

23 February 2010

To:

Lothian and Borders Police
Lothian and Borders Joint Police Board
ACPOS
COPFS
SPSA Board
Scottish Government
Lothian and Borders MSP's
Members of the Scottish Parliament Justice Committee
Chief Constables eight Scottish forces

**PROGRESS REPORT ON SPSA FORENSIC SERVICES LABORATORY,
EDINBURGH**

At the end of last week I wrote to update you on the impact of the deliberate fire that was experienced in the early hours of Thursday 18 February at the Scottish Police Service Authority's (SPSA) Forensic Services facility in Howdenhall, Edinburgh.

Two rooms within the Howdenhall facility were badly damaged by fire and there was extensive smoke damage to the rest of the building. A Lothian and Borders police investigation into the attack remains ongoing.

Since last Thursday, staff have been working alongside contractors to clean the building from top to bottom. That process is now largely complete and we are entering the next phase of the recovery plan which will involve the testing of the many pieces of technical equipment within our facility.

The initial response, installation of core systems and activation of business continuity plans went extremely smoothly and, four working days after the fire took place, I am able to update you on our assessment of the implications for services and how we intend to manage the impact.

At top of our the agenda is to ensure business continuity; that the fire and resultant impact on our facilities has minimal impact on our services and in particular to ensure that it does not lead to any significant delays in our support to investigations or trials.

We have been in touch with every relevant Procurator Fiscal's office on the upcoming caseload and are co-operating closely with them on the early identification of cases where there may be potential timing issues.

Similarly on the investigative side, cases that would normally be coming through to the lab from the police are being assessed by the 'Forensic Gateways' within Forces which are staffed by professional police officers so that priority cases are quickly identified and differentiated from standard volume crime cases

Staff within the Edinburgh laboratory have reviewed all of our current caseload for the coming four weeks and identified those cases with urgent deadlines that cannot wait. As of today (23 February), we have so far sent two biology cases with urgent deadlines to be completed by our SPSA Forensic Service centre in Glasgow.

In terms of our four main areas of forensic science carried out within the laboratory, our current assessment is as follows:

Biology

There are 10 biology cases where analysis has not yet been begun, and 100 cases which are already subject to forensic analysis but have not been completed. The next court deadline is the 15th of March. We have no plans to outsource any work within this area at this time as we expect our DNA facilities to be back up and running by Friday 5th March 2010. If the timing for recovery of these facilities changes we will review the position.

Toxicology

13 toxicology cases have been identified as priority cases and are being outsourced to the toxicology unit at Glasgow University (these cannot be done within another SPSA laboratory as Edinburgh is the only facility for this service at present).

Our toxicology equipment will be running and tested over the next two days. Once these tests have been completed, we should be in a position to determine when our full service will be up and running again.

There are 10 cases due for reporting in March 2010. If the results of our equipment tests are successful, this work will be carried out by Edinburgh laboratory staff. However we will consider outsourcing this work if required.

Drugs

The drugs equipment will be tested over the next 24 hours. We expect to have our full drugs service back up and running by Friday 26th February. The earliest court deadline for drugs cases is the 15th March. While we do not anticipate the need to outsource at this stage we will hold this in review.

General Chemistry

Our instrumentation in the general chemistry unit has experienced the most significant impact due to its proximity to the rooms where the fire took place. There are however only a small number of chemistry cases being worked on by the Edinburgh laboratory (less than 20).

We are currently testing all the equipment and we expect to have a further update on progress by Friday 26th February 2010.

I want to stress that it is our objective to minimise the impact of this incident on those we service – namely the police and the courts. Through optimisation of our wider Forensic Service network we plan to manage the caseloads for Scotland. While this impacts the work schedule for SPSA Forensic Service staff we hope that it will have little visible impact on other force areas but welcome cooperation and understanding on this matter. We have not at this stage placed work with commercial providers outside Scotland, however that is an option we will not hesitate to use if we need to.

I would also like to take this opportunity to address the issue of security which has been a subject of some comment over recent days.

To have a laboratory targeted in this way is an unusual occurrence and I am not aware of any such attacks within Scotland either in the time of SPSA or when the laboratories were owned and managed by forces . Although the majority of our laboratory facilities in Scotland are located within police buildings and are not staffed 24 hours a day, we take the security implications of this seriously.

We have already taken steps to ensure that the Howdenhall site will be under 24-hour guard and are also reviewing security implications for our other forensic facilities. For example, we have just taken over the keys to our new laboratory in Dundee, to which staff will migrate over the next few months from their current home within Tayside Police headquarters. That new facility will also be under 24-hour guard.

Forensic Services staff in Edinburgh have responded flexibly and highly professionally to these exceptional circumstances and many have sacrificed personal time to enable reinstatement of normal services as quickly as possible.

The team in Edinburgh have had tremendous support from colleagues in our other laboratories who have taken on some of the urgent work, from ICT and corporate service colleagues within SPSA, from Lothian and Borders Police, from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal service and from a range of supporting contractors.

I will continue to keep you updated on progress and any further significant developments.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Nelson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tom Nelson
Director of Forensic Services
SPSA