

**Forensic Science Strategy: a national approach to forensic science delivery  
in the criminal justice system**

Submission by Prospect to the House of Commons Science  
and Technology Select Committee

**4 April 2016**

[www.prospect.org.uk](http://www.prospect.org.uk)

## **Introduction**

Prospect is a trade union representing 113,000 professionals, managers and specialists across all sectors of the economy. We represent 50,000 professional scientists and engineers in the UK. These included more than 1,000 employed by the former Forensic Science Service (FSS).

Since then a significant number have since exited forensic science, resulting in depletion of the UK's specialist skills base. Although, as indicated below, the Home Office consultation includes some welcome proposals, these will not come to fruition unless the skills base can be rebuilt.

Prospect has previously offered a unique perspective on events during the closure process and its consequences. Our submission in 2013 to the Select Committee was informed by the experiences of members made redundant from the FSS at all its main locations. FSS sold off its equipment and skills base with only a minority of staff being retained either in police forces or outside private forensic suppliers.

Now, five years after the union campaigned against closure of the old service, Prospect welcomes the Home Office decision to re-establish a national forensic science service with the chance to restore what was a national asset.

Although it is tempting simply to say 'we told you so', the truth is that this is too important an issue to take any satisfaction in being proved right about the concerns we expressed several years ago.

## **Learning from mistakes**

Then Prospect warned of the negative impact on both the criminal justice system and forensic science in the UK if work transferred to private firms and in-house police labs. In the worst cases, it said, there would be the potential for miscarriages of justice and some crimes would go unsolved.

We firmly believe that if the government had listened to the concerns of its own scientists at the time it would not be in the position of having to perform this embarrassing U-turn.

This new decision by the Home Office has come far too late for many of our members. Much of what we warned ministers about has come to pass. Confidence and investment in forensic science has been undermined. Prospect hopes that the government will learn from its mistakes and begin to listen to its specialists in the civil service. Prospect and its members should be involved in rebuilding key elements of a national forensic science service.

A report last year from the National Audit Office underlined our concerns and warned that standards were deteriorating, with police increasingly relying on unregulated experts.

Now, in the light of the Home Office Forensic Science Strategy document published in March 2016, Prospect believes the Home Office must urgently take measures to restore a national Forensic Science Service that nurtures a world-class framework and specialist skills base.

At least one generation of scientists has been lost, weakening capability in several areas and although shocking it is not surprising. Existing forensic procurement models do not reward private providers for offering or investing in specialist skills that are not used routinely. Prospect is relieved that the Home Office has admitted that 'more needs to be

done to ensure appropriate compliance with quality standards to maintain public confidence and reduce the potential for miscarriages of justice.'

The strategy document also highlights a new opportunity to create a joined-up Forensic Science Service, provided by the emergence of a new technique – digital forensics, which it says is an increasingly common feature of investigations. The strategy sets out a roadmap for the delivery, by the end of the current parliament, of a national approach to Forensic Science.

### **New techniques**

In our view a shift in balance of forensic investigation work toward biometrics and away from traditional forensic techniques is a potential vehicle to ensure a new national service, which will help combat the rise of cyber and digital crime and provide clarity on standards, accountability and transparency through a national framework.

The current mixed landscape of forensic delivery models can create fragmentation of cases, which means there is no single scientist in possession of all the information required to make a full and robust examination. Ultimately this means that the court is left to make this evaluation itself, which carries high risks.

The Home Office strategy for real-time forensics to be at the heart of a new approach is welcome. It should enable investigators to deliver forensic outputs as near to the point of need as possible, delivering faster results, and swifter criminal justice outcomes.

The aim of the strategy it says is to 'reinforce the legitimacy and capability of forensic science through consistent quality management and standardisation across police forces and enhanced governance for the forensics system.' We agree with the sentiments expressed, along with the proposal for a police force review that will look at moving the current system of fragmented provision into a 'Joint Forensic and Biometric Service.'

Given the fragility of the forensic science 'market' and the damage that has done to Research and Development it is also critical that a meaningful strategy is developed to encourage new technology and innovation. Serious work needs to be undertaken to create an oversight of the health of the supply chain and work closely with research councils and other public research organisations to identify new opportunities for forensic science.

In addition, Prospect supports proposals to give the Forensic Science Regulator statutory powers, and further research to identify the contribution and value of forensic science to the criminal justice system in England and Wales in light of changing crime types and digital technology.

The significant challenge, having dismantled the former Forensic Science Service, will be in delivery of this strategy. The reality is that scientific expertise cannot simply be turned off and back on again, like a tap, and the skills that do still exist are disparate and fragmented. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the Home Office and ministers develop and commit to a medium-term strategy and that, this time, it is rolled out in consultation with all relevant stakeholders.

Prospect stands ready to contribute to such a partnership.