

## Forensic Proficiency Testing Service Protocols

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## 1. Introduction

Forensic Access has been at the heart of forensic science since 1986. We have one of the broadest bases of forensic disciplines of any independent provider and undertake active casework for the prosecution, defence, industry, private individuals and other organisations. We provide a range of forensic proficiency tests under the FPTS® brand. FPTS® is an acronym for Forensic Proficiency Testing Services.

## 2. Accreditation and PT

Accreditation requires the formal, external assessment of an organisation's documented procedures against a relevant International Standard.

The relevant conformity standard for laboratories in the field of forensic testing is ISO/IEC 17025. Compliance with ISO/IEC 17025 cannot guarantee that the procedures give accurate results. Only the external check of a proficiency test can confirm that the results are accurate – hence the requirement within ISO/IEC 17025 for laboratories to take part in PT schemes.

It must be stressed that taking part in a PT scheme does not confer accreditation upon a laboratory. This applies even if the provider is working to become accredited for the provision of PT schemes.

It is a UKAS policy that all accredited laboratories shall participate in PT's/ILC's where such schemes are available and relevant to their scope of accreditation.

## 3. Responsibilities

Forensic Proficiency Testing Service (FPTS) will design, validate, deliver, administrate and evaluate the proficiency testing schemes. Schemes are designed with reference to advice and recommendations from Advisory Groups and from direct feedback from participants as a result of customer feedback questionnaires.

Each scheme is managed separately, and individual Product Specifications are available for each.

The responsibilities of individual staff are detailed in the Forensic Access Quality Manual; however, the operation of PT schemes require specific responsibilities: -

- UK Sales Manager – To oversee the general operation of FPTS, dealing with customer accounts, orders and communications relating to FPTS activities.
- Product/Technical Manager – To oversee the management of all Schemes and ensure that Schemes are run in accordance with FPTS policies and procedures
- Scheme Co-ordinator – Each scheme is organised and managed by individual Scheme Co-ordinators

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- Technical Specialists – To provide technical assistance as required. External advisors are selected on the basis of their personal expertise and not their affiliation; they need not be members of the Advisory Panel. When consulting experts, FPTS will not disclose any participant information, purely scientific information will be exchanged. See 'Confidentiality' for further details.

## 4. Definitions

### **Forensic Access (FA)**

Forensic Access has been at the heart of forensic science since 1986. We have one of the broadest bases of forensic disciplines of any independent provider and undertake active casework for the prosecution, defence, industry, private individuals and other organisations.

### **Forensic proficiency Testing Service (FPTS)**

Forensic Access provide a range of forensic proficiency tests under the FPTS® brand. FPTS® is an acronym for Forensic Proficiency Testing Services

### **Proficiency Testing (PT)**

Evaluation of participant performance against pre-established criteria by means of Interlaboratory comparison

### **Customer**

Organisation or individual for which a proficiency test scheme is provided through contractual arrangement

### **Participant**

Laboratory, organisation or individual that receives proficiency test items and submits results for review by the proficiency test provider

### **Sub-Contractor**

Organisation or individual engaged by FPTS to perform activities relating to material provided by FPTS that affect the provision of the scheme. The term sub-contractor also includes those people who are often referred to as collaborators.

### **Proficiency Testing Scheme**

Proficiency testing designed and operated in one or more rounds for a specified area of testing

### **Proficiency Test Range**

The provision of several different products all related to the proficiency test scheme they are associated with

### **Proficiency Test Round**

Single complete sequence of distribution of proficiency test items and the evaluation and reporting of results

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## Proficiency Test Material

Individual test items provided as components in a proficiency testing round. These individual test items may feature in one, or more than one round and the evaluation of these results will be collated to form datasets for specific items and provide a database of results for interlaboratory comparisons.

## 5. Organisation

Our PT Schemes are overseen by an Advisory Panel which meets at least annually. The Advisory panel has representatives from the Police, the Association of Forensic Science Providers (AFSP) and the Chartered Society of Forensic Sciences, joined on an 'as needed' basis by highly experienced technical specialists. Their remit is to consider and comment upon the programme of PT's planned by FPTS for the forthcoming year and discuss any scientific issues arising from PT's conducted in the current year. Panel members can advise FPTS staff at any point during the year and group email correspondence is frequently used to facilitate discussions. A list of current advisory panel members is available on request.

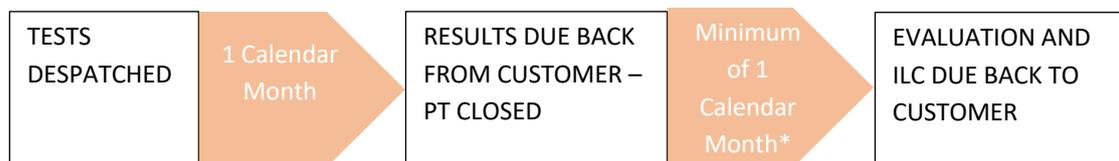
The day-to-day running of an individual PT is the responsibility of the 'Scheme Co-ordinator' and the UK Sales Manager. Ultimate responsibility for all FPTS PT's lies with the Managing Director of Scientific Services, Philip Avenell.

## 6. Timetable

FPTS provides on-going PT schemes where test materials are issued on a regular basis every year (Scheduled Services). Customers can purchase one or more test rounds at their discretion as they become available to purchase on the FPTS website.

### 6.1. Scheduled Service

FPTS advertises the ongoing Scheduled Service timetable on a rolling annual basis. The annual programmes are compiled by FPTS in conjunction with the Advisory Panel. Scheduled Rounds will generally be released quarterly, with customers able to purchase tests one round at a time. This is determined by the deadline specified in the product specification. Release of the next Scheduled Round in each product range for sale to non-subscribers will commence upon closure of the previous one.



To be included in the scheduled round the test must be purchased via the website by the purchase deadline.

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The outline process of conducting a single proficiency test round is as follows:

- i. Preparation of test materials and supporting documentation.
- ii. Despatch of test materials on the advertised date from FPTS
- iii. Participants analyse test materials and return results by a given date. (FPTS will not guarantee late results being evaluated or included in the inter-laboratory comparison report.) For tests that form part of our Scheduled Services, this is 1 calendar month from despatch.
- iv. Results subject to review and interpretation by FPTS.
- v. Distribution of reports to participants, within the agreed timescale of PT Close (Scheduled). FPTS reserves the right to extend this period in cases where the results evaluation proves to be atypical, any differences to individual timetables will be communicated in the detailed Product Specification available on the website for each of the individual products.

Participants will be kept informed by email if a delay arises at any of these stages or if there are any changes to the scheduled design or operation of the proficiency testing service.

## 6.2. On Demand

FPTS also offer PT scheme materials outside of the schedule round timetables for customers with specific requirements. This will be referred to as an 'On-Demand Service'. Customers wishing to participate in an On-Demand Service should contact FPTS to discuss their requirements. Inter laboratory comparison reports may still be obtained when using the On-Demand Service depending on the availability of appropriate test materials.

## 7. Confidentiality

Forensic Access will protect the identity of any participants taking part in the Forensic Proficiency Testing Service (FPTS) proficiency testing schemes and ensure that all participant information remains confidential and known only to persons involved in the operation of the proficiency testing scheme, unless the participant waives confidentiality.

If an 'interested party' such as the Police Quality Standards Specialist Group, The Centre of Applied Science and Technology Group or National Accreditation Service requires the results of the proficiency test to be provided directly by FPTS then all participants affected must be made aware of the arrangement in advance of their participation.

In exceptional circumstances, when a regulatory authority such as The Forensic Science Regulator, requires proficiency testing results to be directly provided to the authority by the proficiency testing provider, the affected participants shall be notified of this action in writing, where possible, in advance.

Forensic Access will protect the identity of biological sample donors who have provided samples and given consent for their samples to be used in FPTS test materials. In situations where a participant may require information relating to any given DNA profile then the request must be made in writing.

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The confidentiality of FPTS staff shall be protected and names and addresses of Scheme Co-ordinators will be withheld to protect confidentiality and in order to avoid any conflicts of interest. Any reports issued from FPTS will be signed and issued on behalf of FPTS by the Technical Manager and/or Quality Manager.

To avoid any conflict of interest / breach in confidentiality, if Forensic Access or its subcontractors wish to participate in a PT they will be treated in the same manner as any other participant. Participating staff will not have access to details of other participants. Likewise, when FPTS seeks expert advice from Forensic Access' staff and subcontractors (or indeed, any other source), it will not disclose any information that would breach participant confidentiality.

## 8. Collusion and Falsification of Results

It is the policy and overall objective of the Forensic Proficiency Testing Service to ensure that collusion between participants or between individuals taking part in FPTS proficiency testing schemes and pilots is not committed.

Collusion is contrary to professional scientific conduct and it serves only to nullify the benefits of proficiency testing to customers, accreditation bodies and analysts.

Participants returning results to FPTS must confirm that they have neither colluded with any other person in completing this test, nor falsified any of the results, by signing a statement on the Results Form specific to the proficiency test undertaken.

***"I confirm that I have completed this test following documented standard operating procedures, have not discussed the test or results with any person(s) not directly involved in the testing or peer review of this test and that I have not falsified any of the results."*** If you agree to this statement, please type I AGREE in the box below.

Failure to return 'I Agree' shall lead to that participant's result being excluded from the Inter-Laboratory Comparison Report.

If collusion is suspected by, or reported to, Forensic Proficiency Testing Services, then an issue will be raised through the Continuous Improvement Process and a full investigation will be carried out.

In any instance where the investigation indicates that a participating laboratory has colluded or falsified results, the Customer Representative for that laboratory will be advised and asked to cooperate with furthering the investigation.

As a preventative measure, FPTS reserves the right to distribute more than one test material within a PT so that participants cannot compare results directly.

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Laboratories found to be engaging in collusion or falsification of results may be refused participation in subsequent proficiency tests.

## 9. Participation in Schemes

FPTS policy ensures customers can participate in FPTS schemes following that they meet the specified criteria

- Customers are Forensic Service Providers, or other 'interested parties' that undertake forensic testing. (Other 'interested parties' may include universities, The Centre of Applied Science and Technology Group, NCA and other investigating authorities). Other 'interested parties' wishing to take part in FPTS services will be at the discretion of the FPTS management.
- Have entered into a contractual arrangement with FPTS (details about making contractual arrangements can be found in the FPTS Terms and Conditions available on the website).

Uptake of all FPTS Schemes on offer can be decided by the individual customers and participant requirements. The FPTS schemes do not stipulate a minimum level or frequency of participation.

Schemes are advertised on website [www.forensic-proficiency.co.uk](http://www.forensic-proficiency.co.uk). For each new scheme round a full product specification can be downloaded. Product Specifications contain details of the design, aims, test materials, fees and specific timetables for the round.

If there is not sufficient interest in a given scheme round, Inter Laboratory Comparison (ILC) reports may still be possible if the test items have been included in previous rounds and the database of scheme materials contains sufficient information. If there is an insufficient dataset of test material for ILC, then FPTS will contact any customers, where possible before despatch of test materials, to inform them that an ILC will not be possible. An alternative style of evaluative report may be supplied to the customer and discussions will be held on any further course of action.

FPTS will evaluate one set of results per kit purchased and return one individual report. If multiple kits are purchased multiple reports will be returned.

## 10. Enrolment and Fees

The programmes for FPTS Schemes are available on the website, [www.forensic-proficiency.co.uk](http://www.forensic-proficiency.co.uk). Customers place their orders online by browsing these programmes and ordering through the website. Alternatively, customers can contact FPTS on 01865 595458 or [fpts@forensic-proficiency.com](mailto:fpts@forensic-proficiency.com) for assistance with placing an order.

PT order confirmations are automatically emailed to customers on completion of the ordering process. The confirmation email contains links to the following documentation:

- i. A printer friendly version of the order
- ii. Terms and Conditions
- iii. Technical Specifications & Instructions for Participants
- iv. Results Forms and instructions for return

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It is the responsibility of the customer to check the documentation and ensure that they are enrolled on the correct PT.

Details of all fees are available on the website or upon request. Payment can be made by credit/debit card via the website (preferred) or invoiced in accordance with customers' purchasing procedures. FPTS reserves the right to withhold test materials and/or PT reports from participants if payment is delayed.

## 11. Preparation, Stability and Safety of Test Material

### 11.1. Preparation of Test Materials

Materials used as part of the FPTS proficiency testing service will have been prepared by competent staff within the FPTS environment. The use of specialists outside FPTS will occasionally be used to perform certain tasks. In these cases, suitable competency of any sub-contractors has been ascertained.

Where biological material or personal material is obtained from volunteers, consent is required and kept on record. Biological material information is held on a confidential in-house Biological Samples Register. In a situation where a participant has discovered an anomalous DNA profile within their laboratory environment they must investigate this using their own procedures. However, if they believe that this may have originated from an external source then they can apply to have any anomalous components searched against FPTS registers. No confidential donor information will be shared with any third party.

Test materials may be seeded with determinands in their natural / unaltered form, or at a formulation composition / level (e.g. mixed substances, dilutions etc.). Details of test material preparation will normally be published in PT reports for consideration by participants. However, FPTS reserve the right not to publish details of test material preparation dependent on the design of the test and with the agreement of the Advisory Panel. In such instances, preparation details will be retained by FPTS.

Test materials will not be distributed by FPTS until quality checks demonstrate that the individual test items are of sufficient uniformity. Details of the quality checks in place to determine uniformity are retained by FPTS but not published in PT reports.

### 11.2. Stability of Test Materials

FPTS proficiency test materials are sufficiently stable for the duration of the test. This includes the time between their preparation and the start of the test, as well as during transportation of test material and for the period set for participants to analyse them.

Stability checks are carried out at defined intervals on longer-term stock materials to ensure test materials are fit for purpose at point of issue.

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Test materials will be packaged and transported appropriately to maintain their stability during transportation. It is the responsibility of participants to follow the storage conditions on receipt of test materials as advised in the Instructions for Participants, regardless of the transportation conditions.

### 11.3. Health & Safety

Appropriate personal protective equipment must be utilised as would be in standard case work examinations and in accordance to the usual standard operating practices. Biological materials should be treated as biohazards at all times.

## 12. Despatch and Receipt of Test Material

All test materials are distributed with a hard copy delivery note and an information card detailing how to contact FPTS and other useful information.

Instructions specific to the PT with regards to storage on receipt, type of analysis required etc. will be provided in the 'Instructions to Participants' accessed via your order confirmation email. It is the responsibility of the participants to read these instructions and follow them. FPTS cannot be held responsible for any problems arising from failure to comply with our directions.

It is the responsibility of the customer to contact FPTS if they have not received the test material within agreed timescales, as set out in our Terms & Conditions.

Delays to the despatch and delivery of test materials occasionally arise. If despatch of a test material must be delayed for any reason, participants will be notified by email prior to the advertised despatch date. FPTS cannot be held responsible if participants overlook this notice of delay.

If test materials are received damaged/contaminated or are lost in transit, FPTS will issue replacement materials at the earliest possible opportunity.

In the event that proficiency testing items are distributed and are subsequently found unsuitable for performance evaluation, participants will be informed with details of the issue and investigation.

## 13. Analysis of Test Materials

If the proficiency test is to yield maximum benefit as an external check on the routine working of participants' methods, then the sample should not be given any special treatment. Hence, participants are free to use whatever method of analysis they wish. On the occasions where the method is known to be empirical (i.e. the result is dependent on technique) FPTS shall advise participants that only the results submitted for a given method will be used to derive assigned values by consensus.

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## 14. Submission of Results

The reporting of results within the requested time scale and in the specified units is part of the performance assessment.

The deadline for the submitting of results is detailed in the 'Instructions to Participants'

Participants are requested to submit their results and methods by completing the Results Form supplied and returning by email to [fpts@forensic-proficiency.com](mailto:fpts@forensic-proficiency.com).

Participants that fail to return results by the published round closure date will not be automatically included in the results evaluation process.

Where extenuating circumstances have prevented timely results submission, participants should contact FPTS to discuss this prior to the round closure date. An uplift in fees may be applied at the discretion of the UK Sales Manager to transfer a participant from a Scheduled Round to an On-Demand Service.

Participants that do not meet the expected timeframes will automatically fail to meet the expectations of the test.

## 15. Evaluation of Results

Results from participants are evaluated in-house under the guidance of the FPTS Scheme Co-ordinators. Individual participants should note that our quality procedures involve extensive cross-checking and scrutiny by several FPTS staff under the guidance of the Scheme Co-ordinator. Consequently, this means that the process can take several weeks depending on the complexity of the data.

As a result of participants using the On-Demand service, or of test materials being used in multiple PT rounds, some datasets may change between issue of a Scheduled Round report and ultimate closing of a round.

Data relating to participants of a given Scheduled Round will be the subject of an initial report pertaining to those participants who return their results in accordance with the specified timescales of that round.

Outlying participants will be individually compared with the dataset arising from the Scheduled Round participants. All participants will have an option to request a 'Round Conclusion Report' once the round is ultimately closed (a maximum of 3 months after despatch of the last participant's test materials). There will be an additional charge for issue of a Round Conclusion Report.

To provide Inter-Laboratory Comparison of results there must be sufficient information of any given test material being compared. Each round will contain the same test material, however other previous rounds may also contain the same test material accumulating in a database of information

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## 16. Performance Assessment

The current PT schemes yield qualitative, not quantitative, results. The qualitative results will be simple 'yes/no' type results. The schemes used prescribed test protocols and the test material is known and at a level which will be fully expected to be detected by standard laboratory identification tests therefore statistical design is not applicable to current schemes.

Scoring is simple and standardised. Results are presented in a readily understood format and permit inter-laboratory comparison at that time and in the future.

The expected performance requirements for each scheme round will be documented in the 'Instructions to participants' received with the proficiency testing items.

Where results do not meet expectations an investigation into the cause involving the participant, FPTS or both will be required. The initial investigation will be dealt with via the UK Sales manager and Quality Manager and a decision will be made to recall part or the whole of an affected proficiency test round will ultimately lie with the UK sales managers and/or Product/ Technical Manager.

## 17. Reporting Results

As a guide reports are usually issued within a minimum of 1 calendar month after the closing date for submission of results, however some schemes and rounds may vary. Participants are advised in the individual round product specification when to expect individual publication of reports.

FPTS aims to provide Reports to customer as soon as is practical after the closing date of the PT and within the agreed timescales.

Any delays in the production of the reports will be communicated to the customer via email before the report due date.

Reports issued to participants are regarded as being in the public domain, However, reports issued by FPTS are subject to copyright, which cannot be assigned to other publishers. Anyone wishing to use data within the FPTS reports in their own publications should first seek permission from FPTS. Contents of the reports must not be reproduced in any way without this prior consent. This request for respect copyright cannot preclude publications exploiting FPTS data being distributed without prior knowledge or approval of FPTS.

## 18. Appeals and Complaints

FPTS will ensure that all participants raising complaints and appeals are dealt with in a professional and courteous manner and that all complaints and appeals are recorded using the documented complaints and appeals procedures.

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Records of any incidents will be kept detailing the complaint details, potential causes and follow up actions.

FPTS shall treat all participant complaints and appeals as confidential and ensuring that only those persons with appropriate levels of authorisation are privy to customer information.

FPTS undertakes to correct any mistakes attributable to errors on its part promptly. If a participant has any concerns about any aspect of the PT they should contact the Scheme Co-ordinator by email ([fpts@forensic-proficiency.com](mailto:fpts@forensic-proficiency.com)) or telephone (01865 595458).

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