



**Forensic
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Shaping forensics, together.

FCN

Annual Report

2024/25

Foreword

It is with great pleasure that I can present the 2024/25 annual report for the FCN, detailing the activities completed during the year, the way we have helped forces and other organisations and the benefits that work has contributed to, along with information on our finances and resources.

I am extremely proud of all the hard work that the people in the FCN have undertaken during the year, the level of commitment and enthusiasm shown and just how much work has been done towards the year's delivery plan. I hope that the readers of this report will also recognise that.

As I have mentioned before, I remain determined to ensure that whatever the FCN does, it does it to only help with meeting the current challenges and mitigating the key risks in police forensics. I would invite anyone to get in touch if they think that is not the case so that we can be flexible and adjust if needed, to keep us on track with that overall aim.

Looking forward into 2025/26, the main NPCC forensic priority areas which the FCN will help

John Armstrong
FCN Managing Director

I have been NPCC Forensic Portfolio Lead for the past three and a half years, and in that time I'm aware of being something of a stuck record. Each year seems to be an exceptionally busy year in forensics, and that remained the case in 2024/25.

And I continue to be grateful to the FCN and the vital work that it does for forensics at a national level, working into the NPCC Forensic Portfolio and on behalf of police forces across England and Wales.

The 2024/25 year marked the first year that the FCN was funded directly by the NPCC's operating budget rather than via Home Office grant. This may seem

Chief Constable Nick Dean
NPCC Forensic Portfolio Lead

support, remain as for last year; Digital Forensics, Market, Quality & Regulatory compliance, along with other key areas of activity aimed at R & I, Workforce and Strategic threat assessment.

There is also the matter of Police Reform of course, in particular Forensic Reform, which the Home Office are progressing at pace in preparation for the appointment of their Director of Forensic Services who will lead the reform work. The FCN will also help where it can with that work.

The 2025/26 delivery plan has been set in the context of reduced funding again. This has resulted in a smaller headcount and unavoidable changes to our normal ways of working. Stakeholders and others we work with will undoubtedly see differences in how we operate going forward, but I am confident that the FCN will still deliver to our plan and continue to provide help to policing in meeting its priority challenges and risks.

I hope you find the report of interest and enjoy the read.

like a minor change, but what it means for policing was significant. I believe having the FCN as fully part of the policing family has helped everyone work better together. I'm pleased to see the transition has been smooth and to see the forensic community rallying together to tackle the challenges we face, and taking grasp of the opportunities to innovate.

Thank you to the FCN team for their ongoing work in this area. This report has my full support, as does the delivery plan for 2025/26.



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Delivery

Quality, Compliance and Accreditation

Performance

Digital Forensics

Supply Chain and Marketplace

NPCC Forensic Portfolio Support

Quality, Compliance and Accreditation

The FCN continues to work closely with Policing and wider stakeholders to increase knowledge and awareness of quality and compliance with the FSR's Code. Together we're improving standardisation, reducing duplication, and increasing efficiency.

COMPLIANCE AND ACCREDITATION SUPPORT

Much of our focus this year was helping Policing prepare for the second version of the Forensic Science Regulator's (FSR) Code.

On behalf of Policing and the NPCC, we continued to support the FSR's Incident Examination Specialist Group (IESG) in developing and understanding the proposed changes and potential impact of Code v2.

A well-established CSI anti-contamination project has been conducted with the aim of improving the CSI approach to anticontamination measures through the assessment of data to better understand the risks to forensic evidence. We undertook experiments in collaboration with Lancashire Constabulary and Derbyshire Police, developed a national risk assessment and conducted national surveys to collate the data needed to quantify these risks. A report of the findings is under development and will be published in Q2 of 2025/26.

We have also drafted a Training & Competency Framework for Incident scene examination (INC 100), building on material shared by the CSI

Technical Forum and the wider community. This has been progressing through community review and will be finalised in early 25/26.

Police forces continued to be supported via our Compliance Support Team service, with the team undertaking ten on-site visits and numerous remote support packages in this period.



VALIDATION

The FCN is helping drive standardisation and efficiency through enabling validation forensic methods, processes and equipment in a collaborative and community-led way.

Building on a collaborative glove cleaning validation exercise undertaken by four Police Forces (GMP, TVP, YaTH & West Mercia), we published a series of documents describing how other Police Forces can implement this validation within their own Force – a great example of community-led validation.

We developed an 'Assurance Decision Model', prompted discussion around use of other forms of assurance that can complement validation. Data from the FCN's Validation Tracker has been collated into a single source, allowing the community to more easily access and understand it. Summaries of the data are now being fed back to the community via our Quality Matters publication. In addition, we published a series of documents including guidance and templates for SARCS (see more below).

SARC support

Together, we continue to support SARCs nationally in achieving compliance to the FSR Code and ISO:15189 Medical laboratories Standard.



Forensic Medical Examination (FME) Strategy Collaborative Learning Exercise – CLE

A Collaborative Learning Exercise (CLE) has been developed by FCN's SARC Specialist Board to test the SARC FME strategy process.

Following a pilot of this exercise in November 2024 with five SARCs, the national CLE went live in February 2025. Overall 45 SARCs across England and Wales participated, with forensic healthcare practitioners completing in total 227 strategies based on four different case scenarios.

A review of the findings is currently underway.

Competency assessment support

A number of national training events were held in 2024 to roll out a newly developed approach to intimate and non-intimate DNA swabbing, involving ultraviolet gels. This training has been developed into a training toolkit which has been published and utilised nationally.

SARC Consumable Supply

We have also helped resolve numerous challenges related to consumables, including issues related to supply, quality, and specification changes. The escalation pathway document for consumables has been refreshed and published.

Consumable Assurance Testing

The FCN-led consumable assurance initiative for SARCs has been able to prove there is no need to batch test all DNA Grade Consumables at SARCs or

in any other areas of forensics upon receipt, with cost avoidance and process efficiency savings first realised in 2024/25.

This change was first included in the FSR Code V1, but the work completed within the SARC project has bolstered the evidence of assurance and is now a point of reference in Code V2. Removing the need for DNA-grade consumable batch testing by DNA labs, CSIs and SARCs, has led to approx. £3.6m in annual cost savings nationwide.

£1.8m

saved nationally in annual cost avoidance by removing the need to batch-test all DNA-grade consumables, rising to £3.6m per year once adopted in Code V2

SARC Verification guidance

Working with and on behalf of the community, the team have published SARC end-to-end verification guidance including various template documents to support SARCs to assess their processes, providing them to tools and mechanisms to demonstrate they are fit for purpose.

SARC DNA Elimination Guidance

In collaboration with FINDS and the SARC community, the complexities of the requirements for DNA elimination databases in SARCs has been worked through and a DNA Elimination Database Guidance has been published.

SARC mobile units

The FCN has produced draft plans for the layout of 'Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) Mobile Units', the purpose of these units being for use as a contingency for existing SARCs and at major events such as festivals, with the aim of increasing disclosures. These plans have been made available to stakeholders to utilise if mobile units are required in the future.

Performance

The FCN undertakes activities that support the forensic community to benchmark performance and identify opportunities for improvement.

CSI

Throughout 2024/25 at the request of the forensic community, we established a new data set for crime scene investigations.

Police forces submitted their in-house forensic data returns which the FCN collated, analysed and published back to forces. The report enables forces to better understand how their force data compares to their peers enabling forces to explore opportunities for efficiency gains.

Digital forensics

On behalf of the NPCC Digital Forensic Portfolio, the FCN collected performance data covering several high priority areas including workforce, demand, capacity, and efficiency.

The data provided by 42 policing organisations was analysed to produce a performance report which, whilst giving a national picture also allows forces to see how they perform against national averages.

Streamlined Forensic Reporting

A draft performance framework for Streamlined Forensic Reporting (SFR) has been completed and shared with the community.

It includes high-level qualitative measures for all disciplines, and quantitative data on demand and cost avoidance to policing, specifically for road traffic toxicology (RTTOX) and drugs.

Having this performance data for the first time has enabled the forensic community to see the full benefit of SFR (see page 8 below).

Digital Forensics

In digital forensics, the FCN supports delivery of future developments, compliance requirements and response to challenges – on behalf of the NPCC, and working with police forces and the Home Office.

Computer ground truth data (GTD)

Building on the GTD we first shared with the community in 2023/24, this year we provided updated Window 11 GTD to mitigate the impact that constant and rapid change in the DF environment has on the resources required to maintain Code compliance. We estimate that sharing this GTD nationally saves around £520,000 per year for forces.

£520,000

in annual efficiency savings from national delivery of computer ground truth data

Cell-site exercise

We ran a second cell-site analysis collaborative learning exercise. The exercise assists forces with working towards compliance with the FSR Code. 32 organisations participated in the exercise including 6 forensic service providers – this is the first time private-sector companies have been involved in the exercise.

The Streamlined Forensic Reporting process was also approved for cell-site analysis within year. The FCN would like to thank DS Jon Heathcote of Staffordshire Police, who has driven this work forward on behalf of the community.



Validation

We updated our suite of validation templates and used these in combination with the updated GTD to undertake a validation exercise on Magnet Axium which is available for forces to use to reduce the resources required for validation in force.

DF performance

Working with the Digital Forensic Portfolio, the FCN developed a DF performance framework with the first data collection exercise taking place in Q2 (see 'Performance' section above).

The data submitted from 42 policing organisations was analysed to give a greater understanding of performance and risk within digital forensics across England and Wales and provides a baseline to monitor the impact of ongoing change.

DF suppliers

We have shared our suite of validation templates with the Association of Digital Forensic Service Providers (ADFSP) to facilitate the standardisation of how validation is performed and documented. Giving policing the confidence that the services and products they purchase continues to meet their needs. We are also working with a small number of suppliers to test the concept of FSR Code compliant validation being conducted by the tool developers, again further reducing the resources required for in-force validation.

Artificial intelligence

The FCN's joint research project with the Universities of Warwick and Leeds to explore the use of AI and natural language processing (NLP) to support digital forensic investigations has evolved to include new and improved models for assisting investigations of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and drugs related offences. The models will soon move to in force testing.

Supply Chain and Marketplace

FCN supports across the whole of the sector in relation to the forensic marketplace, specifications, standardisation, regulatory and legal requirements.

Risks & issues

The FCN plays a vital role in monitoring and resolving forensic supply chain and marketplace risks and issues on behalf of the NPCC. In 2024/25, we supported on a number of issues across physical and digital forensics from vendor tooling faults to invoicing problems and forensic service provider issues, which were flagged to the FCN via police forces or other routes.

We also undertook a lessons learnt exercise with the community on a recent marketplace issue which impacted a significant number of forces, and which has informed a refreshed National Forensic Marketplace Contingency Plan.

Operational oversight

A market share refresh has been completed across physical and digital forensics, and shared with the Forensic Marketplace Operations Group (FMOG) and other stakeholders.

We have gathered and shared intelligence with forces regarding working operationally with suppliers in relation to DF activities to help mitigate risks.

A working group has been formed for data collection and collaboration, working with BlueLight Commercial, as well as support provided to BLC for a digital forensic software procurement strategy.

SceneSafe

This year we continued our Supplier Assurance Visits to SceneSafe. The primary purpose of the visit in February this year was to gain additional assurance of the production of fingerprint powders by SceneSafe. The opportunity was also taken to discuss the production of Gun Shot Residue (GSR) Kits and SceneSafe's management of their Staff Elimination Database (SED). The report is available on our Knowledge Hub page.

Synthetic opioids

We continued supporting the Home Office synthetic opioids taskforce with data and intelligence from internal and external drug laboratories.

Vetting

We hold regular engagement with police vetting regarding issues in the marketplace, as well as working with forces to encourage a consistent approach.

Standardisation & efficiencies

We held initial discussions with the NPCC's Forensic Marketplace Strategic Plan (FMSP) Project S&E lead Kirsty Potter to begin developing an implementation plan.

CAID

We brought together forensic service providers to share a supplier's view of CAID with the Home Office team leading on the CAID review, as well as the NPCC DF Strategy Board and CAID team.

Workforce

The FCN helps police forces enhance their forensic workforce, from staff recruitment and retention, to training, career development and wellbeing.

In addition to our main areas of work on apprenticeships and wellbeing below, during 2024/25 we also updated two pieces of guidance – one a guide for mentors in forensic teams, another a toolkit for partnership working.

APPRENTICESHIPS

Level 4 for DF

A total of 26 apprentices were onboarded for the Level 4 digital forensic apprenticeship during 2024/25 – following FCN’s successful creation of the specification and recruitment via the learning providers and police forces.

These entry-level roles are also a way for forces to secure additional funding via the government’s apprenticeship levy.

£792,000

secured in additional funds for policing based on the government levy of £18,000 per apprentice

Level 7 for DF

Through 2024/25, the Level 7 advanced apprenticeship for experienced DF practitioners was developed, and the provider Cranfield University brought onboard.

The first cohort of L7 DF apprentices began in March 2025, with a second cohort already being recruited for October 2025.

As opposed to the Level 4 apprenticeship, the L7 is an integrated degree-level qualification specifically for those already working in digital forensics. It takes 24 months to complete.

Level 4 for physical forensics

In 2024/25, the FCN submitted an expression of interest for a physical forensic practitioner Level 4 apprenticeship, which has been approved by the UK’s apprenticeship body IfATE. A trailblazer group has been established and an occupational standard created.

WELLBEING

During 2024/25 the Wellbeing Toolkit case studies were updated. The FCN is working with Oscar Kilo to continue to develop the toolkit, and is working with multiple police forces and universities on the development of partnerships.

The results of the ‘wearables’ research project with Leicestershire Police in 2023/24 were reported at a STAR event in summer 2024 and the report was published.

Recently, the FCN has begun work on research with the University of Birmingham and UK and international law enforcement in relation to the wellbeing of forensic practitioners.



NPCC Forensic Portfolio Support

The FCN is fully funded and governed by the NPCC, so we help across a range of national forensic priorities, from monitoring strategic threats to research and innovation.

STREAMLINED FORENSIC REPORTING - SFR

Streamlined Forensic Reporting (SFR) is a set of guidance and templates which give practitioners a more efficient and consistent way to report forensic outcomes.

The FCN manages and oversees this SFR process, working with a multi-stakeholder SFR Board which meets quarterly. Thank you to all those who contribute their time and expertise to the board.

SFR is always evolving. In 2024/25, two new disciplines—fibres and speed estimation from CCTV in collision investigation cases—were added to the SFR process.

We have also developed, for the first time, an SFR Performance Framework, which is built into Power BI and now has a finalised dataset for road traffic toxicology (RTTOX) and drugs. It includes high-level qualitative measures for all disciplines, and quantitative data on demand and cost avoidance to policing for RTTOX and drugs.

Having this performance data has enabled the forensic community to see the full benefit of SFR: an annual cost avoidance to policing of around £11million for these two disciplines alone.

£11m

approximately saved in annual cost avoidance for policing by using SFR for road traffic toxicology and drugs

To educate people on SFR, a third and final training video aimed at CPS and other end-users has been published on the FCN website (below).



RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Our vision is to establish forensic science robustly within the research and innovation environment to ensure a positive impact and delivery of direct benefits for forensics, policing and our communities.

Through a range of direct funding and support to access funding opportunities, we estimate around £1.58million of forensic research funding has been made available for forces to access or benefit from.

AI research

In 2024/25, a joint project between the FCN and researchers at Leeds and Warwick universities explored the use of Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Large Language Models (LLMs) in drugs-related investigations.

An earlier phase of the project found that the model can identify relevant messages 21-times faster than a human. The technology would be used to support

investigators and flag relevant messages, and not for decision-making.

£1.58m

of forensic research funding made available for forces to access

Partnership working

We have actively provided forensic engagement in the Accelerated Capability Environment (ACE) deepfake projects, including attending the Deepfake Challenge Showcase event, participating in workshops, and providing subject matter support for project teams.

FCN continues to work with UKRI to refine forensic investment and provide subject matter expertise on projects like 'Single Cell and Single Molecule Analysis for DNA identification' (SCAnDi). We also coordinated the Government spending review

FORSTRA

On behalf of the NPCC, the FCN manages and oversees a national Forensic Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment—or FORSTRA.

During 2024/25, we conducted a biannual risk status assessments with police forces, and published a highlight summary to them.

Y-STR DATABASE

The FCN works jointly with Home Office FINDS to produce a UK Y-STR reference database. Our Swab Out Crime campaign has collected more than 4,500 samples from men.

Recently, Y-STR profiling helped Cambridgeshire Constabulary convict David Newton, 70, with the murder of Una Crown in January 2013. The analysis technique was used to match his DNA to samples taken from the 86-year-old widow's fingernails.

Y-STR analysis focuses on the characteristics of the Y-chromosome which appears in people who are genetically male. Unlike DNA-17, Y-STR testing can

submission for forensics in the police science and technology submission. We collaborated with Home Office Science, Innovation and Technology (SIT) Delivery to ensure the statements of user needs (SUNs) to for forensics will provide the most benefit to policing. We also represented policing at the Horizon EU CYCLOPES event specialising on the topic of IoT and Digital Forensics.

Strategy and governance

We've updated the NPCC Forensic Science Research & Innovation Strategic Plan to ensure it continues meeting the needs of police forces.

Areas of research interest (ARIs) for forensics have been updated and published on the FCN website. We have engaged with the office of the Police Chief Scientific Adviser to ensure the problem book reflects current forensic challenges and aligns to the ARIs.

We've also refreshed our community research groups, called 'Special Interest Groups', which are focused on strategic themes and priorities for research.

In 2025/26 we will engage with forces again and produce an updated FORSTRA. This will inform the NPCC forensic priorities and therefore the focus for the FCN and other forensic teams.

Thank you to all those forensic leaders who participated and guided the assessment.

pinpoint male DNA among large amounts of female DNA, making it particularly useful in rape and serious sexual assault cases.

Thank you to all police forces which have held sampling days, and to every person who has donated an anonymous sample to the project. All future participants now receive a £10 gift voucher as a thank you.



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Finances & team

FCN finances and team

FINANCES

The financial position at the end of the 2024/25 year is shown below:

Spend category	NPCC Grant Allocation	Year-End Spend
	2,808,273	
Staff Costs (salaries & all on-costs)		2,616,915
Dorset police host force contribution		18,000
Travel & Expenses		107,498
Web site, licences, Comms		16,216
Events, Room hire & staff training		26,403
In-year projects: Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) & CSI Anti-contamination		86,541 (previous year's projects credits: 51,760)
Total	£2,808,273	2,819,813

TEAM

The latest organisational chart for the FCN is shown below:

