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Firearms Specialist Group

Note of the meeting held on 26 September 2024 held in Birmingham and online via videoconference.

- 1. Welcome, introductions, review of actions and minutes**
 - 1.1.1 The Chair welcomed all to the seventh meeting of the Firearms Specialist Group (FSG). Members introduced themselves, outlining their backgrounds and expertise.
 - 1.1.2 A full list of the attendee organisations and apologies is provided at Annex A.
 - 1.1.3 The actions from the last meeting were reviewed. The following points of discussion were raised. All other actions were marked as completed.
 - 1.1.4 Action 1 - Secretariat to publish the minutes of the July meeting on the website of the Forensic Science Regulator (FSR). The Secretariat will check to see if this has been completed.
 - 1.1.5 ACTION 1: Secretariat to check if the July meeting minutes have been published.**
 - 1.1.6 Action 3, July 2023 - Members of the FSG to share existing documents relevant to the consideration of setting competency standards. There had been no existing documents received, however the competency standards would still be reviewed.
 - 1.1.7 Action 7, July 2023 Chair to draft a letter to CPS requesting the guidance is circulated to CPS officers for their awareness and understanding. The Chair sent an email to the CPS representative asking that guidance was circulated

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and emphasising that prosecutors should not be prosecuting unless they have, statements from accredited forensic providers.

1.1.8 ACTION 2: The Chair to identify a suitable CPS representative to join the group.

1.1.9 The Chair asked the group if the minutes of the previous meeting were an accurate record. The group confirmed they were.

2. Workplan update

2.1.1 The Chair discussed the workplan. A session on interpretation, evidence, and evaluation would be held on the 09 October 2024, at the FSR Interpretation workshop.

2.1.2 Databases required more work. The Chair highlighted with the interpretive approaches and evidence evaluation, the statistics coming out of databases is going to become more critical, and how should the group respond to this.

2.1.3 The Chair asked the UKAS representative if the NaBIS database does not form part of the accreditation. The UKAS representative confirmed this was correct. NaBIS currently only answer direct questions posed and it is left for the SIO and prosecution to determine significance. The AFSP representative said it may be useful to see examples of statements and reports which contain information from the database, that have been presented in court.

2.1.4 The NaBIS representative said NaBIS would be willing to consider any suggestions or proposals from the FSR about how they use the database. The Chair agreed they would discuss this with NaBIS, and whether statistical training should be included.

2.1.5 The Chair will be meeting with the Regulator in October 2024 and will discuss standards of competence with the Regulator.

2.1.6 ACTION 3: The Chair to meet with NaBIS to discuss the database, and statistical training.

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3. Update from UKAS

- 3.1.1 The UKAS representative verbally provided an update to the members of the FSG. The main points were:
- 3.1.2 There were a number of documents out for consultation on the UKAS website:
- 3.1.3 GEN1 which is General principles for the assessment of conformity assessment bodies (forensic organisations). There had not been major updates to this document.
- 3.1.4 Lab 52 which is a new document for conducting forensic testing activities at practitioners' home addresses. UKAS had received a high amount of feedback on this document. It was highlighted this document was only in respect of ISO 17025, and not 17020.
- 3.1.5 There had been some staff changes, and as a result there has been a change to some of the cases and new assessment managers.
- 3.1.6 Due to uncertainty with the publication of version two of the Code, and the Code coming into effect, recruitment had been paused.
- 3.1.7 UKAS provided an update to the NPCC Quality Board and the NPCC national quality managers meetings, regarding the number of organisations that hold accreditation to 17020 for crime scene activity.
- 3.1.8 UKAS will keep the group updating on their work with a police force on looking at an approach to major crime, as this would include firearms processing of scenes.

4. Update from the Office of the Forensic Science Regulator (OFSR)

- 4.1.1 The representative from the OFSR verbally provided an update to the members of the FSG. The main points were:
- 4.1.2 The Annual Report covering the regulator's first year in statutory office (July 2022 – July 2023) was laid in Parliament on 12th September and published to the Regulator's pages on GOV.UK the same day.

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- 4.1.3 The Forensic Science Conference is taking place in Leeds this year. There will be an interpretation themed workshop on 9th October and the conference itself on 10 October 2024.
- 4.1.4 Nine organisations have successfully applied to the Regulator to be allowed to carry out the urgent classification of firearms outside accreditation to inform remand decisions. Those forces are:
- a) Nottinghamshire
 - b) GMP
 - c) MPS
 - d) Lincolnshire
 - e) Devon & Cornwall
 - f) Northamptonshire
 - g) Kent
 - h) Dorset
 - i) Leicestershire
- 4.1.5 The Regulator has asked for data returns as stipulated in the FSA and in the guidance document that this group developed. He has requested the data to cover the period July 2023 to July 2024 to coincide with his reporting year. It was noted that the data this time will not reflect a whole year as the Code did not come into effect until October 2023. The outcome of this data return will be shared with the group for discussion. One of the data returns received required further questions to the organisation from the OFSR, and the chair agreed to assist the OFSR with further questions for the organisation.
- 4.1.6 Action 4: The Chair to draft the follow up questions to the organisation who provided the data return response.**
- 4.1.7 The UKAS representative asked if there were many firearms referrals being reported to the Forensic Science Regulator. The OFSR replied there had only been one referral received to date.
- 4.1.8 The AFSP representative asked who would be attending the second day of the conference. The OFSR replied it would be for the SAI's, and quality managers.

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5. Classification Sub-Group proposal

- 5.1.1 The Chair informed the group it was the intention to set up this group. The MPS representative was asked if they would be happy to chair the group. Members of the group would have a broad range of expertise, and any FSG members who would like to volunteer to join the group should contact the MPS representative.
- 5.1.2 The Chair highlighted classification was a unique feature of firearms examinations, which provides legal opinions on classifications. The Chair was concerned about some firearms classification cases where there were differences of opinions between experts. The Chair would like to see scientists stating any differences in opinion, and explaining what they are. The Principal Forensic Services representative also highlighted the question of how to mitigate against bias within the firearms section on Forensic Science Regulator's guidance on cognitive bias. It states that the alternative hypothesis in such cases of complex classification is referred to and given weight in the statement.
- 5.1.3 The Chair agreed to write to the head of the labs if they receive any queries on classification cases, and this would be passed onto the classification sub group to look into, to produce a report, and develop guidance.
- 5.1.4 The AFSP representative suggested the group could explore what would be the requirements for classifying firearms, for example is someone entitled in to provide just an opinion or do they need to explain why and provide alternatives.
- 5.1.5 The Ballistics primer document produced by the Royal Society of Ballistic Science was undergoing amendments before a version 2 was published, and it was suggested this was something the group could also look into. This was already on the workplan for the group, however there was a section on classification which the classification sub-group could work on. It was agreed that the classification sub-group should work on this. The Chair of the sub-group had a contact who had been involved in the Ballistics primer document, and it was agreed they will contact them for more information.

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- 5.1.6 Action 5: The Nottingham Trent University to reach out to their contact to find out what is currently happening with the document, and what they need from the group.**

6. Chairs Update

- 6.1.1 The Chair provided the group with an update on the Firearms legislation. At the previous meeting the Chair had shared with the group that sound moderators were going to be removed. A statutory instrument was going to be put before Parliament in July 2024.
- 6.1.2 The Chair would be attending a practitioners group meeting with the Home Office and various interested parties in two to three weeks' time, and an update was expected then.
- 6.1.3 The Chair asked the Nottingham Trent University representative about any link between their institution and other institutions in terms of developing research programmes which are aligned with research that practitioners in forensic labs were not doing. The Nottingham Trent University representative replied there was a good link with their institution and other institutions, and most institutions will have academics that have very close links with practitioners. Often some of those are formal agreements. Some of them are more informal, and some just professional relationships.
- 6.1.4 For research purposes practitioners may want their questions sent to academics to ask if their students would like to be involved.
- 6.1.5 The Chair asked the Nottingham Trent University representative if they had a list of current research projects for firearms, and an estimate of the costs involved. The Nottingham Trent University representative confirmed yes they did, and a four-year project could cost approximately £80,000.

7. Firearms Evidence Evaluation

- 7.1.1 The representative from AFSP provided the group with an overview of the Firearms Evidence Evaluation Survey results which were:

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- a) There were 37 participants from three forensic science providers, NaBIS, forces, SPA, and defence experts.
- b) 60% of those who participated in the survey had more than 10 years experience.
- c) Firing marks, image, shotgun, and ammunition type cases were the most common type of cases that participants had expressed opinion on. Participants were asked if they had expressed an opinion that “the findings are consistent with the police/prosecution view.” This case types could benefit from evaluative approach.
- d) Two thirds of the participants had received formal training in the evaluative approach, however 95% of participants would support training opportunities to improve their knowledge and confidence in evaluating the evidence in firearms cases.
- e) 92% of participants would support the calibration of firearms experts opinions regarding the evidential strength assigned for these cases.
- f) Less than half of participants said they are comfortable with asserting uniqueness when talking about firing marks opinion.
- g) 84% of participants supported the creation of a national support group/function for firearms evidence evaluation. Members agreed a support group would be useful. The OFSR representative added that the interpretation guidance documents should be completed first before such a group could be established.

7.1.2 The SPA representative suggested firearms specific workshops would be beneficial and could be held over the country. The OFSR agreed this was a good idea, and suggested using the existing group, expanding the membership, and share the group’s work with the community, and add statistics.

8. AOB

8.1.1 The AFSP representative made a suggestion that, to address the concept of calibration of expertise, a competency exercise could be devised, where

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practitioners could be invited to make an assessment, on firing marks for example, and if the result was not clear no scale could be used, and the practitioner would be assimilating a level of support in favour of it being the suspects firearm.

- 8.1.2 The chair thanked all members for attending and closed the meeting.
- 8.1.3 The next meeting of the FSG would be held in February 2025, and the date was to be confirmed.

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Annex A

Representatives present in person:

Chair

The Association of Forensic Science Providers (AFSP)

The National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NaBIS)

Office of the Forensic Science Regulator (OFSR)

Principal Forensic Services

Nottingham Trent University

Scottish Police Association (SPA)

Representatives present online:

The National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NaBIS)

Office of the Forensic Science Regulator (OFSR)

United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS)

Metropolitan Police Service Forensic Firearms Unit (MPSFFU)

Apologies received from:

Merseyside Police

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)