Letter from Mark Burns-Williamson OBE, APCC Chair and PCC for West Yorkshire

I write to you as Chair of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC) and in my capacity of Forensic Services APCC portfolio lead.

Looking forward to appearing before the panel on 9th October 2018, along with the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) forensics lead, Chief Constable James Vaughan, I thought it may be useful to briefly set out the position of the APCC in relation to the current state of forensic science provision, particularly as it relates to policing in England and Wales.

I have had the opportunity to review the content of the NPCC written evidence submission and agree the content is an accurate reflection on the current state of forensic science in policing. I sit on various national governance boards, Home Office, NPCC and APCC led, and aware of some significant challenges, risks and issues that currently exist across this broad and complex discipline, along with potential solutions being developed.

A significant ongoing issue which has required effective national leadership to resolve, is that of supply and demand, particularly with those services contracted to the private sector. This has potential to disrupt the effectiveness of criminal justice and undermine public confidence in the criminal justice system. It is fair to say that there are some differing views within the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) community as to the cause, and the roles and responsibilities of the organisations involved, however, PCCs have shown unity in addressing issues as they arise and in seeking longer term solutions. An example of this can be found in the recent Forensic Marketplace Review, jointly commissioned by the Home Office, NPCC and APCC with all organisations contributing and agreeing the output. The review is yet to be published, hopefully the recommendations contained within will improve the provision of forensics services for policing in the short to medium term.

Another issue of concern is that of accreditation to ISO standards of laboratories providing forensic services to policing and the wider criminal justice system. Currently around 80% of all forensic examinations, most commonly fingerprint examinations, are carried out ‘in house’ by police forces. PCCs rightly expect the very highest of standards and support the forensic science regulator, though the process to acquire accreditation has been challenging to forces. Without a statutory obligation to acquire accreditation, and in times of increasing demand and reducing budgets, decisions of prioritisation have had to be made by Chief Constables and PCCs, focusing on threat and harm.

However, once again, short term progress is being made with some forces already accredited and others in the process of so doing. In the longer term, PCCs have supported significant investment of police reform and transformation grants supporting the Transforming Forensics Programme which I represent the APCC on. Both marketplace management and accreditation services exist within the planned programme deliverables and will potentially provide solutions to
these and other issues as long as sustainable support and funding is in place to take this urgent work forward.

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