

Quality Standards Specialist Group

Minute of the meeting held on 13 September 2012
Home Office, 2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DF

Present:

Andrew Rennison	Forensic Science Regulator (Chair)
Simon Iveson	Forensic Science Regulation Unit
Peter Harper	Orchid Cellmark Ltd
Craig Donnachie	Scottish Police Services Authority
Katherine Monnery	United Kingdom Accreditation Service
Nuala O'Hanlon	Forensic Science Northern Ireland
Brian Rankin	Forensic Science Society
Chanda Lowther-Harris	Metropolitan Police
Sandra Stanley	Greater Manchester Police
Barry Edwards	NPIA (attending for Jon Vaughn)
Ric Treble	LGC Forensics
Kevin Sullivan	Forensic Science Service
Soheel Joosab	HO Science Secretariat

1. Welcome and apologies

1.1 Mr Rennison welcomed those present to the meeting. Apologies had been received from:

Shirley Bailey-Wood	British Standards Institute
Charles Welsh	Skills for Justice
Karen Smith	Thames Valley Police
Jon Vaughn	NPIA
Ian Brewster	South Wales Police
Karen Squibb-Williams	Crown Prosecution Service

2. Minutes and actions arising from previous meeting (14 June 2012)

2.1 Subject to a few minor corrections, minutes of the last meeting were agreed as accurate.

2.2 Action 8.2: accreditation of defence experts ('*Defence Access Paper*') remains an ongoing action for the FSRU, working in hand with the CPS.

3. Interpol update

3.1 Kevin Sullivan advised the group that Interpol clearly recognise the importance of forensic science and have, accordingly, been hosting a series of symposiums. And that he attended these as a representative of the FSS; although given that the FSS has been wound up, Kevin now attends the events as a member representing the Forensic Science Regulator. It is hoped that the outputs and considerations of the QSSG will feed into the training symposiums.

3.2 As themes of the symposiums, associates experts are invited to write and present reviews of specific aspects of their work. Accordingly, a number of informative papers have been generated and published; however it seems that the fact of the existence of these papers is limited. Interpol has, therefore, expressed a view that there could be improved approaches in better sharing, on an International level, of forensic science policy and practices.

3.3 It has been proposed that a new standing committee be established for forensic science with a number of objectives. First, and foremost, the committee would look to better disseminate information and best practice coming out of the conference/symposiums and ensure that associated papers are more accessible across EU member states. The Committee's role will also be to identify appropriate topics and strategic objectives (within the forensic science community) for forthcoming conferences.

3.4 Given committee's objectives, there is an opportunity (for next year) to put forward to the general assembly of Interpol the UK's (e.g each member state) strategic objectives regarding forensic science. Mr Rennison felt that such views would not be feed through the QSSG, but more through such organisations as SOCA. That would, however, not limit the contribution through advice and support that the QSSG could lend represnetating the end-user forensic science community.

3.5 Although welcoming the approach, and emphasising that there are a number of positive objectives, Mr Sullivan felt that there needs to set in place protocols that best ensure there is limited duplication of work, and which will allow for the effective and proactive sharing of best practice internationally.

3.6 Mr Rennison suggested that (subject to copyright) the material coming out of Interpol, relative to forensic science, might be linked on his website. Given, that through, Mr Sullivan, there is a seat at the Interpol Committee; it is a matter for Mr Rennison to discuss with SOCA. In the interim, any associated papers/electronic relating to Interpol and forensic science will be placed on the Forensic Science Regulator's website.

Action: Dr Sullivan to provide available Interpol papers

3.7 The QSSG supported the establishing of an Interpol standing committee on EU forensic science, and would see the committee as a further opportunity to support, and influence, the development of international forensic science standards.

4. Piloting the Codes

4.1 Mr Iveson reminded members that, from a previous meeting, colleagues had elected (option B) - to publish a revised set of Codes at the end of the year. In the interim, a desktop exercise would be undertaken, with UKAS technical assessors and a pre-assessment session for participating organisations involved in the pilots. However, the associated cost to take forward the pre-assessment with nominated establishments has yet to be fully determined.

4.2 Kath Monnery said that the UKAS are in the process of drawing up the terms of reference for the pilots and the eligibility criteria for potential participating establishments. An advert inviting participation - ideally organisations that are realistically moving toward accreditation and could include police forces - will be put

out shortly. It is expected that the pre-assessment days will be 18/19th December and pilots taking place early in the New Year. The pilots would also feedback into further pre-assessment days.

5. Scenes of crime investigation (paper QSSG 2012-09-13-2)

5.1 Mr Rennison said that, as significant inbounds have been made into laboratory accreditation standards, and as deadlines have been set on laboratory accreditation, it is the right time to think about setting crime scene standards; bearing in mind that ISO17020 accreditation as a whole new application process; pragmatically, it could be seen as an extension of scope of those organisations that are ISO17025 accredited - as the two standards are very close together to allow a reasonably common approach.

5.2 The recommendation (from the proposed paper), is that ISO17020 be formally adopted as the standard for crime scene investigations, but what should the time scales be 'wrapped' around that, and should the Codes make more explicit reference to a crime scene standard, and should an appendix be developed to cover that area?

5.3 It was agreed that the Codes should refer to crime scenes in scope of ISO17020. However, it was felt that an appendix to the Codes may not be required at this time as the UKAS RG document would provide sufficient guidance for organisations. The RG (consultation draft) draft shall be circulated for member's consideration.

Action: Kath Monnery/Secretariat:

5.4 The Regulator advised the Group that it is his intention to publish a more strategic plan which will set out the longer term vision for standards in forensic science. A key element would be that in ten years time to see a new international standard for forensic science, with the UK as strong voice in developing such a standard. This reflects discussions that have been held with Australian and American colleagues, where this view has been welcomed.

5.5 Such a standard would incorporate (among other elements) crime scene, medical forensics and laboratory activities. Additionally, within a period of five years there is an expectation to see a crime scene investigation standard in place. Brian Rankin posed a question as to whether five years would be a practical time line for police forces to adopt a CSI standard. Mr Rennison said that police forces have a 2020 vision, so that with 2017 as a target date (not a deadline) this should be achievable for the majority of forces.

6. Handling complaints in relation to the FSS archive: Draft Protocol, FSS Archive Complaints

6.1 Mr Rennison introduced the item saying that the draft protocol sets out (as part of the managed closure of the Forensic Science Service, and the absence of FSS staff) an agreement between him as Forensic Science Regulator and the Home Office in relation to the handling of possible complaints, appeal cases or cold case reviews, around the quality of scientific work undertaken in cases stored in the Forensic Science Service Archive (FSSA).

6.2 The Group considered that the draft protocol was a comprehensive one. Brian Rankin highlighted, however, that although the draft considers aspects of the

complaints about the science and processes applied, there is little about the position of ex-FSS staff where their past actions/decisions may be under examination in the event of a complaint. For example, should there be included in the protocol avenues that would be open to individuals regarding rights of appeal or to be able to make representations when their performance is under question. This might also include guidance on whether those individuals under scrutiny might have access to the relative forensic case files they were involved with so to allow an informed response.

6.3 Mr Rennison said that this would not be about forming judgements on individuals, but about managing complaints about the quality of the science. However, he recognised the points made regarding the potential impact on individuals were valid ones, and that he would consider the issue with the author of the draft - but with an emphasis on avoiding being drawn into disciplinary enquiries.

Action: Andrew Rennison

7. Consultation on appendices: Digital and Video analysis

7.1 Simon Iveson advised that since last presented to the Group, the appendices had undergone further iterations and a technical review, and that he was now seeking member's further views as to whether the appendices were in a form to be published for consultation; which, if agreeable, would be in approximately two or three weeks. The Group provided a number of suggested amendments; Mr Iveson welcomed the feedback and said he would revise the drafts accordingly.

7.2 Mr Rennison said that CAST had provided significant input into the development of the appendices, and that he would write a letter of thanks to the CAST contributors.

Action: Andrew Rennison

8. Validation guidance update

8.1 Mr Iveson said that since the last meeting of the Group a number of slight revisions to the draft validation document had been made, and that the latest version was now with Mr Rennison for his further consideration.

8.2 Mr Iveson said he had recently been nominated to present at several forthcoming forensic workshops on the subject of validation. At those workshops it is his intention to talk through the proposed validation guidance to get a firm understanding from those attending as to what their view of validation is; the requirements of validation; what can and cannot be validated; who should be carrying out the validation; and the difference between validation and verification. Opinions from the workshops will, as appropriate, feed into the guidance on how validation should effectively be conducted. An emphasis will be on the language used which should be clear, concise and perhaps set out in terms for end users who are unfamiliar, e.g. those who may not be scientists, with the concept of validation.

9. Accreditation guidance

9.1 Mr Rennison reminded the Group that commercial forensic service providers who are in contract with police forces are under a requirement that all their laboratory activities must be accredited to ISO17025. With regard to similar work undertaken in-house by police forces, the Regulator has agreed with ACPO that forces must be

equally accredited to ISO 17025. EU Group Framework Decision 2009/905/JHA requires that DNA laboratory activities must be accredited by 30 November 2013, and that labs handling dactyloscopic data should be accredited by November 2015.

9.2 To that end, Mr Rennison presented the Group an outline paper on accreditation guidelines which set out, from a police operational perspective, the current position and future expectations around police force accreditation.

9.3 Kath Monnery noted the paper stated that areas used for storage of exhibits and evidence was not considered to be a laboratory. She appreciated that a store may not be considered a lab; however the importance of looking at stores as part of the overall accreditation process should not be underestimated. Considering the context of the document, Mr Rennison felt that the referred line could be removed.

9.4 It was agreed that definitions used in the paper, e.g. the definition of a laboratory, should be incorporated within the glossary of the next edition of the Codes.

9.5 Kath Monnery, felt that the second paragraph under the section headed 'FSR's Position' requires general clarifying, as does the term 'conducted by police forces outside the procurement framework' – i.e. does this mean traditionally conducted by the police force in question, or police forces generally.

9.6 Chanda Lowther-Harris said that the wording 'Digital data recovery' should be, in terms of a laboratory activity, made clear. For example, if a police officer is not located in a high tech crime unit, but is in a police station and is attempting to examine data on, for example, a mobile phone would that be in or out of scope for the purposes of the guidance. Mr Rennison said that as far as accreditation is concerned, there should be no distinction between warranted officers and forensic examiners in the undertaking of laboratory activities. However, he acknowledged the point being made and agreed to reconsider the wording.

9.7 A number of members said that they had not seen the NPIA Blood Screening Guidance referred to in the paper. The guidance should, therefore, be circulated to members for their information.

Action: Secretariat

10. Terminology in scope of accreditation

10.1 This area of work stems from the fact that over the years different scopes of accreditation schedules have

10.2 Kath Monnery advised that the UKAS is currently working on harmonising the terminology. There is now a final master schedule, using standard terminology, which has all of the techniques that organisations have accreditation for. UKAS will now be starting a process to convert all forensic scopes into the new standardised phrasing with an increased level of detail. This will be happening over the next few months, with draft schedules going out to accredited organisations for their approval.

10.3 Mr Rennison welcomed this, and will note in his business plan that this is work in hand with UKAS.

11. BSI National Committee for Forensic Science

11.1 Mr Rennison introduced the item reminding the QSSG that it now also has a role in providing advice to the newly established BSI technical Committee. The Committee will represent the UK in the creation, preparation and publication of a number of European wide forensic standards.

11.2 As members of the QSSG, colleagues are automatically invited to join the new technical committee. However, there is a requirement for members to be formally nominated by their organisation. Nominations can simply be in the form of an email from appropriate individuals within organisations sent to the Committee Secretary, Ian Richardson (contact details were provided on the circulated terms of reference).

11.3 Although the BSI are content with the spread of expertise offered by the QSSG; it may, however, be the case that the BSI may elect to establish and manage a separate committee (divorced from the QSSG).

11.4 Mr Rennison requested that any comments on the terms of reference should be made to Mr Richardson.

12. Update on the CEN project committee European standards

12.1 The Group was advised that Mr Rennison has been nominated to lead the UK delegation. The first meeting of the CEN project Committee is to be held on 23rd October in Warsaw, both Mr Rennison and Mr Richardson will be attending. In advance of that meeting, Mr Rennison has written to Steve Allen (Chair of the AFSP) seeking a nomination of a member of the AFSP to contribute to the meeting from a commercial providers perspective.

12.2 Mr Rennison shared with the Group that Charles Welsh had indicated an interest in attending the meeting as Skills for Justice are taking forward a significant amount of work on a European basis on competency standards. Kath Monnery said that, separately, UKAS had expressed to BSI an interest to be involved in that work. Mr Rennison considered that, with members' agreement, that UKAS might be better placed to participate in the meeting of the 23 October, and future meetings thereon. This was agreed.

Action: Andrew Rennison to contact Mr Richardson advising UKAS' role at future CEN meetings

Action: Kath Monnery to advise Mr Rennison of UKAS nomination

12.3 Mr Rennison said that he would provide feedback following the Warsaw meeting.

13. AOB

13.1 Ric Treble expressed a concern that under the Protection of Freedoms Act, and the decision made to destroy DNA samples currently held under particular circumstances that many suppliers regard this as being, in terms of quality in forensic services, a generally negative step. In noting that commencement of the destruction of samples has now been put back (for operational reasons), to March, this may offer a window of opportunity to try and rationalise this approach. Destruction of samples should be linked to destruction of profiles, as handled in the rest of Europe. Mr Treble

felt that in the UK pushing ahead to destroy samples, there would be serious risks in terms of inability to conduct forensic examinations.

Mr Rennison said that the Act is quite clear on the point, and that any change would have to be made through legislation. The particular matter was debated at great length, with solid arguments put against the destruction of samples. However, the political decision for destruction was made and that he, as Regulator, is not in a position to put forward proposals suggesting that the decision should be reversed.

13.2 On a related quality aspect, Mr Treble raised a concern regarding the delays of 'Upgrade Project'. Mr Rennison echoed this concern and said that he is in discussion with Amanda Cooper about this.

13.3 Nuala O'Hanlon asked the position regarding the production of the Codes of Practice annexes. Mr Rennison said that the adverts (which went out a number of months ago) inviting expressions of interest were for shoe marks, firearms discharge residue, blood pattern analysis, drugs and entomology. Three of the contracts (shoe marks, blood pattern analysis and drugs) were awarded to an organisation named SR which is a New Zealand based organisation. Entomology was awarded to a group – Endgate - that includes the Natural History Museum. Firearms discharge went to a former FSS forensics firearms specialist. As the draft annexes are produced, they will be presented to the QSSG for consideration and also undergo technical reviews.

13.4 More recently, adverts went out inviting bids for the production of annexes on DNA cross-contamination (controls and avoidance) which will be produced in hand with the Contamination Specialist Group. An invitation to tender is about to be published for the production/support to write a standard for fingerprint examination. The next round of tenders are likely to be for the production of appendices on a range of firearms issues, fibres and tool marks.

14. Date of next meeting

11 December 2012, 11:00a.m, Home Office, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DF