

Forensic Science Service

Written evidence submitted by the Biochemical Society

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1. The Biochemical Society is a Learned Society with over 5,000 members worldwide. Our membership encompasses those working in academia and industry with a wide range of perspectives and views on policy-relevant science. Our science policy work supports and promotes the molecular biosciences by indentifying and acting on the issues in science and education policy which most affect the molecular bioscience community.
2. We are grateful for the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry. The Biochemical Society's response has been prepared on the basis of contributions from both its members and the wider molecular bioscience community. In this instance, it is importance to highlight the important contribution to this response made by the staff running the Forensic Science programme at University of the West of England (two of whom are ex-employees of the Forensic Science Service).

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?

3. The Forensic Science Service (FSS) is a world-leading forensic science provider, with a track record of leading development and innovation in this area. This record includes the development of DNA testing, the world's first National DNA Database (NDNAD) which was established in April 1995 and the automation of DNA testing.
4. Further UK-based developments and innovation in this area will require continued investment in research and development for forensic scientific examinations. Collaborative work between forensic science providers and universities would seem to be the best approach, but funding for this is extraordinarily difficult to obtain and in a purely privatised sector, it is hard to see the potential sources of such funding. The UK could thus fall from being a world-leader to a user of technology developed elsewhere, perhaps not to the rigorous standards which are currently embedded in forensic science culture in the UK.
5. FSS staff are actively involved internationally in setting up and supporting forensic science provision in other countries. There is a risk that the international reputation of the UK in this area will be lost in addition to difficulties due to withdrawing from long term contacts with other countries.
6. A large number of senior forensic scientists in the country have been trained within the FSS. In transferring the FSS to the private sector where there may not be such a strong emphasis on training the UK risks retaining and generating further skills in this area. In addition, a loss of "corporate memory" and training resources e.g. senior staff who would be likely to take early retirement rather

than be employed by another company is being risked. This concern of loss of “corporate memory” in this area expands to the related abolition of the National Policing Improvement Agency.

7. The winding down of the FSS severs a link to Government through which policy initiatives could be quickly and robustly implemented e.g. DNA database expansion projects. Centralised and key associations with other government agencies such as the Ministry of Defence, Forensics Explosives Laboratory and MI5 will also be lost.

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

8. The national and historic coverage of the FSS (in England and Wales) means that there is a breadth and depth of experience and expertise which is particularly important in serious and complex cases. Specialist scientific advisers need to be aware of huge range of specialisms and be able to identify and call on this expertise as required in individual cases. The proposed winding down of the FSS could lead to this expertise becoming harder to identify and utilise. This would be to the detriment of the judicial system.

9. A loss of expertise and capacity to develop and implement new and improved processes, especially with new technology as it becomes available, could limit access to justice. It is our view that government should underpin forensic scientific work in the UK by continuing to support the FSS in order to have an experienced workforce able to spend time if necessary on projects that are not immediately profitable but which serve the purposes of justice.

10. The FSS has archived data relating to the prevalence of evidence that aids the valid interpretation of results. How this data will be used in future, in the event of the FSS being wound down, is an important issue which must be dealt with in a way which is in the public interest.

11. The temptation with any private company focussed on making a profit is to undertake the cost-effective processes and not invest in more speculative or expensive procedures. This may have a negative effect on the administration of justice due to some testing not being undertaken, which could provide evidence of innocence or evidence that assists a prosecution.

12. The ease or likelihood of sharing developments for the benefit of justice rather than the profit of private companies is being diminished. The DNA technologies developed by the FSS were able to be adopted by other companies who could become accredited and able to link to the NDNAD.

13. High quality relevant scientific results can greatly assist the investigation of crime and administration of justice. Investment in development work is likely to be well repaid in the long term in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of forensic examinations. The decision to wind down to FSS should not be solely financial.

Concluding remarks

14. It is of concern that the Home Office only announced a review of research and development (on the 27th Jan) over a month after the announced closure of the FSS. James Brokenshire, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, announced the aim of this review would be "to consider the current and likely future status of research and development relevant to forensic services for the criminal justice system within England and Wales". It is hoped that no irreversible decisions will be made regarding the closure of the FSS until this review has

concluded, and both Parliament and the science community have been given the opportunity time to respond.

15. The Biochemical Society is delighted that the committee has chosen the proposed winding down of the Forensic Science Service as the subject of an inquiry. We hope that the Government will also recognise the need for further discussion on this issue. We would be pleased to discuss further any of the general points raised in this submission, to provide more detailed information, or to suggest oral witnesses and other specialist contacts, should this be of interest.