

# Dealing With The Media

Most people get most of their news and information from the mainstream media, whether we like it or not. So, whatever you are working on, it will probably be useful to get into the newspapers and on the local radio. There are however some important points you should bear in mind when you are preparing your exposure to the media.

Almost all of the world's media (most probably your local rag too) is owned by just a handful of Media Giants. These corporations also own and invest in the big businesses that are often the cause of many of the problems we are challenging.

Always remember that your aims aren't the same as the journalist's. You want to let people know about what is happening and why. Publishers want to sell papers and advertising to make maximum profit out of your "news". This means that the mainstream media work on the assumption that readers, listeners and viewers don't want to be bothered with details. Sensationalism sells. Expect your story to be stripped down to the most exciting elements and turned into entertainment. Reasons, background and even central facts will usually be left out in order to focus on whatever colourful imagery the media decides is the flavour of the day. This makes for quite a depressing picture - but don't give up. Think about making your own media: leaflets, newsletters, magazines, graffiti etc. Use existing alternative media - see the list at the end of this info-sheet.

If you do decide to use mainstream media to get your message across, think carefully about how to do it and how you can benefit from it. Be prepared to play their game. How much you play the game will depend on who you are dealing with, and how sympathetic they are to your cause.

## Media Contacts

First of all you have to decide which media you want to target. Who will be likely to run your story? Will they be sympathetic to your cause? The Daily Telegraph is unlikely to print a story about an animal sanctuary in Upper Lowerton, but the Lowerton Gazette and BBC Radio Lowershire should be interested.

Local and regional media are most likely to cover you. All local media are worthwhile targets of press campaigns. The national media often picks stories up off the locals, so you may strike lucky.

Start by finding out which papers, radio and TV channels cover your area. Check the Yellow Pages, and look at the contact details in

### Jargon Buster

- ★ **News Release:** (Used to be called Press Release) - a short announcement distributed to the news media, usually in the hope they'll print the story.
- ★ **Deadline:** The time by which you have to get your news release to the press.
- ★ **Embargo:** The time before which journalists should not publish information from your news release.
- ★ **Photoshoot, Photo-opportunity:** When you set up a nice scene for them to come and take a picture.
- ★ **Notes To The Editor:** This goes at the bottom of the News Release and includes more details - e.g. about your group, technical details etc. See example on page 4.
- ★ **Soundbite:** A phrase which sounds good on radio/TV - often contains three words or ideas grouped together.
- ★ **Press Stunt:** (aka Media Tarding) a stunt designed specifically to appeal to the camera.

newspapers. You can also have a look at the Newspaper Society's website "www.newspapersoc.org.uk/website" for details of your local newspapers. Make sure you have the direct line for the news desk by ringing them all up and double checking their phone and fax numbers. It's also worth asking whether they prefer to get news via fax or email. Make a list with the names of people who cover particular topics or localities and their telephone, fax and email addresses. Keep this list up to date, and share it with other local groups.

Check with other campaigners in the area which journalists they have found sympathetic. Looking at articles in the paper will give you some clues too. Quite often campaigns attract freelance journalists and photographers sympathetic to the cause. These can provide lots of help and advice. If possible get to know individual reporters. If they like and trust you, your stories are more likely to get in.

We'd like to be able to say that there is a difference between the broadsheets and the tabloids. But more often than not there isn't. Both can strip your news down to raw sensationalist trash. The broadsheets may print more column inches, but they're not likely to have that much more hard information. When you're making the news yourself, you realise that what is portrayed in the media often bears little or no resemblance to what is really happening.

### Who to avoid, who to go to

- ★ **The Guardian**, particularly Wednesday's Social section, (mark it for the attention of particular editors) is often worth a shot. Be careful: even progressive editors like John Vidal have written negative articles about decent campaigns.
- ★ **The Times**, particularly **The Sunday Times** has often been accused of printing downright lies. There is a strong feeling that whether or not you talk to them, if they want to print a story about what you are doing, they will do so. Some campaigners have been shocked by what they felt to be The Times implying that they are murderous terrorists. Seriously. Beware also the Times' sister paper **The Mirror** (although The Mirror is a lot better than **The Sun**).
- ★ **The Mail** has also been accused of twisting stories heavily in order to make them sensationalist.
- ★ Journalists from The Sun, The Mail and The Times have in our experience all claimed to be from The Guardian in the hope of getting a better reception. Don't be afraid to ask for an NUJ card (if they haven't got one, they're likely to be private detectives or state security). Whoever they are from, if you feel uncomfortable with any journalist you should always send them away.

## Deadlines

All media have deadlines for publishing. Find out what these are. Get your press release there in good time. As a rule of thumb: for weekly local papers get press releases in several days before the deadline (but after the previous issue has come out). For a daily newspaper get it in by lunch time the day before publication.

If you are planning a major event, then release the info about 2 weeks to 10 days before (marked "Forward Planning"), then again 2-4 days before. For weekly newspapers/magazines do the Press Releases 2 weeks before, and then 2-3 days before the deadline.

Note that the picture desk often has different deadlines from the news desk, so check this out if you are trying to get photographic coverage.

# Writing the news release

Because news releases are aimed at the news-pages they should contain news (as opposed to opinions or rants). This boils down to something happening, rather than the fact that somebody has said something (unless that somebody happens to be famous). If you want coverage in the news pages you should think about how you can create events, eg a public meeting, a colourful protest, a petition. You can then use these events to get your opinions across.

## Basics

News releases should be sent directly to the news desk or news room by fax or email, or to a journalist known to cover this sort of news (see *Distribution* below). Journalists have to plough their way through hundreds of press releases, so make sure your news release stands out.

- Go for an eye-catching headline, then grab their attention in the first sentence with the main points - squeeze them into the five W's: **Who, What, Where, When** and **Why** (not necessarily in that order, but do put them all in the first sentence, or at least the first paragraph).



- After that, keep it short and sweet - one or two pages at most. Keep sentences and paragraphs short, and stick to the 'hard facts'.
- If there are lots of details to go in the press release then add them at the bottom under "Notes to Editors".

- Look at how radio reports and newspaper articles are written. Follow that style as well as you can. If you do it well your news releases will be copied without any changes whatsoever - this is something to aim for, since it lets you present your story how you want to.
- Reporters will mainly look at attractive or familiar releases. Think about using things like: a distinctive header, an unusual (but readable!) font, coloured paper. Do regular (but interesting) News Releases, so that they will recognise your group.

## Embargos

If you don't want information published too early, (e.g before your planned action has actually happened), then *Embargo* the press release. Just write something like "Embargoed until 0:01 16/6/2004" along the top. The media will generally respect these embargoes - that means they won't publish the information before the time stated. But remember that embargoing a press release doesn't mean that they will keep it secret. If applicable, expect the information to be passed on to the police, and even the target of whatever action you are planning! (It has been known for the press to tip off, or even ask for a statement from companies that are to be the target of actions - see the Media and Actions section below.)

## News Release Checklist

- ★ Keep it short.
- ★ Use headed paper.
- ★ Have clever, appropriate. headlines.
- ★ Put key details in first paragraph - the five **W**'s - who, what, where, when and why.
- ★ Use quotes, snappy soundbites.
- ★ Do you need notes to editors?
- ★ Have you got pictures? Will you have photo-opportunities?

## Example of a News Release



# Treesresponsibility Lancaster

c/o SCN, Room 7, 96 Church St, Lancaster, LA1 1TD

Email: [trees@seedsforchange.org.uk](mailto:trees@seedsforchange.org.uk)

Tel: 01524 840028

2/09/03

## **MEDIA RELEASE** - for immediate use **REFOREST BOWLAND!**

Local people are invited to take part in an ambitious bid to reforest the Forest of Bowland this autumn. Lancaster-based community group Treesresponsibility is organising four tree-planting weekends in October, with the aim of creating a new woodland of over four thousand native trees including oak, ash and hazel on a four hectare field near Wray.

Treesresponsibility co-ordinator Jo Robertson said: "Every day we are faced with news about global warming, threatened wildlife and deforestation. Planting trees is a great way for individuals to take action - it's both fun and helps the environment." Trees soak up the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide as they grow, thus helping to slow the rate of climate change.

The land at Wray was recently bought by siblings Ron and Wilma Heldon, with the aim of creating a new woodland that will be open to the public and the local community to enjoy. Both have a long-standing interest in conservation and woodlands: "This is a great opportunity to make a real difference. We hope that people will want to come often to Ivah Great Hill, to visit and enjoy the trees they have planted."

Tree-planting will take place on four weekends, 4-5 October, 11-12 October, 18-19 October and 1-2 November. Anyone who fancies a look around the land and a day or two of tree-planting can find out more by phoning 01524 xxxxxx, emailing xxxxxxxxxxxxxx or checking this website: [www.xxxxxxxxxxxx/xxxx](http://www.xxxxxxxxxxxx/xxxx). Free food and entertainment will be provided.

### **Notes to the Editor:**

+ Treesresponsibility Lancaster is a not-for-profit community group, set up last year to take positive action against climate change. Our aim is to educate people about climate change, to involve local communities in tree-planting and to improve the environment for the benefit of the people in North Lancashire.

+ Last year Treesresponsibility planted over 1000 trees at Animal Care in Lancaster with the help of ten dedicated volunteers.

+ **PHOTO OPPORTUNITY** of the site and volunteers - contact Jo on 01524 xxxxxxxxxxx.

+ More information is available on our website: [www.xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](http://www.xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx) or phone 01524 xxxxxxx.

/ENDS

### **One Side only**

The News Release is less than one side - more information won't fit into the average news article.

### **First Paragraph**

The **five Ws** would have been too complicated to fit into the first sentence, so they are made into a paragraph.

### **Notes to the Editor**

Background information for future reference, and in case the editor wants to do a feature on your group / this topic.

### **Photo Opportunity**

If you want to get a photo in put down a contact person that the newspaper's own photographer can get in touch with.

# Go green next month

This is one of the newspaper articles resulting from the news release.

LOCAL people are invited to take part in an ambitious bid to reforest the Forest of Bowland this autumn.

Lancaster-based community group Treeresponsibility is organising four tree-planting weekends in October.

It aims to create a new woodland of over 4,000 native trees including oak, ash and hazel on a four hectare field near Wray.

Treesresponsibility co-ordinator [redacted] said: "Every day we are faced with news about global warming, threatened wildlife and massive deforestation.

"Planting trees is a great way for individuals to take action -

## Plant a tree in Bowland

it's fun and helps the environment."

Trees soak up the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide as they grow, thus helping to slow the rate of climate change.

The land at Wray was recently bought by siblings [redacted] with the aim of creating a new woodland that will be open to the public and the local community to enjoy. Both

have a long-standing interest in conservation and woodlands.

"This is a great opportunity to make a real difference," they said.

"We hope that people will want to come often to Ivah Great Hill, to visit and enjoy the trees they have planted."

Tree-planting will take place on four weekends: October 4/5, 11/12; 18/19 and November 1/2.

Anyone who'd like a look around the land and a day or two of tree-planting can find out more by phoning 0 [redacted], emailing: [redacted]

or checking the website: [www.\[redacted\].org.uk](http://www.[redacted].org.uk). Food and entertainment will be provided.

## Distribution

You can email, deliver by hand or fax your release. Posting it is really not a good idea - it may not get there on time and it'll probably get lost in their internal mail system.

If you fax or email the release, phone up and check that they have it. Even if you are sure that it arrived OK, it's a good excuse for drawing attention to it.

If you take the News Release to the offices, ask to see the News editor, and give it to them personally. Try and strike up a relationship with them so that they'll remember you.

## Follow-up

Try to cultivate relationships with journalists. If you get a good write up, phone the journalist up and tell them that you liked the article. Suggest future items about what your group is doing that they might want to cover. Contact them directly the next time you are planning something and invite them to a briefing and a photoshoot.

A negative or bad write up isn't the end of the world. If at all possible phone up the journalist, tell them that you were pleased to see an article on your group/action, but that you felt they missed/misunderstood some points, and that you'd like to meet them to get the record straight. It's important to give them the impression that they can get an interesting story out of this (or better, a series of interesting stories). If the journalist thinks that you just want to complain, you'll likely not see them again.

If, after trying to talk to a journalist who did a negative write up, you get another negative article from them, look for another journalist to talk to. It's rarely (if ever) worth the effort of complaining to the Press Complaints Commission, but you may feel it worthwhile to get lots of people to complain to the paper. Send out another Press Release as soon as possible putting your side of the story across, and write a letter to the Editor, asking them to publish it as your 'right to reply'.

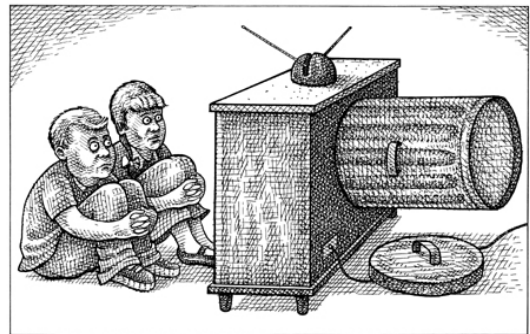
# Interviews

Sooner or later you'll be asked to give an interview. If you're in a situation where you may be interviewed (e.g. on an action where the press are present), then make sure you take a couple of moments to prepare yourself.

Interviewers like to focus on personalities and personal details. They call this "the human angle" and are usually more interested in your personal life than the details of your campaign. You can politely but firmly refuse to divulge personal details and point out that lifestyle is not the issue here. The campaign is far more interesting to the readers/listeners/viewers.

If journalists feel that you are holding back, they sometimes resort to saying things like "your campaign needs this coverage - I'm doing you a favour". Don't be intimidated, and never lose sight of the fact that you are actually doing them a favour by giving them interesting material! Always be firm, and think about what you want to say before you are interviewed.

**Radio and TV Interviews** somehow seem more scary than facing a reporter with a notepad. Don't worry about being nervous - this is normal. Just make sure you are prepared.



Before the interview ask about the questions and how much time you have to get your point across. Almost always you will get a vague answer. Insist on knowing what they are about, and point out that if you have an idea what the questions will be you can give a better interview. Your mileage on this one will vary. Don't be surprised if they completely change the questions during the interview.

It's good to watch or listen to the programme you will be appearing on a few times before the interview. This will give you an idea of what to expect: is the presenter sympathetic or challenging, perhaps even aggressive towards guests? Think of tactics for dealing with his/her style, and practice them on friends.

Think of no more than 3-4 points that you want to get across, and do this using soundbites (see below) and repetition (phrase it differently each time). If you try to include more than this you will sound scatterbrained and the issue complicated. Listeners will just switch off. If several of you are to be interviewed agree on a common strategy and points to get across.

Use *soundbites* - group lists in three - "this project will kill our community, our environment and our jobs!" Groups of three come across extraordinary well in interviews.

If you are getting interrupted by the presenter or other guests, politely and patiently ask to be allowed to finish your point. However, make sure you are always polite to the presenter - the audience's sympathy will invariably be with the host. It's important not to lose the goodwill of those listening. When there are several guests with opposing views make sure to ask the presenter to give you the last word. This is important; the last words in a programme stick in the audience's minds - so think of a good soundbite to finish up on.

Don't avoid answering controversial or difficult questions - it'll make you sound like a politician (and as you can guess - that comes across as untrustworthy). Just try your best. If the interviewer

is trivialising the issue, or asking foolish questions (e.g. about lifestyle) tell them so, and point them to the real issues. "Politicians' answers" - where you avoid the question and answer the question you'd like to have had - can sometimes work, but be careful you don't sound slimy.

If you are being attacked for something ("your campaign is costing the area jobs"), be prepared to turn it round ("this development will cost the area a valuable recreational resource. We have drawn up a plan of how more jobs can be created without taking away the kids' play area!")

In a recorded interview don't be afraid to pause to think about how to answer a question - this will be edited out. It's also useful to remember that distressing coughing fits sound awful on tape. If you really mess things up in an interview that is being recorded you can go for a bit of a cough. They will edit the phlegm out of the tape and take it from the last question. You can also ask to have another bash at the question. Do it until you feel happy with the interview.

Finally, a tip from a professional radio journalist: avoid drinking dairy milk before interviews (even in coffee or tea). Milk forms mucous and you'll end up clearing your throat during the interview.

## **Photo Shoots and TV Cameras**

Be careful about photoshoots/TV coverage. The people behind the camera will try to get you to do what they think will make a good picture. Often this will make you look silly, or even give a negative impression of your campaign. If you are expecting cameras, or have invited them, think about shots that would work well for the cameras, and the kind of things they may ask you to do (and whether you are prepared to do them). Camera operators get extremely annoyed if you refuse to follow their instructions (they are used to people being so in awe of the camera that they do anything). In our experience they cheer up quickly when provided with a better shot - so be polite, friendly and above all firm, explaining that if they wait around for a couple of minutes they will get a far better shot.

With both stills and TV cameras, have a think beforehand about what arty or interesting angles can be done. The operators will usually just go for the standard shots, and are often happy to try something different (they also often hide this happiness behind grumpy pride, so be patient with them). An example of an arty angle is, instead of having a shot of 40 people cycling down the road, getting the camera operators to lie down in front of the cyclists and take a picture from below, through the spokes.

Photographers generally go for an impression of multitude. Whether it's lots of cakes on a table at a fund raiser or lots of people up cranes, go for something that will give an impression of mass. TV cameras on the other hand prefer moving things, particularly something that you don't see every day, like tree climbing, throwing custard tarts at people (and not something "boring" like a demo or somebody handing out leaflets). If you are doing something that looks relatively boring like handing out leaflets, then get somebody to do it on stilts, or do a short theatre piece describing what you are fighting against. This also applies, but generally to a lesser extent, to stills cameras.

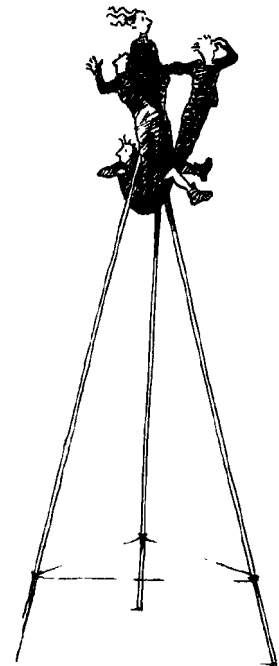
A good way around all these problems is to produce your own stills or video, or get a freelance to do it for you. They must be of a very high standard to be accepted, but it is well worth it. Phone up and talk to your press contacts or the picture editor - ask what format and resolution they want them in.

## Media and Actions

If you want the press to cover “Top Secret Actions” don't rely on embargoes (see above) to keep your actions secret. It's better to talk to a sympathetic journalist, telling them that there will be a really good story, and that they can come along. If you have built up a good relationship with a journalist, and have fed them lots of good stories, they should be happy to come along to cover a secret story, even if they don't know what it is about. Don't tell them what it is unless you are really, really, really sure that you can trust them (i.e. never!)

If you don't want a journalist along on a “Top Secret Action”, send out a news release (or talk to your friendly journalist) a few days before with a few juicy, but very carefully chosen, hints. Let them know when you will release a full press release.

When doing an action designate a confident person to deal with the press. Do this even if you haven't invited any journalists - they might turn up anyway. Refer all press to that person. The press person could be on the spot or on the end of a phone. They should be prepared to make statements and counter any false claims that may be made by the police or the company in question. They should also be able to fax/email further information - including the original press releases.



## Press Stunts

A press stunt is an event created for maximum publicity. You're aiming to attract photographers and maybe TV, so you'll need to be imaginative and visual. The image presented needs to be clear, simple and directly connected to the issue of concern.

Pictures taken at press stunts often appear without a story, just with a simple caption. So the picture itself must tell the story. Keep it simple and focussed. Placards or banners strategically placed in the picture help to get the message across (particularly if they have a clearly visible website address on them). When news releasing press stunts, put “Photo Opportunity” somewhere visible on the page together with the time and place. Make sure you are ready and set up before the cameras arrive (eg tell the journalists to turn up 15mins after the whole thing is due to start).

## Other ways of using the media

Don't rely on press releases and press stunts alone, but also think about the following:

**The letters page** - Writing a letter to the editor is a good way of getting your view across without it being edited. Luckily local papers thrive on publishing letters. It saves them writing articles and makes them appear to care about local viewpoints.

Your letter should be concise and to the point. A short letter is more likely to be published than a long letter. Letters referring to something in yesterday's or last week's paper are more likely to get in. Send the letter promptly, e.g. if a weekly paper comes out on Thursday, get the letter to them by the Monday. Most newspapers want a postal address even if you email or fax it. Do take the trouble to read and check your letter. Get someone else to read it too.



If lots of letters arrive about something your group is involved in, the paper will also take more notice of your press releases, or even approach you for the story. So get your pens out and write lots of letters, and get friends and family to write as well.

**Radio Phone-ins** are another good way of reaching lots of people. Think about what you are going to say before you phone in. Write down one to three key points you want to get across and stick to those. Get your friends to phone in as well - it increases your chances of getting someone on air.

Some groups have someone pretending to be from the 'other side' to make outrageous comments about the topic. "Who cares about chopping down the woods. The two jobs that the development will create are far more important than the kids that play there!" They use this to air the most controversial elements of whatever it is you are campaigning against. (Some find this unethical, but do remember that this trick is one used regularly by large organisations and businesses when dealing with opposition in local communities).

## Unwelcome Media Attention

Sometimes groups or projects experience unwelcome press attention - your group may wish to keep a low profile, or the press has cooked up a story and you're the fall guys (see box).

The problem with unwanted media attention is that it is usually unexpected. Forward-planning is the best thing you can do to avoid the worst effects of unwelcome press attention. It's important not to be paranoid - most groups won't ever have this kind of attention, and even if they did it would represent nothing more than an uncomfortable article or two. If you think the media may be interested in investigating your group then half an hour's preparation now may save days of hard work in the future.

**In August 2002** the National Coalition of Anti Deportation Campaigns was awarded £340,000 by the Community Fund. The Daily Mail ran a story "Is this the barmiest Lottery Handout of them all?" as part of their campaign against refugees. The Home Secretary tried to get the funders to withdraw the grant, and the lottery funding bodies have since been reformed to give the government more direct control over their decisions.

If a journalist thinks there might be a story, they will search for background information about the group and the people involved. They will check their archives whether you have been in the media before. They will also look at your website and publications. Then they will probably contact your group to get more information and some quotes. Be aware that they may not tell you that they are journalists looking for a story. They may pose as someone interested in joining your group, wanting your help or pretend to be an academic doing research. If your group is a limited company (like a co-op, or charitable company limited by guarantee etc) they can get the home addresses of your directors from Companies House ([www.companies-house.gov.uk](http://www.companies-house.gov.uk)), and may well visit or phone them at home. Search the internet (using [google.com](http://google.com) and the BBC news search function on <http://news.bbc.co.uk>) for your directors' names and consider any information that you find there.

Is there any aspect of what your group does, or that affiliated or even similar groups do, that could be seen by the likes of The Sun or The Mail as being controversial? This is likely to be the point that the press will latch onto. If you are involved in animal rights you may be asked about industrial sabotage. If you are involved in traffic issues you may be asked about street parties. If you are campaigning against Genetic Manipulation you may be asked about crop-pulling...

Draw up some guidelines about talking to the press. Who should talk to the press and when? Are you happy making statements over the phone or should there be some consultation within the group about any statements to be made? Print the guidelines out and put them up near the phone.

### **Dealing with unwanted press attention**

Make an assessment before anything happens - is your group likely to be targeted by journalists? If so draw up a plan of how to Deal with unwanted press attention:

- ★ Take control of the situation.
- ★ Find out who they are - ask for ID, write down the details and office contact number.
- ★ What do they want? Find out as much information as you can without giving anything away.
- ★ Don't be pressured into answering their questions. Tell them your press officer will get in touch with them or that they will be sent a written statement.
- ★ Do not pass on telephone numbers or addresses for other people without first checking.



### **Alternative Media**

Don't forget the alternative media. Let news-sheets like SchNews, Indymedia and the many regularly produced magazines know about what you are doing if you think it is relevant to their readers.

[www.urban75.com](http://www.urban75.com)

[www.indymedia.org.uk](http://www.indymedia.org.uk)

[www.schnews.org.uk](http://www.schnews.org.uk)

*For more briefings on grassroots activism and to find out about free workshops and training have a look at our website:*

[www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)

Seeds for Change Lancaster  
96 Church St  
Lancaster LA1 1TD  
Tel: 0845 330 7583  
[lancaster@seedsforchange.org.uk](mailto:lancaster@seedsforchange.org.uk)  
*Scotland, Northern England and N.Wales*

Seeds for Change Oxford  
16b Cherwell Street  
Oxford OX4 1BG  
Tel: 0845 458 4776  
[oxford@seedsforchange.org.uk](mailto:oxford@seedsforchange.org.uk)  
*South East England, South West England,  
the Midlands and South & Central Wales*

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