

Lessons of McKie case seen south of border

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The lessons of the Shirley McKie case are already being taken on board by the fingerprint service south of the border.

In response to a question from the SNP leader, Alex Salmond, Home Office minister Joan Ryan revealed yesterday that the National Fingerprint Board in England and Wales had issued a guidance document about learning from the McKie saga in Scotland.

The board, part of the Association of Chief Police Officers, has produced a document in response to the McKie affair, entitled "Erroneous and disputed identifications: Learning from experience elsewhere." The Home Office minister stressed that it was not a policy document and was for guidance only, but it demonstrates the extent of the repercussions of the Ayrshire fingerprint saga.

The written answer by Ms Ryan says the document was circulated to all bureaux in England and Wales and referred in particular to the report of HM Inspectorate of Constabulary into the Scottish Criminal Records Office.

Mr Salmond said last night: "It is high time the Scottish Executive took its head out of the sand and saw the impact the Shirley McKie fingerprint misidentification is having not just on Scottish justice, but also now on justice south of the border.

"It is not good enough for Scottish ministers to continue their intransigent opposition to a full, public judicial inquiry into this scandal. "Their position is becoming a national embarrassment."

The Home Office reply said the report to bureaux in England and Wales cited all the key recommendations suggested for their Scottish counterparts after the McKie affair. The need to move towards a non-numeric standard, better management, external competency testing and common procedures in the event of problems were all cited.

But Mr Salmond said: "The image of Scottish justice is being damaged and we know that other jurisdictions have been forced to react.

"The fall-out from this case is being felt beyond Scotland's borders. "A credible fingerprint service is vital to tackling crime but as it stands in Scotland the washed-up Lib-Lab government's failure to hold a public inquiry into the McKie case means we are yet to restore public confidence in our justice system."

The McKie affair, in which Ayrshire police officer Ms McKie's career was ruined when she was wrongly accused of contaminating a murder scene, resulted in a £750,000 settlement with her after a lengthy battle, but a Holyrood committee is now conducting a parliamentary inquiry into the affair and there is a continuing dispute over the full release of documents submitted to the inquiry.

In learning some of the lessons from the affair, the system south of the border is currently being changed, including the creation of a "forensic regulator" and a National Policing Improvement Agency to improve the provision of forensic science.