusive, hostile and sensational – particularly national papers or broadcasts. To satisfy public appetite, the media will often look for an organisation to blame or for an individual failing in their duty of care.
   4. Poorly managed communications will certainly fuel a critical media approach and shake public confidence. A skilful and consistent approach to media handling is vital to mitigate against the impact of media scrutiny. It will be a primary contributing factor to how the management of the issue is perceived by the media, public and colleagues and how the organisation’s reputation is preserved or otherwise. The power and influence of the media must never be underestimated.
   5. We want to be able reassure the public that safeguarding issues are being managed appropriately to protect children at risk and the wider public interest. Therefore, it is important to take a positive and proactive approach when engaging with the media.
4. **When Will a Safeguarding Issue Attract Media Attention?** 
   1. Every issue is different but there is one overriding question, to which, if the answer is ‘possibly yes’, or ‘probably yes’, then the relevant communications department must be informed. That question is:

*“If details of this case or potential case were to be in the public domain, would there be public interest, comment or criticism?”*

If the answer is **yes or even possibly yes**, then the following must also be taken into consideration:

* How serious is the incident?
* Do we have a duty to protect other people at risk?
* How damaging are the circumstances now, or potentially, to the reputation of the organisations involved?
  1. A quick assessment needs to be made against the above criteria and a decision taken as to whether communication leads need to be involved. It is however always better to inform the relevant communications leads as a precaution if nothing else, than not to inform them and be left facing an escalating crisis in terms of reputation management and public outcry.

1. **Reactive and Proactive Press Strategies and Statements**
   1. **Proactive Strategies** in communications refers to when an organisation takes control of a public relations message before it has the chance to take control of the organisation. For example taking the opportunity to promote the work of the HSCP through case studies illustrating positive outcomes for families, recruitment campaigns and support for carers and, on occasion, successful interventions and prosecutions.
   2. **Reactive Strategies** in communications deals with organisations dealing with a situation/event after it has occurred. This generally is the case, when a child dies or is seriously injured and Partnership is required to publish the findings of a Child Safeguarding Practice Review.
   3. All communication activity from the HSCP needs to be conducted in a manner that ensures transparency and accuracy around the facts of the matter. It should manage community anxiety and provide reassurance to the public and raise confidence about the work of the HSCP and actions it takes to keep children safe, improve services and practice. This principle applies whether the HSCP are responding to a positive or negative event in children’s safeguarding.
   4. Safeguarding partner organisations and relevant agencies should notify the communications team of positive or negative issues that impact on the HSCP and state whether this is a proactive or reactive response to a child safeguarding matter, in doing so the approach and statements to the press interest can be effectively managed and coordinated accordingly.
2. **Statutory Partner and Relevant Agency Engagement**
   1. The statutory safeguarding partners should be alert to any media interest in a child safeguarding matter associated with Herefordshire.
   2. Senior staff who may be involved in a safeguarding issue should ensure they are aware of their respective communications lead and establish a good working relationship with them and keep them engaged at all stages of a potential incident.
   3. The communications departments of the statutory and independent / voluntary and private sector partners provide an important professional function towards the effective management of the safeguarding issue.
   4. Proactive engagement with these respective departments as an integral part of the safeguarding procedures will benefit the overall safeguarding process.
3. **Who Should Alert the Communications Department?** 
   1. All press calls in relation to a safeguarding issue with implications for any HSCP statutory safeguarding partner agency and relevant partners should be referred to Herefordshire Councils communications team (01432 260006).
   2. In the event of being contacted directly by a local or national journalist, the member of staff should:

* Take the name of the journalist, the publication or broadcast media they represent and their telephone number.
* Then advise the journalist to contact the communications team in the first instance or offer to transfer their call.
* Notify the communications team immediately if the call is not transferred and provide the journalist’s contact details. The communications team will then contact the journalist directly.
  1. Having considered the above criteria (set out in 4.1) it is the responsibility of the safeguarding lead in each organisation to inform their own agency/organisation communications lead as soon as possible.
  2. The Council Communications team will thereafter liaise with any other safeguarding leads in safeguarding partner or relevant organisations where the media interest raised involves or impacts on their agency/organisation.
  3. It is important that all agencies who are contacted by the media about a child safeguarding matter, do NOT share any case details or provide a position statement without expressed permission and agreement by the three statutory safeguarding partners.
  4. No individual, service area, agency or organisation may produce or issue press releases, make press statements or post comments via social media on issues with implications across agencies relating to the safeguarding of children and young people or the work of the HSCP. Neither must they issue comment, written or verbal, or organise a press conference or invite the press to a safeguarding event, without prior discussion with Herefordshire Council’s communications team.
  5. No individual should speak to any publication, radio or television station on safeguarding issues with implications across agencies without the knowledge and guidance of the communications team.
  6. Elected members may find themselves involved in cases from time to time as residents in their wards seek assistance or advice. Irrespective of their involvement, they must refer all media enquiries to the communications team as outlined in these protocols.

1. **Which Organisation Leads on Communications?**
   1. All communications relating to the work of HSCP, including Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews and Ofsted inspections, will be managed by Herefordshire Councils communications team, with support from communications teams from the other statutory safeguarding partners and other relevant partner agencies.
   2. This protocol establishes that whilst each agency is responsible for its own communications, it will need to work closely with the Council Communications Team whom it is agrees will take the lead in coordinating all media responses.
   3. An exception to this may arise in cases where there is an ongoing criminal investigation and agreed that the Police are best placed to take the lead.
2. **Sign-off Process**
   1. All statements and briefing material must be signed by the communication lead in conjunction with agreement from the HSCP safeguarding partners.
   2. Prior to the publication of any material, the Safeguarding Partners in conjunction with the Independent Scrutineer will establish who the nominated spokesperson will be in the event of media enquiries
   3. The communications team will support the nominated spokesperson of HSCP or, where appropriate, the Director of Childrens and Families or Lead Member in agreeing press responses and in preparing for any press interviews in liaison with relevant agencies.
   4. Prior to any media publication the Partnership Team will compile a media and communication plan for approval by the Safeguarding Partners and Independent Scrutineer.
   5. Where there is an absence of a Safeguarding Partner responsibility will be delegated and sign off will be undertaken by relevant senior management and safeguarding leads of the safeguarding partner agency.

* 1. This protocol establishes that given timing is often a crucial factor, senior staff involved will have to take decisions on behalf of, and in the interests of their organisations in the absence of their chief officer.
  2. All media responses need to be swift and timely, messages need to be clear concise and simple and agreement must be sought by those agencies implicated in the case of media interest.

1. **Role of Communications Leads**
   1. Once a Communication Lead has been identified it is critical that they represent communications for the HSCP organisations and become an integral partner at meetings where decisions relating to media interest are discussed in order to offer advice and guidance on media and communication issues. The focus of the media can shift very quickly indeed and its vital that all involved are aware of the impact the media can have on a safeguarding process and the potential risk to partner organisations reputations.
   2. The communications leads should be trusted with all information surrounding any particular incident as they need to understand the full story and background in order to provide appropriate advice and identify the most appropriate response.
   3. Communications leads will often come back with a series of queries based on what they believe the media will want to know, this is sometimes referred to as Q&As. They are thinking like the media and attempting to pre-empt question and prepare agencies with informed evidence based answers.
2. **Working protocols for the communications team and the media**
   1. All local, national and trade/professional press calls should be routed through the communications team. One telephone number for all initial press enquires will be used.
   2. If the police are involved and the issue relates to a possible criminal offence being investigated, the communications team will liaise with the police press office and other agencies involved, agreeing a media strategy.
   3. The communications team will never knowingly mislead the press, the public or employees on any issue. It will work with the media to aim to ensure that any publicity describing policies, aims, decisions and review results is objective concentrates on facts and explanations, and promotes clearly what HSCP aims to achieve for the children and young people of Herefordshire.
   4. The value of integrity will be maintained. This means that there are sometimes matters where HSCP and its members should properly respect confidentiality, particularly where it has a duty of care to children, young people and their families or carers. HSCP will not discuss with the media individual cases relating to personal health or social care issues.
   5. HSCP will not comment on information provided to the press anonymously or comment on quotes that cannot be attributed. These anonymous comments are often inaccurate or malicious.
   6. If the media is materially inaccurate in its reportage, the communications team will seek to correct misinformation, working with the publication or programme and HSCP. In order to manage the risk of the publication of potentially libellous material, the communications team will respond only to professional journalists from established newspapers, radio, TV stations or social media platforms.
   7. All news releases and statements must be printed on HSCP press release paper and must be produced by and issued through the communications team.
   8. A position statement will be included with each press release explaining the role of the HSCP.
   9. For urgent press releases the communications team will make every effort to contact the Director of Children and Families and HSCP lead representatives. If this fails the relevant most senior manager will be asked to clear urgent work.
   10. When lead representatives are featured or are participating in the production of a press release, that representative will be consulted on content if possible before release.
   11. The communications team will identify a number of designated spokespeople from HSCP to give in depth broadcast and printed media interviews on operational and technical matters and on issues of public interest.
   12. The lead representatives of the HSCP or the Director of Children and Families will be approached in the first instance for interviews on safeguarding issues. The view of the Independent Scrutineer may also be sought on issues of assurance of the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.
3. **Training and Compliance**
   1. The communications leads of the HSCP relevant agencies (Appendix 1) are responsible for managing these media protocols in their respective agencies.
   2. It is the responsibility of each agency to ensure that the relevant staff involved in this protocol have appropriate training.

**Appendix 1**

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| **Organisation** | **Communications lead** | **Contact details - List updated May 2021** |
| Herefordshire Council | Alex Floyd | 01432 261899                                         [alexandra.floyd@herefordshire.gov.uk](mailto:alexandra.floyd@herefordshire.gov.uk) |
| Wye Valley NHS Trust | John Burnett | 01432 355444 ext. 2928 [John.Burnett@wvt.nhs.uk](mailto:John.Burnett@wvt.nhs.uk) |
| Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health Care Trust | Communications | [WHCNHS.Communications@nhs.net](mailto:WHCNHS.Communications@nhs.net) |
| Herefordshire and Worcestershire CCG | Kerry Thomson (Lead) | 01432 383795/ 07834 788380 [Kerry.thomson5@nhs.net](mailto:Kerry.thomson5@nhs.net) and [hw.comms@nhs.net](mailto:hw.comms@nhs.net) |
| National Probation Service – West Mercia | Harry Harper  Rebecca Gough | 020 3334 3536 – [harry.harper@justtice.gov.uk](mailto:harry.harper@justtice.gov.uk) [rebecca.gough1@justice.gov.uk](mailto:rebecca.gough1@justice.gov.uk) |
| Community Rehabilitation Company | Chief Officer - Dal Veysey | [Dal.Veysey@justice.gov.uk](mailto:Dal.Veysey@justice.gov.uk) |
| West Mercia Ambulance Service | Murray McGregor | 01384 246496 or Out of Hours: 07909 528550 |
| West Mercia Women’s Aid | Helen Richardson | [Helen.Richardson@wmwa.org.uk](mailto:Helen.Richardson@wmwa.org.uk) |
| West Mercia Police | Melinda Cooksey  Alex Gale | Mobile: 07814773721  Direct Dial: 01905 331002 Ext. 7742020  [melinda.cooksey@westmercia.pnn.police.uk](mailto:melinda.cooksey@westmercia.pnn.police.uk)  Mobile: 07779543174  [alex.gale@westmercia.pnn.police.uk](mailto:alex.gale@westmercia.pnn.police.uk) |
| CAFCASS | Rebecca Jenkins | [Rebecca.Jenkins@cafcass.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Rebecca.Jenkins@cafcass.gsi.gov.uk) |
| NHS England | Claire Deeley | 0113 825 0646 [england.nemedia@nhs.net](mailto:england.nemedia@nhs.net) |
| West Mercia Youth Justice Service | Keith Barham | 01905 732200 [keith.barham.whyos@westmercia.pnn.police.uk](mailto:keith.barham.whyos@westmercia.pnn.police.uk) |