

# Witnesses' own words and open questioning

The types of questioning that will get the most accurate details.

First published 24 November 2020

Written by College of Policing

## Witnesses' own words and open questioning – guideline

Officers and staff should allow the witness to give an account in their own words, using open questions where possible, to obtain sufficient reliable information to determine next steps.

### Evidence summary

Evidence suggested that asking questions in an open format tended to increase the accuracy and amount of information provided when compared to more specific closed question styles. The evidence is based on 10 laboratory-based studies that explored the effects of a variety of open and closed question formats. The study samples varied – some used students and others used adults from the general population, including some with learning disabilities. Evidence also suggested that when witnesses are made to give more specific answers to questions they are less accurate than when they are able to choose how precise their answers are. Allowing interviewees to balance specificity and accuracy results in higher-quality information. This evidence is drawn from six laboratory studies sampling students.

#### Empirical evidence

Moderate

#### Practitioner evidence

Not available

## Open questions while getting specific information

During the initial account stage officers and staff are typically looking for brief details of the incident, enough to establish if an offence has occurred. Also if there are any immediate safeguarding needs and what action needs to be taken next. The formal statement or recorded interview would elicit the

detail required to progress the investigation.

In addition, given the particular focus of an initial account it is acknowledged that open questions may not always be possible as sometimes specific information may be required for time-sensitive decision making. Wherever possible the witness should be supported to give an account in their own words by using open questions.

Practitioners consistently indicated that they would start taking an initial account using open questions, but that the exact questioning style would depend on the circumstances and the particular dynamic.

## Responsive questioning style

### Hints and tips from the front line

Statements from individual officers:

1. 'I would start by asking what has happened and keeping questions open. If the person goes off on their own story at length, then I would adapt the questioning to regain focus. The call log gives an idea of what the incident is about, which helps to probe and narrow things down to be more precise and figure out if there is an offence.'
2. 'My opening question is very open and will be based on what I know already. For example, "I know you contacted the police earlier – tell me why?" I will then record what is said and may ask more direct questions to get the detail that I need at that time in order to conduct fast-track actions and highlight the best way forward.'
3. 'In fast-moving dynamic events, I may well have to ask direct closed questions in order to elicit specific information, for example if we should be in pursuit of offenders, or specific details.'

### Hints and tips from existing guidance

You should encourage the witness to provide an account in their own words by using non-specific prompts like:

- 'Did anything else happen?'
- 'Is there more you can tell me?'
- 'Can you put it another way to help me understand better?'

An open-ended question, for example one which begins with 'tell me', 'explain' or 'describe', is the best kind of question for gaining good-quality information. It allows the witness to give an unrestricted answer, which enables them to control the flow of information. This questioning style also reduces the likelihood of you inadvertently influencing the witness' account.

## Tags

Evidence-based policing