

Part 1 – For publication

Purpose of the report

1. To formally record the decision taken by the North West Joint Oversight Collaboration Committee (NW JOCC) that the Regional Toxicology Facility (RTF) was no longer viable and it should be decommissioned.

Background

2.1 The Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) has the legal power and duty to ‘enter into collaboration agreements with other PCCs, other policing bodies and partners that improve the efficiency or effectiveness of policing for one or more policing bodies or police forces in consultation with the Chief Constable (where this relates to the functions of the police force, then it must be with the agreement of the Chief Constable)’ (*The Policing Protocol Order 2023 (Paragraph 17h)*).

2.2 Section 22a of the Police Act 1996 provides the statutory basis for collaboration agreements between police forces and policing bodies in England and Wales. A Section 22a agreement is a formal collaboration between police forces and/or policing bodies to share resources, responsibilities, or services for more efficient and effective policing.

2.3 The PFCC is a member of the NW JOCC which includes all the PCCs, Deputy Mayors and the Chief Constables from the North West. These are Cumbria, Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Lancashire and North Wales. The purpose of this committee is to provide the opportunity for joint scrutiny and oversight of the performance and value of collaborations affecting two or more of the six police forces. It focuses on ensuring existing collaborations are operationally effective and providing both value for money and demonstrable benefits to the public.

2.4 Following the UK Forensic Science Regulator’s (FSR) note of concern regarding the threat to Forensic Science in the UK, in December 2018 the North-West Region commenced an initial marketplace assessment which was presented to the North West Regional Deputy Chief Constables Board in January 2019.

2.5 In January 2019, the marketplace assessment was approved, with the Board instructing further work to develop a Business Case, under the management of a ‘Regional Insourcing Forensics’ Project, exploring forensic services exposed to Forensic Service Providers (FSPs) that could be readily brought in house. These services included Drug Testing, Footwear Examination, Firearms testing and classification, Forensics Courier Service and Toxicology (*i.e. A regional laboratory for toxicology testing focused on Section 5a Road Traffic Act toxicology work (namely drug driving)*). North West Regional Toxicology Facility

2.6 By December 2019 it was agreed to move towards Regional Collaboration in the services above. Individual Business Cases (Commercial, Management, Economic, Financial and Strategic) were prepared exploring regional collaboration in greater detail.

2.7 The Business Cases, together with Heads of Terms for a regional Section 22a Agreement, were approved by the NW JOCC on 10th September 2020. These set out the detailed strategic, management, financial, business and commercial cases together with the detailed basis on which a Section 22a Agreement would be prepared. It is noted that Greater Manchester opted out of the collaborations.

2.8 The table below details the different areas of areas of forensic collaborative activity and the lead Force and participating parties.

Collaborative activity	Relevant Chief Officer	Participating Parties
Drugs testing	Lancashire	Cheshire, Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside & North Wales
Footwear examination (Group A)	Lancashire	Lancashire, Cumbria and Merseyside
Footwear examination (Group B)	Cheshire	Cheshire and North Wales
Firearms testing and classification	Merseyside	Cheshire, Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside & North Wales
Toxicology	Merseyside	Cheshire, Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside & North Wales
Forensics Courier Service	Merseyside	Cheshire, Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside & North Wales

2.9 In accordance with the Section 22a agreement, regular reports have been provided to the NW JOCC on the delivery and the effectiveness and efficiency of the Regional Collaborations.

Regional Toxicology Service

3.1 With regard to the Regional Toxicology Facility (RTF), the laboratory was built within the Annexe at Merseyside Police Headquarters which houses a number of other forensic services for the force. This single facility was intended to service 100% of the demand for the 5 collaborative forces.

3.2 Staff were recruited in line with the agreed model from early 2021 and commenced training and the development of processes and procedures with the key objective of achieving ISO accreditation from UKAS.

3.3 Accreditation was achieved in September 2023 and in October that year, the RTF started to take live case work from Merseyside Police and then by December, for Cumbria Constabulary.

3.4 There were a number of operational challenges early on which led to UKAS suspending the ISO accreditation in March 2024 after undertaking surveillance visits in January that year.

3.5 Further live casework was therefore not accepted by the RTF and the 5 forces continued to outsource to external providers in the private marketplace.

3.6 The RTF then went through a period of review to understand the challenges that led to the withdrawal of accreditation and any required remedies, and work commenced to secure reaccreditation by UKAS in the autumn of 2024.

3.7 Following briefings to the Chief Constables and PCCs of the collaborative forces, it was determined that the RTF was no longer a viable facility and that Forces would confirm their withdraw from the toxicology element of the Section 22a Agreement. In addition, Merseyside Police were tasked with exploring the potential options around outsourcing the facilities operations. Consequently, contact was made with Blue Light Commercial (BLC) who supported preliminary market engagement. Six companies registered interest and met virtually with Merseyside Police and BLC. The nature of their interest varied, ranging from proposals to acquire the operation of the facility outright, to discussions around transferring operations to existing facilities or providing ongoing technical support to the facility.

3.8 On 30th October 2025, an extraordinary meeting of the NW JOCC was held to discuss the options for outsourcing the facility, including indicative timelines and associated costings. Following the discussions it was agreed to move forward with decommissioning of the RTF and not to explore outsourcing further. Therefore, forces would continue to outsource Section 5A Toxicology work to external forensic service providers. This decision was formally endorsed at the NW JOCC meeting on 6th November 2025.

3.9 Consequently, the RTF will be decommissioned and the Section 22A agreement for North West Regional Forensics will be amended accordingly. The PCC is asked to formally record the decision of NW JOCC to decommission the RTF and to formally agree to withdraw Merseyside Police from the Section 22a agreement with regard to the toxicology collaborative activity.

Financial and Resource Implications

4.1 Since 2020/21, it is estimated that the total cost of the Regional Toxicology Laboratory at point of decommissioning is £5.75m, of which Merseyside Police have invested £2.38m. This investment includes the set-up costs, including accreditation costs, and the running costs of the facility. Merseyside Police funded its share of the costs from approved one-off resources and in year underspends from the overall Force budget.

4.2 Whilst establishing the RTF it was necessary for each Force to continue to 'outsource' their toxicology demand to external forensic service providers. Consequently, Merseyside Police retained the original toxicology budget provision

to fund this expenditure. This budget provision will remain to fund the service requirements going forward.

4.3 It is estimated that the cost of decommissioning of the RTF, e.g. redundancy costs and the remaining contract costs, will be funded from the disposal of the specialist forensic equipment. Any surplus will be returned to Forces in accordance with the Section 22a agreement.

4.4 In terms of the floor space vacated by the toxicology service, this will be repurposed by Merseyside Police.

Risk Assessment

5 The private forensic marketplace is considered to be more stable than it was in 2019 and there are a number of established forensic service providers who are delivering Section 5a Toxicology Services to UK police forces. The 5 forces who were part of this collaboration will continue to outsource demand to forensic service providers. All forces are eligible to be aligned with the national framework for procurement of forensic services which is coordinated by Blue Light Commercial who ensure a national approach to value for money, quality and resilience within the marketplace whilst still giving local forces flexibility over which services they use.

Consultation

6 Internal consultation has taken place with affected staff members as well as engagement with key stakeholders across policing and across the forensic science sector (Forensic Science Regulator, UKAS, NPCC Lead for Forensics).

Conclusion

7 The Regional Toxicology Facility is being decommissioned, the Section 22a collaboration agreement is being amended and the collaborative forces are continuing to outsource demand to external providers.