

8 March 2010

To:

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

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

On 23 February I wrote to update you on the impact of the deliberate fire that was experienced at the Scottish Police Service Authority's (SPSA) Forensic Services facility in Howdenhall, Edinburgh and to provide you with an assessment for the implications of services and how we planned to manage the impact.

Over the past two weeks staff in the Edinburgh laboratory have been working hard to ensure laboratory services are reinstated as quickly as possible and a number of services are now fully up and running.

Ensuring that the fire and resultant impact on our facilities has minimal impact on our services and does not lead to any significant delays in our support to investigations or trials remains top of our agenda.

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

Biology

Power and lighting are now available in biology allowing the examination of cases to restart. There are 15 biology cases where analysis has not yet begun, and less than 100 cases which are already subject to forensic analysis but have not been completed.

One item of DNA equipment was condemned by the manufacturers. A replacement was ordered and was delivered on Friday 5 March. Validation of this has taken place over the weekend. Further work is required to test the equipment and this will continue over the next few days. We expect a full DNA facility to be up and running by Wednesday 10 March. We are already processing samples to ensure that the Search/DNA laboratories are free from contamination in preparation for resuming analysis.

Over the last week we have been reporting cases that were examined/processed prior to the fire. As a result no court deadlines have been missed and we are confident all future deadlines are achievable.

We are responding to a Major Incident in Edinburgh that took place over the weekend, which may generate some urgent work that needs to be outsourced. However, nothing from the work in hand before the weekend requires that degree of support.

Toxicology

The alcohol analysis equipment has been reinstated and assessed as fit to proceed with casework. Routine examinations commenced on Monday 1st March and Drink Driver cases are now up to date.

More detailed toxicology work also recommenced last week with the validation of equipment and processes.

We have outsourced 21 cases 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). Timings have been agreed with the University to ensure court deadlines are met.

Almost all cases that were examined prior to the fire have been reported. Edinburgh laboratory staff will begin work again today (Monday 8 March) on casework with deadlines towards the end of March.

We will consider outsourcing a small batch of cases with later court deadlines to allow for some flexibility within the Edinburgh laboratory.

A meeting is being sought with the Area Fiscal and local Procurator Fiscal Deaths Unit to determine demand and coordinate timings.

Drugs

The fire has had little impact on our drugs section. All major equipment was declared satisfactory and Drugs casework recommenced as planned on 26 February.

The drugs laboratory reported 172 cases in the month of February, significantly above their SLA. This has meant that the lab has managed to output significantly more cases during the month than normal monthly agreed capacity, ensuring that performance has been maintained despite the fire.

There are currently 107 ongoing new cases and a further 14 submitted cases. We are in discussions with the respective Procurator Fiscals on the upcoming caseload and are co-operating closely with them on timings.

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. The General Chemistry work is being monitored and there are no urgent deadlines at present. Replacement of damaged equipment is a major priority.

Fire accelerant examination procedures are now back on line, with the environmental assessment complete and found to be satisfactory.

The Glass examination kit has been assessed by the manufacturer and while it could be repaired we have been advised that it should be upgraded with a trade-in because of the longer-term damage caused by smoke. Environmental checks with standards are being carried out by Forensic Services Glasgow.

The FTIR ('chemical fingerprint') equipment is defunct and we are assessing models elsewhere in SPSA with the intention of taking the opportunity to standardise equipment specifications. This is an efficiency approach as it will enable us to simplify procurement/maintenance arrangements in SPSA Forensic Services, as well as enabling common quality management standards and practices to be set.

I would like to confirm that we have still not placed work with any commercial providers outside Scotland, however we will continue to consider that as an option if required.

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