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Forensic Science Regulator

Firearms Specialist Group meeting

**Note of the meeting held on 16 February 2026 held in
Birmingham and online via videoconference.**

- 1. Welcome, introductions, review of actions and minutes**
 - 1.1.1. The Chair welcomed members to the meeting and lead in introductions. Due to the groups representative from NaBIS being unavailable, a stand in was attending in their place, who was introduced to the group.
 - 1.1.2. The minutes of the previous meeting were discussed and agreed
- 1.2. Actions from previous meeting**
 - 1.2.1. The group discussed the actions from the previous meeting.
 - 1.2.2. **ACTION** – Representative from NTU to write up the example of challenges they have encountered in relation to securing funding, and share this with the Regulator and members from OFSR.
 - 1.2.3. Representative from NTU confirmed that this item has been closed.
 - 1.2.4. **ACTION** - Chair to contact NaBIS to ask whether they wish to provide an additional representative to replace the outgoing member.
 - 1.2.5. Chair updated the group that current understanding is that NaBIS are proceeding with just one representative on the group going forward (they previously had two).
 - 1.2.6. **ACTION** – Chair to look into the background of the Firearms Consultative Committee (FCC) and at what point this was abolished.

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- 1.2.7. Chair informed the group that the committee ended in 2003. The committee had been established after Hungerford, and the 1988 amendment act, but had to be renewed every three years. In 2003 the group was not renewed by the then Home Secretary.

2. Updates**2.1. UKAS Update**

- 2.1.1. UKAS representative provided an update to the group.
- 2.1.2. Resourcing: UKAS shared staffing changes and general resourcing information.
- 2.1.3. Publications: Recent publications mainly relate to toxicology and FRD, with no direct relevance to firearms.
- 2.1.4. EA4-23 Changes: Updates to EA4-23 are underway; Some interpretation examples have been removed. Now references ISO 1043 Part 4. Lab 13 will also require revision as a result.
- 2.1.5. The House of Lords Science & Tech Committee report, which UKAS provided evidence to, is expected to be released tomorrow.
- 2.1.6. In relation to declarations, there has been an agreement with the FSR that the UKAS Gen 6 policy does not apply. Gen 6 includes an opt out provision at a regulator's request. A technical bulletin will be issued once the updated FSR declarations guidance is released.
- 2.1.7. The Technical Advisory Committee has not met for about a year due to staffing changes. UKAS will review membership and reinstate meetings soon.
- 2.1.8. Technical Assessor Capacity. Following recent resignation, only two firearms technical assessors remain. UKAS particularly needs scene going firearms technical assessors, which are difficult to source due to low numbers of qualified individuals and conflicts of interest in a small community.

2.2. UKAS Query regarding 3D printing of components

- 2.2.1. UKAS raised a query regarding the use of 3D printers within laboratories to support firearms examinations, including the production of components to aid in the classification of recovered items.

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2.2.2. The group discussed 3D printed components and associated software and how those two aspects relate to the current FSA MTP 601.

2.2.3. This issue may require clarification through an updated FSA for a future version of the Code, and the group will advise the Regulator on that issue.

2.3. Counter classifications

2.3.1. Declarations of non-compliance around counter classification were discussed following a question from UKAS around consistency.

2.3.2. Following discussions, UKAS to have further discussions offline

2.3.3. **Action** - UKAS to have further discussions offline to confirm their position, and bring back to the group.

2.4. National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NaBIS) Update

2.4.1. No specific update, however, as is already known there are ongoing changes in NaBIS with the planned closure of the Manchester facility in 2027.

2.4.2. A strategy change meeting is scheduled for the day after this meeting.

2.5. National Capacity:

2.5.1. The group discussed national firearms practitioner capacity.

2.5.2. NaBIS capacity has not changed, however in anticipation of the Manchester closure there is planning for a phased movement of police forces to the facility in Birmingham .

2.5.3. Capacity issues were discussed, with the acknowledgement that Police reform is also looking at this particular issue more widely.

2.5.4. The group identified that challenges with succession planning had contributed to the current capacity challenges, especially in relation to scene going practitioners.

2.5.5. There is a lack of awareness in police forces that some services are available to them for free at the point of use (or are already covered in costs), for example services provided by NaBIS around scene strategies etc.

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- 2.5.6. **Action** - Chair to draft a letter for the Regulator's consideration, setting out the groups longstanding concerns around practitioner capacity. This will be shared with the group for input before being sent to the Regulator.

2.6. OSFR Update

- 2.6.1. OSFR representative provided an update to the group. The Regulator has recently published an interpretation guidance document (Forensic science activities: interpretation and communication FSR-GUI-0004), which has been drafted with support from experts from across forensic science, including members of this specialist group. This will ultimately be supported by further discipline-specific interpretation guidance which is currently being developed.
- 2.6.2. Regulator is currently considering issues which might go into the next version of the Regulator's Code. This presents an opportunity for the group to consider changes to existing firearms FSAs and whether further FSAs are required.
- 2.6.3. The group noted drafting issues within existing firearms FSAs, as previously identified by the group. There was also discussion as to whether FSA specific requirements are needed within the firearms FSAs.
- 2.6.4. It was noted that additional meetings of the group may need to be scheduled to fully discuss and develop any required changes.

3. Classification by unaccredited forces

- 3.1.1. The Chair and OSFR provided an update regarding the use by police forces of the allowance for classification by unaccredited forces to inform urgent remand in custody applications (section 66.2.2 of the Code).
- 3.1.2. There are remaining concerns that, in some cases, the allowance may not be being used as intended, or not consistently so. The code includes a provision for auditing of those making use of this allowance, and this remains an option for consideration.
- 3.1.3. The next round of data returns for this allowance is coming up, and it was noted that this will allow for further detail to be obtained on how the allowance is being implemented. Consideration will need to be given on the questions asked within the data request.

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- 3.1.4. **Action** – Chair and OSFR representatives to meet to plan next annual return approach. This will then be shared with the group for input.

4. Classification of Top Venting Blank Firers (TVBFs)

- 4.1.1. The group discussed the large number of cases currently being seen involving un-converted TVBFs. Since the last meeting of the group, the Regulator has published the notification '04-2025: Top Venting Blank Firers'.
- 4.1.2. The group discussed the impact of the Regulator's notification and responses to this within the community.

4.2. Opinions relating to the assessment of convertibility

- 4.2.1. The group discussed whether a practitioner can or should be able to provide an opinion as to whether an item is readily convertible, as per section 1(6) of the Firearms Act 1982, or whether this is solely a matter for the court to decide.
- 4.2.2. Members of the group highlighted that this is an area which is being challenged in court by defence teams at present.
- 4.2.3. The group discussed whether firearms practitioners are best placed to judge whether an item can be converted 'without any special skill on the part of the person converting it in the construction or adaptation of firearms of any description' (as per the wording of the Firearms Act 1982). Especially where a practitioner undertakes such conversions on a regular basis and might therefore be argued to have developed such skill in the course of that work.
- 4.2.4. The counterpoint was also expressed, that the technical knowledge of a firearms practitioner might make them better able to assess the ease of convertibility than the average member of the jury.
- 4.2.5. Observers from the SPA noted that practitioners in Scotland do not express an opinion on whether or not an item is readily convertible. They list the steps taken and the tools used as well as the statutory defence from within the 1982 act.
- 4.2.6. The group noted the difference between the historical Model Firearms Examination (MFE) approach which focussed on manufacturers and importers,

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ensuring they complied with the legislation and the NCA lists, which have placed a focus on individuals who possess such items.

- 4.2.7. The group noted that there is an upcoming workshop on the assessment of convertibility being organised by Eurofins. There was agreement that the Chair should attend this event to gain further insight on current approaches to such work.

- 4.2.8. **Action** – Chair attendance at upcoming Eurofins conversion workshop.

4.3. Opinions relating to complex firearms law

- 4.3.1. The group discussed what was being seen in practice since the publication of the Regulator's notification.

- 4.3.2. Concern was raised whether practitioners are expressing legal opinion where this might not be appropriate, or there is no appellate court ruling on such classifications.

- 4.3.3. It is generally accepted that firearms practitioners can provide opinions relating to areas of firearm law to help the court, where the law is well established and non-controversial. This contrasts with practitioners giving a legal opinions on areas which have not been established and where there are differing legal views that have not been sufficiently tested in court. Legal interpretation of complex law is not within a firearms expert's area of expertise.

- 4.3.4. The group discussed whether a new Forensic Science Activity (FSA) should be created for the assessment of convertibility of imitation firearms (including blank firers), and included in a future version of the Code. Group members, including the representatives from UKAS highlighted that such activity would not fall within the accreditation for the existing classification FSA given the nature of the examination involved.

- 4.3.5. **Action** – The AFSP representative to start initial drafting of a potential FSA for assessment of convertibility for future discussion by the group.

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5. Membership of group

- 5.1.1. The group discussed the possibility of adding a police armourer representative on the specialist group, including potential armourers who could be considered by the Regulator.
- 5.1.2. **Action** – The Chair to recommend a police armourer to the Regulator for consideration if they can join the group.
- 5.1.3. The group also discussed whether consideration should be given to invite a barrister to join the group. It was not clear who would be an appropriate recommendation at this stage, and this may warrant further discussion.
- 5.1.4. **Action** – Members of group to consider possible legal representatives that could be asked to join the group.

6. Firearms Classification (standing item)

6.1. Reactivated deactivated guns

- 6.1.1. The group discussed whether deactivated firearms, particularly historically deactivated items could be considered readily convertible for example in the context of the Firearms Act 1982.
- 6.1.2. The group noted that such items would have a deactivated stamp, and that the owner would therefore have a reasonable expectation that the item could not be readily converted into a fireable state. In addition, it was also noted that the Firearms act 1968 states that deactivated items cease to be a firearms.

7. Scientific Issues

7.1. Kinetic Energy and provisions / penetration tests

- 7.1.1. The group discussed different approaches being used to assess kinetic energy at the muzzle in relation to the 1 joule threshold from the Firearms Act (1968)
- 7.1.2. UKAS representative noted that some laboratories were undertaking penetration tests with ballistic gel while others were using chronographs for this assessment. UKAS have seen instances where both approaches have been used without validation, and as such would not be accredited.

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- 7.1.3. UKAS emphasised that both techniques require appropriate validation. If a technique was being used with modified ammunition then this would need to be reflected within the validation. Similarly if an approach was validated for compressed air then further validation would be needed for propellant based ammunition.

7.2. Analysis of audible gunshots from CCTV/Doorbell footage

- 7.2.1. The group discussed a question that had been raised with the representative from the Metropolitan Police, by an officer who had been asked whether there were any experts who could comment on the sound of gunshot coming from a particular weapon. Specifically whether it was possible to tell the difference between a viable firearm and a blank firer.
- 7.2.2. Some commercially available technical solutions have been looked at historically by police forces. The assessment that had been made at the time was that these systems were not effective.
- 7.2.3. It was noted that some, more recent systems, directly feed into audio experts who will provide further analysis. While there have been some advances in the technology available on the market, these systems are mostly focussed on looking at indoors settings to detect gunshots.
- 7.2.4. The group was not aware of any such system currently being used or validated for use within the UK CJS.

8. Firearms Evidence Evaluation**8.1. Discussion regarding draft of Discipline Specific Interpretation Guidance**

- 8.1.1. The group discussed the Firearms Discipline Specific Interpretation Guidance, being developed to accompany the recently published Forensic science activities: interpretation and communication guidance document from the Regulator (FSR-GUI-0004)
- 8.1.2. AFSP representative provided an overview of the approach being taken for the current draft, with the aim of having everything in one document, as this was seen to be helpful.

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- 8.1.3. The AFSP representative highlighted areas within the document that would benefit most from the thoughts and inputs of the group.
- 8.1.4. Within the Classification section of the document, the draft sets out that where legal uncertainties exist and reasonable alternative views cannot be resolved by forensic expertise, the matter should be deferred to the court with clear explanation of the associated issues.
- 8.1.5. The draft includes the concept of pre-assessment, informed by recent discussions, which is an approach intended to mitigate against confirmation bias.
- 8.1.6. The document also discusses when firearms expertise can legitimately be applied to digital imagery (eg CCTV, device-stored photographs). In cases where an image merely needs interpretation as to whether it shows 'a gun-like object' a firearms expert may be no better placed than a layperson unless the image quality is sufficient to identify type or class.
- 8.1.7. Members discussed challenges such as AI-generated imagery, deepfakes, and increasingly high-quality replicas, noting the importance of ensuring experts do not overstep interpretative boundaries.
- 8.2. Action** – the group to provide feedback on the Firearms Discipline Specific guidance document within six weeks from this meeting.
 - 8.2.1. The group went on to discuss the signoff process for the Discipline Specific Guidance document, as well as possible launch strategies for the guidance.
- 8.3. AFTE Scientific Advancement Committee Update**
 - 8.3.1. Now in 2nd consultation phase, AFTE looking to update theory of identification.
 - 8.3.2. Moving away from theories into 'principles' and are looking at the latest ISO standard for forensic science with an aim to support practitioners in their movement from categorical to evaluative approaches.
 - 8.3.3. This version is aimed at being a bridge between the existing categorical approach and the evaluative approach they are moving towards. As such the current document is compromise between approaches, and represents an interim approach.

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- 8.3.4. The AFTE conference in May expected to look at the next phase of this document.

9. Chair's Update

- 9.1.1. The chair provided an update on potential changes in FA Legislation.

9.2. Removal of Sound Moderators from legislation

- 9.2.1. The proposed removal of sound moderators from legislation. There is currently an amendment to this effect which is with the House of Commons, and waiting to see what view they take on the amendment.

9.3. Merging Section 2 licensing with Section 1 consultation

- 9.3.1. The planned consultation on merging Section 2 licensing with Section 1 has yet to be published.
- 9.3.2. A petition against this change has reached the required numbers of signatures to trigger a debate in parliament, which is scheduled for next week (23 February 2026)

10. AOB

- 10.1. As a point of interest for the group, the representative from PFS highlighted a case where a non-functioning firearm (Victorian era) with proof marks where there was a question as to whether 57(1D) of the Firearms Act (1968) require test firing to prove component parts were viable. During the Crown court trial, the judge directed the jury that this section of legislation means that if the prosecution did not test fire with the component, it would be speculation on the part of the expert.

10.2. Date of next meeting

- 10.3. Plan for an online meeting mid-April with an aim to having a draft for the proposed new FSA for discussion.

- 10.3.1. Next in-person meeting planned for the end of June/beginning July

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Annex A

Representatives present in person:

Chair

The Association of Forensic Science Providers (AFSP)

Office of the Forensic Science Regulator (OFSR)

Scottish Police Association (SPA)*

Principal Forensic Services (PFS)

Metropolitan Police Service Forensic Firearms Unit (MPSFFU)

The National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NaBIS) x1

Representatives present online:

UKAS x2

Nottingham Trent University (NTU)

Apologies received from:

Crown Prosecution Service

The National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NaBIS) x1

(* Representatives from SPA attend as observers from outside of the Regulator's Jurisdiction of England and Wales)