United Kingdom Accreditation Service – Written evidence (FRS0014)

The United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) is the National Accreditation Body for the UK. UKAS is recognised by government to assess, against internationally agreed standards, organisations that provide certification, testing, inspection and calibration services. UKAS is independent of government but is appointed as the national accreditation body by the Accreditation Regulations 2009 (SI No 3155/2009) and operates under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, on behalf of government as a whole.

UKAS has been assessing and accrediting organisations in the field of forensics for more than 30 years with over 60 entities now accredited for a variety of scopes including DNA profiling, Body Fluids, Digital Forensics, Drugs Analysis, Toxicology, Fingerprint Enhancement and Comparison, Explosives and Firearms. In addition, there are a further 20 organisations that have applied for accreditation and are progressing through the system.

The accredited organisations are largely made up of a combination of commercial providers and police forces, the latter of which account for 34 of the accredited organisations.

Accreditation has been granted against the standard ISO/IEC 17025: General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories, where the activities are laboratory based; in addition, scene of crime activities have been assessed and accredited using ISO/IEC 17020: Requirements for the various types of bodies performing inspection.

UKAS has been working with the Forensic Science Regulator (FSR) since the creation of this role. Some of the key interactions include UKAS representation on the FSR Forensic Science Advisory Council and on the FSR Specialist Groups for Quality, DNA, Digital Forensics and Fingerprints. In addition, the FSR sits on the UKAS Forensic Science Technical Advisory Committee. The FSR regards accreditation as an essential part of the regulatory framework and relies on it to ensure technical competence and consistency across the mixed economy that now exists for the provision of forensic science services. To this end the FSR and UKAS have entered into an agreement (facilitated via confidentiality waivers with the accredited organisations) which allows the sharing of specific information to assist the FSR in their evaluation and on-going monitoring of organisations who undertake forensic activities for the Criminal Justice System (CJS).

Where requested by forensic organisations the assessment of compliance to the Forensic Science Regulator’s Code of Practice and Conduct is also undertaken by UKAS as part of their routine assessments against ISO/IEC 17025. As at the end of July 2018 38 of the 60 accredited entities also hold accreditation for the FSR Codes of Practice.

UKAS has an agreement, which has been in place for nearly 20 years, with the National DNA Database (NDNAD), through UKAS publication LAB 32, to ensure that all suppliers of profiles to the NDNAD are accredited to ISO/IEC 17025.
Accreditation to ISO/IEC 17025 includes technical requirements such as the need to have competent staff, valid methods, appropriate equipment and robust quality control regimes; and; management system requirements such as the need to have clear policies and processes, internal audit programmes, mechanisms to identify and review customer requirements, systems to manage complaints and non-conforming work, and expectations in relation to management commitment and oversight.

Additionally, where the organisations request accreditation for giving opinions and interpretations associated with the test results that they produce there are further requirements including more extensive expectations relating to staff competence and reporting.

In assessing against these requirements UKAS routinely identifies aspects that do not meet the required standard and ensures that organisations take appropriate remedial action, this has included informing customers and the CJS of any significant concerns relating to the data produced.

UKAS can and does, impose sanctions on organisations that significantly fail to meet the requirements for accreditation; these sanctions can include the suspension or termination of the accreditation of the organisation, which are then made public on the UKAS website www.ukas.com

The FSR Codes of Practice and Conduct detail expectations with respect to standards and accreditation requirements, many of which include the need to be accredited to ISO/IEC 17025 by specified deadlines.

The deadline set by the FSR for the accreditation for Fingerprint Comparison is October 2018. As at the end of July 2018, UKAS has conducted assessment visits to 15 entities, with a further three planned prior to the deadline and is currently predicting that approximately 10% of the organisations conducting this activity will have met the required standard and be accredited by the deadline. This level of compliance with the FSR expectations is similar to the numbers that met the deadline for the accreditation of Digital Forensics in 2017. Consequently, it can be concluded that without statutory powers the compliance by organisations to the expectations of the FSR with respect to standards and accreditation would be limited with the resulting impact on confidence in the services provided.

Therefore, UKAS concludes that the system of accreditation is an essential mechanism to support the CJS by ensuring that there is objective evidence that the technical processes used by accredited organisations are valid and capable of generating high quality analysis and, where appropriate, the associated interpretation for presentation in court. UKAS fully supports the FSR policy to extend the requirement for accreditation across all sectors of forensic science. UKAS also supports the granting of statutory powers to the FSR to ensure that standards are consistently applied and met by all organisations that provide forensic science into the UK Criminal Justice System.

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