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NCA Performance in Northern Ireland

Q1 2021/22 (April – June 2021)

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Introduction

About the NCA

The NCA leads the UK's fight to cut serious and organised crime (SOC), a chronic and corrosive threat which affects UK citizens, more often than any other national security threat. This year's National Strategic Assessment assesses that the overall SOC threat to the UK has continued to increase and has been largely resilient to the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Global networks, the UK border and current and emerging technology all play key roles as enablers of SOC offending and the latest estimated social and economic cost of SOC to the UK - approximately £37 billion¹ - is assessed to be a significant underestimate of the true cost.

Our approach is the identification and disruption of high-harm, high-impact criminals and organised crime groups; diminishing their capability, infrastructure and influence. In particular, those who:

- Exploit the vulnerable through child sexual abuse and exploitation, trafficking, servitude, fraud and other forms of abuse.
- Dominate communities and chase profits in the criminal marketplace, through criminal reputation and/or the use of violence in the supply of drugs and firearms.
- Undermine the UK's economy, integrity, infrastructure and institutions through their criminality.

Meeting the challenges of the changing nature of the SOC threat is a critical objective for the NCA and wider law enforcement community, and there have been substantial developments in SOC's complexity, scale and volume.

The NCA's 21/22 Performance Ambitions

The NCA's Senior Leadership Team and Board are responsible for setting annual ambitions that are routinely tracked in our operational and strategic governance forums and prioritised throughout the year. In 21/22 the NCA has retained its ambition to deliver exceptional services and results across the Devolved Administrations, setting a goal to *maintain the volume of branch-led disruptions in Northern Ireland and Scotland*. We also seek to *maximise the impact of our capabilities to support the response to SOC impacting in these areas, in line with our achievements in 20/21*. These will be actively pursued with PSNI, Police Scotland and other partners; and demonstrates the NCA's commitment to build even stronger relationships with our partner agencies.

About this report

The aim of this report is to summarise NCA performance and activities within Q1 2021/22 (April – June 2021 inclusive), with a clear focus on activity related to Northern Ireland, and the impact that this has had on protecting communities from SOC. The report highlights the work of the NCA's specialist capabilities and the

¹ Home Office, 'Understanding Organised Crime: Estimating the Scale and the Social and Economic Costs', November 2018.

Paramilitary Crime Taskforce (PCTF). However, the official classification of this report prevents the detailed inclusion of live operational activity and tactics.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) will also be submitting a report setting out its performance against serious and organised crime during this period. The two reports can be read in conjunction to give an overview of law enforcement activity impacting Northern Ireland. In certain instances, there may be some overlap between cases reported in the two products reflecting the close working relationship between the two agencies.

Our Impact in Northern Ireland

Disruptions impacting on Northern Ireland							
Disruption Assessment	Jul 19 - Jun 20		R12	Jul 20 - Jun 21		R12	
	Lead	Support	Total	Lead	Support	Total	
Major	6	2	8	7	1	8	↔
Moderate	20	4	24	37	1	38	▲
Minor	70	10	80	40	14	54	▼
Grand Total	96	16	112	84	16	100	▼

Figure 1: NCA Disruptions with Impact in Northern Ireland July to June 2019/20 and 2020/21

Overall levels of disruptions impacting upon Northern Ireland remain relatively consistent. However, when considering threat specific disruptions², there has been a substantial increase in disruptions relating to exploitation of the vulnerable, increasing from 13 to 45 and now accounting for almost half of the disruptions impacting upon Northern Ireland. The majority of these relate to CSA, thus aligning with the threat highlighted in the latest National Strategic Assessment.

There has been a decline in drugs disruptions; this may be expected following the surge activity relating to **Operation VENETIC**, the broadest and deepest UK operation into SOC to date, involving the takedown of a bespoke encrypted global communication service used exclusively by criminals, which occurred during 2020/21.

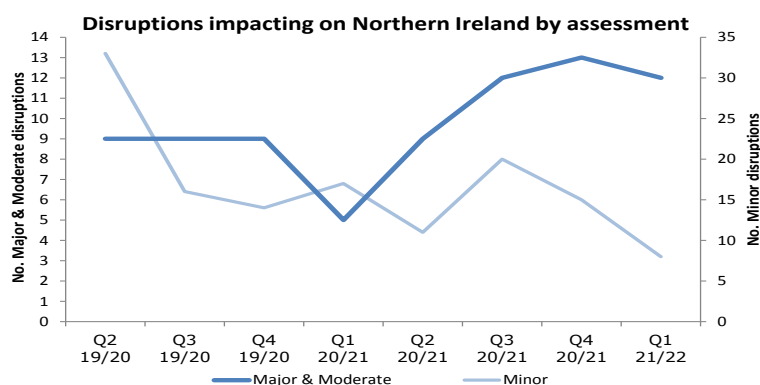


Figure 2: NCA Disruptions with Impact in Northern Ireland by Assessment Level Over Time

The impact of NCA disruptions in Northern Ireland is also increasing, with 46% (46) over the last 12 months assessed as major or moderate (the highest level of impact), compared with 29% (32) in the previous 12 months. This was also evident in Q1

² See Annex B for disruptions by threat area

2021/22, whereby 60% (12) of all disruptions were major/moderate. The current and longer-term trend illustrates the Agency's push towards higher quality outcomes.

In addition to those disruptions where an impact on Northern Ireland has been specifically identified, there have been **a further 53 disruptions** during the last 12 months assessed as having a **global impact**. These are predominantly Cyber Crime and online Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) disruptions that cannot be attributed to any specific geography but are likely to have had impact in Northern Ireland. Examples from Q1 include;

- an individual was charged and is currently on remand facing 16 indictments relating to the abuse of two children in America, with analysis of seized digital devices revealing thousands of indecent images of children, with multiple victims of severe offending across the globe;
- the arrest of an offender who was sharing first generation images and discussing the sexual abuse of children globally.

This report will now set out examples of NCA's impact, both directly and indirectly, in Northern Ireland across a range of threats. Updates from our **specialist support services** are provided in **Annex A**.

Exploiting the vulnerable

The below updates incorporate the Agency's most significant operational and partnership activities this quarter relating to **Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)** and **Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking (MSHT)** in Northern Ireland:

- Following guilty pleas at court in June 2021, Abdul Hasib Elahi, **an online blackmailer is facing years in prison after targeting nearly 2,000 people globally to commit some of the most sickening sexual offending the NCA has ever investigated**. The perpetrator blackmailed victims worldwide inciting them to horrifically abuse themselves, siblings and children (as young as eight months) before selling the footage as 'box sets' to other offenders. Masquerading as a stockbroker or rich businessman on 'sugar daddy' websites, he singled out victims who were in debt or too young to legitimately be on the sites and tricked them into sending him naked or partially clothed images of themselves. He also targeted some victims on social media. An extensive NCA investigation showed that there were at least 196 victims in the UK alone, **including one in Northern Ireland**. The Agency worked collaboratively with international partners to safeguard those who had been contacted.
- In April 2021, the NCA arrested and charged an individual in Newry, Northern Ireland suspected of the possession, making and distribution of IIOC, extreme pornography and prohibited images of children.
- Between April and June 2021, the NCA's CSA Referral Bureau (CSA RB) made **94 disseminations to PSNI**. Amongst those were a number of high priority referrals relating to self-generated IIOC, which supports the on-going concerns around the rise of this content. PSNI reported that during

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April and May 2021, six arrests were made and five suspects attended voluntarily for interview in relation to disseminations to them.

- One of these disseminations related to a suspect having engaged in sexualised conversation with an individual they believed to be 15 years old and requesting indecent images from the user.
- The CSA RB also continues to support PSNI with a case that was first assessed by the Bureau in August 2020. This relates to a Northern Irish children's football coach who is currently on bail for numerous CSA offences, including the grooming of a 13 year old female.
- Under a dedicated NCA project aimed at identifying real world CSA offenders operating on the dark web to remain anonymous, the NCA made two disseminations to PSNI between April and June 2021 following de-anonymisation of suspects.
- In June 2021, intelligence shared by the NCA led to the stop of a ferry travelling from Dunkirk to Rosslare, and the arrest of a Polish HGV driver who had attempted to smuggle three migrants into the UK. The driver has now been charged with facilitating illegal immigration and bailed in France. Subsequent to this, the same Polish driver was arrested, interviewed and released under investigation by the UK authorities on 27 July 2021.
- During Q1, the Agency's **Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU)** supported seven requests for tactical advice from PSNI. In April, PSNI took part in a national exercise focussed on Labour Exploitation, co-ordinated by the MSHTU. This included nine safeguarding and awareness-raising activities in high-risk areas of Labour Exploitation. As a direct consequence of this co-ordinated activity in Northern Ireland, **two National Referral Mechanism (NRM)³ submissions relating to domestic servitude** were prioritised and developed along with the applications for two Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders.

Those that dominate communities and chase profits in the criminal marketplace

We set out below updates on our most significant operational and partnership activity from Q1 relating to our ongoing efforts against **Firearms** and **Drugs** related criminality in or related to Northern Ireland:

- During May 2021, NCA Belfast and the National Firearms Threat Centre (NFTC), identified the location of a cache of firearms in Jerrettspass, Northern Ireland. A search was conducted, with the support of PSNI, which resulted in the recovery of **three handguns, three Scorpion type machine pistols, one MP5 Kurtz, one AK 47 type rifle and three sub machine guns. Magazines and ammunition were taped to each weapon.** Army Ammunition Technical Officers (ATO) and PSNI CSI attended

³ The NRM is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.

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the scene and completed the evidential seizures. NCA Belfast and NFTC continue to progress the investigation.

- In April 2021, an operation took place involving PSNI and NCA officers under a tasked PCTF investigation into the supply and distribution of controlled drugs including cocaine, amphetamine and MDMA in Northern Ireland. Three premises were searched resulting in the arrest of **three suspects for drugs importation and supply offences and seizure of equipment used in drug production** (an industrial dry powder blender). **A fourth person was arrested on suspicion of firearms offences following the recovery of a firearm.**
- As part of a PCTF tasked operation focusing on street and middle market drug dealers who fund paramilitary organisations, a parcel from the Republic of Ireland was intercepted in November 2018, which contained a quantity of cocaine. Two suspects were subsequently arrested. In May 2021, **one of the suspects was sentenced to five and a half years.** £5,285 cash was forfeited and will be donated to Addiction NI (a local drugs charity). The NCA Expert Evidence Team supported this prosecution by providing evidence on drugs commodity seized and interpretation of the suspects' text message communications.

Undermining the UK's economy, integrity, institutions and infrastructure

The below updates incorporate the Agency's most significant operational and partnership activities across **Economic Crime** and **Cyber Crime** in or related to Northern Ireland:

- **The NCA's National Cyber Crime Unit (NCCU)** leads Team Cyber UK (TCUK) in delivering **the response to high-impact ransomware attacks.** The Agency is working closely with international partners to build a collective understanding of the increasing severity of the ransomware threat, and the actors involved, allowing a collaborative response. The NCCU also coordinates national activity, with PSNI leading investigations and supporting victims within its jurisdiction. This quarter, the NCCU has provided co-ordination and support to PSNI and a wide range of businesses and institutions within NI. This included providing support, via the TCUK national coordination lead, to partners in PSNI in investigating the Organised Crime Group responsible for a **ransomware attack (highlighted as an emerging threat in the NSA)**. Intelligence capabilities were also provided to support with a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack with Ransom Demand of Service (RDoS); NCCU facilitated the sharing of intelligence with partners to develop the understanding of the wider threat picture.
- In Q1, the NCA's **Civil Recovery Team** progressed a number of existing investigations which are still in a covert phase. In addition, a new investigation has been developed arising from a previous PCTF criminal investigation. The **NCA Asset Denial Team** is continuing with four investigations with links to Northern Ireland which have **a combined gross**

asset value of approximately £8m. Civil Recovery and Tax powers are widely used by the NCA, both as part of the Agency’s general operations within Northern Ireland, and as part of the PCTF. These powers are currently being used within PCTF to target the assets of those involved in drugs, fraud, extortion, illegal money lending, excise evasion and other acquisitive criminality related to paramilitary activity.

- The NCA has been supporting the Home Office to **enact the Criminal Finances Act 2017 in Northern Ireland**, which was ratified via the legislative process on 28 June 2021. The Act amends the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and increases law enforcement’s ability to prevent money laundering, tax evasion and corruption, combat the financing of terrorism, and recover the proceeds of crime. The Act includes Unexplained Wealth Orders (investigative order to compel a respondent to explain the nature/extent of their interest in identified property), Account Freezing Orders (allows for the freezing of monies held in bank and building society accounts) and Listed Asset Orders (enables the seizing of mobile stores of value)⁴. The NCA is already considering the potential use of these new investigative tools in a number of cases, although they are complex and take time and can only be used if the right circumstances are present.

Our Impact across the UK

Much of the NCA’s work is aligned to threat, risk and harm; and is agnostic of geography. The criminals targeted are sophisticated and work across geographical boundaries both in the UK and internationally. The agency’s assessment is that such an uplift in disruptive impact will both **directly and indirectly benefit Northern Ireland**. Directly, as demonstrated by the range of examples highlighted above, but also indirectly, such as removing dangerous content from the internet; shutting down distribution channels for drugs and guns; creating a hostile environment for SOC criminals to operate in; and raising public awareness/driving policy changes to provide greater resilience to fraud. The Agency assesses that these ‘UK wide’ successes are making communities in Northern Ireland safer.

The below presents headline figures incorporating both NCA-led activity and activity in support of our partners; working together to tackle SOC in communities across the UK and further afield.

Total NCA Disruptions							
Disruption Assessment	Jul 19 - Jun 20		R12	Jul 20 - Jun 21		R12	▲ ▼
	Lead	Support	Total	Lead	Support	Total	
Major	117	39	156	99	51	150	▼
Moderate	389	158	547	578	273	851	▲
Minor	1334	763	2097	2195	1072	3267	▲
Grand Total	1840	960	2800	2872	1396	4268	▲

Figure 3: Total NCA Disruptions, July to June 2019/20 and 2020/21

Total NCA disruptions between July 2020 and June 2021 were **52% (1,468) higher** than in the preceding 12 months. Disruptions categorised as major - where the

⁴ These include precious metals or stones, watches, artistic works, face value vouchers and postage stamps.

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biggest impact has been achieved are relatively consistent, with a slight 4% (6) decrease. This is not unexpected; Q1 2020/21, during which the bulk of VENETIC disruptions were achieved, now features in the previous year, with the 36 major disruptions achieved in that quarter being the highest quarterly total recorded by some distance.

Before concluding, the Agency would like to share a selection of the NCA's operational successes throughout Q1 from across the UK that, given the individuals targeted and scale of criminality, will likely have an indirect impact on Northern Ireland:

- **Five British men were arrested** in June 2021 after **a tonne of cocaine, with an estimated street value of more than £80million, was discovered on a yacht** sailing from the Caribbean to Europe. Three crew members were arrested when their vessel was interdicted in the mid-Atlantic by the Spanish Customs Service as part of a joint investigation between the NCA and the Spanish National Police. Two other men linked to the vessel were also arrested by Spanish officers in the Costa del Sol. All five have been remanded in custody on drugs trafficking offences. The arrests are linked to an ongoing investigation into international drug trafficking, which has so far resulted in the arrest of a number of individuals in Spain, and the seizure of 1.6 tonnes of hashish, €45,000 and four sailing vessels. The British head of the OCG – a former Royal Navy officer living in Southern Spain – was among those previously arrested.
- In June 2021, a self-employed accountant **paid over £1.9 million to settle a civil recovery claim based on alleged links to a criminal gang responsible for laundering £160m of drug money.** This included cash held in bank accounts and funds from the sale or refinancing of properties. The NCA case drew on evidence that linked the individual to a large-scale money laundering operation, previously investigated by the NCA, during which 32 individuals were convicted of money laundering and drugs offences.
- In June 2021, a joint international investigation **led to the takedown of DoubleVPN, a service used by cyber criminals around the world to mask their location and identities online.** The activity, led by the Dutch National Police, saw the seizure of server infrastructure across the world, with NCA officers taking the UK node of the network offline on the 29th June 2021. Web domains were replaced with a law enforcement splash page explaining that the network has been seized and is no longer available for use. DoubleVPN was advertised on both Russian and English-speaking cyber crime forums as a service which provided anonymity to those seeking to carry out cyber attacks. A number of UK businesses whose networks had been unlawfully accessed by DoubleVPN were also identified. They were notified and officers helped them protect themselves against potential network intrusions.

ANNEX A: Supporting partners with our Specialist Capabilities

The NCA leads the UK SOC response through a combination of intelligence development, enforcement and investigation. Within this, the Agency has developed a range of niche capabilities - from advanced analysis to technical solutions - that service both our investigations and those of our partners. A snapshot of how these have impacted the SOC threat in Northern Ireland are provided below.

Support Area	Significant Q1 Updates
<p>Major Crime Investigation Support (MCIS)</p> <p><i>The team provided advice and support to PSNI in 11 instances; deploying officers into force on 24 occasions. These cases included murder, sexual offences, suspicious deaths and missing persons.</i></p>	<p>One case in Q1 relates to an ongoing investigation into online CSA offences by a male from Northern Ireland with potentially thousands of victims worldwide. MCIS provided significant support to PSNI including strategic and operational investigative assistance, safeguarding and practical advice in respect of the ongoing international investigations.</p> <p>Another case involves the ongoing investigation into deaths and allegations of ill treatment at a Care Home in Belfast. A further request from the investigation team in May resulted in support and guidance being provided by National SIO Adviser (NSIOA), Crime Investigation Support Officer (CISO), National Injuries Database (NID) Manager and Adviser in respect of strategic direction, engagement with partners and corporate risk management.</p>
<p>UK Financial Intelligence Unit (UKFIU)</p>	<p>During Q1, the UKFIU disseminated 19 terrorist-finance related Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) to PSNI. The UKFIU also referred 209 Defence Against Money Laundering (DAML) requests to PSNI and NCA Civil Recovery Team Belfast for advice. The Unit issued eight international requests on behalf of PSNI in relation to drugs, money laundering and fraud investigations. In addition UKFIU made 22 fast-track SAR referrals to PSNI relating to suspected vulnerable persons; including five relating to suspected child exploitation and three to suspected human trafficking.</p>

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UK National Central Office (UKNCO) for the Suppression of Counterfeit Currency and Protected Coins	<p>The key functions of the UKNCO are to maintain records and undertake analysis relating to all counterfeit currency detected within the UK. This analysis also assists the NCA and its partners to mitigate identified and emerging risks.</p> <p>The team processed and analysed 56 seizures submitted by PSNI during Q1. The UKNCO further assisted with 4 witness statement requests to support prosecutions and investigations.</p> <p>Of note this quarter is that counterfeit £20 Polymer notes (issued by Scottish and Northern Irish Banks) are being recovered in Northern Ireland. Although it has been identified that counterfeit Bank of England Polymer £20 notes are also now in circulation, to date none of these have formed the basis of submissions from PSNI.</p>
Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP)	<p>The latest Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) E-Safety Forum took place in May. CEOP involvement this quarter has focused on supporting the development of new guidance entitled <i>'Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people'</i>.</p> <p>A total of 207 Thinkuknow⁵ Ambassadors have now been trained in Northern Ireland.</p>
UK Missing Persons Unit (UKMPU)	<p>The UKMPU is situated within the NCA and is the point of contact for all missing persons and unidentified bodies. In Q1, the unit provided support in the case of two children believed to be at significant risk from their father, after their mother made disclosures whilst in hospital. The children were seen getting into a vehicle and although there have been no further sightings, a number of arrests have been made. UKMPU continues to support PSNI in the ongoing investigation via open source and other checks, and submissions to the Missing Persons DNA Database.</p>
Anti-Kidnap & Extortion Unit (AKEU)	<p>The AKEU is the national repository for kidnap, blackmail and sexual extortion complaints. Details of suspects are checked against reports from other forces and, where possible, disseminated to the relevant jurisdictions.</p> <p>In Q1, the AKEU provided these services to PSNI on 90 occasions; five in relation to kidnap, 11 blackmail and 74 concerning sexual extortion.</p>

⁵ Thinkuknow is the national online safety education programme run by the CEOP Education Team, which aims to protect children and young people from sexual abuse and exploitation.

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UK Protected Persons Service (UKPPS)	<p>The NCA Central Services Unit provides, as a part of the UKPPS, operational support to the PSNI Protected Persons Unit. UKPPS is a service developed, deployed and maintained to deliver specialist national capabilities that are not normally affordable or easily available to partners. This assists both the NCA and its operational partners to deliver their mission.</p> <p>In Q1, the UKPPS has provided 112 new instances of support on behalf of PSNI and continues to provide on-going assistance.</p>
UK International Crime Bureau (UKICB)	<p>The UKICB is the UK's competent authority when managing the new Trade and Co-operation agreement warrant (TaCA Warrant) which replaced the European Arrest Warrants (EAWs); acting as a conduit between law enforcement partners, both at a national and international level.</p> <p>During Q1, PSNI made two arrests⁶ and no surrenders⁷ for persons sought on TaCAs. Conversely, PSNI referred five cases to the NCA for onward dissemination; these resulted in one arrest and six surrenders.</p>
National Economic Crime Centre (NECC)	<p>Representatives from the Agency's Proceeds of Crime Centre (PoCC) are planning to travel to NI to present a series of introductions to the Criminal Finances Act 2017 in September 2021, to include what this will mean to NI and lessons that can be learnt from England and Wales.</p> <p>Close liaison between PoCC & the Department of Justice NI is continuing to make sure this event is delivered.</p>

⁶ When a subject wanted for extradition is arrested.

⁷ When the subject arrested for extradition has gone through the court process and is then surrendered to the country who issued the warrant for arrest.

ANNEX B: Data by Threat Area

SOC Area	Threat	Q4 2020/21				Q1 2021/22				R12 Total	R12 Total	Trend
		Major	Moderate	Minor	Total	Major	Moderate	Minor	Total	Jul 20 - Jun 21	Jul 19 - Jun 20	
Those who exploit the vulnerable	Child Sexual Abuse	0	4	3	7	0	6	0	6	27	4	▲
	Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking	0	0	3	3	0	0	2	2	11	8	▲
	Organised Immigration Crime	1	1	4	6	0	0	1	1	7	1	▲
Those who dominate communities and chase profits in the criminal marketplace	Drugs	2	2	0	4	0	2	0	2	11	30	▼
	Firearms	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	2	6	7	▼
Those who undermine the UK's economy, integrity, infrastructure and institutions	Cyber	0	2	3	5	0	1	2	3	28	40	▼
	Fraud	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	4	5	▼
	Money Laundering	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	▼

Figure 4: Breakdown of NCA Disruptions impacting on Northern Ireland by SOC threat, July 2020 to June 2021⁸

⁸ Note that this reflects disruptions against the main SOC threats; there are additional disruptions not shown in this table, categorised as 'other'