



Department of  
**Justice**

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt  
Máinnystrie O tha Laa

# Northern Ireland Forensic Services Strategy 2021-26



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## Foreword by Minister

I am pleased to introduce the Northern Ireland Forensic Services Strategy 2021 – 2026 which outlines the strategic priorities for forensic services over the next five years to support the effective and efficient working of the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System (NICJS).

The nature of forensic service provision requires an integrated longer term vision in order to both continue to identify and reflect the values that forensic science contributes to the Criminal Justice System, and to protect and develop the quality, integrity, capability, capacity and responsiveness of services in the strategic interests of the wider NICJS and to ensure public confidence.

A key deliverable within this Strategy will be a cross-organisational review of the service delivery model with the aim of delivering the approach best suited to the needs of the NICJS.

As a public service it is critical that we demonstrate value for money, adopt best practice, utilise emerging science and technologies, exploit opportunities and optimise the values generated by forensic services from crime scene through to court. This in turn should lead to cost avoidance, increased effectiveness, improved speed and responsiveness and improved public confidence.

The strategy seeks to ensure that emerging threats, challenges and issues facing the delivery of forensic services are anticipated and addressed during the five year period as well as establishing a sound platform in preparation for the longer term.

Ultimately delivery of this Strategy will contribute to a faster, fairer justice system in which the general public have confidence.

**Naomi Long**  
**Justice Minister**

## Introduction

Forensic services have a very important role in the Criminal Justice System through the provision of objective and impartial scientific analysis and contribute to the Justice Minister's vision for a faster, fairer justice system in which the general public have confidence.

Within Northern Ireland there are two principal suppliers of forensic services – **Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI)**, an Agency of the Department of Justice (DoJ) and the **Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)**. Both organisations provide high quality United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) accredited services for the majority of forensic services required by the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System (NICJS)

Forensic services have encountered enormous challenges over recent years. The expectations and demands of customers, at all stages of crime investigation, intelligence gathering and crime prevention continue to increase mainly as a consequence of developing technologies and as the nature of crime continues to change.

This Forensic Services Strategy which has been commissioned by the Department of Justice, sets out the Vision, re-affirms the approach to retain forensic services within the Northern Ireland public sector and outlines plans for delivery of NI based forensic services for the next 5 years.

## Background

The Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland (CJINI) carried out inspections of FSNI in 2009 and 2014 which resulted in a number of recommendations, primarily for FSNI but also for the DoJ and the PSNI. The 2014 CJINI report strongly advocated a more collaborative Criminal Justice approach to the development of forensic services. Service provision at that time was characterised as disjointed and not in pursuit of a common aim. CJINI have indicated their intention to carry out a further review of FSNI commencing in 2021-22.

In response to the CJINI report a DoJ Forensic Services Strategy was developed and agreed by the Justice Minister in 2014. Building on the progress of actions taken under this Strategy, in 2016 a revised strategy was endorsed by the then Minister and the Criminal Justice Board (CJB). The vision of the strategy was to:

*“Ensure that the NI Justice System has access to timely, good quality and cost effective forensic services which support the delivery of faster, fairer justice from crime scene to court and in which the general public have confidence.”*

This Strategy set strategic priorities for forensic services for the three year period 2016-2019 to provide for more integrated service provision with partners working collaboratively and delivering the value adding characteristics of the crime scene to court model advocated by CJINI.

The Strategy proposed new governance arrangements to oversee implementation including the establishment of the Forensic Services Leadership Group (FSLG) comprised of senior officials from across the Criminal Justice sector.

## Current Position

The 2016 Forensic Services Strategy set out a new course aimed at maximising the potential contribution of forensic services within the context of perceived operational inefficiencies, associated backlogs and delays in the production of reports, the management of strategic customer relationships and performance improvement.

Good progress has been made in addressing these challenges with the Forensic Services Leadership Group (FSLG) and the Forensic Services Operations Group (FSOG), facilitating tangible improvements in communication, collaboration and co-operation.

- A comprehensive programme of research has been undertaken to understand the value that forensic services bring to the Criminal Justice System with the aim of developing a toolkit that comprehensively measures the down-stream public value of forensic services to the Criminal Justice System and wider society. This work continues with a delivery date of March 2021.

- Work streams of the FSOG have examined service efficiency in a number of areas: PSNI forensic demand, PSNI submissions, demand for toxicology, Crime Scene Investigation tasking, performance reporting and the FSNI/PSNI Service Level Agreement (SLA).
- The mapping project focused on a process review of the scientific analysis of Alcohol and Toxicology, ranging from the collection of exhibits by PSNI and State Pathology to the submission of a case file to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS).

A comprehensive benefits realisation report has been developed which outlines improvements to processes, enhanced understanding of the demand for forensic services, performance, management and information requirements identified and a revision of the organisation and management of some services.

## Our Purpose and Vision

The purpose of the 2021 Forensic Services Strategy is to build on the progress made to date and explore the potential for greater integration of service provision with partners working collaboratively, with an appetite for considering unified service delivery models, and the continued objective of delivering the value adding characteristics of the crime scene to court model advocated by the CJINI.

Work will be completed on the Value Project being undertaken with Ulster University to identify and systematically measure the values that forensic services bring to the Criminal Justice System and the production of a toolkit to inform the future decisions of stakeholders in the system.

A key aspect of this strategy will be to **deliver a victim focused approach** in all our interactions with victims commencing from initial contact with Crime Scene Investigators, through the processing of casework by forensic specialists, to the presentation of evidence at court, to ensure that supporting victims is at the core of every step of our service delivery model.

This Strategy sets out how we intend to invest for the future to ensure that forensic services in Northern Ireland are equipped to harness opportunities, drive sustainable productivity and ultimately deliver the **Vision:**

**“To deliver world class forensic services to the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System”.**

In support of the Vision, our **Aim** is:

**“To provide timely, high quality and cost effective forensic services through collaboration, innovation, science and technology to support safer communities and inspire public confidence”.**



## Drivers for Change

The drivers for our ambitious forensic programme are:

- A Public Service ethos
- IT modernisation
- Scientific developments
- Workforce modernisation
- CJINI 2009 & 2014
- DoJ Corporate Plan
- PSNI Horizon 2025 Plan
- FSNI Corporate Plan
- Forensic Science Regulator

The approach outlined will aid delivery of the Programme for Government Outcome 7: *We have a safe community where we respect the law and each other* and Outcome 11: *We have high quality public services*.

## Benefits

The benefits envisaged include:

- More engaged staff delivering value added services
- Released capacity and realignment to where demand requires
- Reduced duplication and bureaucracy
- Improved effectiveness
- Modernisation of systems
- Introduction of new techniques

- Increased Public Confidence in Criminal Justice system and Victim Satisfaction

## Enablers

- Engagement and Communication
- Stakeholder buy-in
- Organisational Transformation Teams
- IT – Agile, Mobile
- HR - Skills and Capabilities
- DoJ – Finance and Resource

## Foundation Principles

These key principles will be considered for all outcomes:

- Objectivity
- Evidence Based
- Innovative
- Productive
- Harnessing Technology
- Collaborative Decision Making
- Value Adding
- Impartial
- Responsive
- Agile
- Community & Victim Focused



## Strategic Priorities

Four strategic priorities have been identified which focus on continuing to improve forensic services through the crime scene to court model within the NICJS.



Understanding the value of forensic services (as referenced earlier), including the significant impact of those services on wider society, will help to inform and underpin the work streams to deliver these strategic priorities.

A key outcome of this strategy will be to deliver a victim focused approach in all our interactions ensuring that supporting victims is at the core of our service delivery model.

To deliver on the strategic priorities contained in this document, work streams will be established to present key stakeholders with defined options for consideration. These reports will be evidence based, rich in meaningful benchmark data, wherever possible incorporating performance metrics and/or value for money considerations, that when taken together, will help inform decisions for investment by the respective organisational governance boards.

A further key requirement will be consideration and analysis of developments and good practice at both national and international level with the aim of enhancing collaboration across the forensic community.

## Collaborative and Streamlined Service Provision



### Service Delivery Model

Forensic services are currently delivered across three core business areas, these are Scientific Support Branch and the Cyber Crime Centre within the PSNI and by FSNI. Opportunities to streamline services across functional barriers with partners working more collaboratively along with the potential for greater integration of service provision will be explored.

A work stream will be established with the objective of exploring unified service provision, to identify and evaluate options for a future service delivery model and recommend a preferred approach.

A strategic paper, encompassing available data, will be developed for key stakeholders to make an evidence based, objective decision on the future of the forensic service delivery model.

The timescale for delivery of any changes will be dependent on the approach recommended, approval by key stakeholders and the extent and cost of change involved.

#### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- Producing a high-level shortlisting paper of options to enhance the Northern Ireland forensic services delivery model.
- Engaging with key stakeholders to agree which options to progress to full evaluation.
- Developing an evidence-based business case and recommended approach for the future service delivery model.
- Commencing implementation of the new model.

## Funding Model

All funding for forensic providers (PSNI and FSNI) and stakeholders (including the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), the State Pathologist, etc) emanates from the Department of Justice. FSNI receives over 80% of its funding from PSNI and small amounts from other users for provision of services through Memorandum of Understanding arrangements. FSNI also receives some direct funding from DoJ.

There is a need to consider a more holistic view of the funding model to ensure that scarce resources are aligned with priorities across the complete forensic portfolio with the aim of providing clarity and implementing the most appropriate funding structures as recommended by CJINI.

A work stream will be established to identify the options for funding forensic services. A report detailing each option will be considered by key stakeholders to make an evidence based decision on the future of any potential funding model.

### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- Reviewing the current funding arrangements for forensic services across Northern Ireland.
- Developing a holistic model that aligns funding and service priorities for consideration by key stakeholders
- Establishing reporting mechanisms to afford confidence that forensic services demonstrate value for money.

## Submissions Gateway

Building on both the work completed to date through the 2016 Strategy and the changes implemented in response to Covid-19, further opportunities have been identified to streamline the authorisation process and prioritisation of submissions. Collaborative working with stakeholders including PPS will ensure proportionality in developing the forensic strategy, including further enhancements to staged reporting, based on an outcomes approach to deliver added value to the justice system.

A longer term approach to strategic service demand identification and capacity planning will also be considered.

Initially this work is likely to focus on Road Traffic Collisions, Drugs and Toxicology (with other areas such as Biology and DNA at a later stage) with the aim of developing an overarching strategy to manage demand, encompass legislative changes and meet investigative and court requirements.

Input from all CJS partners is essential to ensure that the return on forensic evidence is maximised.

### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- Developing a mechanism to report performance data based on Crime Type.
- Developing collaborative decision making arrangements between PPS, FSNI and PSNI to ensure efficiency in the submission process.
- Develop automation of submission processes across all forensic partners.
- Developing long-term demand forecasts reflecting crime trends, legislative and policy developments.

## Measuring Value

The outcomes of the project to measure the value of forensic services will support delivery of all aspects of this strategy.

Understanding the value of the service to the Criminal Justice System and wider society will inform decision making not only in relation to the service delivery, funding and submissions models mentioned above but through the ongoing use of the public value toolkit, currently under development by Ulster University, to support wider strategic decision making regarding how investment along the criminal justice chain will be supported.'

### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- Identifying how to use the Public Value Account and Scorecard to measure the value of forensic services.
- Continued engagement with the Home Office Impact of Forensics Project and transfer of learning to NI.
- Using value information to inform decisions and maximise the benefit of forensic services to the Justice System.

High Quality  
and Objective  
Forensic  
Services



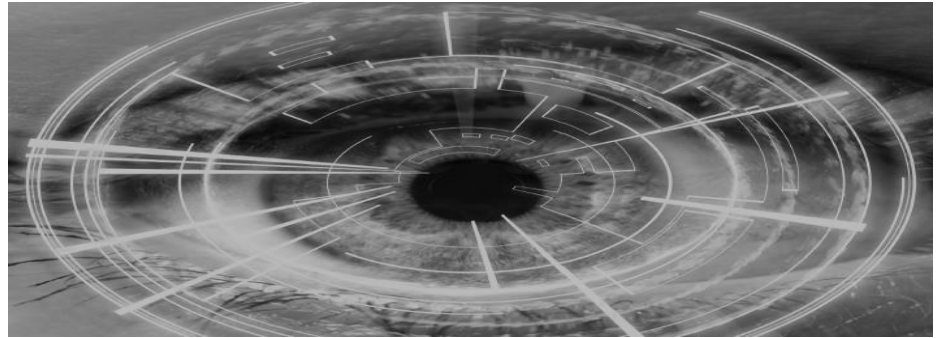
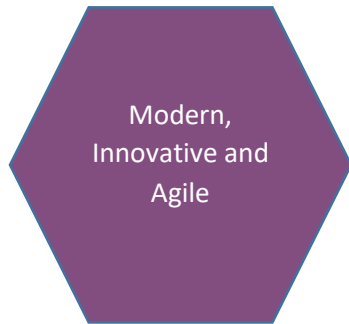
## Accreditation

Quality accreditation is a key objective for all forensic providers and each of the three business areas involved in the delivery of forensic services in Northern Ireland are at various stages of accreditation.

There has been good collaboration between the organisation's Quality Units in the past and further opportunities for developing a shared, collaborative approach to Quality Management will be explored.

### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- The Introduction of ISO17020 accreditation for crime scene attending roles.
- Maintaining quality standards and extending the scope of ISO17025 accreditation across forensic services.
- Adhering to the Forensic Science Regulator's quality recommendations.
- Maximising opportunities for closer collaboration and shared learning across forensic service providers.



## Exploiting Technology

Advances in technology continue to offer great opportunities to push the boundaries of science and service provision and positively impact on the way forensic services are delivered.

The demand for forensic expertise is increasing through all stages of crime investigation, including intelligence gathering, crime prevention and detection. Associated with the development in technology arises the potential for forensic services to move from the lab to the scene of crimes.

Opportunities presented by technological advances of the future must continue to be addressed. Advances in technology, automated techniques in particular, combined with traditional scientific skills challenge us to provide more meaningful output with more diverse exhibits at lower cost and in a shorter period of time.

Both the PSNI and FSNI have developed ambitious Digital Strategies.

Opportunities to enhance IT systems and linkages across the justice system must also be taken to maximise the potential of available systems which complement each other.

### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- Enhancing digital exchange of forensic information across CJ partners.
- Live transfer from crime scene to laboratory.
- Introducing new and emerging DNA technologies.
- Introducing new technology to capture crime scenes, recover evidence with more science delivered at scene.



## Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is the ongoing effort to improve products, processes, or services by reducing waste or increasing quality. Understanding the importance of continuous improvement is a key component of Lean and Agile methodologies. Successful organisations are never satisfied with the status quo and understand the importance of continuous improvement in all areas of the business. A cornerstone of this strategy is the drive for continuous improvement across all aspects of forensic services.

With rising customer expectations, economic challenges and the changing nature of crime there is an increasing demand for forensic providers to deliver faster, agile and value for money services.

FSNI and PSNI will work collaboratively to realise the full potential of each organisations Continuous Improvement and Transformational plans to ensure that maximum benefit is achieved to the wider Criminal Justice Sector.

### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- Reviewing processes to ensure practices are streamlined, efficient and effective.
- Benchmarking forensic services against other providers to ensure Criminal Justice Partners receive excellence in service including quality, performance and value.
- Engaging with national forensic providers to share best practice and learning for the benefit of the NI Criminal Justice System.
- Engaging with key stakeholders to further enhance reporting of forensic evidence to the Courts.
- Engaging with key stakeholder to align turnaround times for forensic services with Criminal Justice partner requirements.

## Innovation/R&D

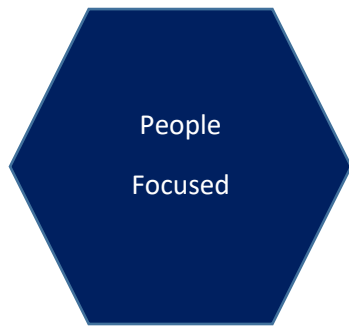
As part of this strategic objective, forensic service provider organisations, both individually and collectively commit to fostering an environment where innovation thrives.

There is a commitment to also purposefully explore and incorporate learning from other forensic organisations such as Forensic Science Ireland, An Garda Síochána, Forensic Capability Network and other leading accredited forensic units.

A joint FSNI/PSNI Innovation/R&D Strategy has been developed which will help to underpin and co-ordinate a joint programme of Innovation/R&D between FSNI and PSNI.

### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- Developing local projects through the Joint Innovation Delivery Group which will benefit the NI Criminal Justice System.
- Identifying funding opportunities from various sources to support forensic innovation and research projects.
- Participating in European Research and Development initiatives.
- Identifying opportunities to collaborate with forensic partners including AGS, FSI, SPA, FCN and ENFSI



## Education

Across the Criminal Justice System and legal profession, there is evidence of a need to develop a better understanding of forensic services.

Within the arena of forensics the user gains most value when they have a good practical understanding of the capabilities, limitations, opportunities and risks which the service brings.

Moving forward with ISO/IEC 17020 accreditation will also create a need for training on quality awareness and knowledge of processes for scene attendance for first responders and for evidence collection by Police Officers.

This Strategy will explore options for investing in user and stakeholder training and awareness which will ultimately contribute to better outcomes, from crime scene

through to court and is a genuine “invest to save” approach for individual Criminal Justice Organisations and for the CJS as a whole.

### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- Engaging with key stakeholders to develop an education awareness package for front line officers and wider criminal justice partners to ensure forensics opportunities are maximised.

## Career Pathways

There are around 412 full time equivalent staff employed in the delivery of forensic services in Northern Ireland (170 FSNI, 140 SSB and 102 Cyber Centre). This includes both specialist and administrative staff and to deliver the rigorous quality standards required there is extensive investment in training. It can take up to 5 years for a forensic specialist to become competent in their specific discipline.

This Strategy will explore opportunities for career pathways and staff development with the aim of establishing processes to enable placement opportunities across organisational boundaries to allow for career enrichment, professional development and learning.

It is hoped that this approach will help to retain specialist staff for longer and will have positive impacts on staff morale.

Due to the specialised nature of the work and small numbers in some specialist teams, succession planning will also be considered.

## Mental Health & Well Being

It is acknowledged that some of the crime scenes that forensic services staff attend can often be graphic, traumatic and have a lasting effect.

This strategy will adopt a collaborative approach in developing support mechanisms to assist staff in dealing with issues which may arise from attendance at these types of scene.

### Through this Strategy we commit to:

- Developing our workforce skills and capabilities, including continued professional development.
- Exploring opportunities for job-shadowing, development or short-term placement opportunities across PSNI and FSNI and other forensic service providers.
- Exploring an Apprenticeship scheme for forensic staff.
- Developing a succession planning model to ensure that forensic service delivery is maintained in future years.
- Developing joint Mental Health & Well Being initiatives

## Governance

This strategy, commissioned by the Department of Justice, was approved by the Justice Minister on 23rd March 2021. The Strategy was developed under the oversight of the FSLG and specific work streams will be developed, through a number of FSOG led workshops with key stakeholders across the justice system, to meet the strategic priorities outlined.

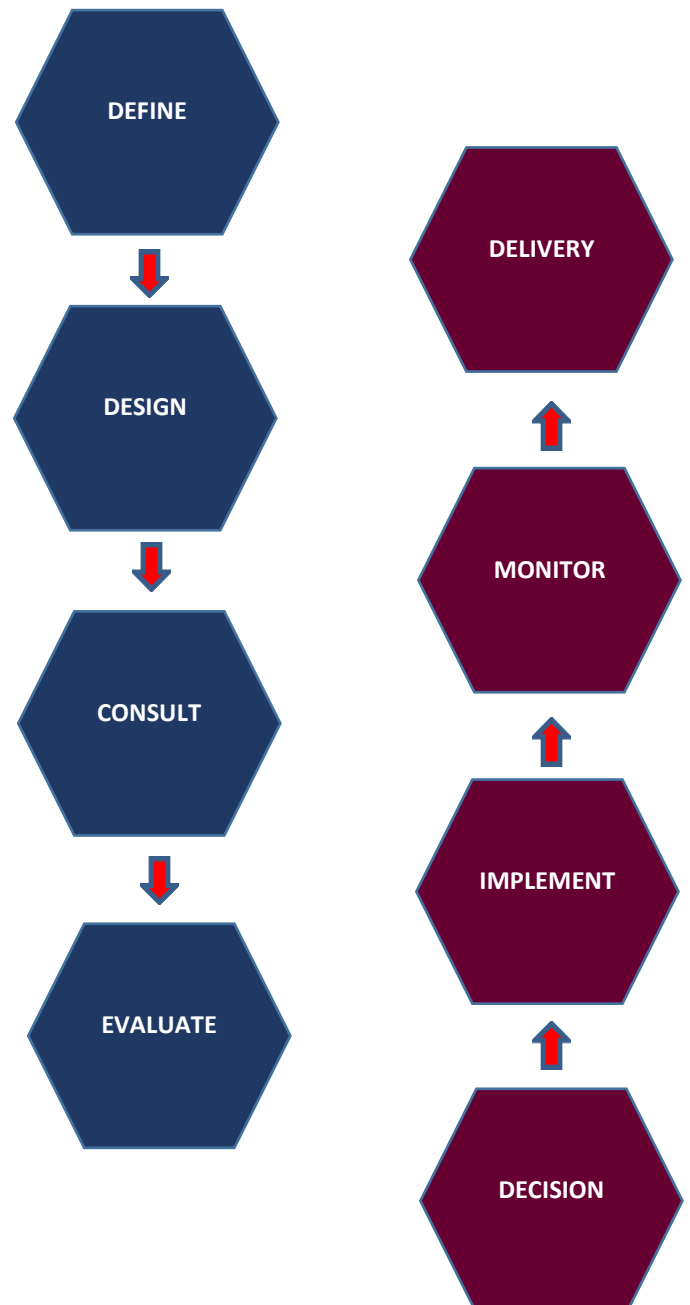
Each project and work stream will develop options for key stakeholders to consider, which will be evidence based, rich in meaningful benchmark data wherever possible, incorporating performance metrics and/or value for money considerations, that when taken together, will help inform decisions for investment by the respective organisational governance boards.

These are the FSNI Leadership Group and PSNI Transformational Change Board. Wider CJS consultation will be facilitated through the FSLG.

Papers on significant strategic or cross-cutting issues will be shared with the Department of Justice and Criminal Justice Board and agreed by the Minister.

Throughout this governance process FSLG will continue to provide strategic leadership to ensure that the strategy is delivered and will

provide annual updates to the Department and Criminal Justice Board. The FSOG will continue to engage operational leads from across Criminal Justice Organisations to progress the wide range of work streams agreed.



## Resources

This strategy lays the foundation for a comprehensive programme of work over the next 5 years and associated funding is required to deliver the strategic priorities outlined. The level of investment secured will determine how much can be achieved, however it is important to recognise the importance of up-front investment which is necessary to achieve longer term benefits that will extend far beyond the forensic providers themselves.

Additional departmental funding for resources will be required for both FSNI and PSNI to enable the DEFINE / DELIVER stage of the work streams with further investment to be considered at later stages as options are explored and developed.

The ongoing impact of Covid-19 must also be taken into account and has the potential to impact delivery of the strategic priorities in a number of ways including there being insufficient funding available to progress initiatives as planned.

Staff outages, delays in recruitment and increased submission levels could also require resources to be diverted to priority casework to the detriment of the Strategy.

## Conclusion

Good Progress has been made in implementing the 2016 Forensic Services Strategy, not least in building strong, sustainable relationships between all parties to ensure collaboration and co-operation.

The 2021 Forensic Services Strategy recognises the need to continue this work in a dynamic environment with continually emerging challenges. The work programme needed to deliver the strategic priorities outlined will be both comprehensive and challenging and will ultimately ensure delivery of the vision for forensic services and the value adding characteristics of the crime scene to court model advocated by the CJINI.

Collectively as part of this strategy our forensic services will deliver a more agile, adaptive and sustainable forensic solution and has the potential to transform current forensic services and relationships across the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System.

## Glossary

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| CJB   | Criminal Justice Board                          |
| CJINI | Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland  |
| CJS   | Criminal Justice System                         |
| CSI   | Crime Scene Investigator                        |
| DoJ   | Department of Justice                           |
| DNA   | Deoxyribonucleic Acid                           |
| ENFSI | European Network of Forensic Science Institutes |
| FCN   | Forensic Capability Network                     |
| FSLG  | Forensic Services Leadership Group              |
| FSNI  | Forensic Science Northern Ireland               |
| FSS   | Forensic Services Strategy                      |
| FSOG  | Forensic Services Operations                    |
| FSR   | Forensic Science Regulator                      |
| HR    | Human Resources                                 |
| MOU   | Memorandum of Understanding                     |
| NICJS | Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System        |
| PFR   | Proportionate Forensic Reporting                |
| PPS   | Public Prosecution Service                      |
| PSNI  | Police Service Northern Ireland                 |
| R&D   | Research and Development                        |
| SLA   | Service Level Agreement                         |
| SPA   | Scottish Police Authority Forensic Services     |
| SPD   | State Pathology Department                      |
| SSB   | Scientific Support Branch                       |
| UKAS  | United Kingdom Accreditation Service            |
| UU    | Ulster University                               |