

## **RSC response to the House of Commons Science & Technology Select Committee inquiry into the closure of the Forensic Science Service**

The Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the House of Commons Consultation into the closure of the Forensic Science Service.

The RSC is the largest organisation in Europe for advancing the chemical sciences. Supported by a network of 46,000 members worldwide and an internationally acclaimed publishing business, its activities span education and training, conferences and science policy, and the promotion of the chemical sciences to the public.

This document represents the views of the RSC. The RSC has a duty under its Royal Charter "to serve the public interest" by acting in an independent advisory capacity, and it is in this spirit that this submission is made.

### **Executive Summary**

- 1 The Forensic Science Service (FSS) is a leading provider of analysis and interpretation of evidence from crime scenes and plays a critical role in the provision of forensic services from the crime scene to the court room. It works on more than 120,000 cases per year and employs 1300 scientists [1].
- 2 An integral role of the FSS is to retain and reinforce its leading position as provider of forensic science to the UK criminal justice system. They provide solution based expertise in analytical science and all criminal areas, as well as training. Their vision is to challenge the way forensic science services are delivered and who delivers them.
  - **If the UK is to maintain its position as a world leader in the provision of Forensic Science Services there must be continual investment in Research and Development.**
  - **In order to continue the advances in the fight against crime and increasingly, terrorism, there needs to be research and development work to produce lower detection limits, enhance specificity of detection techniques and to ensure that new designer drug, and explosives residues can be detected. Research and development in the field needs to be on-going to keep ahead of the developments in criminal tactics including drugs and terrorist crimes. This will rely on ever increasing sophistication in forensic methodology.**
  - **A properly resourced unit with specialist capabilities and advanced skills base must be retained in the UK.**
  - **The UK is currently a world leader in the provision of forensic science services. This contributes to the scientific skills base in the UK and this advantage will be lost unless managed carefully.**
  - **The quality of data must not be compromised by the drive for cost efficiency.**
  - **The impartiality of future providers of data must be ensured.**
- 3 FSS work around core values of objectivity, responsiveness, reliability, innovation and collaboration.

- 4 The UK FSS has a recognised track record, delivering 120,000 cases, attending 1500 crime scenes, processing 500,000 DNA samples and providing evidence in over 2000 court cases annually [1].
- 5 In providing this service, there is an interaction between the provider of the forensic service the police and other agencies. The provider of forensic data must be involved in an iterative discussion with the police to maximise the information from any crime scene. This requires a specialist ability to interpret data and offer suggestions and advice on how to use the data and to offer suggestions for looking at the samples in different ways.

### Questions and Responses

***What will be the impact of the closure of the Forensic Science Service on forensic science and on the future development of forensic science in the UK?***

- 6 **It is a major concern that the closure of FSS would mean that the central repository of expertise in this field in the UK would be lost.** The FSS is an internationally recognised source of expertise in the field of forensic science. It has pioneered major breakthroughs in the field of DNA analysis [2] in the criminal justice system and has developed, and currently holds the world's first and largest DNA database. FSS currently provides forensic services to the 43 police forces in England and Wales. It also provides consultancy services to countries outside the UK.
- 7 **The loss of future advanced skills, specialist techniques and capacity to address non-routine requirements.** Forensic science must provide high quality data. There are two distinct areas of this data provision. They are: Routine analysis and specialist work. It is likely that the routine analysis could be carried out by other organisations which have sufficiently trained staff, rigorous quality control systems and can demonstrate impartiality. The FSS currently is the provider of many highly specialised services including the development of new advanced techniques and world class training services. The specialist work includes research required to drive forward the capabilities in the field and to ensure that the more unusual requirements can be addressed. This requires that a technical capability be maintained which may be utilised less frequently.
- 8 **An inability to ensure that the science is keeping up with developments in crime.** The FSS must keep up with developments in crime, including the detection and identification of new drugs and developments in terrorist activity. This means that research into new techniques and procedures is required to produce lower detection limits and enable new materials to be identified at much lower levels than is currently achievable. A key function of FSS is to provide research in the field and to ensure that new technologies and procedures are available in the future. The ability to deliver these new technologies and developments will be compromised as commercial providers will not be able to invest in research and development unless there is an immediate financial return.

- 9 **An erosion of the scientific skills base in the UK.** The sector needs a supply of talented scientists who are capable of advancing the science. Forensic science is a field in which the UK is currently a world leader. With the closure of FSS a major concern is the UK would suffer an erosion of its skills base in this area.
- 10 Pressure to reduce costs and compete has been a factor in the privatisation of UK water industry. Salaries in this sector are low (starting salaries £12k). Temporary staff are paid at ~ £7 p. h. covering analyst duties, and in some cases replacing more senior staff to save costs. It is likely that this scenario would be played out in the forensic sector, further driving the erosion of the skills base. This would have a detrimental impact on the UK's position in this, and other scientific sectors. It would ultimately result in a smaller talent pool of highly qualified scientists available to UK PLC.

***What will be the implications of the closure on the quality and impartiality of the forensic evidence used in the criminal justice system?***

- 11 **There is a concern that the quality of the data will be compromised by the drive for efficiency and sample throughput.** Private sector competition has resulted in some improvement in turnaround of routine results. Routine analyses may therefore be carried out more cost effectively. However, there must be a mechanism for ensuring that the quality of data provided by commercial laboratories be ensured.
- 12 **Impartiality of data providers could be compromised.** Spending cuts mean police forces have less money to spend on forensics consultancy and are taking this work in house. Police forces have advised that their spend on external forensic suppliers will continue to fall as forces seek to maximise efficiencies. This may mean that the impartiality of the data providers could be compromised resulting from potential conflict of interest situations.

***What are the alternatives to winding down the Forensic Science Service?***

- 13 **A properly resourced unit with the specialist capabilities and required skills base must be retained. This could be attached to a university.** Keeping core functions which are profitable and disposing of more specialist peripheral functions is an option. The major concern is that any alternative must ensure that specialist skills and research capabilities will not be lost to the UK. The capability to carry out these specialist functions must be retained in the UK.

## References

1. <http://www.forensic.gov.uk/html/customers/>
2. <http://www.forensic.gov.uk/html/company/history/>