

Comparison of the 2020/21 Second Edition and 2026 Third Edition

Fire Investigation Code of Practice for Investigators of Fires and Explosions for the Justice Systems in the UK

The Third Edition (October 2026) is not a wholesale rewrite of the Code. The overall structure, methodology and philosophy remain substantially unchanged. However, there are a number of important amendments, additions and clarifications throughout the document which collectively move the Code towards stronger forensic governance, greater scientific rigour, enhanced health and safety controls and recognition of modern investigation technologies.

1. AIMS (Section 1)

Amended wording

The 2026 edition updates the competency requirement from:

knowledge, understanding and competencies

to:

knowledge, understanding and competencies/skills

Additional legal clarification

The definition of "must" now explicitly references both:

- Criminal Procedure Rules; and
- Act of Adjournal in Scotland

This is a minor clarification rather than a substantive change.

2. SCOPE (Section 2)

Most significant conceptual addition

New Section 2.5

The 2026 Code states:

The Code is focused on the proximate causes of fires starting and spreading and does not specifically address ultimate or distal causes such as human or organisational factors.

There is no equivalent statement in the 2020 edition.

Practical significance

This formally defines the boundaries of the Code.

The Code is concerned primarily with:

- where the fire started;
- how it started;

- how it spread.

The Code is not specifically intended to address:

- organisational failings;
- management shortcomings;
- safety culture deficiencies;
- systemic governance failures.

This is arguably one of the most significant changes in the entire revision.

Other amendments

The wording relating to statistical investigations changes from:

supposed origin and cause

to:

likely origin and cause.

The reference to:

community risk reduction

becomes:

prevention and protection risk reduction.

3. DEFINITIONS (Section 3)

Competence

The definition is expanded to state that competence must be:

applied and evidenced consistently.

Expert Witness

2020

Defined simply as:

Expert.

2026

Expanded to:

Expert / Expert witness / Skilled witness.

This reflects modern court terminology and broadens applicability.

Peer Review

2020

Peer review required:
competence equal to or greater than the author.

2026

Peer review is simply:
a technical review carried out by a competent fire investigator.

Significance

The requirement is more flexible.

4. NORMATIVE REFERENCES (Section 4)

The Code has been extensively updated to align with the current forensic regulatory environment.

Notable updates include:

Reference Area	2020 Version	2026 Version
FSR Code	Issue 5 (2020)	Statutory Code v2 (2025)
ILAC G19	2014	2022
ILAC P15	2016	2022
UKAS RG201	2013	May 2026
FSR Validation	Issue 1	Issue 2
Criminal Procedure Rules	Earlier version	2025 Rules

5. GOOD PRACTICE (Section 5)

5.1 General

Hydrocarbon Detection Dogs

2020 referred to:
accelerant detection dogs.
2026 refers to:
hydrocarbon detection dogs.
This is technically more accurate.

5.2 Scene Examination

New evidential consideration

The 2026 edition adds:

injury patterns on any victims as a factor that may assist in area-of-origin determination.

This was absent in the 2020 edition.

Significance

The Code now explicitly recognises that injuries may provide evidence relating to:

- fire development;
- occupant position;
- origin assessment.

5.4 Roles and Responsibilities

Enhanced Health and Safety Requirements

The 2026 edition introduces specific references to:

- Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE);
- welfare considerations;
- decontamination procedures;
- post-scene cleaning processes.

Examples include:

5.4.2.3

Adds:

RPE requirements.

5.4.2.7

Adds:

post-scene cleaning/decontamination processes.

These areas were not explicitly addressed in the 2020 document.

5.4.2.11 Digital Scene Recording

This is one of the major operational changes.

2020

Required retention of:

- photographs;
- scene plans;
- wiring diagrams.

2026

Adds:

- LIDAR scans;
 - digital scans;
 - visualisations;
 - advanced documentation methods.
-

6. ESTABLISHING REQUIREMENTS (Section 6)

Welfare risks added

2020 referred to:

health and safety risks.

2026 refers to:

health, safety and welfare risks.

7. CASE ASSESSMENT (Section 7)

7.1 Scene Attendance

New record keeping expectation

Investigators should now record:

all individuals involved in the investigation including those active at the fire scene and their roles where possible.

This expands accountability and disclosure obligations.

7.2 Scene Investigation

Digital evidence recording expanded

2026 specifically adds:

- scans;
- visualisations;
- electrical schematics;

- ventilation schematics.

The 2020 edition referred only to:

- photographs;
- scene plans;
- wiring diagrams.

7.4 Examination of Items Retrieved from the Scene

NEW SECTION 7.4.9

The most significant practical addition

This clause did not exist in the 2020 edition. The 2026 Code now states that where samples are recovered because of:

- portable hydrocarbon detector indications;
- hydrocarbon detection dog indications;
- suspected odours;

those samples should be submitted for laboratory chemical analysis to confirm the presence of ignitable liquids before being relied upon for forensic reporting purposes.

The Code also states that this should occur promptly to reduce degradation.

Why this is important

Historically:

- a dog indication,
- a hydrocarbon detector reading,
- or a petrol-like smell

might be treated as strong evidence supporting accelerant use.

The new Code expressly recognises these as indicators only and the suspected presence of ignitable liquid should be confirmed analytically through laboratory testing before being relied upon in forensic reporting.

This strengthens scientific robustness and reduces the risk of unsupported conclusions.

From an evidential perspective this may be one of the most important new additions in the Third Edition.

8. REVIEW OF CRITICAL FINDINGS (Section 8)

Significant wording change

2020

Critical findings and conclusions must be reviewed independently.

2026

Critical findings and conclusions should be reviewed independently.

Significance

This changes the requirement from mandatory (must) to recommended good practice (should).

9. CASE REVIEWS (Section 9)

Additional clarification is provided regarding:

- defence teams;
- disclosure obligations on the defence.

These are refinements rather than major changes.

10. REPORTING (Section 11)

Draft Reports

2020

Draft reports:

- marked as drafts;
- left unsigned.

2026

Draft reports:

- marked as drafts;
- signed;
- dated.

Significance

Improves version control and authorship accountability.

Plain English Requirement

The 2026 edition specifically requires technical terms to be explained:
in plain English.

Photographic Evidence

A new requirement states: the location of objects photographed at the fire scene should be clearly indicated.

Database Evidence

The 2026 version additionally requires investigators to communicate alternative propositions and hypotheses to the court where databases are relied upon.

Storage and Archiving

The 2026 edition adds:

in accordance with relevant requirements.

This is intended to align with current governance and quality frameworks.

11. CASE RELATED CONFERENCES (Section 12)

Title Change

2020:

Case Related Conferences.

2026:

Case Related Conferences / Joint Meetings.

New Requirement

The Code now states that:

conferences and their recording/documentation should comply with relevant rules.

12. ATTENDANCE AT COURT (Section 14)

Several clarifications have been added.

Notes in court

New wording states:

whether notes may be used while giving evidence is a decision for the court.

Opinions and conclusions

2020 referred only to:

conclusions.

2026 states:

opinions or conclusions.

Misstated evidence

The investigator is now directed to bring to the court's attention:
any of their evidence which has been misunderstood or misstated.
