



Engaging local media a guide for community rail groups

This guide aims to help community rail groups engage with local media to secure positive coverage that can assist in raising profile and awareness. It offers advice on developing working relationships with journalists and media outlets and tips on identifying and writing eye-catching stories and content.

Further support on these topics is available from Community Rail Network for our members. Contact news@communityrail.org.uk or **01484 481053**. You may also want to refer to our guidance on marketing and communications communityrail.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2018/02/Marketing-communications-guidance-2017.pdf and the use of social media communityrail.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2018/08/ACoRP-social-media-guidance.pdf.

Why should you interact with local media?

While the media, particularly print media, is changing in today’s digital age, successfully securing coverage is still a great way to promote your partnership or group and the work you do. Appearing in your local media, especially if you can do so on a regular basis, remains a fast and easy way of reaching thousands of people. Increasing awareness in this way is vital to both your group and the wider community rail movement, which although growing, still has a relatively low public profile.

Local media are always on the lookout for news, and still like to receive press releases. Community rail stories can provide ‘good’ news, celebrations of community achievements that are the bread and butter for many local outlets, while also linking to wider societal issues like accessible transport, health and wellbeing, social inclusion, mobility and sustainability.









“ Positive media coverage is a powerful marketing tool because it positions you in a favourable light by projecting the credibility, expertise, passion, and image you want to convey. Best of all, it comes from an independent source and the only cost is the time it takes to organise.¹ ”

¹ <https://www.purepublicrelations.com.au/media-coverage-can-benefit-business/>

Part 1 – Engaging and working with journalists and the media

Who are your local media?

Your local media are any news outlets that cover the area your group works in, either physically or online. This could be traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and TV, or hyper-local offerings such as websites, magazines, newsletters or blogs, coverage in any of which could enhance the profile of your group.

Type of media	Potential ‘reach’ and benefits of coverage
<p>Newspapers</p> 	<p>Local newspapers will normally either be published daily or weekly, and will cover a certain geographical area, often with tailored editions for different parts of that area. Although sales of print copies are generally in decline, online readership is growing, and coverage can easily reach thousands of people. Local papers rely on community stories and provide an ideal arena for community rail news</p>
<p>Radio</p> 	<p>This can range from major regional coverage, e.g. thousands of listeners across county/district areas, to local/community broadcasters who may cover individual towns or cities. To supplement stories to fill news slots, stations will be looking for interview opportunities to develop items beyond just a press release. They may also cover events ‘as live’ to bring such occasions to life for listeners</p>
<p>TV</p> 	<p>As with radio, this can range from regional coverage, e.g. local BBC/ITV programmes, to local independent channels. Coverage on mainstream local news or magazine shows could reach hundreds of thousands of viewers. Aside from an interest in covering significant news stories linked to rail/community rail, TV producers may be interested in more in-depth ‘feature’ pieces on certain projects your group might be involved in, particularly if they are linked to major social issues</p>
<p>Websites</p> 	<p>Certain areas, or cities/towns/villages within them, will be covered by websites that might offer guides to local tourism, activities, or events, suggesting things to see and do. These websites might have a section to report local news and celebrate community achievements, which could be a good fit for community rail news. They might also host a local events diary that your group could use for promotional purposes</p>
<p>Magazines/ newsletters</p> 	<p>Smaller towns and villages will often have community newsletters or magazines, publications that are generally free and distributed to individual households or at communal venues such as shops, medical centres etc. Usually produced on a voluntary basis, editors will be grateful for copy related to local groups and activities and with circulation figures sometimes running into the thousands, this can be a good avenue to promote what you do and potentially recruit more members</p>
<p>Blogs</p> 	<p>Some bloggers can have significant online followings, and may publish links to your press releases and/or write comment pieces on the impact your group is having on the local area. You may also be able to promote your group via any transport/rail-specific blogs that focus on the area in which you work</p>

Who should you contact?

If you are contacting your local media outlets for the first time, do some research to find out who they are, the areas they cover – all of this information should be available online – and try to identify who your most appropriate reporter/journalist might be. Have a look at or watch their typical output, and remember to look for all of the media types listed above. It is very rare to find transport specialists in local or regional media these days (besides perhaps regional TV) but you may well find that there is a particular reporter who covers the ‘patch’ in which your group operates. They will be constantly on the lookout for stories relevant to their area, and will be glad to hear from you.

Once you have identified an appropriate contact, you should make an introductory call to say who you are, what your group does, and exchange all contact details. It is a good idea to initially go through a media outlet’s main newsdesk, as they can ensure you are put through to the right person to speak to about future stories. In your initial conversation, to help pique a journalist’s interest, you might mention any upcoming major events or projects to see if they might be relevant, saying you will get back in touch with the details nearer the time. Once you have the correct details (e-mail, telephone number, social media handles), use these to create your own media contacts database that you can refer to instantly any time you want to put a story out.

Making contact to sell your stories

When you have a story that you think your local media might be interested in, contact your nominated journalist to tell them about it. The best way to do this is to phone them to briefly explain the story, before then emailing a full press release immediately afterwards. This way, the reporter will have the story fresh in their mind when the details come through. When on the phone, be positive about the story and have some notes written down in front of you to guide you and help get the main messages across. Get to the point quickly and try to sell the story as best you can, emphasising why the story is relevant to their area. State that all the details will be in the press release you are about to send, but you’re happy to help further if needed.



TIP:

When sending your release, copy and paste it into the body of the email, rather than attaching it, although it is fine to attach pictures. If you do need to send an attachment containing text, use a Microsoft Word file, not a PDF, so reporters can edit the copy if needed. Copy in the main newsdesk (usually news/newsdesk@) as well, so they have a note of the story and can deal with it should your usual contact be called away.



Maintaining relationships with media

Building an effective relationship with media contacts is important and can undoubtedly help in securing coverage of your group’s activities. From a journalistic point of view, this is largely based on trust. If you can gain a reputation as a group that regularly sends interesting, accurate and informative pieces, reporters will continually come back for more content and look to include your news whenever they can. This is where accuracy is crucial: if you make mistakes that come back on the reporter who publishes it, they are unlikely to return to you.

Another key issue in developing relationships with your media contacts is knowing when to get in touch. If they work to daily deadlines, e.g. daily newspapers, radio/TV stations, find out when you can speak to them to minimise disruption. If your story is for immediate release, calling print

journalists first thing in the morning, around 9am, is generally a good tactic as they will be looking for stories to pitch to editors in that morning’s news meeting, which often takes place around 10am. For daily newspapers and radio/TV, calling in the morning is preferable, and you should avoid the end of the day or just before regular, e.g. hourly, news bulletins. If a reporter asks you to call back at a certain time to help assist with their workload, listen and be accommodating if you can.

If your story concerns an upcoming event or photo opportunity, e.g. the launch/completion of a project, try to send a diary note with all the details – sometimes known as a press notice – well in advance, ideally at least a week before the event itself. This will allow media outlets to get the date in the diary, enhancing your chances of coverage. Then, when you call your contact with the full release, remind them that a press notice has already been sent.

 **TIP:**

For daily news operators, Friday's can be a good day to make contact, as most daily newspapers will have two editions (Saturday and Monday) to fill, and radio/TV stations will need content that can be used either immediately that day or for weekend news/feature slots. If you are dealing with a weekly newspaper, avoid sending anything the day before its publication day, send your copy well in advance. For community magazines and newsletters, which may be monthly or quarterly, keep a note of their publication deadlines and make sure your stories are sent ahead of those.

You should not get disheartened if media outlets fail to attend your events, or cover your story in as much depth as you had envisaged. Local press coverage can be unpredictable, and is naturally led by breaking news and events, which you will be competing with. You could have the best story you've ever had, do everything right in terms of media engagement, to find it's then eclipsed by a bigger story on the day. That's just the way it goes sometimes and does not mean you shouldn't try again.

With local newspapers, even if your full article is not used in print, which is limited by page capacity, it might be included as a NIB (news in brief) item that is given more prominence online. Every story, no matter how small, is also generally published on social media, so this again provides another opportunity for coverage, which you and your partners can highlight and share.



Part 2 – Tips for identifying and writing stories

What makes something newsworthy?

Whether consciously or not, we are all immersed in the news every day, and everyone can name at least one aspect of what constitutes a ‘news’ story. There is no definitive list, but elements that might appeal to local media include:

- Topical – information or an event/occasion that has a ‘today’ line;
- Novelty – news about something being introduced or happening for the first time, e.g. a new facility or service;
- Geographically relevant – something that will have a local impact on people/communities;
- Public interest/informative – something that affects the wellbeing or welfare of the public or society;
- Human interest – something that affects people and provokes feelings of empathy;
- Unexpected/unusual/dramatic – something out of the ordinary;
- Campaign – something that conveys public feeling or is seeking local support, e.g. save our hospital, give us more money for schools, join our fight against climate change etc;
- Seasonal/traditional/celebration – news that marks common events or times of the year, e.g. Christmas/Easter stories, anniversaries;
- Entertaining/humorous – stories that provide a sense of fun and light relief;
- Biggest and best – awards, special achievements, record-breaking feats.



The story you are trying to pitch to a media contact may contain many of those aspects (left), so you should try and use your ‘news sense’ to identify the best and most current news line. What is it that affects your specific area, or a significant number of people, that will therefore appeal to local/regional media?

TIP:

One way to identify your main news angle is to imagine you’re literally shouting it from the rooftops: if you had to grab the attention or support of local passers-by in one sentence, what would it be? This concept is also referred to by some as the ‘pub test’: if you ran into a pub and had to explain your story to people in a single sentence, what would you say? What is the ‘hook’?

Within community rail, some common stories that have the potential to lend themselves to local/regional media coverage can include:

- The creation of a new community rail partnership or group;
- The launch or completion of a community rail project, e.g. new artwork, new gardening display, new facilities at a station, new train services influenced by community rail;
- A drive to recruit more community rail volunteers;
- Work involving young people/schools or some form of marginalised group(s), particularly projects that involve societally-important issues such as rail safety or healthy, active travel;
- Promotional campaigns geared towards getting more people using trains for regular travel;
- Specific events based in and around the railway and stations;
- Award wins or any outstanding achievements or aspirations by particular group members, e.g. charitable efforts or noteworthy contributions to the local community.

Writing for local media

While everyone has their own writing style, there are guidelines that can be applied to any community rail story to make it more appealing to local media contacts. While you should not write to a restrictive formula, there are some tips that you should bear in mind to keep your copy clean and concise, helping your press release to stand out from the crowd. They can also be useful to remember when you are distinguishing news stories from other communications that you might issue to members or followers, e.g. blog posts or social media updates.

TIP:

Even if a project is not itself 'new', there may be a news angle you can use to appeal to media, such as a new approach (e.g. a new partner coming on board, or new groups that you're working with), a milestone (e.g. 1,000 school children reached through a sustainable travel awareness scheme), or an appeal for involvement (e.g. local people being encouraged to submit their ideas).



Writing for news

Some things to remember...

- ‘KISS and tell’ – this handy acronym stands for ‘keep it short and sweet’, and tell the story. Use short and simple words, phrases and sentences, and no jargon. Check each of your paragraphs to see whether it offers something of use to your story. If it doesn’t, lose it;
- The six W’s – what, who, where, when, why, how – ensure that you address all of these somewhere in your story;
- The ‘inverted triangle’ – this is a technique that can be used to help piece your story together. Consider an inverted triangle with the widest part of the shape at the top. The most crucial parts of your story (your news angle) go here, following by other information/facts in a descending order or importance. Never bury any crucial parts of your story at the end. Try to get as many of the six W’s as high up as you can, before adding background and context, or introducing a secondary line. Use the end of the story to tie up any loose ends, e.g. providing contact details;
- Be **accurate** and **consistent** – ensure there are no spelling or factual errors. Be consistent with dates, numbers, tenses, titles etc. Journalists will often be pressed for time and rely on the information you are giving them being correct;
- Quotes – use these effectively to help bring your story to life and add authenticity. Use emotive statements and words that help add colour and the passion for what you do. Quotes offer a chance to add drama and opinion, rather than just simply stating facts.

Things to avoid...

- Personal opinion and comment – ‘I did this’, ‘we did that’, or ‘this is great’ is absolutely fine for blogs or social media posts, but it does not belong in a press release. That is not to say you should not include the thoughts and opinions of key players, you should, but do so using quotes;
- Assumption/speculation/over-embellishment – this is something that journalists in local media want to avoid. Stick to the facts and be confident that you can justify and vouch for all the information in your story;
- Clichés and jargon – you might be very familiar with the community rail world and the wider rail industry, but the public will not be. Any information that is not immediately clear to a local audience, or not explained in an easily understandable way, is likely to be cut, and may turn off journalists from using your story at all. Avoid the excessive use of acronyms, which aside from perhaps an abbreviation of your own group, should not be needed;
- Waffle and repetition – this is a no-no. Journalists are crying out for clean copy that needs as little refining as possible. Avoid saying the same thing repeatedly in different ways, and statements of the obvious that won’t keep people’s interest. Retain your focus and keep your word count down by remembering to ‘kiss and tell’!



Putting together your press release

There is no set formula for putting together the perfect press release, but there are certain elements to include that will encourage journalists and editors within local media to use your stories. Getting the basics right will ensure your content is noticed rather than discarded, and make it easy for reporters to transfer the copy straight onto the page or into scripts for radio or TV.

In any press release, you should always consider:

Opening details – make the ownership of the press release crystal clear. Put the name of your group, the date, and your preferred method of press contact, e.g. email. If you want the story published as soon as possible, put ‘for immediate release’. If you want the story to be held until a certain date and time, e.g. the day of an event, you need to place what is known as an embargo on the copy. This just needs a simple line stating, for example, ‘embargoed until 00.01 on Monday June 1’. This instructs media outlets not to publish the story until the date and time you have set, even if you have sent a press notice beforehand;

Title/headline – try to use a short, simple phrase that will grab attention and draw people in. If you can see an obvious play on words then consider using it, but be careful not to belittle the story itself;



Introduction – this is the most important sentence of your entire story. You need to make an impact start and get to the point straightaway, also showing the local/regional relevance. The idea is to make people want to read on! Try and make your intro short and snappy, no more than 25/30 words.

One method is to use a ‘clothesline’ intro, one on which you can hang everything, with as many of the six W’s summed up as possible. You should always aim for at least the ‘who’ and ‘what’, and try for a ‘where’ too, as for local media in particular, some kind of geographical reference is needed. Getting all six W’s in an intro is very rare, but it can be done, as the following, albeit imagined, example shows:

“Lady Godiva (who) rode (what) naked on a horse (how) through the streets of Coventry (where) today (when) in a bid to cut taxes (why).”

To use an example from community rail, here is the intro Community Rail Network (then ACoRP) used to promote their ‘Value of Community Rail’ report in 2019:

“A hidden army of 8,500 volunteers (who) give nearly 400,000 hours a year (how) to bring local railway lines and stations (what) back into the heart of Britain’s communities (where).”

When looking at your intro, consider whether it offers a self-contained summary that, if the rest of the story were to be cut, would be capable of standing alone and making sense to readers or listeners;

Body text – your introduction should have dealt with the main point of the story or event, the latest, most important, or most dramatic thing to have happened. From there, you should continue in a descending order of newsworthiness – try to think of the inverted triangle! Also, always remember you are not writing a chronological story, e.g. ‘we started by doing this, and then we did this, and then we did this’.

If you've got some noteworthy facts and figures, try to use them high up in the story, if you haven't already done so in your intro. These can add initial impact and can then be explained and expanded as your story develops. Using end notes with links to sources can be helpful;

Quotes – as mentioned earlier, quotes allow you to inject some colour and emotion into your piece, and you should aim to get a quote from an appropriate source within your group – it is your press release after all! – relatively high up in the story, ideally in about the fourth or fifth paragraph. The quote will usually be an opinion or reaction (avoid quoting factual information) to your story, which you will have outlined in the opening paragraphs. The same person can be quoted again later in the release, or if you decide to introduce a secondary line or angle, you may wish to quote somebody else, to add variety.

For example, say you are a volunteer within a station friends' group writing a press release about a new piece of artwork you have installed at your station in partnership with a local school. Your initial paragraphs would announce the new artwork and give some details about how/why it came about. You might then quote the chair of the group, and/or the headteacher from the school, saying how great and/or engaging the project was. Later in the story, you might introduce a secondary line that further pieces of artwork are planned, but to do that, the friends' group needs more volunteers. You might choose to quote somebody else here, e.g. the group secretary, outlining how people can get involved and the benefits on offer;

End notes – always wrap up your press release as neatly as you can, ensuring there are no outstanding questions or loose ends for journalists to tie up. It is nice to finish on an emotive quote, but after that, you should always ensure there is a final sentence with any relevant contact details. This might read something like, 'For more details on (name of group), call (number), or visit (website).

After a clear – **Ends** – add a 'Notes to editors' section, which gives you the chance to reference any facts and figures and add some general information not suitable for the body of the press release itself. Parts of this section, once developed, e.g. an 'about us' paragraph, can be added to all of your press releases as standard. For example, you could say how long your group has been in existence, mention awards you may have won, or recent projects that have been completed. This gives reporters the chance to add more weight to the story if they want to, and may stimulate interest in follow-up pieces.

For examples of two press releases related to community rail, click [here](#);



Photographs – you should always include some kind of image with every press release you send. The only exception to this rule would be if the release related to an event where you wanted the media to attend to take their own pictures, and even then (as outlined below) you should ensure you are able to take and provide your own to send afterwards if needed. If the story is linked to a particular project, event or campaign, provide pictures that allow people to make an obvious connection between the story and the image. For example, if your press release related to a new community garden at a station, you would include a shot of people enjoying the new garden. Bear in mind that close-up shots of a few people doing/showing something (while looking at the camera) can be a favourable alternative to standard group shots with lots of people lined up neatly in a generic location. You can always send both types of shot and give reporters and editors the choice.

Even for more generic or smaller stories, you should include some form of stock image, whether that is a picture of your group at work, or just a file picture illustrating your local station or line;

TIP:

Make sure the people in your picture are willing and happy participants, and as diverse as possible (e.g. different ages, genders and ethnicities), unless your project is targeted at a particular audience that you want to show (e.g. older people). If you are taking pictures of children, remember to get the necessary permission from either parents or schoolteachers to allow the image to be used in any media coverage. Schools will have consent forms for this, but you should draft your own simple consent form or permission slip for pictures to take to any events, keeping any completed copies safely on file. For more details, learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/briefings/photography-sharing-images-guidance



You may use a mobile phone to take the majority of your pictures, and in most cases, this will produce images of sufficient quality to be used by the media, both online and in print. However, you should ensure that any pictures you send for media use are high resolution (minimum 1mb) JPEG files, with options of both upright and wide shots. If you need to send any particularly large files, i.e. anything over 10mb, then don't send them directly via an e-mail, send them via a file-share option such as WeTransfer. Do not send blurred pictures as these obviously cannot be used! With any picture you do send, always ensure it is captioned fully and correctly.

Press notices – if your story relates to an event or launch that you want media to attend, you should send a press notice beforehand, which as mentioned earlier, should ideally be sent about a week prior to the day itself. This should be a clear invitation to encourage photographers, reporters and film crews to attend. This note is not a full press release, but should include a brief summary of the story (e.g. two sentences) and all the relevant details of the event – where, when, what and who – including a mobile number for a relevant contact from your group on the day. It’s important that this person will be able to take calls on their mobile, welcome media and show them in/around.

The note should not just be a photocall, it should also state what filming and interview opportunities will be available (e.g. film and photograph the children posing with their new artwork and

commenting on how much they enjoyed the project), and who your (and/or your partners’) media spokespeople will be. This is particularly key to radio and TV outlets, who need some action to film or record, not just static pictures.

Given the pressures on local/regional media, they may not be able to confirm whether they are able to attend until the day of your event, regardless of whether it had been diaried up beforehand via you selling in, e.g. a week ahead, to encourage their attendance. Because of this, you should always plan to take your own pictures or film your own video clips regardless of how confident you are of having the media there. If you feel it is a particularly strong news story, you could consider hiring a local freelance photographer to ensure your pictures are high quality and suitable for both media distribution (e.g. later that same day) and your own promotional use.



Promoting your stories and linking them to your wider work

Gaining positive media coverage allows you to raise the profile of your group and its activities, and you should seek to maximise this by ensuring it aligns with your own communication channels, e.g. website, social media, blog posts. If you have a website – which should clearly list who your group’s designated media contact is – have your latest press release somewhere prominent on the front page (with an option to download a copy, with images), and if you get a story published anywhere, add and highlight the link. Also promote the coverage via your social media, tagging the publisher, e.g. the newspaper, in your post to try and take advantage of their significant online following.

If your press release is linked to an event, start some social media coverage a couple of days before to build up, and then make sure you update your channels regularly on the day itself with images, quotes and reports of what’s happening.

Our report on ‘Communicating community rail’ communityrail.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2018/02/CommunicatingCommunityRail-researchreport-2017.pdf and advice on marketing and communications communityrail.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2018/02/Marketing-communications-guidance-2017.pdf talk about the importance of combining different communication channels and interlinking them effectively. By dovetailing media coverage with other communications, e.g. social media, you can add an interactive element to stories and enable further interaction and involvement, increasing the reach and impact of your work. This integrated approach can help to stimulate interest and positivity around your group, and may generate new ideas for projects or result in new members signing up.

You should also consult with contacts at your train operator about any press releases, as they, especially if they are directly involved or quoted in the story, may be able to promote content via their own communication and press channels.

Whenever you do get media coverage, shout about it from the rooftops – including sending the story to our monthly ‘Community Rail News’ bulletin at news@communityrail.org.uk – and show the world the fantastic work you are doing! Community rail is good news not fake news! Fact!





The Old Water Tower,
Huddersfield Railway Station,
St George's Square,
Huddersfield HD1 1JF

T 01484 481052

E info@communityrail.org.uk

W communityrail.org.uk