

1)

I am Nick Griffiths, crime reporter with the News & Star and The Cumberland News. I am based in Carlisle and work in a patch covering north and west Cumbria and Dumfries & Galloway.

I began my career as a journalist as a trainee reporter with Dumfriesshire Newspaper Group in 1998, working for four weekly titles covering much of Dumfries & Galloway and stretching just into north Cumbria.

I joined Cumbrian Newspapers in 2000 as a trainee reporter for the News & Star and The Cumberland News, based in a district office in Workington.

In 2003 I transferred to the papers' Carlisle office as a trainee general reporter and qualified as a senior reporter in April 2004. In September that year I was appointed crime reporter for the two papers.

2)

I would say that overall there is a good working, professional relationship between the News & Star/The Cumberland News and Cumbria Constabulary.

We expect them to provide us with details of crimes, incidents and operations of importance to the public.

We also recognise the need to be fair and accurate with this information and are aware of the role we can play in helping police and the key part we can have in aiding investigations, appealing for witnesses and raising awareness of crime trends and efforts by officers to tackle them (offering reassurance to the public).

If I was to raise one criticism I would suggest there could be more emphasis on information coming to us as soon as possible and a sometimes better realisation of our deadlines.

Missing a deadline can mean details not reaching the public until a day later, thereby presumably slowing down the flow of information coming back from a witness appeal.

3)

As crime reporter I have virtually daily contact with the constabulary press office to keep up to date on press releases, campaigns, incidents and any other issues they are dealing with.

I also have daily contact with an appointed force representative (usually a detective constable), who will give a briefing on incidents over the last 24 hours.

This allows them to get timely witness appeals out to the public on crime including grassroots lower-level incidents (shed raids, burglaries etc) in the first available edition – and push advice on crime trends (for instance, shut your windows at night if there is a spate of sneak-in burglaries in hot weather).

I speak to a range of other officers and civilian staff regularly to get extra comments, clarification or confirmation of details and updates from cases/issues they are in charge of or have involvement in.

I will also speak to other officers with whom I have developed a relationship of mutual respect and trust over the years to perhaps get clarification or greater background to a story so it can better inform our reporting, make us more accurate in our representation of an incident and less likely to cause distress to anyone involved.

I sometimes speak to representatives from Cumbria Police Authority when a story touches on their involvement.

I should clarify that I do also do other stories besides crime so while I have daily contact in my role as crime reporter, there are days when someone else will fill in while I am on other assignments.

Before being appointed crime reporter in April 2004 I was a general reporter in Carlisle who took an interest in crime reporting, so I would speak to officers and the constabulary press office if they were relevant to jobs I was doing – but this did not happen as frequently as it does in my current role.

Prior to being a general reporter I worked in a district office in Workington with another reporter. We took it in turns to do daily “calls”, which involved speaking to the press office and also a designated force representative (at this stage it was usually a detective sergeant) for an overnight briefing.

4)

As set out above, I have had contact with press officers at Cumbria Constabulary frequently throughout my career and virtually daily in my current role as crime reporter.

This communication is initiated both by me and the press office themselves.

This will depend on the circumstances – I’ll ring up to ask them about something but they may ring me to flag up an impending story, particularly if it is close to deadline and it is an appeal/information they urgently want to be made public.

5)

Over more than seven years as crime reporter I have occasionally been given an officer's personal mobile number or home number. This invariably happens if I have been speaking to them about a story, I've mentioned I may need clarification or to check something the next day – and they have then mentioned they are off work that day and given me another number to contact them on. All this is done with the intention of getting the most accurate possible report.

6)

News stories. Sometimes I might be setting up a profile piece on senior or high-profile officers or interviews/background pieces on crime trends, major cases or issues affecting the force.

7)

Help with investigations (though witness appeals etc), help raising the profile of initiatives and operations in the community, good PR to show the force is operating as our readers would expect.

Recent examples include:

- * An appeal for witnesses over an attack on a man on a disability scooter;
- * An appeal for information after a body was found in woods in a likely murder case – the woman had been missing for months and police were trying to gather information;
- * Details of how there would be extra officers on the beat over the busy Christmas period to stop drink-fuelled trouble.

8)

I have had cups of coffee bought for me at the police station when attending for a briefing or interview. I have also accepted the occasional invitation to a leaving party or social occasion where, for instance, somebody might buy me a pint out of politeness.

9)

See answer eight.

10)

At the morning briefing we often have a coffee from the canteen machine while going through the incidents. I may buy these (they are about 60p per coffee) and claim them as expenses.

At the occasional social occasion I have been to involving police (see question eight) I have also bought the odd pint for an officer out of politeness if I'm having a chat with them.

11)

See answer 10.

12)

Yes, I have attended press conferences. They were called to give out information about a certain issue or incident.

I have been to numerous press conferences over the years. Examples include a press conference following the west Cumbria shootings, the floods in the county in 2009 and an announcement of a potential merger with another force.

In so far as it being valuable, the force got the information across – but I personally prefer a one-to-one briefing/interview. I recognise though that if there is a major incident that draws massive media attention a press conference is sometimes the most practical option.

13)

Yes. It tends to be in advance of a highly visible operation where they want to send out a message to the community, for instance dawn drugs raid on a crime-hit estate. Sometimes I may get an informal "heads up" that there may be a development due in a story of significance to our readers to inform our reporting and prepare us in case it breaks close to deadline.

14)

Yes. Sometimes you may be given background information to inform our reporting, often with the aim of reducing potential unnecessary distress to people involved in the case or preventing legal problems.

For instance, we may be told under the proviso that we do not print anything that a bad car crash could prove to be fatal before this has been officially declared.

This is often so we take greater care with any pictures that could identify the car involved or take greater care if approaching the family (we would not want to turn up on the doorstep moments after they have been told of a death).

Similarly there may be legal complications in some cases that we are informed about, for instance the potential accidental identification of sex attack victims if we are too specific in naming the location of the assault or other details (they may be the only 14-year-old in a relatively small street).

We were given an off-the-record briefing about how the month-long inquest into the deaths of the west Cumbria shooting victims was expected to pan out, so such a major public interest story could be planned and staffed adequately.

15)

The only thing that could be classed as hospitality would be the 60p cups of coffee bought to drink while going through the morning briefing (see question 10). This is agreed with the editor, put down on my expenses form and signed off by the editor.

16)

I've received on-the-job in-house training on dealing with the police – and speak constantly to my bosses as I go along if I have queries on how to handle anything.

17)

My news editors are aware where I am when I go to my daily briefing and I keep them up-to-date with how I am going about anything I am working on.

18)

Obviously everything should be done within the law. We should treat the information we are given fairly and report it accurately. We are aware of the importance of the role we can play in helping police and the key part we can have in aiding investigations.

19)

None.

20)

Through office and mobile phone numbers we have been given. The force representative at the daily briefing may "call over" someone investigating a particular incident if I require clarification/further information. The press office will also facilitate meetings/interviews.

21)

Yes. There are many incidents involving the police which we require information on that we would not necessarily want to bother a serving officer directly with (for instance a relatively minor car crash that closes a city road) and press offices play a vital role here. They can also give guidance and act as a go-between for the media and police.

Their general role should be to allow us to gain access to specific areas and information in the possession of a public service.

We are not asking for anything the public is not entitled to and press offices can facilitate these requests.

22)

I believe the recommendation that forces and authorities should record all interactions between police employees and media representatives would seriously hinder the flow of information from the police to the public.

Being practical, if an officer has an extra form to fill in, an extra layer of red tape to overcome, is it not likely they might avoid taking the time to give the type of background information or clarification mentioned above that provides better informed, more accurate reporting?

Also, I believe a record of all interaction would put off whistleblowers.

23)

No. I can only speak of my own experience in local journalism, but I consider the professional working relationship we have with the police is already an appropriate one.

There should be an open, trustful working relationship between police and journalists, obviously working within the laws and rules already set.

I don't think police officers should be hidden away from all journalists across the country because of allegations levelled at a few national reporters and police officers.

Being in a position where we have access to the police involved in the issues and incidents that are of public interest in our area is a key tool in trying to produce reports that are as fair and accurate as it is possible to be.

It serves nobody's purposes to put in place barriers or practices that hinder the flow of legitimate information to the public.

We both serve the communities in which we are based and can help each other in that respect.

Nick Griffiths
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