Mr Peter Merrill – Written evidence (FRS0021)

1. In the Call for Evidence, I respond to question [2] ‘What are the current strengths and weaknesses of forensic science in support of justice’, and to questions [12-14] within the section entitled ‘Forensic Science research landscape’.

Summary

2. The contribution made by forensic science to the criminal justice system is significant. But we have seen a paradigm shift over the last few years, as forensic science capabilities have evolved from being more than just a criminal justice enabler: forensic science is now used to help combat the evolving threats to our national security and economic well-being; forensic science outputs now influence Government decision-making at the highest levels. This extension in its area of application, augmented by technological developments, means that its value to society now extends far beyond its contribution to securing criminal justice outcomes. Therefore, the weakness in the current assessment of forensic science is that its contributions, benefits and potential are not fully recognised – the research landscape is not inclusive or fully utilised.

3. By continuing to focus exclusively on the value of forensic science in supporting the criminal justice system, the Government and the public fail to understand its true contribution and fail to appreciate its future potential. Instead, forensic science should be measured according to the contribution it makes to realising three key national security objectives [1]: protecting our people, projecting our global influence and promoting our prosperity.

Strengths

4. In supporting criminal justice outcomes, forensic science is the lifeblood of law enforcement; however, its impact on many areas within the Government’s transformation strategy is wide-reaching: it delivers intelligence products, research materials and both strategic and tactical information. Indeed, forensic science has become an ever more important contributor to national security, influencing the National Strategic Assessment, the National Control Strategy and the National Intelligence Requirements. These security outcomes are realised through the integrated application of an extremely wide range of forensic science techniques and capabilities, drawn from both the physical and the social sciences. However, its influence does not end there: the forensic science continuum extends beyond domestic law enforcement, encompassing support for international investigations and knowledge building.

Weaknesses

5. We live in an ever-advancing and evolving technological age. Forensic science relies ever more on this new technology, as we manage existing threats and exploit new opportunities – taken together, forensic science and new technologies constitute a whole, one that is much greater than the simple sum of its parts.
6. As a result, it is not easy to measure the true contribution of forensic science: with technology alone often being seen as the primary driver and enabler, the role of forensic science is underestimated, is not always understood, and is at times not even acknowledged. An example is the combining of knowledge and techniques drawn from physiology, psychology and computer science in the form of artificial intelligence programs and machine learning algorithms.

7. The growth of forensic science and society's dependency upon it means that there is now a need to review its expanded role, a need to challenge its leadership, its oversight and its governance. Doing so will lead to enhanced cohesion, improved strategic leadership and better alignment with other Government departments and agencies.

References

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