

# Northwards Housing

## Protocol and guidance for dealing with the Media

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Northwards Housing's Communication Strategy 2006-2008 outlines the organisation's aims and objectives for communicating with a diverse audience. The purpose of this protocol is to ensure that our key aims and objectives are successfully delivered and to set out the standards and procedures for effective media relations.
- 1.2 All media enquiries raise the public profile of Northwards' so we need to ensure **efficient, timely responses to media enquiries and promote positive, accurate and balanced media coverage** that truly reflect the activities of the organisation, as well as our identity, style, vision and values. An organisation's reputation can sometimes stand or fall on media coverage.
- 1.3 Effective two-way communication, particularly with the local media, plays an important part in informing residents and the wider community about the latest news and the services we offer.
- 1.4 In addition, we need a protocol to establish our own internal processes for working on both reactive and proactive relations with the media (flow chart appendix 4). Directors and Senior Managers will also receive basic training on interaction with the media.
- 1.5 The **close working relationship with Manchester City Council** means that we need to ensure a clear and transparent distinction is drawn between the Council and Northwards, albeit within a partnership that promotes a wider responsibility for the regeneration of North Manchester and Northwards' responsibilities to the Council. This includes working continually with Manchester City Council to support and deliver the city's priorities.
- 1.6 Equally important is the need to make clear the different roles and responsibilities of Officers, Board Members (including those with specific responsibilities such as Sub Committee Chairs) and Executive Directors in relation to the media.
- 1.7 The public will, from time to time, need to understand the nature of the working relationship between Manchester City Council and Northwards Housing and a clear media protocol is a platform for defining and supporting this relationship.

### 2. The Legal Context

- 2.1 All Council publicity and media work is governed by provisions in legislation (Local Government Act 1986 sec.27) and the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 1988 revised in 2001. Whilst no separate guidance has been written for ALMOs, it is generally

expected that Northwards Housing will comply with these requirements where appropriate.

- 2.2 This legislation is intended to ensure public money is not spent inappropriately on political communications; that Council's policies and aims are as objective as possible.
- 2.3 Further restrictions apply during the period prior to local elections in the period between the publication of a notice of election and polling day. Proactive publicity should be precluded in all its forms for candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election, or deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in such a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. Wider publicity initiatives need to be considered carefully during this period and no candidates can be quoted in news releases in the period leading up to an election. The above is relevant in regard to Council nominated Members to Northwards' Board and applies equally to the website and intranet.

### 3. Dealing with the Media

- 3.1 Northwards Housing is committed to effective media management to ensure our residents are informed about the services and issues which affect their everyday lives and their community. This protocol encourages participation and effective **engagement with residents and other stakeholders** to make sure that Northwards' priorities match the aspirations of residents and remain consistent with those of Manchester City Council.
- 3.2 Effective media relations will increase public awareness of the services we provide, allow local people a real say in issues that affect them, allow us to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities and **improve local accountability**.
- 3.3 Northwards will be proactive in involving residents in stories that present, not only a human interest story, but those that highlight effective working together in the delivery of the housing service.
- 3.4 Wherever possible, we will try to anticipate media attention and prepare press releases in advance, especially if there is an issue likely to be contentious or high profile; embargos will be used as a last resort as compliance cannot be guaranteed.
- 3.5 The Communications staff within the Business Support Team at Northwards, will over time build valuable contact with the local media based on open and honest transactions to ensure a positive and mutually beneficial relationship.
- 3.6 **Managing negative publicity** is important and relationships with the media will seek to address any lack of understanding by journalists about Northwards' ambitions and role. As well as reducing these risks we will reduce lost opportunities for good news stories; ensure a consistent and reliable message from one source within the organisation, thereby controlling

the disillusioned feelings of staff and customers that can sometimes occur following the publicity associated with negative stories.

- 3.7 The Communications staff will monitor and evaluate the coverage Northwards receives in the local, national and technical media, compiling a portfolio of material and at the same time remaining alert to any emerging issues and trends.
- 3.8 Northwards Housing welcomes the opportunity to talk with the media and therefore 'no comment' is not a recommended response to media enquiries. The only situation when this response would be appropriate is for legal reasons. Individuals authorised to communicate with the media are as follows:
- Communications and Marketing Manager
  - Communications Officer
  - Head of Business Support
  - Chief Executive and Executive Directors
  - Chair and Board Members (by prior arrangement)

Other Northwards' employees are permitted to speak with the Media, but for reasons outlined above and to ensure consistency this can only be with the prior authorisation of an Executive Director.

- 3.9 On a day to day basis the media will be asked to contact the Business Support Team where Communications staff will co-ordinate and draft a response for authorisation by the most appropriate person within the organisation, usually an Executive Director. This may be in consultation with Manchester City Council.

#### **4. Reactive Contact with the Media**

- 4.1 Reactive contacts with the media are those situations where the organisation is required to respond to events and enquires from the media, usually at short notice, and without having had the chance to prepare a response in advance or to prevent an event from occurring.
- 4.2 On receipt of an enquiry from the media the communications staff will take full responsibility for the enquiry, taking details including the journalist's name, contact details, publication and deadline.
- 4.3 If **crisis management** is required, the relevant Executive Director will work with the Communications staff and co-ordinate a brief action plan on how best to deal with the enquiry. This will include:
- a list of officers and managers to approach for further information
  - a timescale to be worked within
  - if necessary a joint visit or interview to gain an understanding of the issues raised.
  - Informing the Chief Executive, Chair of the Board and Manchester City Council.

- 4.4 For **general media enquiries** the communications staff will contact the most appropriate member of the Executive or Senior Management Team who will take responsibility for gathering the information. For expediency, Communications staff may also approach front line managers about the enquiry, depending on the nature of the situation and the availability of officers.
- 4.5 When gathering information, managers must use their initiative and access all sources of information to prepare a comprehensive response to the questions raised. Importantly it may also be appropriate to speak to partners and colleagues in other teams who could have additional information that would be useful. It will be necessary for Communications staff to understand the personal elements of a case and the events that led up to the enquiry, prior to drafting a response. Information about individuals, however, will only be given in order to correct an inaccurate assumption or statement, or when the individual gives their permission.
- 4.6 Managers must report back to Communications staff within the agreed timescale with all the details requested. This report can be verbal or written depending on the complexity of the enquiry and what has previously been agreed. Once all parties are agreed, the final response or statement will be sent to the relevant Executive Director for signing off prior to release. If the relevant Director is unavailable and a delay needs to be avoided then another member of EMT can authorise its release (see 4.7 below) but this must be in their own name. If a response is emailed or faxed to the media then Communications staff will telephone the media organisation to check they have received it.
- 4.7 Northwards will try to respond to enquiries from the media within reporters' deadlines, although trust and accuracy must not be compromised by media demands. In practice, potentially contentious issues are those that the media take the keenest interest in and if the deadline is tight then a suitable holding quote from the appropriate Director may be required rather than miss the opportunity of a more balanced news story.
- 4.8 Although the Communications and Marketing Manager and the Communications Officer can be quoted as "a Northwards Housing spokesperson" in practice Executive Directors, along with senior managers will be responsible for providing the content of press releases in relation to day-to-day business. Press releases will therefore be more personal and normally include a named individual, including their job title. Board Members will not normally be involved in reactive press releases, unless the media enquiry comes via them.
- 4.9 All letters to newspapers in response to articles or readers' letters must be discussed and agreed by the Communications staff to ensure consistency, style and appropriate timing.

- 4.10 All requests from the broadcast media (TV, radio/film) to film or record are to be made via the Communications staff who will discuss the request with the relevant Director.
- 4.11 Communications staff must be informed about any VIP visits so they can prepare any publicity in advance.
- 4.12 Requests from journalists under the Freedom of Information Act for information held by Northwards' will be shared with Communications staff and the appropriate Director so that they can be prepared for any emerging stories or trends.

## 5. Proactive work with the Media

- 5.1 Proactive work with the media are those situations where the organisation initiates change in advance, by organising events and releasing statements and good news stories to the press and anticipating situations, rather than reacting to issues and reports when they happen.
- 5.2 Northwards works proactively with the media to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the role the organisation plays within the regeneration of north Manchester and the wider social housing environment. This includes the use of national, regional and local press, professional and trade journals within the sector, as well as TV and other broadcasting media.
- 5.3 It is the aim of Northwards to publicise its work by promoting at least 3 or 4 **'good news stories'** per month. All staff are encouraged to refer to their Communication Handbook on what makes a good news story and then speak to Communications staff about their particular needs. The Communications staff will draft a release based on the information provided. A draft will then be sent to the officer for approval prior to being sent to the relevant person, usually an Executive Director, for authorisation.
- 5.4 All press releases will include a 'note to editors' facility at the bottom of the press release to provide background information, as well as further contact details.
- 5.5 Generally, **five days notice** should be given to Communications staff if a press release is planned. Press releases also need to be distributed at the time of the relevant announcement. Time is therefore an essential factor; old news is not considered newsworthy and communications staff need as much notice as possible. Although there can be no guarantees, the greater the planning, then the greater the chances are that the release will have the desired impact.
- 5.6 News releases will usually include a quote from a front line officer, a member of the Executive Management Team or Board and where appropriate a partner organisation.

- 5.7 All press releases will be added to the Northwards Housing website and managers or in some cases Board Members need to be prepared for follow-up requests for further information or interview. EMT and all Board Members will be notified automatically by email of all new press releases / stories added to Northwards' website. Information will also be sent to NFA (National Federation of ALMOs) as appropriate and to all North Manchester Ward Members.
- 5.8 Photographs will be accompanied by a standard release form (appendix 3) to ensure Northwards is authorised to use images in its publications and on the website. In the case of children, appropriate consent will be obtained from the parent/guardian, including a disclaimer allowing images to be used in any of Northwards' publications and on the website.
- 5.9 In certain circumstances, a press release may not be necessary. Communications staff can contact the media and arrange briefings, photo calls or interviews if necessary, coordinating attendance, as appropriate, of those with knowledge of the story.
- 5.10 Proactive promotion of news must take into account the purpose the publicity will serve, the costs, and whether it provides value for money. The target audience should also be considered and staff will be mindful of Northwards' equality and diversity policy, including the need for all communications to be accessible as per Northwards Housing's Communication Strategy.

## **6. Joint Publicity with Partners**

- 6.1 If projects are undertaken in partnership with another organisation, Northwards will ensure that its role and contribution is identified appropriately and the relevant quotes from named individuals included.
- 6.2 Northwards' logo is to be included alongside the logos of the other organisations involved in the news release.
- 6.3 Communications staff will approve the draft text of the news release prior to it being issued and the method, manner and timing of distribution will be agreed in advance with the relevant contacts from each of the partner organisations e.g. contractors, police.

## **7. Joint Publicity with Manchester City Council**

- 7.1 Northwards' close association with Manchester City Council means extra steps will be taken not to undermine this good working relationship. In addition to the above, and prior to releasing its own news stories, Northwards will provide a copy of its news stories, at least 24 hours in advance to Manchester City Council's Press Office, whenever it is practicable to do so. However, every effort will be made to ensure the City Council is briefed at an earlier developmental stage if at all possible. This provides an opportunity for the Council to review the story, volunteer feedback and check the story against a range of other ongoing publicity within the Council. It will avoid

duplication; the release of contradictory information and reduce the risk of a news story that might otherwise prove to be politically sensitive from being released, especially if the timing of its release can be easily changed to suit both parties.

- 7.2 In cases of Anti Social Behaviour it is important that the Council's ASBAT Team and Northwards agree together any joint publicity following a successful intervention. In most cases, Manchester City Council's Press Office will lead in drafting and co-ordinating a response for the approval of both parties prior to publication on both the Manchester City Council and Northwards website.
- 7.3 In certain circumstances the Council's Press Office may receive an enquiry regarding a Northwards customer direct from the Media. In all such cases, the information should be forwarded to the Communications staff at Northwards for action, unless there is a reason to provide a joint response.
- 7.4 Certain situations may require a quote from the Chair of Northwards' Board and, or from Manchester City Council's Lead Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services, or possibly other Senior Councillors or Officers, such as the Director of Housing. This will be considered at the time and discussed with the Council's Press Office.

## **8. Guidelines for Staff**

- 8.1 Staff approached by the media who are asked to provide a comment should politely refer the enquirer to the Communications staff based in the Business Support Team. This is to ensure a consistent response by the Communications staff on behalf of the organisation and protect staff from making 'off the cuff' remarks that they might not otherwise make, had they had time to think about a response.
- 8.2 Executive Directors may be contacted individually, especially by the technical press and must use their judgement in deciding whether to provide an immediate response, or to refer the enquiry to Communications staff. The latter is recommended if at all possible, whilst further enquiries are made and to allow more time for a considered response.
- 8.3 There should be a general assumption that anything said to the media might be used (e.g. "that sounds terrible!" "sorry I don't know anything about that" or "I'm not allowed to tell you"). The national media might for example adopt a different approach to local media organisations.
- 8.4 Staff involved in major projects or initiatives must develop a media/communications plan in consultation with communications staff.
- 8.5 Confidentiality of staff and customers must be maintained at all times.
- 8.6 In addition to proactive work with the media, guidance is given at appendix 1 on writing a press release.

## **9. Guidelines for Board Members**

- 9.1 Generally speaking Board Members should follow the guidelines for staff at section 8. They should be mindful of Northwards Housing's Code of Conduct for Board Members in all their dealings with the media, particularly section 9 of the code regarding confidentiality, and act in the best interests of Northwards at all times.
- 9.2 An appropriate mechanism will be agreed with the Governance Support Officer at Northwards for ensuring that tenant members of Northwards' Board are informed, if requested, of responses Northwards makes to the media. This is in recognition of the degree of ad-hoc contact these particular Board Members have with tenants living in the area and provides an opportunity for them to prepare their own response to operational issues that might be brought to their attention by members of the public.
- 9.3 The Chair and Vice Chair of the Board will, from time to time, be asked to agree a quote on behalf of Northwards to be included in a news story. It is also possible that the Chair of each of the Sub Committees may be asked to comment on a particular policy or decision that was made. In all cases, a draft will be prepared by Communications staff and sent to the relevant Board Member for their approval.
- 9.4 The appropriate person for media interviews will usually be the Chair or Vice Chair.
- 9.5 If any Board Members are approached directly by the media then Communications staff should be informed. If Local Council Board Members are being interviewed by the media they must be clear that they are speaking in their role as a local ward member, not as a representative of Northwards' Board; unless the latter is specifically agreed.
- 9.6 Board Members and Managers may need to prepare for interviews and brief guidance is provided at Appendix 2.

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4.6.07

Press releases are useful if you want to promote a new service, relaunch an existing one, publicise an event or key project or celebrate an important achievement. Think about what makes the news interesting i.e. novelty, danger, celebrity, triumph over tragedy, milestones and anniversaries, superlatives (biggest, oldest, youngest, highest) and stories about 'people'.

They are not 100% reliable as the press will pick and choose what they want to cover and of course a lot will depend on other news items on the day.

- Establish Who, Why, What and When
- Start with the main issue that you want to get over and keep to the point.
- Put your next four facts in short paragraphs underneath.
- Keep it brief.
- Consider what your main points are, include information such as benefit to users, uniqueness of project etc.
- Something unusual, a human interest element usually captures the imagination.
- If a photo opportunity is involved consider something quirky such as dressing up or using props.
- Use a snappy headline to catch the media's attention.
- Journalists like straightforward jargon free information which can be read quickly.
- Remember journalists cut copy from the bottom so put all your key points in the top few paragraphs. Information in footnotes should only be background information.
- Quotes are useful as they can endorse what you are trying to say and can add credibility to your article. Use quotes from residents who have benefited from a service for example.
- If there is a special event connected to the news release remember to give location, date and time.
- If there is a photo opportunity available to the press let them know in the notes to editor section.

## **Appendix 2**

## **Guidance of preparation for Interview**

Establish the scope and purpose of the interview in advance. Find out who else is being interviewed and whether the interview will be live or recorded. Ask journalists what their deadlines are and try to meet those deadlines.

- Pull together your facts
- Decide on a few key points
- Practice
- Make your key points early in the interview
- Be polite and straightforward
- Don't be drawn on speculation or opinion
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so

Remember Northwards' website contains a significant amount of information and can be brought to the media's attention.

### **TV Interviews**

Find out as much as you can about the programme on which you're being asked to appear - is it live or pre-recorded? Why has the programme chosen this particular topic and what angle are they taking? What are they expecting from you - what are the question areas? Is the audience completely general, or is targeted at a particular group? Think about the points you could make which are most interesting, useful and relevant to the appropriate audience.

### **Dress for success**

Avoid jackets or suits with close-checked or herringbone patterns as the cameras cannot always cope with the intricacy of the pattern so viewers get an uncomfortable strobing effect. The same applies to closely-stripped shirts in sharply contrasting colours. Men should also avoid very dark suits, particularly in combination with white shirts which can drain colour from the face. Light pastel shirts are more flattering. For women, go for the unfussy look if you are trying to appear smart and authoritative - bold patterned scarves and loud jewellery can detract attention from what you are actually saying. For jackets and suits, fairly neutral colours tend to work best - deep saturated reds are not usually so successful.

### **Mind your language**

Think about the way you talk in your work life - is your conversation peppered with abbreviations, technical terms and other jargon? Imagine instead that you are chatting in the pub to someone who is perfectly intelligent, but who simply doesn't know anything about the subject. How would you explain it to them without being patronising?

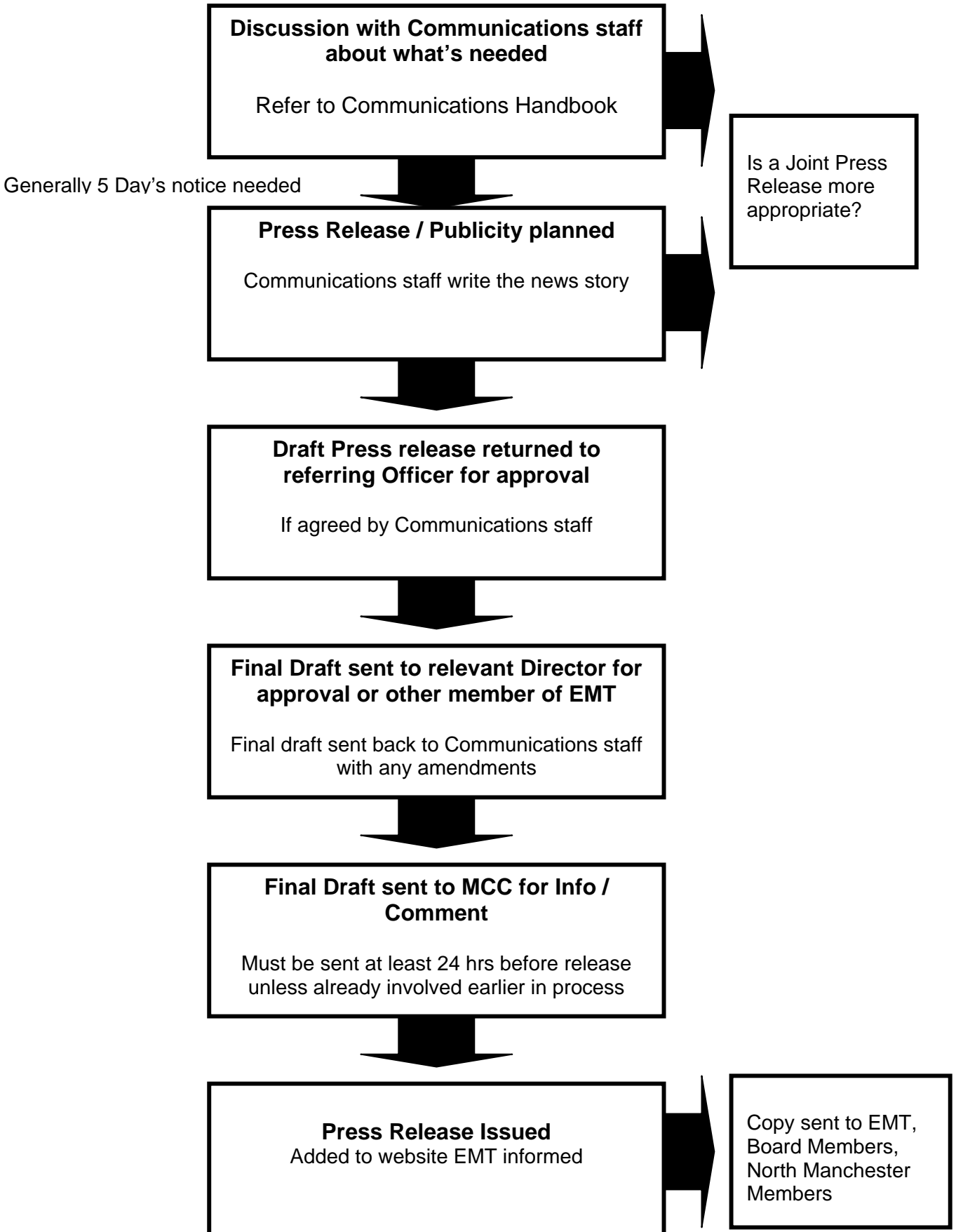
## **Common Mistakes**

Allowing your eyes to wander around the studio

If your eyes flicker around during a TV interview, you look uncomfortable, and probably guilty. Keep your eye-line focused on the interviewer, then you come over as being in command of your subject. Avoid frowning - it makes you look miserable. With most topics, a smile won't come amiss!

Don't assume your audience knows about your subject. People often make the mistake of addressing their remarks to the interviewer (who may be well-informed) rather than the audience.

Generating a Press Release (Proactive)



## Dealing with a General Media Enquiry (Reactive)

