

FCN quarterly report

Q3 – 2025/26

Thanks for reading the FCN's quarter 3 report, covering Oct-Dec 2025. Please contact us with any questions or comments. In this report...

- Quality and compliance (p1-2)
- NPCC sub-portfolio business activities (p3)
- NPCC portfolio project activities (p4)
- Forensic marketplace & industry engagement (p5)
- Digital forensic marketplace (p6)
- Digital forensics (p7)
- Research & innovation (p8)
- Workforce (p9)

Quality and compliance

Incident scene examination

The team continued to provide guidance to Incident Scene Examination through the NPCC's CSI Technical Forum and the FSR's Incident Examination Specialist Group (IESG) this quarter. The FCN have provided significant input to enable the IESG to develop and recommend a revised approach to compliance to the FSR Code in this area, including a minimum scope for methods and helping develop a milestone approach to compliance.

CSI technical forum

In addition to the IESG, the team, with Jane D'Arcy as our FCN lead, continues to underpin the CSI Technical Forum. The Risk-Informed Decision Making (RIDM) group, which is part of the CSI Technical Forum, met for the first time this quarter. The meeting was well attended and discussions plentiful around how Police Forensic Units assess risks

in relation to their compliance with the Code. The next phase will be to take a deeper dive into how Policing can use risk assessment to provide a foundation for decisions within the Forensic Unit, and how these risks and decisions should be documented and articulated so wider stakeholders clearly understand the rationale for decisions. Integral support continues to be provided to other workstreams within the national CSI Technical Forum as well, including the Anti-Contamination workstream and the Facilities & Consumables workstream amongst others.

The FCN is now planning its annual SceneSafe Supplier Assurance Visit, with plans to cover the newly re-specified gunshot residue (GSR) kits and its compliance with PAS 377, plus the routine reviewing of SceneSafe's compliance with ISO 18385. If there is anything you would like the team to consider covering in this visit, please do get in touch.

Training and knowledge sharing

This quarter the FCN hosted an extremely well attended webinar on the subject of 'Understanding ISO 18385', which provided valuable to the community, particularly around the process of Ethylene Oxide treatment to remove DNA from consumables. We've already received lots of positive feedback, but if you would like to have your say please email us and equally if you have any suggestions for any future webinar content, whether that's related to consumables or otherwise, please drop us a line with your requests for consideration.

The team also hosted a much appreciated webinar for SARCs this period, providing essential information to the SARC community about how to accurately declare compliance with the FSR Code. This has been accompanied by written FCN guidance to provide further clarity. *More over the page...*

Quality and compliance (continued)

Consumables

In collaboration with BLC, Scenesafe and the policing/medical community, the initial design of new 'one size fits all' RTA Blood and Urine Kits has been completed, with new documents detailing component specifications, policing guidance and independent testing advice now agreed and ready for NPCC portfolio engagement and sign-off. A consumables webpage has been introduced on the FCN website as a repository for latest advice and guidance, currently holding information relating to DNA Sampling and RTA Toxicology kits. In Q4, a review of casework toxicology kits will commence.

Validation

The NPCC Quality Board's Validation Sub-Group chaired by Kay Hannam is gathering more pace, benefitting from a significant drive by Michelle Gaskell, backed up by the whole of the FCN's Quality Team. FCN personnel chair several of the workstreams within that group, which assists in bringing to life Policing's vision to enable more collaboration in this area. Several meetings took place this quarter with more activity planned in the next quarter as well.

Members of the team have been working closely with BlueLight Commercial (BLC) this quarter to evaluate tender responses within Physical Forensics, to help ensure, as much as possible, the work Policing procures from the private sector is compliant with the Code and where not assisting BLC to agree plans to close these gaps or find suitable alternatives. (See more on p5.)

To finish the round-up, the FCN hosted the increasingly popular National Quality Managers (NQM) Meeting again this quarter, that meeting is well attended by almost every NPCC Police Force plus additional Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) and continues to be a critical escalation point for Quality Managers to UKAS, the FSR and the NPCC's Quality Board. We are considering how we can develop the NQM network to gain even more value from this incredible knowledgeable group – more on that in future issues.



Forward look

- A review of casework toxicology kits will commence
- Final details and publication of INC 100 milestones expected in the next quarter. The team will then consider how we can assist Police Forces comply with the first milestone
- FSR's Declaration Guidance to be published imminently, the team will be reviewing that as soon as it is published to determine if we need to provide any further guidance
- SceneSafe Supplier Assurance Visit in March 2026
- Provide Ground Truth Data to enable Police Forces to more easily transition to Code V2 for FSA – MTP 101 Friction ridge detail: comparison

NPCC sub-portfolio business activities

FORSTRA

FCN, on behalf of the NPCC Forensic Portfolio, have continued to develop V2.0 of ForSTRA, which is planned to be published by end of Q4. Assisted by Valeed Ahmed (EMSOU), we have further collated and consolidated risks from across all the forensic sub-portfolios, as tasked at the FPB Forensic Day in October 2025.

This has been a resource intense piece of work, to enable, for the first time, a full overview of all portfolio risks and our thanks are extended to all who have supported us.

The outputs of this work will be presented to the NPCC FPB and will help to inform the HO Reform Programme of our areas of greatest risk.

Streamlined forensic reporting

The FCN continues to lead the SFR process; the Q3 multi-stakeholder NPCC SFR Board was held in October. A new Communications Framework has been finalised and published, ensuring timely, clear and consistent messaging as SFR continues to expand into new disciplines and organisations.

The SFR performance framework continues to evolve as part of the development of a balanced scorecard for SFR.



A survey has been introduced to capture data relating to the volume of MG22A, B, C & D reports being produced by each organisation, for each discipline, and how long each of these reports take to produce on average.

Whilst the data collected represents only a small proportion of disciplines / organisations, it is demonstrating over £13 million in cost avoidance to policing per annum, and an efficiency saving in reporting time of over 50%.

The FCN have produced interim template MG22 forms in response to the FSR's notification 03-2025 and will carry out a further review once v3 of the FSR's Declaration

Guidance has been published. This delayed FSR publication has impacted on the delivery of v6 of the National SFR Guidance document, which is now likely to be in Q4.

In Q3, the FCN have also been working with Board members to consider the impact of changes to Criminal Practice Directions on the SFR process, specifically in relation to expert evidence.

Retention guidance

The FCN have commenced a further review of the NPCC Guidance Document entitled

'Forensic Materials - Retention, Storage and Destruction', primarily to ensure compliance with V2.0 of the FSR Code; this is expected to be published in Q4.

Forward look

- ForSTRA – presenting Consolidated Risk Profile to NPCC FPB; Working towards developing V2.0
- SFR – seeking to appoint CSO EN Lead and reinstate Guidance and Forms ENG, Publish V6.0 Guidance, align Annexes A, C & D with V3.0 FSR Declaration Guidance
- Retention Guidance – publishing V2.0

NPCC portfolio project activities

Swab Out Crime Y-STR project

The FCN and FINDS campaign organised through BBC Science Focus magazine has been successful in boosting sample numbers and our partners, Eurofins, have agreed to continue receiving samples up until 31st March 2026.

Through a combination of sampling events, the swab-at-home postal system and use of existing UK YSTR datasets from YHRD, Kings College London and other academic institutions, the target of 10,000 profiles looks set to be achieved. Dr Roberto Puch-Solis at Dundee University (a world-leader in forensic DNA statistics) has made good progress in Q3 with the development of a new statistical method for the evaluation of Y-STR profiles.

The FCN and FINDS are successfully through the first stage of a STAR bid to obtain further funds to support the continuation of this research, and application of the developed model against the new UK reference collection.

Following the announcement by the Home Office of a £7 million investment, as part of the Safer Streets Mission, to develop YSTR matching capability within NDNAD2, the FCN and FINDS have commenced initial

planning in Q3 to consider the technical requirements and the impact on policing and providers; this activity will continue to build throughout Q4 and beyond.



Biometric opportunities – FCN set to help

In support of a proposed 4th National Operation to obtain outstanding biometric samples from persons convicted of serious offences, the FCN, on behalf of the NPCC FINDS Lead ACC Simon Wilson, has successfully applied to the ACRO Police Information Access Panel, to obtain indicative data from PNC that would inform the feasibility and benefits of such an operation by providing the number of missing samples, estimated to be in the tens of thousands. The intention is to consider convictions dating back to the 1940's up to the present day, including those recognised through the introduction of the Voluntary Attendee process in 2012.

Standardisation & efficiencies work package (NPCC Forensic Submissions Good Practice Guidance)

The FCN continues to drive forward the S&E Project on behalf of Kirsty Potter.

The core FCN Project team comprised of Physical and Digital, Quality and Marketplace specialists, have had a huge response from our forensic community to support this work, with membership across 4 workstream from 33 forces as well as NCA.

Additionally, we have consulted with other key stakeholders including CCTV and Cellsite Groups, a QD Expert, NABIS and BLC, all of whom have helped to inform and develop the content of the Guidance, which is now set for a line-by-line review.

During Q4, the document will remain accessible for our community membership to continue to add to the Guidance, prior to an internal review, in advance of sharing more widely, for comment with our FSP's, CJS and CPS.

Our anticipation is that the Guidance will be published by Summer 2026.

Forward look

- **YSTR** – submission of 2nd round bid for additional STAR Funding; conclude sample collection and profiling activity with EFS; FCN & FINDS build of next phase Project Plan
- **Biometric Opportunities** – continued engagement with ACRO to determine magnitude of a future programme of work, providing briefing paper to FIND Strategy Board
- **S&E** – conduct internal review of current draft document, expand consultation via Lead Kirsty Potter, work towards producing final draft document

Forensic marketplace and industry engagement

What do we do?

The FMIE Team is comprised of both Physical and Digital Forensic Specialist, providing support to NPCC in respect of Forensic Provision, both internally and externally to policing, monitoring demand and supply, regardless of contracting arrangements. Working closely with BlueLight Commercial(BLC), we provide technical and scientific insight and support to inform and direct procurements and contractual specifications.

Developing the SSQ for convergence of procurements

On behalf of BLC and our community, the FCN has led on the development and evaluation of the SSQ for the recent Physical Forensic DPS Procurement. During Q3 we continued engagement with FSPs in respect of their SSQ submissions and compliance to FSR Codes. Meetings have been held to address any gaps and to determine whether aspects could be considered to fall under "infrequently used methods", as well as to capture risks and mitigations ahead of Go Live of new contracts in April 2026.

The FCN formed part of the Tender Evaluations Team and worked closely with BLC in the evaluation of tender responses, ensuring as far as is possible, the work Policing procures from the private sector is compliant with the FSR Code. Where this may not be the case, we have assisted BLC to understand how to close gaps or find suitable alternatives.

Firearms Silver group

FCN continue to Chair meetings ensuring appropriate and prioritised submission to

available capacity, working with the community to manage and mitigate risk, and authorise submissions.

New contracts – training for WSCC and EMSOU

In preparation for the planned training for WSCC / EMSOU forces, due to take place in January 2026, we have built a training package and updated the Specification Guidance Toolkit. This will ensure that prior to go live of the new contracts, the forces will understand any changes in specifications, commissioning of work or reporting processes and have everything in place to support a smooth transition from the old to the new ways of working.

Operation Kettledrum

During Q3 the FCN, under the direction of the NPCC Operation Kettledrum Gold Group, have been developing a plan to enable compliance for retention or destruction of samples previously retested under the Op Kettledrum Programme of work. We have reached out to forces, in respect of Roads Traffic Samples to determine which forces are comfortable to delegate authorisation for the

FCN, on their behalf, to manage destruction of samples that, under normal circumstances, would have been destroyed 6 months post issues of a report.

There are circa 13,000 samples/cases currently under consideration, however given the age of this programme, the FCN have undertaken work to validate the data held, prior to commencing the next phase of work, being the destruction of the Roads Traffic Samples.

We anticipate these destructions commencing during Q4.

Additional BAU activities

As part of the newly developing Contractual SSRM function, we are continuing to work alongside BLC, joining them on the monthly Forensic Supplier and Force engagement calls, which is crucial if we are to maintain oversight of supply and demand, and capture, on behalf of NPCC, emerging risks and issues.

We have also been working with BLC to develop a process for the reporting and logging of issues. This will comprise a form for use by both forces and FSPs, and will help to inform BLC and the FCN of issues in an agreed and consistent manner.

Forward look

- New Contracts Training for forces: 13th – 15th Jan EMSOU; 21st – 22nd Jan SE Region; 4th -5th Feb S Wales & Gloucestershire; 11th – 12th Feb N Wales and NW Region
- Working with BLC to develop an MI Data and Performance Reporting Tool
- Complete Market Share Analysis and Impact Assessment considering recent contract awards
- Working with BLC, plan in face-to-face Supplier meetings
- Continue with Op Kettledrum destruction phase of work, providing forces with case lists, where request to review has been made.
- Continue with Firearms Silver Group

Digital forensic marketplace

DF software & tooling technical specifications and community engagement

FCN have collaborated with Bluelight Commercial on the national software / tooling framework tender (£80M) representing NPCC by leading on the Technical Workstream to develop and deliver the technical specification of requirement for this procurement.

The tender was published on the 9th January and responses from tooling and software suppliers are due on the 27th Feb.

DF services marketplace market-share project

The FCN have been assessing the current DF outsourcing marketplace to re-evaluate its value and size. This will be based on financial year 24/25.

This piece of work will contribute to the current review of the DF DPS (led by BLC) and provide valuable insight into force outsourcing trends to help manage the wider DF marketplace.

BLC joint working group

A significant amount of work has gone into the setting up of this working group and it is now well established and has been used to plan joint working activities between both

organisations. It has helped manage communication and information sharing.

Force and FSP engagement

Significant FCN engagement in Q3 to assist in management of capacity, demand and backlogs helping provide detailed information to national portfolios and forces whilst assisting FSPs to ensure they are right sized and able to future plan.

Forward look

National software framework

Clarification, Evaluation, moderation and Award will follow from now until end May 2025.

DF services marketplace market-share

The final 15% of data is proving challenging to collect as some FSPs are unwilling to share information with the FCN. We have to seek alternative methods to identify force spend. This is a priority for Q4

and the plan is to have the market share data completed by end March.

DF services (DPS) re-tendering, scoping and planning

BLC have planned to scope the replacement of the current DF DPS by December 2026. The work on this will be similar to that of the Nat Software Framework project and will require significant FCN (Technical) input, collaboration and joint working. This project will form a key deliverable for

Q4 and into next year's planning: It will run alongside the National software framework project.

BLC joint working group

Some planned work in Q4 to refresh the membership and agendas etc to move this group to a more functional working group at appropriate levels to manage the significant cross working between BLC & FCN.

Digital forensics

National digital forensics performance framework

This quarter, we completed the data collection phase for the second cycle of the National Digital Forensics Performance Framework, with 40 police forces submitting performance information. This represents a strong national response and will give policing a comprehensive picture of how digital forensics is performing across the country.

We have begun analysing over 3,500 individual data points, allowing us to identify trends, strengths, and areas where improvement can be made. This work directly supports better decision-making at both local and national levels, helping forces improve timeliness, quality, and consistency in digital investigations. The final national report will be published in Q4.

During this quarter, the data provided by forces in the first cycle has supported the Online Child Sexual Abuse review commissioned by James Babbage (NCA), along with CC Becky Riggs, CC Maggie Blyth, and AC Louisa Rolfe. This demonstrates the real-world value of the framework in

shaping how the most serious crimes are addressed.

AI – emerging opportunities

We have successfully completed in-house testing of a new Research and Innovation application that uses artificial intelligence to help identify drug-related communications within mobile phone data.

In practical terms, this work helps investigators find critical evidence more quickly. The application reviews large volumes of messages and highlights those most likely to relate to drug dealing, reducing the time spent manually reviewing material and allowing officers to focus on the most relevant information.

Results are presented through a clear and easy-to-use dashboard (below) helping users understand and trust the outcomes.

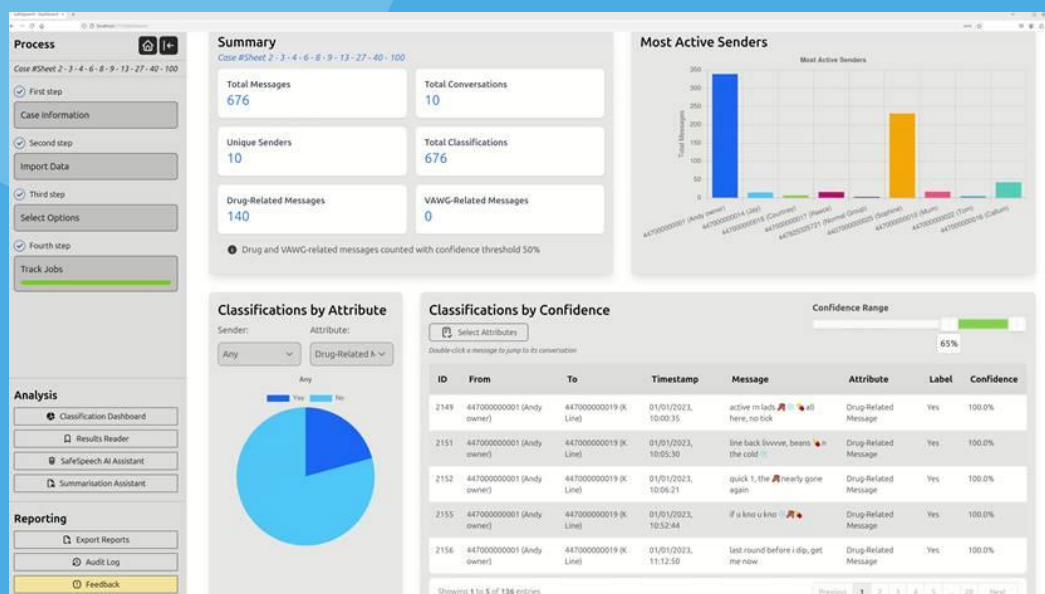
This work demonstrates how emerging technology can be applied safely and responsibly to improve efficiency and effectiveness in investigations. We have planned force-level testing for Q4, moving us closer to real operational benefit.

Cell site analysis collaborative learning exercise

We have launched the third national Cell Site Analysis Collaborative Learning Exercise, with 40 organisations across policing and forensic service providers taking part. This strong engagement highlights the trust placed in us to lead complex national learning activity.

Working alongside experts from Staffordshire Police, we designed and delivered a challenging crime scenario, supported by realistic call data. This allows participating organisations to test their own processes in a safe environment, identify gaps, and make improvements before issues arise in live investigations.

Through this exercise, we are actively raising standards, improving consistency, and supporting compliance with the Forensic Science Regulator's Code of Practice. Additional support from Hampshire Constabulary and key technology providers has strengthened the exercise further, reinforcing its national credibility and impact.



Forward look

- Completing analysis and report on the performance framework
- Concluding the cell site collaborative learning exercise

Research and innovation

The FCN has continued work on behalf of NPCC to ensure forensics is represented in the R&I science system, linked to the OPCS and Home Office.

During Q3, we established and agreed members and TOR for the new National Forensic Portfolio Research and Innovation Board (NFPRIIB).

Engagement was undertaken with the new Police Academic Centres of Excellence (P-Ace) to understand forensic opportunities for research.

We drafted a statement of user needs with the Home Office for research funding in 2026,

focused on forensic problems to ensure wider partnership opportunities.

We also engaged with the AI portfolio to determine an integration plan for AI (NLP) tools to support DF.

During the STAR funding application process, the FCN actively helped 12 forensic-related bids to maximise opportunity for forensics.

We have also been involved with NSIB and the RIL network, where a forensic SPOC is agreed.

Ahead of an Inside X event on 'Advanced data analytics for Digital Forensics practitioners', we provided subject matter

expertise (SME).

Finally, an FCN Special Interest Group (SIG) is planned for Feb 2026 on 'Pathways to building trusted forensic science'.

Forward look

- Research priorities will be agreed for HO funded forensic research for 26/27, and P-Ace research initiated
- Research updates will be shared at NFPRIIB



Inside X 2026 on Advanced Data Analytics for Digital Forensics – a collaborative event between ACE, Home Office, Southampton University and the FCN.

Workforce

Apprenticeships

The FCN have been working with Medr (Commission for tertiary education and research in Wales) to design a brand-new digital forensic apprenticeship for Welsh forces. This will provide Welsh forces with access for the first time to a Digital Forensic apprenticeship. It will be designed in collaboration with the FCN, all Welsh Police forces, Medr, Learning Providers and technical experts ensuring the Welsh forces will have the same opportunity previously available to English forces.

The L7 Advanced Digital forensic apprenticeship has now been suspended due to the govt levy funding being withdrawn. The cohort that started in March 2025 will

complete the programme. This is disappointing as it had involved a huge investment of resource by FCN and forces and would have provided a valuable and rewarding route to development for experienced staff which could have impacted retention of experienced staff. This suspension was outside of our control.

The FCN continue to organise an apprenticeship mentor group – for mentors of DF apprentices – every 6-8 weeks to share knowledge and ideas, and meet with the provider, which is helpful to all involved.

The FCN are also involved in consultation with Skills

England on significant changes that are currently taking place in the apprenticeship arena and will ensure that the community are updated about the impact to policing.

Forward look

It appears to be unlikely that a physical forensic apprenticeship will be approved, however in the next year the FCN will examine alternative approaches/routes to education/training (short courses and micro credentials) for existing workforce and routes for recruitment.

Wellbeing

The FCN were fully supported to attend an EU Operation Cyclopes event in Berlin in October and the ANZFSS conference in Melbourne in November. At these events we presented the preliminary findings of the wellbeing survey we conducted. This was a fantastic opportunity to learn from the other organisations present, and the feedback received was very positive about the work that the community are completing in the UK.

The information shared is being used to enhance and supplement the wellbeing work we are completing.

The report from the wellbeing survey will be published in Q4 and will be introduced in a webinar planned for Jan 2026.

The forensic investigators wellbeing toolkit is being updated and will be published by end of quarter 4, on both FCN and Oscar Kilo websites.

Forward look

Focus groups with practitioners and interviews with forensic leaders will take place throughout 2026, gaining further insight from the survey, leading towards the development strategic plan for forensic wellbeing in the future.