

# Introduction to initial accounts

What and who this evidence-based guidance is for. And how it was put together.

First published 24 November 2020

Written by College of Policing

## About this guidance

### Who developed the guidance?

This guidance was developed by a College Guideline Committee of frontline practitioners and subject matter experts, supported by College of Policing specialists.

### What is this guidance for?

It is designed to provide clear evidence-based practice guidelines on eliciting victim and witness initial accounts. The aim of the guidance is to:

- improve the effectiveness of evidence collection
- maximise the value of information for any subsequent investigation and criminal justice process
- promote early identification of witness needs and vulnerability

Information obtained in an initial account provides the foundation for any subsequent investigation and criminal justice process. This includes support given to the victim or witness.

Obtaining a first account is not always considered part of the investigation, but if essential information is missed or not drawn out at this stage, the investigation and any subsequent process may be less successful. This guidance emphasises the importance of eliciting quality information at this early stage in the process, which takes place before the formal interview stage. The initial account underpins the formal interview and it is important to use a similar investigative approach.

That said, the circumstances in which an initial account is taken can create specific time pressures not present in formal interviews. The practice guidelines set out here are tailored to the context and priorities of obtaining initial accounts.

### What do we mean by an initial account?

The following definition of an initial account is used for this guidance.

Eliciting an initial account is vital to inform any police action that is immediately necessary in respect of an allegation or an incident. Any initial questioning should be intended to elicit a brief account of what is alleged to have happened, for the purpose of:

- protecting life and property, identifying offenders and securing and preserving evidence
- establishing whether an offence has been committed and prioritising areas of the investigation
- assessing the risk to the victim, witness and any other person. A more detailed account should be left until the formal investigative interview takes place

## What types of initial account does the guidance focus on?

The guidance focuses specifically on initial accounts from people presenting as victims and witnesses at the time the initial account is given. Formal suspect interviews are therefore excluded, although it is likely that some initial accounts may in fact come from a person who subsequently becomes a suspect. If, while taking the initial account, it emerges that the witness may be a suspect, the account should be stopped and the person cautioned.

The guidance is intended to apply whenever an initial account is obtained from a potential victim or witness at the start of, or during, the investigation and criminal justice process. Any formal interview of a victim or witness is not covered under this guidance.

## Who is the guidance for?

The guidance is aimed primarily at frontline officers and staff in roles that may require them to elicit initial accounts from victims and witnesses. It is also aimed at those who supervise and train those officers and staff. Although this guidance has been developed primarily for face-to-face interactions, call handlers may find a number of the guidelines relevant to their role, as they often take a form of initial account over the phone.

## How evidence-based is this guidance?

The guidance draws on an extensive review of the best available research evidence, supplemented by the experience of frontline practitioners. Although there is a large evidence base in this area, the majority of the research is from laboratory-based studies. These studies tend to place research participants in a variety of simulated situations and test different approaches to improving their

recall. Although these settings are necessarily artificial, the studies do provide potentially useful findings for approaches that can be used by frontline officers to improve the quality of initial accounts. Practitioner experience informed how the research evidence was used.

## Tags

Evidence-based policing