Dr Julie Maxton CBE – Written evidence (FRS0095)

Introduction

1. I currently Chair – in an independent capacity – the Science and Justice Forum, whose secretariat is provided by the Home Office. The Science and Justice Forum brings together partners from across the criminal and civil justice systems, to consider emerging issues in forensic science and make recommendations to ensure that the UK’s research and development ecosystem can provide the insights and evidence needed to support an effective justice system. In the near-term, the Forum is exploring how scientific knowledge is used in the justice system, and considering what mechanisms can best support the generation and promulgation of science that is important for effective justice. This submission draws on some early themes emerging from Forum discussions that may be relevant to the Committee’s inquiry. These particularly relate to the understanding and use of Forensic Science in the Criminal Justice System, and the Forensic Science research landscape.

Understanding and use of Forensic Science in the Criminal Justice System

2. The Science and Justice Forum is interested in better understanding how robust scientific knowledge is used in the justice system and how best to support this to underpin effective justice. To inform this work, the Forum is developing ‘end to end’ case studies that highlight the different types of scientific knowledge that are relevant to the justice system, and that illustrate different barriers to ensuring this knowledge is available, admissible, and interpreted in a way appropriate for the case in question. This will inform its work going forward.

A number of initiatives already exist that attempt to assist the judiciary when handling scientific evidence in the courtroom, including the collaboration between members of the judiciary, the Royal Society and the Royal Society of Edinburgh to produce legal primers. The Royal Society has separately submitted evidence to this Committee to provide further details of this programme.

Forensic Science research landscape

3. Both researchers and the judiciary can benefit from further bridging the gap between them. While the full spectrum of research inquiry has to be supported – applied investigation needs a constant stream of ideas from discovery-oriented work, as well as many of the benefits of ‘blue skies’ research which may be unforeseen but may equally be of great practical use – insights from the judiciary can inform research priorities. There are areas where research is vital to support the continued effectiveness of forensic science research, but where there are few incentives for researchers to invest time or funders to invest resources (for example, in the maintenance of reference datasets). Meanwhile, as patterns of crime evolve and new technologies enable new forms of criminality, new
research needs also follow (for example, in understanding issues associated with facial recognition technologies, or in developing new digital forensic techniques)\(^1\).

4. There is a need for spaces where the science and justice community can come together to improve the coordination of research needs and priorities across communities, and shape policy decisions about funding allocations. A notable example is the Leverhulme Research centre for Forensic Science, (LRCFS), an independent £10million,10 year research initiative which brings together the different participants from across the criminal justice space to explore research directions and develop effective research road maps collaboratively.

5. The Science and Justice Forum has identified that new approaches are needed to set national strategic research directions, and to ensure that research is not managed parochially, or driven by specific operational challenges. As well as ensuring that research funding is effectively coordinated, there may be a case for further investment in strategically-important research areas and ways of increasing recognition of the importance of such research. The Forum will make recommendations to Government in winter 2018.

6. The Forum is undertaking a mapping exercise to better understand what research is currently being funded, where and how. Building on this, it will make recommendations for new mechanisms that may deliver a future system. Successful models such as the Office for the Strategic Coordination of Health Research (OSCHR) that has demonstrated a powerful capacity to work across government through collaboration, addressing many of the issues required to ensure a comprehensive health research environment and leading to improved health outcomes and economic growth should be considered. There are also lessons from the approaches taken by the Alan Turing Institute and Faraday Institute, in creating institutional hubs or focal points for research that cuts across a range of domains, and from the Scottish model of forensic science research developed by LRCFS.

7. I would be very happy to talk further with the Committee about the Forum’s work.

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\(^1\) The Forensic Science Regulator’s most recent annual report highlights where further evidence is needed - Forensic Science Regulator (2018) Annual report November 2016 – November 2017