

Media Relations Policy

Compass Disability Services

Units 11 – 12 Belvedere Trading Estate
Taunton, TA1 1BH

Date: May 2017

Review date: May 2020

Background

As a charitable organisation working in partnership with local authorities, statutory bodies and other local organisations, our projects, plans and opinions on disability and equality related issues are of special interest to the general public. One of the ways in which we communicate with the general public is through the media.

In order to ensure a professional relationship with the media, due diligence must be taken to ensure that information originating from Compass Disability Services is accurate, complete, reflects the official position of the organisation and is released to the media and target audience in a timely and professional manner.

Compass Disability Services wants to create a climate of openness and dialogue with all stakeholders. This policy supports a culture of openness and dialogue in the organisation, but also ensures that the reputation of Compass Disability Services is protected, and if possible enhanced, and that the chances of misrepresentation by the media are reduced.

In order that our communications with the media are successful it is vital that our communications are concise, clear and unambiguous. To this end all employees, trustees and volunteers are required to comply with this policy at all times.

Definitions

For the purpose of this policy, when referring to 'the media', we mean reporters, journalists, researchers, editors and others working for the press in all forms: newspaper, magazine and other publications, radio, television and internet sites.

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Why might we be contacted the media?

There are various reasons why the media may try to contact our organisation. There may be positive or negative circumstances surrounding their need for comment, it is therefore important that all comments are fully considered and come through the correct channels to ensure that they have the required impact. The reasons why the organisation may be contacted include:

- For a comment on a local, regional or national issue related to disability or equality.
- For a response to an individuals or corporate comment about one of our projects or the organisation as a whole. These comments could be positive or negative.
- For more information relating to a press release or information that has been disseminated by our organisation.
- For a response to a statement about the behavior of a member of staff, volunteer or user connected to the organisation. This statement could be positive or negative.

Confidentiality

We have a responsibility to our users, partners, employees, trustees and volunteers to ensure that certain information remains confidential.

Unless information is already known to be in the public domain or we have the express permission of the person involved, no personal information or information that may cause an individual to be identified should be released.

We also have a responsibility to our commissioners and funders. Therefore, unless information is already known to be in the public domain or we have the express permission of our commissioners or funders, no information relating to contracts, service level agreements or funding streams should be released.

Who is responsible for media relations?

The Chief Executive Officer has been designated as the first and primary contact with the media. The Chief Executive Officer will respond and if deemed necessary, the CEO will respond in person.

All enquiries for comment should be forwarded to the CEO. All press releases from the organisation should be authorised by the CEO.

In the absence of the CEO enquiries should be forwarded to the Operations Manager. They will determine if they have the relevant skills and information to be able to respond to the request or will respond as detailed below.

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Nobody else should make comment on behalf of the organisation without the permission of the CEO or the Operations Manager.

The Media Officer is responsible for maintaining a list of media contacts and monitoring press coverage.

Those with responsibility for media relations will be trained to an appropriate level including media interview techniques and drafting press releases.

Initial Dealings with the Media

Most reporters will contact the organisation when they need information. They know they will be referred to the proper source for information.

If the media contacts you, it is important that you do not rush to make a comment. It is important that you treat reporters, editors, and program directors courteously. Their impression of each individual in the organisation affects their impression of the entire organisation, and this may influence how and what they report about us. It is important that you respond professionally and achieve agreed deadlines. It would have definite negative undertones to read that "Compass Disability Services were unavailable for comment". It is therefore important that all employees, trustees and volunteers follow the guideline below.

Responding to the Media

Upon receipt of a request for information from the media, the request should always be directed to the CEO or in their absence the Operations Manager.

If none of the above is available, then the person receiving the request should say that they are unable to comment and that they will need to pass the request to the appropriate person. Take full contact details from the person making the request (Name, Company, Telephone number, email address, topic for comment). Ask the person making the request for their deadline. The person receiving the request should inform the caller that they will get the appropriate person to contact them within the deadline.

All contact with the media should be recorded, noting what comment was made, which method was used (i.e. written response, telephone interview etc) and any potential impact from the comment.

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Reflecting the Official Position of Compass Disability Services

It is not possible to detail the official position of Compass Disability Services on every potential topic. Those giving comment to the media should however consider:

- If there is an official position on the subject matter in question or has a previous comment been made that would help to determine what our position on a given topic is.
- Does the organisation have the required experience or background to make a comment? If we do not have, then an honest statement reflecting this should be made.
- Comment should reflect the values and beliefs reflected within the organisation's business plan.
- Comments should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards.
- Comments should avoid the use of 'jargon'.

Press releases

As well as responding effectively and punctually to requests for information from the media, it is important to be proactive in seeking out opportunities to promote the activities and reputation of Compass Disability Services.

Maximising the opportunities for press coverage requires every employee, trustee and volunteer to be alert to possible stories and subjects for articles and to let the C.E.O. know about them as soon as possible. Press releases should be considered in the following situations:

- To communicate key achievements of the organisation.
- To communicate key findings of the organisation.
- To promote the involvement of the local communities in the projects of the organisation.
- To promote attendance at special events and functions.

In the absence of the C.E.O., any employee, trustee or volunteer may draft a press release, however they must all be authorised by the CEO before being distributed in order to ensure that there is consistency and that factual content is accurate and that the use of the release can be monitored.

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Crisis management

Compass Disability Services has a history of enjoying positive media publicity. However, given the nature of the organisation's services and projects, it is important to recognise that this might not always be the case.

Therefore, it is necessary to be aware of the need to manage any publicity – negative or otherwise – that may result from a 'crisis' situation which Compass Disability Services has been viewed to cause or been involved in.

Such a strategy will ensure any damage inflicted on the organisation – its reputation, services and projects – by negative publicity is limited. It will also assist in enabling the organisation to disassociate itself from the crisis situation should this be appropriate course of action.

A media spokesperson – which will be the C.E.O. where possible – must be nominated when a crisis has arisen. This role must be agreed by the CEO and Operations Manager.

The media spokesperson will be the only member of staff authorised to speak with the media for the duration of the crisis to ensure the media does not receive any inaccurate or mixed information. The media spokesperson, CEO, Operations Manager and any other members of staff involved with or possessing information on the crisis must agree.

If possible, seek to circulate a press statement as soon as possible, before media outlets have begun to contact the organisation. This will assist in taking the 'sting' out of a crisis and allow the organisation to reflect its position on the situation at the earliest juncture.

It is important to ensure lines of communication are clearly defined by making all staff aware that media enquiries must be directed to the spokesperson. Guidelines for directing media enquiries are included earlier in this policy.

In a crisis situation, it is crucial to be as honest and open as possible, within the bounds of confidentiality considerations. Whatever the situation, damage to the organisation will increase if dishonest claims or statements are later uncovered.

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Policy Revision

This policy will be reviewed every three years and amended as necessary, or earlier in accordance with any forthcoming legislation. All employees should pass suggestions or recommendations for the revision of any aspect of this policy through normal channels to the Chief Executive Officer.

Associated documents:

Confidentiality Policy
Whistle Blowing Policy

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