

CHAPTER 25

ENQUIRIES FROM THE PRESS, RADIO AND TELEVISION

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CHAPTER 25

ENQUIRIES FROM THE PRESS, RADIO AND TELEVISION

25.1 Introduction

25.1.1 This chapter is a supplement to chapters 14 and 16 which describe the routine and non-routine services for the media of television and radio and for the Press, publishing and distribution systems respectively. It also references chapter 3 dealing with public relations.

25.1.2 Enquiries from the Press and broadcasting organizations for information, interviews and broadcasts are usually made by telephone, often at short notice and sometimes outside normal working hours. The procedures described below are aimed at dealing with telephone enquiries but the same principles apply to personal callers and to written requests.

25.1.3 When dealing with reporters a general attitude of friendly and helpful cooperation should be the norm, but there are occasions when individuals become over-persistent, make unreasonable and sometimes provocative demands which go beyond the area of responsibility of a local office, or take up more time than can fairly be made available. Such conversations should be politely but firmly terminated, if appropriate adding that arrangements will be made for someone else to contact the reporter. The member of staff concerned should then seek guidance from a senior officer or if necessary from the Senior Press Officer during normal working hours or the Chief Forecaster at CFO outside normal working hours.

25.1.4 On reference to him, the Senior Press Officer or CFO Chief Forecaster may be able to deal with the matter personally. Alternatively he may decide to refer it to a member of the Panel of Scientific Experts (see paragraph 25.3.3). A third possibility, if matters are not either purely meteorological or concern not only the Office, is that they may be referred for action to the Press Office of MoD or DoE.

25.1.5 The normal outstation response to enquiries from the media will depend on the type of enquiry as outlined in the paragraphs below.

25.2 Enquiries concerning topical weather information

25.2.1 Topical weather information is defined as information relating to current or recently past weather, and to forecasts already issued (but see paragraph 25.4.5), involving matters of a mainly factual nature.

25.2.2 Major media Enquiries from the national press and from London-based broadcasting organizations are normally dealt with by LWC or occasionally by CFO. Those from the provincial Press and from BBC Regional Centres, IBA television companies and local radio stations are usually handled by the WCs with responsibilities for the media as detailed in Annex B to chapter 1. The information should be provided free if it is readily available but requests calling for the application of an undue amount of extra staff time should be considered for charging. Often, in the case of the broadcasting media especially, there is an element of publicity involved and charges may be waived on this account. Head of Commercial Services should be consulted if there is any doubt or charges are refused.

25.2.3 Climatology Enquiries concerning marine climatology should be referred to S&B(Marine Products), and those related to land or upper-air climatology to Head of S&B(CP). All WCs should be prepared to answer straightforward queries relating current or recent weather to the climatology of the area. To facilitate prompt responses appropriate records of local weather should be kept up to date. LWC maintains records of this kind for a wide selection of stations in order to meet the requirements of the national press and to support the forecasters who give live broadcasts on national radio and television. LWC may need to consult any PS office to obtain or to check local information.

25.2.4 Organizational and policy enquiries When dealing with topical weather enquiries from the media, staff should be careful not to be drawn into discussion about matters of organization or policy. Particular care is also needed when the enquiries relate to unusually severe weather which has caused loss of life and/or extensive damage to property because in these circumstances there could be Parliamentary Questions requiring Directorate investigation and a response from D(F&A). In all these cases a report should be made to the Senior Press Officer by telephone and all matters which go beyond factual matters, including the quality of forecasts, should be referred to him.

25.2.5 Requests for information about forecasts or warnings which may have been issued also require careful handling. Verbal quotations from scripted forecasts supplied as part of the Public Meteorological Service (see Annex A to chapter 1) may be given free; transcripts of live broadcasts, if available, and copies of scripted forecasts may also be supplied to the media on request for a charge covering the cost of extraction and reproduction at the appropriate multiplier. Forecasts, warnings and advice provided on repayment should be regarded as commercial-in-confidence and under no circumstances should this type of material or comment on it be given to the media (or to any third party) without the written consent of the customer to whom the service was provided. This ruling will apply for example to such items as Lunchtime Reports and other tailored services for the Press and services to local authorities as well as to all commercial forecasting services. The 'commercial-in-confidence' aspect of such services should be explained to the enquirer who should be invited to refer directly to the customer for the required information. In the case of premium-rate telephone services, where the Office has a joint agreement with TIS, a copy of the forecast may be provided if available locally or obtained directly from TIS.

25.2.6 Enquiries requesting interviews Requests from the media for formal or informal interviews and broadcasts, live or recorded, on current weather should be dealt with as set out in the following paragraphs.

25.2.6.1 P Met O LWC, or in absentia his deputy, may approve requests received there and may nominate an appropriate forecaster to give an interview to the Press or on radio or television. Advice should be sought as necessary from the Chief Forecaster at CFO, and the Senior Press Officer should be informed subsequently about all interviews and broadcasts which are given.

25.2.6.2 P Met Os or their deputies at the M Met O which acts as technical parent of the WC concerned may similarly approve such requests from regional or local Press or broadcasting organizations which are received at outstations. Here too, advice should be sought as necessary from the Senior Forecaster at CFO and the Senior Press Officer, and the latter informed about the more important broadcasts and interviews. A complete list of all interviews and extra broadcasts should be included in the monthly Report of Work.

25.2.6.3 In exceptional circumstances where the weather in question is of immediate interest, which would wane if broadcast was delayed, and where time does not permit reference to higher authority, Officers-in-Charge at PS offices (or in their absence senior forecasters on duty) may themselves give an interview or broadcast. The Senior Press Officer in S&B should be informed at the earliest opportunity.

25.2.6.4 Forecasters may also be required to provide a response without prior warning during the course of routine live broadcast presentations on radio or television. Such question and answer may be part of the normal format by the presentation, in which case forecasters should be able to prepare for most eventualities and the 'ground rules' will have been agreed with the company in advance. Where such questioning is unexpected, forecasters should confine their response to matters which they are competent to discuss and report any difficulties to the Officer-in-Charge who will inform the Senior Press Officer.

25.2.6.5 WCs should make recordings of all radio or television presentations, either routine or non-routine, using the monitoring equipment provided. Sufficient tape should be used to enable access to the appropriate broadcast by Headquarters and retained for one week afterwards.

25.2.6.6 The above delegated authority applies strictly to interviews and broadcasts concerned with factual information about current or recent weather, simple climatology and forecasts for areas and periods for which CFO routine guidance is available. When it appears that an interview or broadcast is likely to stray outside these limits, e.g. to involve scientific matters, organization or policy, the request MUST be referred to the Senior Press Officer or if urgent outside normal working hours to the Chief Forecaster in CFO.

25.2.7 Criticisms It is inevitable that weather forecasts will, on occasion, be subject to criticism by the media. Paragraph 3.3.2 noted the action which should be taken in the event of criticisms being made in the Press or in broadcasts. The media may also request comment from the Office in such situations, by means of an interview or broadcast. This situation may be regarded as a special case of that discussed in paragraph 25.2.5 with the same responsibilities applying, but officers should refrain from commenting on any forecasts which they have not themselves originated. If comment on national forecasts is required the request should be referred to the Press Office Manager or Chief Forecaster in CFO immediately.

25.2.7.1 In interviews a number of important points should be borne in mind. If the forecast was seriously in error for a particular area, this can be acknowledged. However, if possible the opportunity should be taken to emphasize those aspects of the forecast which were successful. For example: 'although the snow did not spread as far south as we were

expecting, heavy snowfalls did occur as forecast in parts of the North and Midlands'. By way of explanation, a brief synoptic account should normally suffice, e.g. 'the depression tracked a little further north than we were anticipating'. Excuses, such as a poor computer forecast, are unprofessional and on no account should responsibility be avoided by disclaiming personal involvement.

25.2.7.2 On occasions where there is widespread media interest, the Chief Forecaster in CFO should attempt to provide guide-lines, after consultation with the Press Officer LWC and other WCs as appropriate. This may be done by Special SR and should include factual details of the incident as well as the general line to be taken.

25.3 Enquiries calling for scientific explanation or comment

25.3.1 All requests for interviews and broadcasts on scientific matters, e.g. explanations of unusual meteorological phenomena, meteorological or physical theories and controversial topics such as climatic change, the depletion of ozone or the effects of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere should be referred to the Senior Press Officer. Requests of this kind are not normally time-critical and if received outside normal working hours the caller should be asked to contact the Press Office on the next working day; but exceptionally, if the request is judged to be urgent, requests may be referred to the Chief Forecaster in CFO outside normal working hours.

25.3.2 In some cases the outcome of reference to Headquarters will be that a local member of staff will be authorized to proceed, and arrangements will then be made for any necessary briefing. In other cases, Headquarters staff will deal directly with the enquiry (see also paragraph 25.4.2).

25.3.3 To assist with the handling of major scientific and controversial matters, a Panel of Scientific Experts exists. This comprises senior members of Headquarters staff who are authorized to give interviews or brief talks on particular topics to the media at short notice. The approved list of experts contains names, Branches, topics on which they can speak and also office and home telephone numbers. This list is kept up to date by S&B(Corporate Communications), Directorate advice being sought as necessary.

25.3.4 Copies of the list of experts are held by Heads of Branches and also by the Press Office, CFO, LWC and Director of Public Relations (DPR(RAF)) who are authorized to contact any panel member directly when necessary. When an enquiry from the media is of a type that makes reference to a member of the Panel advisable, the caller should be told that someone will call him back; the member of staff in CFO, S&B(Corporate Communications), LWC or DPR(RAF) who took the call should himself telephone the expert and act as advised. **UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES** should the home telephone number of any panel member be given to any representative of the media.

25.4 Enquiries concerned with administration, organization or policy

25.4.1 All enquiries relating to administration, organization or policy, items under parliamentary debate (including parliamentary questions whether answered or awaiting answer), and matters which have legal, insurance, political or security implications should be referred at once to the Head of Marketing. Outside normal working hours, urgent matters may be referred instead to the Chief Forecaster in CFO, but whenever possible the caller should be asked to contact the Press Office on the next working day.

25.4.2 Action at Headquarters will depend on the subject of the enquiry. All matters with parliamentary implications will be referred to D(F&A). Other matters may be referred to a member of the Panel of Scientific Experts (which includes members of the Senior Directorate). A third possibility is that DPR(RAF) will be asked to handle it; the MoD Duty Press Officer is based in Whitehall Main Building, telephone number 0171 218 2906 but 0171 218 7907 from 1800-0915 LCT.

25.5 Requests for visits by the Press or by radio/television crews

25.5.1 Requests from the Press to visit a forecast office to take photographs etc. should be referred to the parent Branch for approval. Where the office concerned is located at an airfield, it will be necessary to obtain clearance from the airfield authorities. If the visit is part of a general visit to the airfield which has been approved by the airfield authority it is necessary merely to keep the Press Office informed. Film crews will be allowed up to 2 hours access free of charge at HQ, or 1 hours access free of charge at outstations. Time in excess of these guidelines should be considered for charging as a facility fee.

25.5.2 A visit by the Press or by radio/television crews in connection with current weather may be dealt with as described in paragraph 25.2.5, but visits to airfields must always be cleared also with the airfield authorities.

25.5.3 Requests for visits not concerned with current weather must always be referred to the appropriate Head of Branch for approval by the Director.

25.6 Requests for articles in the Press

25.6.1 The general subject of articles for publication is dealt with in Chapter 3. However, Officers-in-Charge should bear in mind that the Office can sometimes obtain very useful free publicity from invited articles; where there is likely to be a possibility of this, the point should be made when the request is referred to Headquarters for approval.

25.7 General guidance on interviews

25.7.1 Any request from the media for an interview which does not fit into the categories described above should be discussed with the parent Branch and the Senior Press Officer.

25.7.2 When giving interviews to the Press or on radio/television, discussion of a non-controversial subject can easily be steered by the interviewer into an area of controversy. Staff being interviewed or recorded or taking part in a live broadcast should make quite clear in advance to the media representatives concerned that there are certain areas into which they will not be drawn. Despite this, certain interviewers will deliberately move into controversial areas that they have been asked to avoid. Staff should not be intimidated by this policy. With the Press, or when making a recording, a direct refusal is possible. In a live broadcast it is more difficult, and staff may have to exercise some ingenuity in 'turning' the question.

25.7.3 The key to giving a good interview is thorough preparation of the material. If all the relevant facts are in the mind, it should be possible to respond to any reasonable line of questions, given that the essential pre-interview discussion has taken place. Whether or not a formal rehearsal takes place depends on circumstances and on the individuals concerned. Rehearsals can be advantageous, but they can be counter-productive because they destroy spontaneity.

25.7.4 Specific advice on the handling of criticism of forecasts is given in paragraph 25.2.7.