

The corporate and public affairs section within the PHA covers the work areas of public relations, corporate communications and public affairs.

Public relations

Public relations (PR) is a form of communication that an organisation uses to publicise and promote its work and protect its reputation. PR usually involves building relationships with journalists and the media so that important messages, from the organisation, can be given to the public. These messages can inform the public in a crisis, promote the organisation's work or protect its good name.

The PHA PR function works closely with other press and media colleagues, both within Health and Social Care and outside eg with partner agencies and other interested parties.

Proactive activity

An important element of the PHA's external communications is to take a proactive approach in building relationships and engaging with all areas of the media – press, broadcast and online, in both general and specialist (eg health) publications and programmes – increasing the organisation's profile and enhancing its image and reputation by gaining publicity for the needs and benefit of PHA programmes of work.

This work also helps to ensure the PHA is recognised as a credible and trustworthy organisation and the reliable source for public health information in Northern Ireland.

Reactive activity

The PR function also needs to react to requests coming in to the PHA from local press and media organisations, and to correct inaccuracies or items in the media which, left unchallenged, would damage the reputation or work of the PHA.

A PR duty rota is in place that ensures all media enquiries are handled in a timely and professional manner. PR staff agree the media handling, using information

provided by the identified leads on subject areas, and ensure the response is issued.

Local and national broadcast and print media are monitored on a daily basis and media reports are issued to senior management and staff throughout the organisation. The daily PR meeting provides PR staff with the opportunity to review activity and plan the day ahead.

Supporting staff in the media

PHA media spokespersons require the skills to communicate often complicated health messages to the public, even when under pressure. To ensure that they are well equipped for this, PR staff often meet and brief colleagues prior to key broadcast interviews.

Media training is also organised on a regular basis for key spokespersons within the PHA so they are aware of how the media works and the best way to respond in front of a camera or in a live interview situation.

Corporate communications

The corporate communications function within the PHA has several distinct responsibilities including internal and external communications and the development and production of key corporate documents such as the PHA Annual report; Corporate plan and Joint Commissioning Plan.

Internally, the production and dissemination of the PHA's regular staff e-Bulletin keeps all staff up to date with developments in the organisation and important senior management and board decisions, as well as key successes within the different Directorates and work areas.

Development and management of the PHA intranet Connect as a valuable internal communications tool will ensure that staff news and updates posted online will keep the content relevant and informative.

Externally, the corporate function is responsible for the management and maintenance of the PHA website, ensuring important organisational news, media releases and health protection and improvement information is available.

Public affairs

'Public affairs' describes the work the PHA does to brief influential stakeholder groups or individuals about its present and future agenda. These include elected representatives, policy officials, community and voluntary interest groups and trade unions.

The provision of a scanning service and Northern Ireland Assembly alerts ensure that PHA Board members and senior management are aware of policy developments and opportunities to influence future direction on priority public health issues.

An increasing area of work is the provision of a response service for the many Assembly and Parliamentary questions directed to the Public Health Agency. These often form the basis of support or challenge to the work of the PHA in Northern Ireland Assembly debates and subsequent media interest.

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