

# House-to-house enquiries

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These tend to be used in residential locations but can be used in any area where people are associated with premises, such as business parks, shopping centres or industrial estates.

House-to-house enquiries are likely to feature in many investigations, and thorough enquiries are not necessarily resource intensive. For volume crimes, a single officer or small team may be able to complete house-to-house enquiries in the immediate area of an offence. In major crime cases, more resources may be required.

When carried out over a wide area, these enquiries generate a large volume of material that must be accurately recorded, processed and followed up.

For further information see [ACPO \(2006\) Practice Advice on House-to-House Enquiries](#).

## House-to-house strategy

Setting the strategy enables investigators to:

- identify suspects and canvas for witnesses in areas connected to an incident
- establish who lives or works in a particular location and obtain an account of their movements during relevant times

House-to-house enquiries require an organised and methodical approach. Clear objectives are vital in providing direction to a line of enquiry which may become resource intensive. House-to-house enquiries can be used for:

- [suspect](#) and [witness identification](#)
- gathering local information and intelligence
- [providing reassurance](#)

## Methodology

Investigators should use questionnaires (either a standard or bespoke questionnaire) to ensure that relevant information is gathered. It may also be useful to provide house-to-house officers with aides-memoires and/or scripts, and leaflets to hand out to those interviewed. Officers will also require a thorough briefing.

## Suspect and witness identification

Investigators may wish to identify witnesses as well as suspects when undertaking house-to-house. The merit in this is that a search for witnesses is likely to be viewed as routine and is less likely to alert suspects in the area.

### Suspects

When it is believed that a suspect may live or work in a particular location, investigators should establish the identities of all those living or working in premises in that location and obtain accounts of their movements at relevant times. House-to-house is the only certain way of doing this, and is particularly important where investigators wish to carry out mass screening.

In many enquiries investigators carry out their own house-to-house, and verify the accounts given by individuals to assess if they are suspects. In larger enquiries, where teams of officers are brought in to carry out house-to-house, SIOs are likely to want to focus those teams on house-to-house enquiries and have verification enquiries carried out by others.

### Witnesses

House-to-house has the potential to identify people who have witnessed:

- events connected to the incident, such as the encounter or disposal
- sightings of the victim or offender before or after the event
- sightings of relevant property or vehicles
- sightings of potential witnesses (including eliminating unidentified nominals reported by other witnesses)

## Providing reassurance

House-to-house can be used to provide public reassurance in the immediate area of the offence. Depending on the nature of the incident and the community concerned, investigators may find it appropriate to involve local community leaders to represent the entire community, or local authority staff.

Officers carrying out house-to-house enquiries can offer crime prevention and personal safety advice that is consistent and relevant to the circumstances. This may, however, have an adverse impact on the reassurance effect of house-to-house. It should, therefore, form part of a wider communications strategy aimed at public reassurance.

## **Media interest**

Certain types of offence will generate intensive media interest. Reporters are likely to knock on doors looking for exclusive interviews with local residents. During house-to-house enquiries, officers can make residents aware of this and pass on appropriate advice.

The investigating officer should ensure that information given to the public is consistent with their media policy, and that enquiry officers are fully briefed about divulging authorised information only.

## **Location parameters**

### **LEASH**

This mnemonic is often used for identifying parameters for fast-track house-to-house enquiries.

**L**ain in wait

**E**gress routes

**A**ccess routes

**S**ight

**H**earing

Setting adequate and relevant parameters for the location(s) in which it is proposed to carry out house-to-house is critical to achieving the investigative objectives. Investigators should consider visiting the scene locations as soon as practicable to assist them in setting these parameters. Location parameters should be regularly reviewed in light of new material.

Where the objective of the house-to-house enquiries is to identify witnesses, the investigator should take great care to ensure that all available material is used. This means identifying locations that

are significant to the investigation, and verifying the use and users of those areas. The mnemonics LEASH and LEAVERS can assist with this.

Investigators and house-to-house coordinators should use officers who have local knowledge of the community they police. These officers can give valuable information to the investigation team and are able to advise on any policing issues specific to their area.

## **LEAVERS**

This mnemonic is often used when setting the parameters for wider house-to-house enquiries.

**L**ast seen alive

**E**ncounter site

**A**ttack site

**V**ictim frequented locations

**E**vidence and dump sites

**R**outes to and from any of the above

**S**ites and proximities of witnesses

Other valuable intelligence resources are PCSOs, special constables and members of the community who have knowledge of how the area is used. They may identify important locations which would otherwise be overlooked, such as shortcuts over parks or other open land.

Analysis of other records, such as the electoral roll, force command and control systems and key holder records, may assist with the reconnaissance of the area.

Where possible, parameters can be set to correspond with natural boundaries such as major roads, railway lines and open land.

## **Intelligence searches**

Once location parameters have been set, intelligence systems should be analysed to establish if there are any people or events in the area that those carrying out house-to-house enquiries should be aware of. These include:

- violent offenders who pose a risk
- those wanted for other crimes or on warrant
- groups with particular linguistic or cultural needs

- local incidents or issues which residents may raise with the police

## Sources of advice

Advice on setting location parameters for house-to-house enquiries in major crime investigations can be provided by PoSAs, behavioural investigative advisers (BIAs) and geographic profilers. Further information can be obtained from the [NCA Major Crime Investigative Support](#).

## Time parameters

Time parameters will be used by house-to-house officers to verify the presence of individuals at an address and to interview potential witnesses.

Depending on the circumstances of the offence, time parameters should be set for:

- the offence, that is the times between which the offence is thought to have occurred
- the scene, that is the times when people have visited the scene
- sightings, that is the times at which victims, other witnesses and offenders were seen in particular locations
- previous residents and visitors – the house occupants form (MIR/2) defaults to six months but this should be amended as necessary

When house-to-house enquiries are being carried out in more than one location, investigators should set time parameters that are relevant to each. Where there is insufficient material to be able to do this, the alibi times used for the trace/interview/eliminate (TIE) strategy should be used.

Download template [House occupants form](#).

## Subject parameters

In some cases, investigators use house-to-house enquiries to identify people with particular characteristics who are relevant to the enquiry but not thought to be the offender. This is most likely to occur when investigators are trying to establish the identity of unnamed people sighted by witnesses, for example, an unknown man seen walking a dog in the vicinity of the scene, or the driver of a car seen parked at the scene.

In other cases, investigators may decide to exclude some groups of the community, for example, people under the age of 14 years.

## Timing house-to-house enquiries

During the initial response phase of the investigation, it is likely that fast-track house-to-house enquiries will be conducted in the location where the offence took place. The object of these enquiries is the early identification of those with material that could enable the investigation to progress. The low level of material available during this period often means that these enquiries are general in nature, and tend to rely on witnesses reporting that they have seen or heard something of significance.

Where fast-track house-to-house enquiries are carried out, officers may simply call at each house and ask if anyone has seen or heard anything, without seeking to fully establish the identities of all those who occupy the premises. In some cases officers may be able to obtain initial accounts immediately from bystanders or passers-by, for example, at a road incident, a fire or a burglary.

Investigators should ensure that all initial enquiries and witness accounts are recorded on the initial enquiries and witness account form. This should assist the house-to-house coordinator (if or once one has been formally allocated) to obtain a clear picture of what has and has not been done.

Accurate records must be made of all properties visited and persons seen, including details of properties where there was no reply, and of persons who say they have no information to give. These initial records are needed to confirm information or to show discrepancies during court proceedings, or if further investigation is necessary.

Download template [Initial enquiries and witness account form](#).

## Planned enquiries

Investigators need to consider when house-to-house enquiries should begin. If they believe that a specific set of questions should be asked, it may be preferable to delay house-to-house until enough material is available to formulate questions properly. This will avoid officers having to revisit the same premises to ask additional questions.

As knowledge about an incident increases, enquiries can be more specific. They may even focus on locating single pieces of material such as sightings of a particular person or vehicle. In cases

where investigators have specific material that they hope to locate, bespoke questionnaires can be used.

## Identifying resources

The level of house-to-house enquiries and the size of the area to be covered will determine, to a large extent, the resources that are required to carry them out. Where house-to-house is confined to fast-track actions in the immediate vicinity of relevant scenes, or when it is used in smaller localised enquiries, it may be possible for investigating officers to carry them out on their own or with the assistance of a few colleagues. More extensive enquiries, however, require dedicated resources.

Most forces have developed arrangements to support house-to-house, and investigators should ensure that they are familiar with them.

## Motivation

House-to-house is rarely the most exciting job in an investigation, but may be the most important in some. It is essential that house-to-house officers remain focused and alert to the possibility that the person they are speaking to could be a vital witness, or even the offender. Those managing house-to-house enquiries should ensure that officer morale remains high by providing regular feedback on the way their enquiries are contributing to the progress of the investigation, together with updates on the progress being made with other lines of enquiry, and details of any relevant new material that has been received.

Attention should be paid to the facilities provided for house-to-house officers and, where possible, they should be included in the main briefings held for enquiry teams.

## Briefing

It is essential that house-to-house officers are provided with a thorough **briefing** when they are first deployed to the enquiry. Briefings should be updated at least once a day and include a current summary of media releases to ensure that officers are aware of information in the public domain. This may also assist enquiry officers to recognise deceit and excessive interest. The initial briefing to a newly deployed officer should cover:

- details of the house-to-house strategy and the relevant parameters

- the method of carrying out house-to-house enquiries
- what action to take should they believe they have identified a suspect
- what action to take in relation to key witnesses identified during the house-to-house
- what action to take if they locate items of evidential value
- what action to take if individuals refuse or are reluctant to assist the investigation

House-to-house officers are the main visible police presence that communities see in relation to the investigation. Those briefing house-to-house officers should ensure that they have the information they need about the community and understand the importance of fostering goodwill to encourage the free flow of information.

Every opportunity should be taken to emphasise the importance of keeping accurate records. Investigators' record keeping includes policy decisions, actions, details of what information was given out, where, when and to whom, and what information was received.

## Tools

The following tools will support effective house-to-house enquiries.

### Questionnaires

Investigators should identify the questions they require house-to-house enquiry officers to ask. Depending on the circumstances, the standard house-to-house enquiry questionnaire may be adequate.

It is essential to ask the right questions. The quality of information gathered is only as good as the quality of questions asked. Consulting the analyst manager or interview experts when constructing bespoke questionnaires is a way of ensuring that relevant questions are asked and that information is collected in a consistent way to facilitate later analysis.

Download template [House-to-house enquiry questionnaire](#).

### Aides-memoires

Aides-memoires or scripts to ensure that house-to-house officers have easy access to all of the relevant information they need for interviewing house-to-house subjects. Relevant information could include local or national news items, television schedules or significant events to jog witnesses' memories. Where photographs of victims or property are used, these should be of the best quality

available.

All such material should be updated as new material becomes available.

## Leaflets

Some people may be reluctant to provide house-to-house officers with information when initially contacted. It is good practice to leave a leaflet at each address giving details of the investigation and contact telephone numbers. They can then communicate with investigators and pass on information when they are ready to do so.

## Mass screening

Where this type of screening is to be used, it is usual to carry out house-to-house enquiries beforehand to establish the identities of all those who live in the area. This information is then put into a scoring matrix to prioritise the persons to be swabbed.

If the mass screen is solely geographical rather than intelligence-led, the swabbing process is carried out at the same time as house-to-house enquiries. Whichever method is used, the processes should be managed by a major incident room (MIR). Effective house-to-house enquiries identify all persons who need to be swabbed, including those who have since left the area.

For further information, investigators should refer to ACPO (2006) A Practitioner's Guide to Intelligence-Led Mass DNA Screening [RESTRICTED] when considering using this technique in an investigation. You can request a loan copy of this document from the National Police Library.

[Request a loan copy by post](#)

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