

ISO/IEC 17020 Accreditation for Crime Scene Investigation – An overview

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Development of standards for crime scene investigation

Over recent years, there have been many discussions in the UK and Europe regarding standards for crime scene investigation. The main reason for requiring such standards is primarily due to the criticality of this activity within respective judicial systems.

Within the UK a number of bodies such as ACPO, NPIA, Skills for Justice and CRFP have been working on this issue but progress had been relatively slow.

In Europe, various bodies have also been active and the European Network of Forensic Science Institutes (ENFSI) held a meeting with the European Co-operation for Accreditation (EA) in April 2006 to determine the best way forward, to ensure that a common approach would be adopted throughout Europe.

The EA is a regional network of National Accreditation Bodies whose role is to ensure transparency of the operations (including assessments) and results of its members, and ensuring common interpretation of the international standards they use.

Accreditation is defined in ISO/IEC Guide 2:1996 as a procedure by which an authoritative body gives formal recognition that a body or person is competent to carry out specific tasks

The outcome was a Memorandum of Understanding between ENFSI and EA in June 2006, selecting the international quality standard for inspecting bodies, ISO/IEC 17020:1998, as the most appropriate standard for crime scene investigation.

At the same time, a working group was established comprised of representatives from the ENFSI Scene of Crime Working Group, the ENFSI Quality and Competence Committee and the EA to draft guidance to aid in the interpretation of ISO/IEC 17020:1998 for assessing crime scene investigation. This has been published by the EA as '*EA-5/03 Guidance for the Implementation of ISO/IEC 17020 in the field of crime scene investigation*'.

Running parallel with this in the UK has been the appointment of the Forensic Science Regulator who is charged with developing a framework of quality standards for forensic science which meets the needs of the Criminal Justice System and is designed to give the public confidence that forensic science used in the investigation and prosecution process, is robust and fit for purpose.

This paper sets out the approach to be adopted by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) in delivering an accreditation service for crime scene investigation thus satisfying key stakeholder requirements.

1.2 United Kingdom Accreditation Service

The United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) is a Member of the EA and has been formally appointed as the UK's National Accreditation Body through legislation and operates under a Memorandum of Understanding through the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

In compliance with the European Commission's policy, EA members, including UKAS:

- operate in complete independence from commercial motivations
- are authoritative and impartial bodies

- are not involved in conformity activities for which they accredit other bodies
- can demonstrate a high level of competence through participation in the EA peer evaluation system

UKAS has been assessing and accrediting within the forensic science sector for many years. It has actively participated in the ENFSI/EA working group which produced the European guidance document relating to scene of crime investigation (EA-5/03). Additionally, and to ensure that it has a robust service in place to meet future UK demands for accreditation within this area, UKAS has initiated a development project, which is overseen by a steering committee consisting of key UK scene of crime stakeholders, to assist and advise in the development of the ISO/IEC 17020:1998 accreditation service for scene of crime investigations.

2. QUALITY STANDARDS FRAMEWORK

The Forensic Science Regulator is developing a single quality standards framework inclusive of existing accreditation, certification and other standards. Underpinning this framework is his 'Codes of Practice and Conduct for forensic science providers and practitioners in the Criminal Justice System' which sets out the quality requirements for providers of forensic science services into the CJS. It is a firm requirement that all providers shall gain accreditation to ISO/IEC 17020:1998 and/or ISO/IEC 17025:2005, as appropriate, for their scope of work, and that individual practitioners are able to demonstrate a level of competence commensurate with the requisite National Occupational Standards developed by Skills for Justice

N.B. This scope of this paper, in focusing on crime scene investigation, is restricted to ISO/IEC 17020:1998

2.1 ISO/IEC 17020:1998 – General criteria for the operation of various types of bodies performing inspection

Accredited 'Inspection bodies' carry out competent, independent and impartial inspections to provide their client(s) with information/evidence relative to conformity with regulations, standards or other specifications.

As stated in its title, ISO/IEC 17020 (obtainable from BSI Publications or The Stationery Office) is the appropriate standard for those bodies performing 'inspection'. It should be read in conjunction with 'IAF/ILAC-A4:2004 Guidance on the Application of ISO/IEC 17020' and 'EA-5/03 Guidance for the Implementation of ISO/IEC 17020 in the field of crime scene investigation'. This additional guidance will ensure that accreditation to this standard is consistently applied by national accreditation bodies and, by concentrating on the key activities involved in crime scene investigations, will provide confidence across the entire process.

Whilst the standard has many unique requirements, there is some overlap between its requirements and those found in other accreditation and certification standards (e.g. ISO/IEC 17025 and ISO 9001) including for example, that for an underpinning quality system. Both ISO/IEC 17020 and ISO/IEC 17025 address the suitability and control of any equipment used during the inspection process and also requires the maintenance of confidentiality. Other clauses of ISO/IEC 17020 require inspection bodies to conduct inspections in a safe manner whilst abiding by a code of conduct, to participate in an exchange of experience with other inspection bodies (thus facilitating the sharing of best practice) and, importantly, it allows for the exercise of professional judgement by those undertaking the inspection activity.

Accredited inspection bodies have to demonstrate the competence of personnel for all functions. The minimum requirements for competence have to be defined by the inspection body but are driven by 'industry' norms and where, for example, existing training and occupational skills requirements can be recognised as contributing to the necessary competence. The inspection body remains responsible for ensuring the competence of its personnel at all times. When assessing the defined competency criteria and the crime scene investigation activity (i.e. the inspection), UKAS will be guided and supported by independent and impartial scene of crime/forensic experts.

The scope of ISO/IEC 17020:1998 and the additional flexibility it offers for the exercise of ‘professional judgement’ by the inspection personnel, was instrumental in its selection by the EA as the most appropriate standard for scene of crime investigation activities.

3. THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

One of the functions of UKAS is to assess and accredit the competence of inspection bodies to carry out specified fields and types of inspection and subsequently to ensure by monitoring that the required standards are maintained. Assessment of the competence of an inspection body is carried out using document review, visits to the inspection body’s central administrative office and other locations and on-site assessment of inspections. More information on the process as applied to inspection bodies can be found in UKAS publication ‘E1 General Principles for the Assessment of Inspection Bodies by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service’.

3.1 Application for accreditation

Before applying for accreditation, all organisations should have obtained a copy of the relevant accreditation standard (ISO/IEC 17020) in order to properly prepare the application. The Application Form lists in detail what is required to be submitted with the application in order for it to be processed without delay. Incomplete applications will be subject to delay until all information is received (and where UKAS is running a ‘pilot’ assessment and accreditation process – see Section 5 below, may result in the applicant organisation being withdrawn from the pilot).

Upon receipt, an Assessment Manager will be assigned. The Assessment Manager is the case officer responsible for taking the applicant through the accreditation process and for maintaining and renewing accreditation in the future.

3.2 Pre-assessment visit

UKAS normally recommends a pre-assessment visit by the UKAS Assessment Manager (and possibly, a technical assessor). This visit addresses the scope of accreditation requested and will normally involve between 1 and 4 man-days work. It is designed to confirm the applicant’s readiness for full assessment.

The Assessment Manager will provide a quotation for the work involved and a report on the findings of the pre-assessment following the visit

3.3 Initial assessment visit

This will be conducted by a Lead Assessor (normally the Assessment Manager) supported, as necessary, by technical assessors with the expertise to cover the scope of accreditation requested. The length of the visit will depend upon the scope of accreditation requested. Again, the Assessment Manager will provide a quotation for the work involved. Prior to the visit, a visit plan is supplied which provides a proposed timetable for the work to be assessed. Any improvement actions identified against accreditation requirements is notified to the applicant in writing during or immediately following the assessment visit. The applicant is then asked to advise UKAS on how it is intended that these findings are addressed. Once any improvement actions have been implemented to the satisfaction of UKAS, accreditation can be granted.

3.4 Maintenance of accreditation

Accreditation will be confirmed on an annual basis by surveillance visits, with a full reassessment every fourth year. The first surveillance visit takes place 6 months after the grant of accreditation.

At the initial accreditation stage, the accredited body is provided with an estimate of the work involved for the four-year cycle. If at any time the estimated effort changes (for example, if the accredited body has an extension to scope granted which affects the effort required in subsequent assessments), then an amended estimate will be provided. In addition, a quotation for each year's assessment is provided.

4. COSTS & BENEFITS

4.1 Costs

UKAS charges for all assessment effort and quotations are issued in advance of any work commencing. An Application Fee (£1200) is payable by all non-accredited organisations. Standard day rates apply dependant upon whether for initial accreditation (currently £937) or maintenance of accreditation (£705). Inspection bodies also pay an annual accreditation fee of £150. All fees are reviewed annually and published on the ukas.com website. As stated earlier, the duration of the assessment depends upon a number of factors and so it is difficult to give a meaningful estimate of what costs might be incurred by interested parties. As an example, a small inspection body with limited scope of activity can expect UKAS initial assessment effort of between 7-10 days (total investment typically £7759-£10570 including application fee). Surveillance costs are typically around 40%-50% of the initial assessment effort with reassessment costs being similar to those for initial assessment (excluding the application fee). It is recommended that interested parties seek further information on likely costs.

UKAS accredited bodies are recognised internationally for their declared scope of activities. Formal statement of accreditation is in the form of a certificate of accreditation with an accompanying schedule identifying the scope of accreditation. This schedule appears on the UKAS website whilst ever accreditation is maintained. Additionally, accredited bodies can use the relevant UKAS symbol(s) in accordance with the published conditions (URN 09/1090).

4.2 Benefits

Accreditation demonstrates the technical competence and the impartiality and integrity of the organisations offering scene of crime investigation services.

UKAS accreditation offers transparent solutions that deliver:

Public trust: confidence that forensic and forensic related activities are carried out impartially and competently.

One stop shop: accreditation has a broad application across the Home Office, the Police service and Government as a whole, covering multiple sectors and multiple disciplines in a consistent way.

Cost reduction: organisations operating efficiently and effectively with oversight by UKAS, reduce the need for regulators or organisations to establish their own assessment and approval activities.

Accreditation has underpinned quality assurance of forensic analysis for almost 20 years, ensuring confidence of analysis of samples and results produced in the laboratory. However, until now the examination of, and collection of materials from, crime scenes has not been covered by accreditation. Accredited examination and collection of materials from crime scenes will provide additional confidence in the integrity and chain of custody of the materials being collected.

5. UKAS PROJECT PLAN AND PILOT PROGRAMME

To progress accreditation in the crime scene investigation area, UKAS, together with other key stakeholders, has developed a project plan to identify the internal and external arrangements necessary to facilitate the assessment and accreditation of applicant inspection bodies to ISO/IEC 17020.

UKAS will be running a pilot programme with selected applicants to test-out the assessment methodologies and modify them as/if appropriate during the pilot phase. This will permit development of the scheme on an ongoing basis. Once finalised, the assessment methodologies will then be applied in a similar manner to all other bodies subsequently seeking accreditation in this area.

The pilot bodies will be subject to the same rigorous UKAS assessments as for all UKAS assessment activities, but there may be a requirement for additional assessment effort within the pilot if identified as essential to ensure a robust assessment process and an accredited inspection service that satisfies the demanding requirements placed upon it by the UK criminal justice system.

All pilot bodies fully satisfying the pilot and accreditation criteria will be granted accreditation on the same date. Any that fail to meet all criteria within the agreed timescales may continue to progress towards accreditation at their own pace. Likewise, at the end of the pilot programme, other applicant inspection bodies will be processed following the standard UKAS processes achieving accreditation in their own timescales subject to meeting all accreditation criteria.

The key dates for inspection bodies seeking accreditation for crime scene investigation and wishing to participate in the pilot programme have yet to be finalised but indicative timescales are as follows:

- Invitation for expressions of interest from inspection bodies: **December 2010 – January 2011**
- Identification of bodies to be involved in pilot programme: **February 2011**
- Formal application to UKAS (including submission of supporting documentation): **March – April 2011**
- Assessments conducted: **May - October 2011**
- Close-out of all improvement actions: **January 2012**
- Grant of accreditation to all pilot organisations meeting accreditation requirements: **February 2012**

NB to participate in the pilot programme, inspection bodies must have submitted all supporting documentation (as detailed in the UKAS application form) by the specified date (to be advised in due course).

Bodies interested in this pilot programme should make early contact with UKAS using the contact details below (Section 8).

6. TECHNICAL ASSESSOR REQUIREMENTS

UKAS will be contracting-in competent external resources to provide the technical input necessary for the rigorous assessment of applicant bodies. Working with UKAS Assessment Managers, such technical support persons, in addition to technical competence, will need suitable personal attributes and the ability to work objectively and impartially whilst maintaining the security and confidentiality of all information and evidence seen. To this end, the competency criteria have been defined and are available to interested parties. For further information on this and the UKAS recruitment process, please use the contact details below.

7. CONTACT DETAILS

To discuss the accreditation of crime scene investigations, the pilot programme or any aspect of this paper please contact Katherine or Ian (and copy-in Susie on any emails):

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For general matters relating to UKAS accreditation please contact:

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9 REFERENCES

ISO/IEC 17020:1998 – General criteria for the operation of various types of bodies performing inspection

IAF/ILAC-A4:2004 Guidance on the Application of ISO/IEC 17020

EA-5/03 Guidance for the Implementation of ISO/IEC 17020 in the field of crime scene investigation

E1 General Principles for the Assessment of Inspection Bodies by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service