



Forensic Services Committee

30 October 2025

Item 9: Digital Forensics – Next Steps and Timeline for Progression

Appendix: N/A

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide SPA Forensic Services Committee members with an update on Police Scotland’s intention to pause work towards obtaining ISO 17025 within Digital Forensics (DF), and to update on the future vision for the DF business area.

**Recommendation
For Discussion**

Members are invited to discuss the contents of this paper.

Strategic Alignment

Strategic alignment	Four pillars of the Chief Constable’s 2030 Vision: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safer Communities• Less Crime• Supported Victims• Thriving Workforce
Risk alignment	Police Scotland corporate risk register: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• O1A0004, Organisational Technology Resilience• O1E0011, Information Sharing• O4E0001, Cybercrime Digital Forensics Capacity
Prior governance	PSoS Executive review and sign off
Stakeholder engagement	Project and Programme Board membership

Rationale for taking in private	N/A
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Implications

Community		Data & Privacy		Environmental	
Equalities & Human Rights		Financial	✓	Health, Safety & Wellbeing	
Legal		Workforce	✓		

Report Detail

1.1 Background

- 1.2 Police Scotland has been progressing work towards ISO 17025 accreditation for its five DF laboratories in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Inverness.
- 1.3 Accreditation is not a legal requirement in Scotland; however, the credibility of forensic evidence still rests on robust methodology, documentation, and expert witness testimony. The work undertaken by the project in terms of standardisation, internal audit practices, documented procedures, and management oversight ensure casework quality and judicial process is not compromised.
- 1.4 Over the past four years, the Policing in a Digital World Programme (PDWP) ISO 17025 Project Team has achieved significant progress with regards to the journey towards accreditation and placed DF in a much stronger position. Around £1.1m has been invested into training of DF staff, and over a hundred documents, guidelines and processes have been written and published. A steady state tracker with over a hundred measurable indicators has been introduced across all laboratories, improving standardisation and providing a robust and consistent compliance framework. Quality Assurance processes have been embedded and continue to provide a solid foundation.

1.5 Further detail

- 1.6 DF has evolved over the past ten years with the proliferation of technology and over 90% of crime has a digital element. DF underpins modern policing, providing the capability to identify, extract and present digital evidence that is now critical to the vast majority of investigations, while also being a key strand to keeping people safe across Scotland. Recruitment freezes and staff attrition have left DF understrength, with service risk now critical.

- 1.7 DF operates under systemic pressures that constrain the organisation's ability to achieve and maintain accreditation. While work to assess and prioritise demand is ongoing, the service currently faces significant challenges in balancing workload against capacity.
- 1.8 With regards to accreditation specifically, several barriers have arisen, including critical posts remaining unfunded despite being essential to delivery of mandatory validation, verification and proficiency testing. Accreditation is not a one-off event and would require sustainable investment in audits, assurance, and corrective actions, and could be quickly lost without such investment, which would damage Police Scotland's credibility. Attempting to push forward prematurely risks wasted effort and reputational harm.
- 1.9 Given these significant challenges, the decision to seek approval to pause the ISO 17025 accreditation project has been made.
- 1.10 The Cybercrime Quality Assurance Team (QAT) will continue to support the business area beyond project pause, preserving progress and continuing internal quality assurance and audits; ensuring process and system improvements remain aligned to the ISO standards.
- 1.11 Whilst ISO accreditation remains a strategic goal and a key enabler of public confidence in forensic outputs, the current operational, financial, and resourcing environment means continuing at pace is neither achievable nor sustainable. A temporary pause will protect the investment already made, allow critical risks to be addressed, and ensure Police Scotland achieves accreditation on a sustainable and credible basis aligned with its long-term operating model and the Chief Constable's 2030 Vision.
- 1.12 The direction of travel for DF also supports wider national priorities. Robust, credible Digital Forensic capability is integral to maintaining the confidence of Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) and the judiciary in evidential integrity, ensuring that justice outcomes remain reliable and defensible. Furthermore, the approach reflects the ambitions of the Scottish Government's Digital Strategy by embedding innovation, resilience, and public trust into how critical digital services are delivered across Scotland's justice system.
- 1.13 By pausing accreditation and investing in targeted improvements, Police Scotland can ensure Digital Forensic capability remains credible, resilient, and future-ready. Should accreditation be re-prioritised, the organisation will be able to restart from a strong baseline, minimising lost effort.

1.14 Alignment to the New Strategic Direction

1.15 The establishment of the Cyber and Fraud Unit (CAFU) within Specialist Crime Division, with a proposed redesign of DF represents a structural shift in how digital capability will be delivered. Pausing the ISO 17025 project protects operational capacity by enabling concentration of effort on managing the growing laboratory workload.

1.16 The DF business area and PDWP have been working closely to identify solutions to improve DF for Police Scotland.

1.17 Improving Current Capability

1.18 Urgent action is required in three areas to improve current capability and stakeholder confidence:

- Data management capability (sharing and review).
- Lab Automation.
- Frontline Digital Forensic capability (Kiosk).

1.19 Investment in these areas is expected to be modest relative to the operational and reputational risks of inaction. Work is ongoing to fully understand the costs, but even at a preliminary level, such investment would transform how DF is delivered in Police Scotland. It would empower frontline officers and specialist departments to rapidly access, assess, and present digital evidence, while allowing analysts to focus on the highest-risk cases and supporting a sustainable, thriving workforce.

1.20 Data Management – This capability would enable frontline officers to access device extractions remotely, expediting investigations, reducing the need to transport devices to laboratories, and potentially providing COPFS with appropriate access. It would accelerate investigation progression, empower investigators, and deliver cost efficiencies.

1.21 Lab Automation – Automation of manual processes for data extraction, processing, and reporting, improving demand management, reducing exposure to harmful content, and bringing Police Scotland in line with best practice across other UK forces.

1.22 Frontline Digital Forensic capability – The Cyber Kiosk solution was introduced in 2018 however the capabilities were heavily restricted; it was brought to assist dealing with increasing demand and to empower the frontline. The current Cyber Kiosks are however nearing end of life and need upgrading.

1.23 Benchmarking shows other UK forces have already adopted these three solutions, with measurable gains in investigative capability, staff wellbeing, and improved case throughput. Engagement with the

Metropolitan Police, Leicestershire Police and Durham Constabulary have shown how data management (sharing and review), automation, and effective frontline Digital Forensic capabilities have radically improved DF for each force.

- 1.24 It is important to ensure Police Scotland’s DF model is scalable and adaptable to emerging technologies. Embedding flexibility into our future model will protect investment, maintain resilience, and ensure Police Scotland remains aligned with best practice and technological change.
- 1.25 Embedding accreditation within this future model, rather than pressing ahead in parallel with the proposed changes to the current model, will ensure a better long-term fit.

1.26 Future Digital Forensic Model

- 1.27 A proposed three-tier model for DF sets out a structured pathway for how capability will be delivered from the frontline through to the DF laboratories. It recognises the growing demand for timely digital evidence, the need to balance local accessibility with national consistency, and the importance of integrating new technology and process in a tiered way.
- 1.28 The introduction of any new technology or process will be implemented using the Rights Based Pathway (RBP). The RBP is designed to support decision making and to maintain public trust and confidence in Police Scotland in respect of its adoption and use of technology. The Data Ethics Triage (DET) process is an integral part of the RBP and ensures that Police Scotland can demonstrate a consistent and proportionate approach to assessing ethical and public interest considerations around new technology.
- 1.29 The model provides a clear framework for aligning frontline triage, divisional specialists and specialist laboratory functions ensuring that resources are deployed efficiently and that the service delivered to investigators and the courts remains robust, credible and futureproof:
- Tier 1: Frontline officers are empowered and can quickly upload digital data from the scene, minimising the need for physical device seizures.
 - Tier 2: Divisional specialists can provide advice, assist with development of strategies, and access and analyse data immediately, speeding up local investigations.
 - Tier 3: Digital Forensic Laboratories. Specialists will receive pre-analysed, securely managed cases, allowing them to focus on the most complex work.

1.30 Alignment to the Chief Constable's Vision

1.31 The impact from a lack of evolution and investment in DF is recognised at an organisational level, and is committed as a priority under the Chief Constables 2030 three-year vision and business plan, notably:

- Enhance capabilities of digital forensic laboratories to create efficiencies and keep up with technological developments.
- Invest in capabilities outlined within our PDWP workstreams to better prevent, protect, prepare and pursue cybercrime, including enhancing capabilities of digital forensic laboratories to gain formal accreditation, create efficiencies and keep pace with technological developments.

1.32 Benefits

1.33 Benefits of the above approach include:

- Improved case throughput, thereby reducing risk.
- Increased detection rates and criminal justice outcomes.
- Increased protection of the public and vulnerable groups.
- Improved staff welfare.
- Improved trust and confidence in DF service delivery.
- Improved frontline efficiency.
- Improved investigative capabilities.
- Improved reporting efficiencies to COPFS.

1.34 Governance Routes

1.35 A briefing paper will be submitted to Police Scotland's Transformation Board for approval for the pausing of the ISO 17025 project.

1.36 Delivery of the elements outlined is anticipated to be shared between PDWP, Digital Division, and the DF business area. Detailed requirements gathering is currently in progress, which will inform the identification of specific solutions and associated costs, and clarify which area is best positioned to lead each element of the change.

2 Strategic alignment detail

2.1 Strategic alignment to strategic police plan and other key enabling strategies

Strategic alignment	Chief Constable's 2030 Vision: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safer Communities• Less Crime• Supported Victims• Thriving Workforce
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2.2 The proposal is built around the four pillars of the Chief Constable's 2030 Vision:

2.3 Safer Communities: Slow manual data transfer risks delay and loss of evidence, disclosure breaches, and growing laboratory workloads. Modern data management and automated processes ensures timely, secure sharing, upholds fairness, and protects reputation. Efficient digital handling strengthens public trust and demonstrates a professional, victim-focused approach which reduces opportunity and for cases to fail due to procedural errors. The proposed three-tier approach demonstrates a modern, professional, victim-focused approach to policing and enhances inter-agency collaboration, improving outcomes and the perception of joined-up justice.

2.4 Less crime: Manual disc transfers are slow, unreliable and costly, especially across Scotland's remote areas where transport and weather cause delays. Investing in remote data management enables instant evidence access and coupled with introduction of updated kiosk capability enables faster case progression, and better use of police time.

2.5 Supported Victims: Delays caused by manual sharing of evidence can prolong distress for victims awaiting justice or updates on case progress. Witnesses may also have to attend court or give multiple statements due to delays or lost data, causing frustration or reduced cooperation. Remote data management and updated kiosk capability supports trauma-informed practice by reducing unnecessary repetition and delay.

2.6 Thriving Workforce: Digital Forensics demand has increased year on year and is now at a critical point in terms of servicing that demand. A Digital Forensics data management capability would create numerous efficiencies within PSoS and enable a thriving workforce. DF staff welfare will be significantly improved by reducing the manual workload, ensuring the safe sharing of digital evidence, and the encouragement a more

positive work environment. By automating repetitive manual tasks involved in providing data for review purposes onto different removeable media formats and streamlining those workflows, analysts can focus on more complex case work which will lead to increased job satisfaction and reduced stress.

2.7 Alignment to risk register and risk appetite

Risk alignment	<p>There are three related risks on the Police Scotland corporate risk register. Transformational investment within Digital Forensics will aid reduction of risk in these areas:</p> <p>O1A0004, Organisational Technology Resilience - This relates to the risk we face due to the merging of old/different IT systems and infrastructure which are inconsistent and outdated. We need to upgrade our tech infrastructure, or we risk service disruptions, system failures, security breaches.</p> <p>O1E0011, Information Sharing - Because of poor and inconsistent information sharing with partners we might be at risk of breaking data protection laws.</p> <p>O4E0001, Cybercrime Digital Forensics Capacity - Captures lack of investment, process redesign and staffing in digital forensics. Barriers have created capacity constraints. Demand for digital forensics increasingly rapidly. If we can't scale it might lead to missed evidence, delays in prosecutions etc.</p>
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2.8 Prior governance

Prior governance	PSoS Executive review and sign off
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2.9 The proposal to seek formal approval to pause the ISO17025 Project was raised to senior management for review on the 27th August 2025, attended by ACC Houston, Director of Transformation Breeda McCaffrey, DCS Andrew Patrick (CAFU) and Head of Delivery John Sheehy. A paper will be presented to internal governance boards to seek formal approval.

2.10 The 'Digital Forensics Data Management Capability Project' was presented to the Front Door Board chaired by DCC Smith on 7th August 2025. This was later approved to proceed by the Director of Transformation in October 2025.

2.11 Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement	Project and Programme Board membership
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2.12 Board members at Project and Programme Board level have been consulted on the pausing of ISO 17025 and the three tier vision for Digital Forensics. This includes both key internal stakeholders e.g. Digital Division and also external stakeholders including SPA and COPFS.

3 Implications detail

Community		Data & Privacy		Environmental	
Equalities & Human Rights		Financial	✓	Health, Safety & Wellbeing	
Legal		Workforce	✓		

- 3.1 Financial – In terms of the ISO 17025 Project, the financial year 25/26 allocated budget of £141,000 will not be met and approximately £100,000 will be handed back to Transformation. In terms of costs associated with the wider changes detailed in this report, detailed requirements gathering is currently underway and will help inform overall costs and relevant governance routes.
- 3.2 Workforce – There are personnel implications associated with this paper, including the re-deployment of the ISO 17025 Project Team. Wider implications in terms of the tiered approach are yet to be defined in terms of detail and number of resources.
- 3.3 The introduction of the proposed changes detailed in this report will demonstrate that Police Scotland are achieving a high standard of service delivery in relation to DF, in support of wider Criminal Justice service needs and to better meet the expectations of victims and witnesses. Reputational risks exist if these changes are not implemented, and criminal justice processes are negatively affected.