



Media Relations Policy

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Statement of Intent

St Mary's Catholic High School is passionate about maintaining its reputation as a place where pupils can have a high-quality educational experience, staff can be supported throughout their personal and professional development, and the school community can preserve a safe, nurturing and positive environment.

In order to retain a positive reputation that matches the positive environment of our school, the school aims to foster close and mutually respectful relationships with the local and regional media, to ensure our successes can be celebrated and to protect us from negative and libellous reports in the press.

This policy sets out our strategies for liaising with the media and our procedures for press engagement, coverage and comment, as well as the conduct all staff are expected to adhere to with regard to speaking to the press.

Legal framework

This policy has due regard to all relevant legislation and statutory guidance including, but not limited to, the following:

- DfE (2020) 'Governance handbook'
- DfE (2021) 'Keeping children safe in education (2020)'

This policy operates in conjunction with the following school policies:

- Data Protection Policy

- Freedom of Information Policy
- Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy
- Records Management Policy
- Disciplinary Policy and Procedure
- Visitor Policy
- Allegations of Abuse Against Staff Policy
- Staff and Volunteer Confidentiality Policy
- Pupil Confidentiality Policy
- Records Management Policy
- Gifts, Hospitality and Anti-bribery Policy

Roles and responsibilities

The governing body is responsible for:

- Maintaining strategic oversight of the school's media engagement and marketing endeavours.
- Drafting, monitoring and reviewing this policy.
- Ensure proactivity in managing the school's reputation.
- Collaborating with the Headteacher and Local Authority communications officer in developing strategies for responding to negative, sensitive, libellous, defamatory or malicious coverage.

The headteacher is responsible for:

- Overseeing the day-to-day implementation of this policy.
- Ensuring the school's media conduct is in line with the governing body's strategy for the school's media engagement and marketing.
- Reviewing and approving media correspondence, e.g. press releases, drafted by the school.

The communications officer is responsible for:

- Promoting the school in a positive way.
- Developing strategies for engaging with the media and handling media coverage of all kinds.

- Liaising with the media, including scheduling and handling appointments with media representatives and managing the relationships between the school and media outlets.
- Drafting media correspondence, e.g. press releases, on all important and/or successful school activities to ensure positive exposure, or delegating this responsibility to other staff members, where relevant and appropriate.
- Reviewing and approving any press releases drafted by staff members.
- Ensuring that staff members know what to do when contacted by the press, in line with this policy.

All staff are responsible for:

- Adhering to this policy in its entirety.
- Acting in such a way that supports and promotes the school's good reputation, and avoiding acting in such a way that could bring the school into disrepute.

Reputation

Staff and governors have a responsibility to safeguard the school's reputation and, where possible, promote a positive image of the school. The school recognises the significant role that media coverage can play in the community's perceptions of the school, and, thus, will ensure that all staff and governors are well-prepared to handle the media in line with the '[Media training](#)' section of this policy.

In general, the school will adopt a proactive approach to media management, ensuring that the local media is always aware of positive news about the school and that any negative news is immediately handled to mitigate the risk of damage to reputation. The school and its staff will not at any time attempt to mislead the media, either through a direct statement or deliberate omission of information.

Communicating with the media

All direct communication with the media will be conducted through the the headteacher, unless where expressly delegated. The school will endeavour to maintain a close relationship with local media outlets, and will supply them with regular content which they can use for stories.

The headteacher will be responsible for managing relationships with local media outlets. The school aims to develop a close, professional relationship with such outlets, in which the headteacher has a point of contact in each of the local and

regional media outlets, where possible. The headteacher will be proactive in engaging the media with regard to positive news, events and information about the school, and will encourage media representatives to feel as though they are a member of the school community.

The headteacher's contact information is published on the school website to enable streamlined media communications, and it is made clear that they are the point of contact for all media enquiries.

Press releases and coverage

Where possible, the headteacher will ensure that school activities and successes are actively publicised. Where press release drafting is delegated to another member of staff, e.g. the coach of a team that has won a competition, the headteacher will review and approve the press release prior to submission.

No press releases will include photographs of pupils unless express, written permission from parents exists for each individual pupil in the relevant photographs. The originator will liaise with the DPO on matters of consent and data protection, in line with the '[Data protection and record keeping](#)' section of this policy, and the Data Protection Policy.

No staff member or member of the school community will release a press release on behalf of, or regarding, the school without prior approval from the communications officer. Failure to follow this process will be dealt with in line with the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure.

Where press coverage takes place, all parties who may have an interest will be informed as soon as is practicable, e.g. parents, staff, governors and pupils.

All press releases and press coverage will be reported to the governing body in advance.

Formal requests for comment

Where the school receives a request from the media for a quote or a comment on a story they are writing, the query will be handled by the headteacher. Where possible, the headteacher will avoid giving off-the-cuff quotations right away. In general, they will be expected to run the proposed story past Senior Leaders before commenting; however, they will respond to the request as quickly as possible. All comments given will be succinct and professional.

The headteacher and liaise with the Chair of governors before giving comment on any stories which, for example:

- Are particularly contentious.
- Are particularly sensitive.
- Have the potential to be damaging to the school's reputation.
- Relate to confidential information about the school, or a staff member, pupil or parent.

Where the headteacher decides not to respond to a request for comment, this will be as a result of weighing the pros and cons, in the knowledge that the story will likely be published regardless.

Media access to schools

The headteacher is responsible for arranging appointments with representatives of the media for the promotion of school activities, attainment and progress, in line with the school's wider marketing and promotion strategies. The communications officer is also responsible for liaising with media representatives who reach out to the school for an appointment.

The school will not permit individuals representing the media to enter the school premises without prior appointment. Any media representatives attempting to enter the school premises without authorisation will be barred from the grounds; where they refuse to exit, the police will be called.

Where representatives of the media are permitted to enter the school grounds to attend a previously agreed appointment, e.g. to conduct an interview with a member of staff or take a photograph of a group of pupils, they will be supervised at all times, in line with the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy. Representatives of the media will not be permitted to enter the school grounds during break- and lunchtimes when pupils are outside, where possible.

Media representatives will not be permitted to film or take photographs inside the school premises indiscriminately. Where a media representative requires pictures of pupils, the communications officer, in collaboration with the DPO, will ensure no pupil for whom consent has not been obtained is photographed or filmed, and that, where possible, filming of the school grounds is done where pupils are not present.

Media representatives will be treated as visitors when on school grounds, and will be managed in line with the Visitor Policy.

Pupils and the media

Representatives of the media will not be left unsupervised around pupils and will not be permitted to talk to, or photograph, pupils under the age of 16 without prior, written permission from their parent. Pupils over the age of 16 will be required to provide written permission for being photographed prior to being photographed by the media. The school will take all reasonable steps to prevent pupils being approached or photographed by media outlets where express consent has not been granted.

Where a current or past pupil, by virtue of the fame, notoriety, actions or position of themselves or a member of their family, becomes the subject of media attention, the school will avoid engaging in any discussion about that pupil with a member of the media without express permission from the parent of the pupil concerned, or the pupil themselves where they are over the age of 16. Where permission is given for the school to respond to media attention, it will keep communications brief, avoid passing any kind of judgement and will ensure to discourage press from approaching the pupil or the school again for comment.

Staff members and the media

No member of staff will communicate with the media without express permission of the communications officer or headteacher. Where members of staff are asked questions about the school, but have not been cleared by the communications officer or headteacher to speak to the media, they will avoid giving comment. Where a staff member has news they would like to share with the media, they will discuss this with the communications officer, who will engage the media with the staff member's input as appropriate.

Where a staff member is cleared to speak to the media alone, this will be done on a case-by-case basis, meaning that this permission does not automatically extend to other circumstances. Staff members must seek permission each time they wish to speak to the media, and, before being permitted to speak on behalf of the school, will be given training in line with the '[Media training](#)' section of this policy.

Where a staff member speaks to the media without authorisation, they will be required to inform the communications officer immediately, who will take a record of the incident, which will include:

- The name of the staff member who spoke to the media.
- The approximate date and time the staff member spoke to the media.

- The name of the media representative spoken to, if known, and/or the name of the media platform they represent.
- Details of exactly what was said to the media.
- Any follow-up actions needed for damage control.

Incidents of staff members speaking to the media without authorisation will be handled by the headteacher, who will assess whether this was done maliciously. If the headteacher concludes that the staff member's discussion with the media was a one-time mistake that was not intentionally malicious, they may recommend that the staff member undergo media training in how to deflect media questioning. Where the staff member has made the same mistake multiple times, their comments were, whether deliberately or not, particularly damaging, or the headteacher believes they have spoken to the media with the malicious intent of damaging the school's reputation, the case will be handled in line with the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure.

Where a staff member is approached to speak to the media in a personal capacity that is unrelated to the school, they are free to do so, as long as they do not make any comments about the school. Where the school is discussed with the media during conversation, the staff member will contact the communications liaison to inform them of what was said.

Where the school is approached with regard to the fame, notoriety, actions or position of a member of staff or their family, it will decline to comment in most circumstances, and always where permission has not been sought and obtained from the staff member. Where permission is given for the school to respond to media attention, it will only respond where it is relevant and appropriate for the staff member's workplace to do so, contingent on the issue at hand. All communications with the media on such issues will be brief, avoid passing any kind of judgement and will ensure to discourage press from approaching the school again for comment.

Handling unwanted media interest and negative press

The school will aim to ensure that all unwanted media interest and negative press is handled in the most positive way possible. Any unwanted media interest levelled at any member of the school community should be reported to the headteacher as soon as possible.

Although the school will always aim to put forward the most considered and prepared statements in response to negative press or unwanted media interest, it will not

exercise undue delay in responding due to the adverse impact on the school's reputation this could have.

Allegations and investigations

Where media interest concerns an ongoing investigation, whether internal or external, e.g. a police investigation, all staff members and governors will be informed to avoid speaking to the media in all circumstances. The school will not discuss an investigation of any kind publicly, at least until the case has closed. Staff members will be instructed to inform the media that they are “unable to comment on an ongoing investigation” if approached for comment.

The school will ensure that, in the case of an investigation or perceived scandal, the identities of any individuals involved are not released to the media. No pupil under the age of 16 will ever be named by the school to the media under any circumstances. In all but exceptional circumstances, the school will not name any pupil, staff member, governor, parent or any other stakeholder when approached by media to do so. What constitutes exceptional circumstances will be decided on a case-by-case basis by the communications officer and headteacher, and any decision made will remain fully compliant with the school's Data Protection Policy, Pupil Confidentiality Policy and Staff and Volunteer Confidentiality Policy.

Where an allegation is made about a member of staff, the school will observe its duty of care to staff members by taking all reasonable steps to avoid revealing identifiable information about that staff member, in line with the Allegations of Abuse Against Staff Policy.

The private and personal lives of staff or governors

Where the private and personal lives of members of staff or governors become the subject of media interest, the school will not comment. Where appropriate, the school may advise the staff member to seek legal advice, or to complain to the Independent Press Standards Organisation through its [online form](#).

Where a staff member's employment is terminated amidst media interest, the school will only comment to confirm the termination of the staff member's employment, and will refrain from discussing the information in any further detail.

Negative media coverage

The school will maintain a proactive approach to tackling negative coverage. Where negative press is expected, the headteacher will, following a discussion surrounding the best way to handle the specific situation with the governing body, reach out to

pupils, staff, parents and other stakeholders via letter to reassure them of how the school will deal with the issue in question as soon as possible, and preferably before they have a chance to read or see it in the media.

Any unexpected negative media coverage will be reported to the headteacher as soon as it is discovered. No member of staff or governor will respond directly to negative press, including the communications officer and headteacher. Instances of negative press will first be discussed between the communications officer and headteacher, who will decide whether the risk of damage to the school's reputation is significant. If so, the matter will be escalated to the governing body, which will decide on how the matter will be approached.

No school representative will engage directly and publicly with the source of the negative press, i.e. beginning a public argument. Where a response is necessary, this will be done in the form of a statement published on the school website, rather than as a direct response to the initial press.

Statements in response to negative press will always use simple and clear Standard English, and will avoid complex and nuanced undertones to avoid confusing audiences. Statements will refrain from apologising, admitting wrongdoing or making promises for future action, unless legal advice has been sought to this effect.

Following unsympathetic coverage from the local or regional press, the communications officer will reach out to the press after a period of time to refocus their attention on positive school practices.

Handling sensitive issues or crises

In sensitive circumstances, such as a death on school premises, a death or injury during a school trip, or another type of emergency, no member of the school community should offer any comment until the headteacher has delivered an official statement. The headteacher will liaise with the press office of any third party involved in the issue, e.g. the local police, to ensure a consistent response.

Regardless of the severity of an incident, the school will communicate first with staff to inform them of what has happened and what to say if asked about it by the media, and to ensure the school can maintain a united front against controversy. The headteacher will then write to parents, giving a considered statement on the incident, including all the facts that can be given, and setting out the school's planned actions.

The headteacher will handle all wider media attention following a crisis management meeting with the governing body, where applicable.

Data protection and record keeping

The school will ensure that no comments are made that violate the rights to confidentiality and/or anonymity of any member of the school community. To this effect, the school will avoid naming, or publicising identifiable information about, any individuals in the press unless consent has been explicitly sought and provided.

Where the school believes a media organisation has not complied with data protection legislation, it will lodge a [complaint with the ICO](#).

The headteacher will ensure that records are kept of all direct contact with the media, including that which has been inadvertent or otherwise unauthorised. These records will be maintained in line with the Records Management Policy, and will be made available for review by the governing body where necessary.

Bribery and blackmail

While the school aims to maintain a close, professional relationship with members of the media, all of its staff and governors will be careful to avoid inadvertently engaging in behaviour that aligns with bribery or corruption. The relationship between the school and the press will never include the exchange of favours, e.g. money or material gifts in return for positive coverage.

To ensure transparency in operations, the headteacher will make a note of all conversations had with the media in their capacity as a member of school staff, and the school will not accept any gifts from, or give any gifts to, members of the press, whether monetary or otherwise. Any incidences of bribery, attempted bribery or actions that may be incorrectly perceived as bribery will be managed in line with the Gifts, Hospitality and Anti-bribery Policy.

In the unlikely event that a member of the media attempts to leverage action from a member of staff or the governing body under the threat of negative personal coverage, the individual in question must report this to the headteacher immediately without responding to the media representative. The headteacher will support the individual to file a complaint regarding the media representative's conduct with Independent Press Standards Organisation through its online form, and report the incident to the police, where appropriate. Under no circumstances will a member of school staff or the governing body commit the actions that are being leveraged without speaking to the headteacher first.

Libellous, defamatory or malicious coverage

Where seriously damaging coverage is levelled at the school, the school will not normally pursue legal action and will instead handle this according to the following procedure:

- Where malicious, libellous or defamatory content is posted in the media about the school in general, the headteacher, and the governing body will discuss the appropriate response, e.g. what a published statement will say and whether the school will request a retraction. Following this discussion, the headteacher will draft a statement which:
 - Corrects any incorrect information, providing facts to support this.
 - Explains the school's actions or words.
 - Refutes any untrue allegations, providing facts to support this.
 - Does not involve name-calling, threats to take legal action, or libellous, defamatory or malicious words.
 - Will be posted on the school website and sent to local and regional media outlets.
- Where malicious, libellous or defamatory content is posted in the media about an individual member of the school, i.e. a staff member or governor, the individual will be informed that the school will remain neutral in the case, i.e. will not make any public comment or publicly take the side of the staff member. The staff member or governor will be informed that they are free to personally pursue legal action if the coverage is particularly damaging to their personal or professional reputation.
- Where coverage is critically damaging to the school's reputation and is libellous, defamatory or malicious the school will pursue legal advice, with approval from the governing body, with due consideration of the fact that this could potentially have a detrimental impact on the school's reputation.

Media training

Before being authorised to talk to the media in any circumstance, relevant staff members and governors will be trained to engage effectively with the media. The headteacher, and any other members of staff or governors expected to engage with the media on a regular basis will have relevant training.

Media training will ensure that, when engaging with the media, staff members and governors will:

- Talk positively about the school.
- Understand strategies that media representatives will often use to elicit comment, approval or denial from them, and how to avoid inadvertently bringing the school into disrepute or revealing information when not authorised to do so.
- Avoid saying anything to, or in the presence of, a media representative that they would not want to be included in coverage of the school.
- Know how to prepare information for media interviews and how to avoid going off-topic.
- Understand what they can and cannot reveal or say to avoid bringing the school into disrepute.