

FCN half-year report

Updates from April-September 2026

Thanks for reading the FCN's half-year report, covering our activities during April-September 2026. To read about a topic, just click the relevant button below.

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Digital forensics

Cell Site Analysis Collaborative Learning Exercise

The Cell Site Analysis Collaborative Learning Exercise (CLE) has now concluded, with participation from 39 organisations across policing and commercial forensic service providers. The exercise was funded and supported by the Forensic Science Regulator and provided participants with the opportunity to demonstrate that their cell site analysis methods remain fit for purpose, while also enabling the community to identify, share, and promote good practice.

39

organisations took part in cell site analysis CLE

This was the first Cell Site Analysis CLE conducted following the introduction of accreditation requirements for Cell Site Analysis for Geolocation under the Forensic Science Regulator's Code of Practice. As such, the exercise provided an opportunity to assess how organisations are interpreting, analysing, and reporting evidence within the accredited framework. Participation included both prosecution and defence providers, supporting a whole-system approach to quality assurance, consistency of practice, and shared learning across the forensic community. The results and key learning outcomes were presented to

participants at a workshop hosted by the College of Policing in June, providing an opportunity for discussion, reflection, and knowledge sharing.

The successful delivery of the exercise was supported through close collaboration between the Forensic Science Regulator's Office, members of the Radio Frequency Development User Group (RFDUG), policing organisations, and commercial forensic service providers. This collaborative approach brought together a broad range of expertise and perspectives, helping to ensure that the exercise remained relevant, realistic, and beneficial to the wider community. The continued willingness of organisations to contribute their time, knowledge, and experience demonstrates a shared commitment to improving quality, consistency, and confidence in cell site analysis evidence across the Criminal Justice System.

Evidence-Driven Exhibit Triage (EVIDENT)

Digital Forensic Units (DFUs) continue to face significant demand pressures, with growing backlogs and increasing volumes of digital evidence. The EVIDENT project, funded through the Police STAR Fund, is exploring how data science can be used to support smarter, more consistent decision-making when assessing and prioritising digital forensic submissions. The aim is to help forces direct limited resources towards examinations most likely to deliver evidential, safeguarding,

and criminal justice outcomes, while reducing low-value activity and improving service timeliness.

Following project mobilisation activities undertaken during Q1, stakeholder engagement and national workshops were completed, involving representatives from around 25 police forces. These activities have helped refine prioritisation measures, identify available data sources, and inform development of the project framework.

3,000

triage outcome records analysed for EVIDENT

During Q2, the project moved into the analysis phase with the review of approximately 3,000 triage outcome records and around 30,000 sentencing outcomes from Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) investigations. This work is helping to build a national evidence base to better understand the relationship between digital forensic activity, investigative outcomes, safeguarding interventions, and Criminal Justice System (CJS) outcomes. The findings will support future decision-making around triage, prioritisation, operating models, and forensic service delivery, while also informing wider national forensic reform activity and the development of future Target Operating Models.

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Digital forensics (continued)

AI Threats / National Support

We have continued to engage with National Centre for Violence Against Women and Girls and Public Protection colleagues to support the implementation of emerging legislation relating to AI-enabled image abuse and technology-facilitated violence against women and girls. This included providing digital forensic expertise on the investigative challenges posed by AI-generated intimate images, identifying potential capability gaps in attribution and assessment of image-generation tools, and contributing to the development of a national review of digital forensic readiness for image-based and AI-enabled offending.

Throughout the first half of the year, we continued to represent the digital forensics community through the Police AI Threat Hub's deepfake workstream, ensuring that digital forensic considerations are reflected in national discussions on AI-enabled threats. This has included supporting assessments of evidential risk, identifying future forensic capability requirements, contributing to recommendations on standards and guidance, and helping to shape priorities for research, training, and operational readiness in relation to synthetic media and AI-

generated evidence.

This work will continue throughout the remainder of the year as national understanding of AI-enabled offending develops and policing capabilities adapt to emerging threats.

Forensic Wellbeing

In support of Recommendation 3 of the NPCC Digital Forensics Performance Framework, the FCN's DF team developed a comprehensive forensic workforce wellbeing survey in collaboration with FCN Workforce Strategy Lead, Jo Morrissey. The survey sought to better understand wellbeing, job satisfaction, workload pressures, exposure to distressing material, career development, organisational support, and wider workforce challenges across forensic disciplines, providing a national evidence base to inform future workforce wellbeing and retention initiatives.

including 277 responses from digital forensic personnel. This represents one of the largest forensic wellbeing datasets collated nationally and will provide valuable insight into workforce wellbeing, resilience, retention, and support requirements. Analysis of the results is currently underway, with findings expected to inform future workforce planning, wellbeing interventions, and the ongoing development of national support initiatives across the forensic community.

277

responses to forensic
DF wellbeing survey

The survey has now closed and received more than 770 responses from practitioners across a broad range of forensic disciplines,

NPCC Support

Risks and threats

We now have the first ever consolidated NPCC Forensic Portfolio Board risk register. The document brings together all the NPCC forensic sub-portfolio strategic risks to provide a single national picture of the main risks facing forensics in England and Wales. With better insight into our risks, we can ensure effective mitigation is being managed and gaps identified. This work is also aligned to the Home Office forensic reform activity to ensure a cohesive approach to activity which supports the risks. Ongoing management of the risk will now be coordinated through the individual sub-portfolios to ensure the register remains a current and active document.

The second national Forensic Strategic Threat & Risk Assessment (ForSTRA) was finalised and published. Compiled by the FCN's Shelley Wilson, the ForSTRA reports on the top threat themes and the risk status in forensic science across England and Wales. This was the first ForSTRA update since its initial publication in 2023, though interim threat assessments did take place in 2024-25.

Swab Out Crime

The Swab Out Crime project collection phase has now been completed with the collected samples converted into DNA profiles. The final total number of profiles that will form the YSTR Reference Collection will sit at around 9000. This includes the collected samples from face-to-face events as well as the postal service, plus those available from other YSTR sources. Work is currently ongoing on the phase of the project that will build the

mechanism to allow the statistical analysis of profile comparisons in real-life serious crime, enabling the likelihood of a match of suspect to crimestain to be reported. A workshop is planned for late October to demonstrate to stakeholders, how this process will work.

9,000
Y-STR profiles collected
for Swab Out Crime

DNA Enhancement Programme

Running alongside the ongoing Swab Out Crime work, the FCN is an integral part of the DNA Enhancement Programme (DEP) being run by FINDS, and whilst the overall scope of the DEP is wider than just delivery of a YSTR Intelligence Database, the FCN will primarily concentrate its efforts on scientific community engagement, looking at the practical process of delivering real improvements to the National DNA Database for YSTR comparisons. Some of the activities that the FCN will undertake are:

- Policing and forensic community engagement
- Develop an indicative roadmap of activities to drive operational delivery
- Engagement with BlueLight Commercial around future contract provision
- Engage with the wider CJS to ensure understanding of the impact of proposed changes
- Ensure capability readiness of

PACE and Crimestain providers

This is an exciting time for DNA comparisons and the FCN will play a significant role in creating the YSTR Reference and Intelligence Databases.

Streamlined Forensic Reporting (SFR)

The FCN continues to oversee the SFR process, which delivers a more efficient and consistent way to report forensic outcomes, meeting the needs of all parties, at every stage in the criminal justice system.

Throughout the half-year, SFR continued to expand to include new disciplines, namely ignitable liquids/fire accelerants and cell site analysis for geolocation.

In Q1 we developed an updated version of the SFR templates and annexes (V6), which were published in Q2. As part of the update, we transitioned SFR documentation towards FSAs rather than forensic disciplines.

We also introduced two new leads into the Forms and CSI areas and have an ongoing pilot in the CCTV discipline.

Workforce

Wellbeing

In Q1, we published the second edition of the [FCN Forensic Investigators wellbeing toolkit](#) (pictured right). Led by the FCN's Jo Morrissey, the toolkit includes new research and case studies and examples from police forces across England and Wales and worldwide.

We also published the full report of a practitioner survey in 2025, after preliminary results were shared at several events including a webinar in January. [The full report is now available.](#)

The survey results were also used to inform focus groups held throughout Q2 to gather in-depth qualitative feedback on the quantitative findings. The FCN continues to work with the community to provide guidance on how to protect our workforce, and will produce a national minimum standards document.

Following the 2025 survey, during April-Sept 2026 the FCN conducted another forensic workforce wellbeing survey, which received more than 770 responses from practitioners across a wider range of disciplines across England and Wales, and enabling us to compare forensic practitioner wellbeing against police wellbeing results.

We will publish the results of this work soon and use it to inform a third version of the forensic wellbeing toolkit in 2027.

And finally on wellbeing, FCN's Jo Morrissey presented at the ENFSI Scenes of Crime conference in Oxford.



She covered various approaches to supporting forensic practitioner wellbeing. It was an opportunity to share FCN's work with practitioners from across Europe and learn from others. Jo also continues to work with the Home Office on the Operation Cyclopes project findings.

Apprenticeships

In this first half of the year, we continued on the development and management of apprenticeships, as well as working on mentoring and leadership development for forensic practitioners.

Of the 16 apprentices in cohort one, 14 were either recruited on permanent full-time contracts or have successfully achieved digital forensic roles with their forces.

A Level 4 DF apprenticeship in Wales is still being designed, with the intent to start in September 2027.

14 out of 16
DF apprentices staying
in-force

A particular milestone was hit for the first and second cohorts of the level 4 digital forensic apprenticeship, who have entered their end point assessment period.

Forensic reform

In accordance with the wishes of the forensic community, the FCN has become more involved with the Home Office Forensics Reform Programme and begun to provide resources in support of the work, whilst also continuing to assess the impact on the other delivery commitments.

In the first half of the year, this led us to review our delivery

plan for 2026/27 and issue a second edition in August that outlined additional support being provided. In summary, we have so far agreed to provide resources into three project areas:

1. R&I workstream: to help establish a clear plan for the development of R&I within the National Police Service/National Forensic Service.

2. Digital Forensics Evolution: to support the workstreams of DF Validation and Online Child Sexual Exploitation.

3. Market Reform: to support the National Forensic Market Reform Delivery Group to inform the development of a future Marketplace Strategy.

Engagement

Software tooling

As part of software tooling procurement work which the FCN's digital team were heavily involved with, the tender has now been awarded and went live end August 2026. Forces will be able to utilise this as a singular way to procure all software and tooling needs in a standardised way.

Earlier in 2026, the FCN's DF team collated a market share position for all software & tooling suppliers as part of our support to the national software and tooling framework. This helped illustrate issues with the current marketplace, highlighting vendor dominance and reliance, whilst also identifying the vast number of suppliers in this marketplace.

In Q1, to complement this the FCN undertook a refresh of the DF services outsourcing market share – results of which have now been published.

NPCC support

The FCN continues to provide support to the NPCC Forensic Marketplace Lead, Julian Revitt-Smith (Norfolk Constabulary) and Kirsty Potter (Northumbria Police) who last year began leading on the current phase of

work of the FMSP Standardisation and Efficiencies Work Package. The NPCC Forensic Submissions Good Practice Guidance document has been shared with FSPs for their feedback following extensive stakeholder engagement. We are currently reviewing this comprehensive feedback.

The FCN chairs the NPCC Firearms Silver Group set up in July 2025 to ensure effective national coordination for the submission of Complex Firearms Cases. This work continues, aligning demand with available capacity whilst meeting the needs of the criminal justice system.

We also continued supporting the NPCC with other supplier issues, supporting a national working group run by NPCC Digital Forensic Lead, DCC Jayne Meir. The issue has had a significant force impact, and FCN has shared frequent comms with forces and the supplier to resolve the issue in early September 2026. A National impact assessment continues.

We also coordinated information sharing to all forces and forensic service providers (FSPs) in August, during unexpected disruption at another supplier.

The issue was resolved later in the month,

Overall FCN provided coordination managing all meetings and comms across both supplier issues ensuring policing were regularly updated and provided with resolution and timescales.

Ongoing activities

As part of the FCN's business-as-usual activity, we continue collating and monitoring the demand, supply and capacity across forensic service providers (FSPs).

We are also supporting tender evaluations and quality/technical assessments.

Research

Strengthening governance and oversight

The National Forensic Portfolio Research and Innovation board is now established and has developed a strong business rhythm, bringing together key stakeholders from across the policing science and technology landscape, alongside force representatives. By using the board as the primary conduit for forensic science research, we have strengthened collaboration across the network and expanded opportunities for research and innovation.

We now have a system that identifies and supports research and innovation opportunities by maximising the regional innovation network and providing a direct pathway for sub-portfolio leads to escalate strategic requirements for research investment. All forces now have regional points of contact, providing support for innovation funding through initiatives such as STAR, Test and Learn, as well as open invitations to events such as 'Funding Fridays' which shares current policing funding opportunities.

Alongside local academic partnerships we also now have the police academic centres of excellence (P-Ace), five of which support forensic science research. Each P-Ace engages regularly with the FCN Research and Innovation Lead, Shelley Wilson, to ensure that research opportunities are identified and maximised.

Horizon scanning and research

Horizon scanning activity continues, maintaining a constant focus on understanding both the current and future forensic landscape. To support this work, we continuously explore emerging topics through



a combination of landscape reviews and innovation activities.

Some areas, such as deepfakes and microbiomes, require ongoing monitoring, while broader themes linked to climate change and evolving crime profiles require targeted research to understand the forensic implications. Current commissioned work includes research examining the impact of climate change on crime scene activity.

We now have ongoing research delivery roadmaps for Digital Forensics, Fingermarks, and Vehicle Systems Forensics, developed in partnership with the DSTL research team. These programmes are also linked to wider horizon-scanning activities, including collaboration with the NCA TRACER Team and the College of Policing's *Ahead of the Curve* team.

To complement the Police Problem Book, a new Forensic Problem Book has been established to capture operational forensic challenges and ideas that could benefit from research. With more than 100 identified issues already recorded, it has become a valuable living document and an important evidence base for prioritising future research and innovation activity.

Commissioned research with DSTL has continued, with the recent publication of bulletins covering Meta Ray-Ban Glasses

in the context of Digital Forensics and research relating to HFE replacements.

R&I support to Forensic Reform programme

Supporting future capability requirements remains a key priority. Considerable collaborative effort has been invested in identifying the core requirements for a future national forensic research capability. This work helps us understand how to bridge the gap between current arrangements and a more effective, sustainable national research system.

As a result, we now have a stronger understanding of the core principles that should underpin future capability, as well as the limitations of the current system, particularly in relation to strategic governance and funding constraints.

We also supported the Home Office Reform Programme in delivering the first National Forensic Research Summit (pictured). This event brought together representatives from across the UK forensic research communities, alongside academia and key suppliers. Participants explored priority themes and opportunities for collaborative research. The enthusiasm demonstrated across the UK for greater collaboration has reinforced the value of this approach, and we hope to establish the summit as an annual event.

Quality and compliance

The first half of 2026 has seen continued momentum across the forensic quality and compliance landscape, with significant national effort focused on implementation of the Forensic Science Regulator's Code of Practice Version 2. Throughout this period, FCN has played a central role in shaping discussions, coordinating activity and bringing together practitioners, subject matter experts and stakeholders to support that implementation.

Alongside this strategic work, FCN has continued to deliver a range of established services that support the forensic community on a daily basis. *Quality Matters*, our fortnightly publication, remains a key mechanism for sharing information, highlighting emerging issues and promoting good practice across the forensic landscape. We also continue to chair and administer the National Quality Managers' Meeting, providing an important forum for collaboration and escalation into the NPCC Quality Board.

Beyond these activities, FCN remains actively engaged across a broad range of regulatory, quality and validation initiatives. This includes several FSR working groups supporting the development of Code Version 3, continued collaboration with the NPCC National Validation Group to advance national and collaborative validation activity, and ongoing engagement with policing and wider forensic partners to strengthen quality, compliance and scientific robustness across the forensic system.

This report highlights some of the key areas of activity delivered by the Quality and Compliance team during the reporting period.

INC-100 support and anticontamination

In progression towards compliance to the FSR Code V2, the Regulator's Office has developed a milestone approach, providing a pathway to achieve full compliance to the Code.

Milestone 1 is required to be completed by 6th April 2027 and relates to the minimum technical scope and competency requirements of a forensic unit (as defined by the FSR). To enable the FSR to assess a forensic unit's state of compliance with this milestone, the OFSR has worked with UKAS to develop a readiness review process. Assessment of milestone 1 will involve two key stages: a UKAS on-site review against milestone 1 requirements and provision of a Readiness Review Report to the forensic unit and FSR, followed by FSR notification to the forensic unit of their state of compliance against milestone 1. For further information on this review process, please see the recent [UKAS Technical Bulletin](#).

In Q1, a guidance document was developed in collaboration with the CSI Anticontamination Working group and SceneSafe to highlight the manufacturing process and potential DNA contamination risk of SceneSafe consumables that are not typically EtO treated, yet still utilised within FSAs, such as INC-100.

The CSI Anticontamination Working Group (as part of the CSI Technical Forum), chaired by Andy Crofts, has built on the work driven by the CSI Anti-contamination project and further developed the national contamination risk assessment generated from the project work. This is now published as a standalone tool on Knowledge

Hub for CSI units to complete a nationally supported risk-based approach which is both pragmatic and proportionate to controlling contamination within the scene and protect the integrity of the evidence recovered.

Building on the work completed in the CSI Anticontamination Project and Report, the CSI Technical Forum's Anticontamination Workstream initiated a national position paper exploring the value of environmental monitoring (EM) within INC-100 activities.

Compliance support

FCN have conducted on-site visits for units within the CTP network to assist with their readiness for compliance with the FSR Code V2 and Milestone 1 for INC-100 activities, in preparation for UKAS assessment. Any compliance gaps are identified with recommendations on how to effectively and proportionately address those gaps. The units were provided with a report which can be utilised to make compliance improvements after the site visit has taken place.

Validation

In the validation area – which now has its own dedicated NPCC group led by Thames Valley Police's Kay Hannam – there was significant progress made in Q1. Working with the group, the FCN developed an initial draft validation toolkit, populated with information from the National Validation Group discussions. We also launched a mechanism for validation proposal submissions, which forces can use to suggest future areas of focus for validation.

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Quality and compliance (continued)

National validation trackers for INC-100 and forensic cleaning products were also developed and published on KnowledgeHub.

The National GSR Validation, led by BCH and MPS, is making good progress, and the validation plan is close to being finalised. The FCN continues to support the validation planning to ensure national requirements have been considered at all stages of the exercise via community surveys, GSR kit purchasing data and community feedback generated from CSI workstreams. Communications on the status of the experimental study continue to be shared with NVG, the CSI Validation Workstream and wider forensic community.

Issues

FCN continues to play a key role in identifying, monitoring and coordinating responses to quality, technical and supply-related issues affecting the forensic marketplace. Working with partners, we review issues reported by policing through the national reporting process, helping to assess their potential impact, establish appropriate ownership and ensure updates are communicated back to the forensic community. Regular engagement also provides valuable insight into emerging trends and challenges across the marketplace, allowing FCN to represent policing interests and contribute to the development of effective solutions.

FCN continues to review supplier closeout reports following quality incidents to provide observations and feedback to the NPCC Lead for Quality, helping to ensure lessons learned are shared and considered at a national level.

During the reporting period, FCN also undertook a supplier site visit to discuss a number of technical and operational queries identified following recent procurement activity. The visit provided an opportunity for open dialogue, greater transparency and improved mutual understanding between supplier and customer. Similar engagement is planned with other suppliers as we continue to strengthen relationships with key forensic providers and support a resilient and effective forensic marketplace.

SARC FSR compliance

In Q1, the FCN also published the results of our third formal Compliance Landscape Survey. The aims of the surveys are to monitor progress in SARCs and create a forum to highlight any potential challenge or risk on a national scale.

SARC Sample Strategy Collaborative Learning Exercise

A national SARC collaborative learning exercise (CLE) was developed by the FCN-led SARC specialist group with a focus on the forensic medical examination (FME) strategy by the forensic healthcare practitioner (FHP) who conduct forensic medical examinations (FME) in SARCs. This is the second exercise that has been completed.

Four SARC case scenarios were developed including two adult (one male, one female), an adolescent and a paediatric case, covering a range of samples which, guided by the Faculty of Forensic & Legal Medicine (FFLM) recommendations, should be included within the examination strategy developed by a FHP, using the information provided

in these case scenarios. SARCs across England and Wales were invited to participate in this CLE, with two - four FHPs reviewing the case information and completing an examination strategy based on the case details provided to indicate which samples would be recovered and in what order.

49 SARCs participated, representing 96% of SARCs across England and Wales. 93 FHPs completed examination strategies, in total 269 forensic medical examination strategies were completed.

Learning from these exercises have:

- Identified and celebrated good practice
- Promoted discussions and shared learning
- Assisted with patient care and safety
- Empowered staff with confidence in their decisions and sample strategies
- Reviewed and highlighted topics such as appropriateness of proposed samples for continual improvement initiatives
- Informed national recommendations

This CLE, same as the last, enables improved understanding on practice across the SARC landscape and enables shared learning to improve services. It is hoped that this approach will be able to be incorporated into a SARC proficiency test (PT) scheme.

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Quality & compliance (continued)

MTP 101 Support

FCN have continued to support forces with the transition for MTP 101 – Friction ridge detail: comparison. Landscape calls continued into Q1 and/or contact was made with each force to establish readiness for transition template submission in July and to confirm:

- The force's schedule of accreditation on the UKAS website is correct
- Force validation coverage and plans – used to populate a Validation Tracker which will be shared

- Existing validation covers all sources of friction ridge detail
- The force's ground truth database is sufficiently comprehensive for sources of FRD
- Awareness of and experience with the FCN FRD GTD produced to support transition

FCN staff have worked closely with the OFSR, UKAS and force leads to share learning, circulate communications and offer support to forces, with the vast majority of forces having successfully transitioned by

September ahead of the their pursuit of October deadline.

FCN staff have also supported the OFSR in plans for IDENT 1 validation from all outstanding forces.

FCN internal updates

Team structure and people changes

During the early part of 2026 we saw a shrinking of our Forensic Marketplace and Industry Engagement Team (FMIET) by 40%, which sits within the FCN Science Directorate, with two valuable members of the team moving on.

While we were sad to see Julie Harrison and Garry Dixon leave, and we wish them luck in their next chapters, it prompted us to consider what the community need from us and how we can reshape the team to ensure they are able to continue to effectively support you by focusing on what is needed.

We are also aware that the

inclusion of the word 'marketplace' within the team and role descriptions has at times caused confusion and so we are taking this opportunity to rename the team and the roles of those within it, to better reflect what they do every day.

With immediate effect this capability within the FCN is called the Scientific Engagement Team and composed of Paul Greaves, Senior Scientific Engagement Manager, and Darren Hamshaw and Ruth Husbands, Scientific Engagement Managers.

Rather than having discrete physical and digital arms of this team, all three will work across all areas of forensics, putting their time and efforts into work

where it is needed most.

Please be assured that the work they are currently committed to and the support they are providing, via their engagement with you all, will not change.

The FCN funding arrangements for 2027/28 have not yet been confirmed but like most organisations and teams, efficiency savings will be required. As such, plans are being made to recruit to only one role in the science team to help meet our savings requirements. Further details about that will follow.