

INTRODUCTION OF NON-NUMERIC SYSTEM

Radical reforms of the Scottish Fingerprint Service are expected to be unveiled today.

These will include the introduction of non numeric identification of finger prints. The moves are aimed at restoring public confidence in the service which was badly damaged by the Shirley McKie case. Abandoning the traditional numeric system, in which 16 points of agreement were required to match fingerprints, brings Scotland into line with England and many other countries. The non numeric approach is said to be more definitive, requiring a forensic scientist to take into account all aspects of a mark in concluding there is a match. This means officers will be able to fully explain their conclusion to a court, an issue said to be highlighted by the McKie case. Other reforms are expected to target working practices and the culture within the service. The reforms are being introduced long before the Parliamentary enquiry into the service reports - however I understand the MSPs approve of the changes.

Background on Mulhearn report from April 2006:

The report called for the shake-up of the whole structure of the service, with the current four bureaux set-up streamlined into one single organisation.

It identified a mood of "discord, and inter-bureau tension" in the four fingerprint offices in Scotland. The four separate bureaux and the Glasgow office's "predominance" has created an atmosphere where they criticise each other in public and leads to a "sense of alienation" in the smaller offices.

Mulhearn called for a telephone hotline in the service, along with other forums for staff to resolve "difficult or contentious issues". His report stated : "Many police forces and other organisations have subscribed to confidential 'safelines' which staff can telephone to seek advice or report matters of concern anonymously."

He also called for a change in the way fingerprints are verified which was a central issue in the McKie case. Only in Glasgow are prints checked three times by experts who do not know each other's identity. In the smaller offices, anonymity cannot always be guaranteed. Mr Mulhern said this system should be reviewed to "bring about a consistent identification system throughout Scotland". He also advised that Scotland should introduce the non-numeric fingerprint standard by September this year, which is seen as being more definitive than the current 16 points of comparisons sequence which was used in the McKie case. The new system sees the fingerprint expert considering the mark or impression "holistically" to see if there are enough characteristics to conclude that the mark can be identified as that of an individual. It was introduced in England and Wales five years ago.

His plan also called for a review of training for staff. He said much good work has been done to take the Scottish Fingerprint Service forward since 2000, but the action plan identified further areas for development.

In summation he said: "The public can be reassured that everything possible is being done to create a service in Scotland that is benchmarked against the best in the world and adopts the very best practice at all levels."

The Justice Minister Cathy Jamieson said the fingerprint service in Scotland must have the confidence of the public and criminal justice system: "This action plan will help achieve those aims by building on the improvements introduced since 2000 and developing fingerprinting as an integrated part of the new Scottish Forensic Science Service."