



House of Commons  
Northern Ireland Affairs  
Committee

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**Government Response  
to the Committee's  
Fifth Report on  
Forensic Science  
Northern Ireland**

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*Fifth Special Report of Session 2002–2003*

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## The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

The Northern Ireland Affairs is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Northern Ireland Office (but excluding individual cases and advice given by the Crown Solicitor); and other matters within the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (but excluding the expenditure, administration and policy of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Northern Ireland and the drafting of legislation by the Office of the Legislative Counsel).

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### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Elizabeth Hunt (Clerk), Tony Catinella (Committee Assistant), Camilla Brace (Secretary).

### Contacts

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# Fifth Special Report

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The Committee published its Fifth Report of Session 2002–2003 on 20 March 2003. The response from the Northern Ireland Office was received in the form of a memorandum on 19 May 2003 and is published as the Appendix to this report.

## Appendix

### The NIAC Report on Forensic Science Northern Ireland

For clarity, the paper responds to each of the NIAC's recommendations (in bold type) in turn.

- a) **The essence of a forensic science service is to provide a quality of service in which the justice system can have complete confidence (paragraph 6).**

The Government fully supports this conclusion and is committed to the provision and maintenance of a high-quality, efficient and effective forensic science service in Northern Ireland.

- b) **In view of the reported lack of communication between FSNI and the PSNI, we urge the Government to ensure both parties adopt a more professional approach in their respective roles as tenant and landlord (paragraph 12).**

The Government expects both FSNI and PSNI to work closely together to ensure that an efficient and effective forensic science service is maintained. The Chief Executive of the Agency confirms that the Agency has at all times worked with PSNI to address accommodation issues in a properly managed and business-like manner. When issues arise, FSNI deals with the PSNI Estates Services Business Unit direct, and it is satisfied that it receives a reasonable service. However, the Agency recognizes that there have been weaknesses in the system, and some problems could have been avoided in the past, if a more pro-active approach to accommodation issues had been adopted. Part of the problem has been identified as the absence of a general forum for discussion of site matters, although arrangements are in place for discussing some health and safety related issues.

FSNI is currently reviewing its lease with PSNI with a view, inter alia, to setting up a forum to strengthen communication between the two bodies and addressing accommodation issues efficiently and effectively. The Government is maintaining a close watching brief on developments, through the Ministerial Advisory Board, which oversees FSNI. It will act, as necessary, to address any impediments to resolving accommodation issues that may arise.

- c) **The length of the delay in finding new premises for FSNI is unacceptable. We urge the Government to determine the future accommodation needs of FSNI as a matter of urgency. FSNI needs new premises now. Any further delays will exacerbate the problems the Agency is currently facing ( paragraph 19)**

The Government is fully committed to addressing FSNI's accommodation needs, to ensure that it works in a safe and appropriate environment to deliver the required quality of forensic science services.

The Committee is well aware of the history surrounding this subject. To address this and other issues, the Government has set up a high-level Forensic Science Steering Group (FSSG) comprising senior staff from NIO and FSNI. The FSSG, in addressing this issue has commissioned an urgent review of FSNI's future accommodation needs. This work cannot, of course, be undertaken in isolation from FSNI's changing business environment. It must take careful account of the conclusions of a parallel Trading Fund Scoping Study, which is due to report in early July, and its timing has been set accordingly.

A full-time project manager is scheduled to commence work on the project in June, and FSSG expects the review to report in September. The review will be supported, as necessary, by external consultants and will prepare the way for decisions regarding FSNI's accommodation before the end of the year. However, it is recognised that any new build will take some time to progress through the necessary planning and construction stages, and the accommodation review will, in the meantime, identify any remedial actions necessary to sustain current services during this process.

- d) **The proposed move to Trading Fund status for FSNI should secure a viable future for forensic service provision in Northern Ireland. FSNI needs the financial flexibility in order to establish commercial partnerships, to safeguard the provision of all necessary forensic science specialisms in Northern Ireland. It is therefore essential that this starts on the date recommended by Stage II of the Quinquennial Review (paragraph 26).**

The Government is committed to FSNI moving to Trading Fund status, in line with the conclusions of the Quinquennial Review. To take this forward, the Department, through the FSSG, has commissioned a consultant-led Trading Fund Scoping Study (TFSS). The Study will provide a route map, to guide the FSNI's move to Trading Fund status. Amongst other things, it will identify a realistic timetable for change, consistent with the FSNI continuing to meet the Department's needs for an accessible, professional and responsive forensic science service during the change period.

The change timetable must, ultimately, be set to ensure that the necessary preparations can be made to guarantee success, and FSNI's principle service users have developed sufficiently to play their part as informed 'customers' in the new trading relationships. These developments are key to the success of FSNI's Trading Fund status, which must be sufficiently robust to support FSNI in meeting the needs and priorities of the department and its service customers.

TFSS is working direct with FSNI's customers to identify and chart the necessary changes, and will be reporting on a firm timetable for the move when it reports in July.

- e) **The Government must set objectives and performance targets which reflect the principle of quality of service to ensure that commercial pressures do not undermine the Agency's professional integrity (paragraph 31).**

The Government fully accepts the importance of focusing FSNI's objectives and performance targets on achieving and sustaining a high quality forensic science service. The aim of FSNI adopting a more commercially oriented approach is to promote the further development of its management and customer focus, not to cut corners when it comes to delivering quality services. In planning for the move to Trading Fund status, the work of the TFSS will be invaluable in informing customer expectations and assessing the business environment within which FSNI will operate. Its report will support the development of realistic objectives and performance targets, to be agreed between the NIO and FSNI, consistent with FSNI developing and maintaining high-quality forensic science services.

- f) **We are concerned that FSNI may not be able to continue to meet its key objective of ensuring the availability of essential forensic science services for the PSNI as pressure grows. The constraints faced by the organisation in its current accommodation, and the lack of flexibility in its funding, may well lead to a crisis. Trading Fund status will help but not in the short term. Since disruption of PSNI's important investigative work must not be allowed to happen, there may have to be a temporary increase in funding (paragraph 39).**

The Department shares the Committee's view that one of FSNI's key objectives is to support PSNI's investigative role, and is committed to taking action, as necessary, to support this important role. With this in mind, the Agency's resource needs are kept under constant review.

The move to a net accounting regime during 2002 has already provided the Agency with the increased flexibility necessary to develop the range and quality of the services it provides to PSNI and other customers. This enables FSNI to generate additional business funded by the associated receipts. As the Committee is aware, the Agency is actively exploring ways of exploiting this increased flexibility.

- g) **We consider that if the flexibility to respond to any increased terrorist activity or sudden catastrophe is to be maintained the extra cost of this provision should be met by the public purse, with Government supplementing the income of FSNI appropriately (paragraph 43).**

The Government is committed to maintaining an effective forensic science service, geared to meet the needs of Northern Ireland's criminal justice system. FSNI's future funding structures, including the funding of any requirement for the maintenance of a contingent, or reserve, service capacity, are being considered as part of TFSS's work on the move to Trading Fund status.

- h) **There is a clear need for FSNI to be given the freedom to develop and expand its commercial activities as it sees fit, provided that any business arrangements are properly monitored and sanctioned by the Northern Ireland Office (paragraph 49).**

The Government fully recognises the value of giving FSNI greater scope to develop its commercial activities. The introduction of net accounting and the work now underway on Trading Fund status is designed to facilitate this. The Department will continue to monitor the business arrangements through the Ministerial Advisory Board.

- i) We welcome FSNI's openness to the idea of trading partnerships with other forensic science service providers as a means to ensure that it has the best possible skills and expertise at its disposal. This will enable it to continue to compete at the cutting edge of forensic science services provision (paragraph 53).**

The Government also welcomes FSNI's openness to the idea of trading partnerships with other forensic science service providers. The move to Trading Fund status will increase the opportunities available to FSNI to build and develop synergistic partnership arrangements with other providers. This will be valuable in ensuring that FSNI remains at the leading edge of forensic science development as well as supporting the development and maintenance of its scientific skill base.

- j) We urge the Government to press ahead as speedily as possible with its review of FSNI's accommodation needs and the operational arrangements necessary for the Agency to perform successfully as a trading fund. We expect to see substantial progress made in finding new premises for FSNI before the end of this year (paragraph 55).**

As earlier responses indicate, progress is being made in both of these areas.