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NCA

National Crime Agency

NCA Performance in Northern Ireland

Q4 2020/21 (January – March 2021)

Leading the UK's fight to cut serious and organised crime

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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. Our National Strategic Assessment 2020 states there are 4,772 known organised crime groups mapped in the UK, with over 350,000 individuals estimated to be involved in SOC¹. Although not yet released, this year's assessment demonstrates significant growth in the volume of SOC offenders and the threat, risk and harm they pose. The latest estimated social and economic cost of SOC to the UK - approximately £37 billion - 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:

- 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.
- Exploit the vulnerable through child sexual abuse and exploitation, trafficking, servitude, fraud and other forms of abuse.

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 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 disruptions in Northern Ireland and Scotland in line with our achievements in 20/21*. This ambition 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 Q4 2020/21 (January – March 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 encompasses the above three categories as well as organised crime at the border; in particular the work of the NCA's specialist capabilities and the

¹ National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime, 2020. The 2021 Assessment is due to be published by the end of Q1 21/22.

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

For the first time, 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.

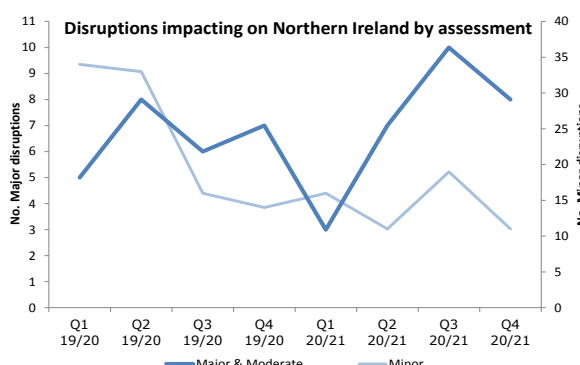
Our Impact in Northern Ireland

Disruptions impacting on Northern Ireland							
Disruption Assessment	Apr 19 - Mar 20		R12	Apr 20 - Mar 21		R12	
	Lead	Support	Total	Lead	Support	Total	▲▼
Major	4	2	6	10	1	11	▲
Moderate	22	4	26	27	1	28	▲
Minor	89	8	97	45	12	57	▼
Grand Total	115	14	129	82	14	96	▼

Figure 1: NCA Disruptions with Impact in Northern Ireland, April to March 2019/20 and 2020/21

Although there have been fewer lead disruptions in the last 12 months compared with the preceding 12 months **more disruptions have been assessed as having a Major or Moderate impact²** (32 to 39), in line with our mission to tackle high end criminality, with fewer minor disruptions being recorded.

During Q4 2020/21, 24 disruptions have been recorded to date, down from 31 in Q3 but higher than the Q1 and Q2 totals. The graph on the right shows our reduction in minor disruptions (the light blue line). This relates to disruptive activity assessed to have a shorter term impact and was skewed by a successful bulk outcome project the first two quarters of 2019-20 (April – September 2019) where the NCA achieved a high volume of cyber disruptions over a period of intensification.



Importantly, the decrease has coincided with major and moderate disruptions (the dark blue line) trending steeply upwards, illustrating the Agency’s push towards higher quality outcomes. This trade-off between impact and volume has been intentionally pursued by the Agency as we have chosen to adopt more P1-P2 operations, our highest priorities and most complex casework. In this 12 month period, **28% of our disruptions were recorded against P1-P2 operations in NI** compared with 17% for the previous period and 23% for total NCA disruptions, clearly

² These determinations are made in the NCA’s Disruptions Moderation Panel, a cross-organisational forum that scrutinise the impact achieved by each disruption. In the case of Major and Moderates, they have achieved a long or medium term impact respectively.

indicating our disruptive efforts remain focussed on those intent on causing the most harm.

In addition to disruptions where an impact on Northern Ireland has been specifically designated, there have been **an additional 64 disruptions** during the last 12 months assessed as having a **global impact**. These are predominantly cyber and online Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) disruptions that cannot be attributed to any specific geography but, by implication, are likely to have had impact in Northern Ireland. An example from Q4 relates to activity conducted by the NCA's Dark Web Targeting Unit, which led to the arrest of a senior administrator of a dark net criminal commodity marketplace; the site was further taken down and servers seized. This affects the global supply of numerous illegal and illicit commodities such as drugs, counterfeit documents, compromised financial and online accounts; and malware and hacking tools.

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**.

Those that dominate communities and chase profits in the criminal marketplace

Below you will find updates on our most significant operational and partnership activity from Q4 relating to our ongoing efforts against **Drugs** and **Firearms** related criminality in or related to Northern Ireland:

- In February 2021, **20kg of cocaine worth an estimated £1.6 million was seized** in Northern Ireland. The drugs were discovered inside an empty fuel tank in a van which had arrived in Belfast on a ferry from Birkenhead. The vehicle's driver, a 39-year-old male from Wolverhampton, was arrested and charged with conspiracy to supply controlled drugs. Officers using specialist equipment were brought in to recover the drugs, in an operation which involved Belfast Harbour Police, Border Force and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Following this seizure, a second male, aged 46, was arrested on suspicion of the same offence in Wolverhampton, and has also been charged.
- In March 2021, NCA and PSNI Officers - working together as part of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF) - arrested **five individuals** suspected of being high-ranking members of a paramilitary crime group on suspicion of **conspiring to supply Class A drugs**. Four individuals were charged; three of whom were remanded in custody. A quantity of cash - estimated to be £3,000 - was also seized under POCA and, as a result of this action, a number of referrals have been made to social services leading to the safeguarding of five children. Follow up action has been taken subsequent to this reporting period and more detail will be included in next quarter's report.
- The NCA provided tactical support to PSNI, including international liaison, on an operation which led to the **seizure of 916kg of vacuum packed**

cannabis from a warehouse in the Newry area; PSNI valued this seizure at £13.7 million.

- During Q4, the Agency undertook a range of online and strategic communications activity in relation to the **firearms threat** by arranging the removal of dangerous web content and running a successful campaign to dissuade people from engaging with firearms. This work has impacted on the whole of the UK and includes the removal of 11 videos showing how to manufacture either firearms, ammunition or components. Also, through a relationship with another major international online marketplace, over 200 listings for UK-prohibited electric stun devices or incapacitate sprays (pepper, CS, PAVA) were either removed or geo-blocked to UK browsers. Separately, the Agency's Firearms Prevent Team ran a UK-wide strategic communications campaign; urging individuals to "Know the Gun, Know the Law, Know the Consequences". This campaign used a diverse range of targeted advertising via the NCA's social media channels; as well as NCA-branded display adverts, regional six sheets, podcast ads, and Google ads which appear when searching for gun-related keywords.

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

The below updates incorporate the Agency's most significant operational and partnership activities across **Economic** and **Cybercrime** 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 actively targeting victims in the UK**. The Agency is working closely with international partners to build a collective understanding of the ransomware threat and the actors involved, allowing us to deliver 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. In January this included supporting an investigation into a network intrusion via a compromised email account and there have been three other notable incidents where the NCCU is either leading investigations into the organised crime groups responsible or providing intelligence capabilities to our partners in PSNI.

- **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. In Q4, the NCA has focussed on progressing existing investigations which are still in a covert phase. The NCA has also developed two new investigations that will target individuals alleged to have benefitted from laundering the proceeds of crime generated by paramilitary groups. This is part of our ongoing commitment to the PCTF. The Agency is continuing to use powers under POCA to compel information from those with knowledge of these potential crimes, and have also disposed of a number of assets previously recovered from earlier investigations.

Exploiting the vulnerable

The below updates incorporate the Agency's most significant operational and partnership activities this quarter relating to **Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), Organised Immigration Crime** and **Human Trafficking** in Northern Ireland:

- In August 2020, the NCA arrested a male subject for accessing a website associated with CSA and exploitation. In January, 2021, the subject was charged and pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to four months imprisonment, subject to a Sex Offender's Prevention Order and placed on the Sex Offenders' Register.
- In March 2021, as part of an investigation into CSA activity - where an account was created on a cloud storage platform, and subsequently used to transfer indecent images of children - a suspect was arrested in the Armagh area and electronic devices seized; resulting in two children being safeguarded.
- In May 2020, a subject was arrested in Australia after sharing significant numbers of indecent images of children; using web forums to seek users who had access to young boys, including contact with an unknown UK based individual. The NCA, working with Australian authorities, identified the subject as a 23-year-old male from Northern Ireland and in February 2021, officers and child protection advisors from the NCA carried out an arrest of the suspect who was subsequently bailed.
- The threat posed by Organised Immigration Crime (OIC) and its impact on Northern Ireland continues to be assessed and actively investigated by the NCA's Project INVIGOR (closely monitoring the situation with regards to any implications arising from the UK's EU Exit). In February 2021, **the NCA received an urgent request from French partners regarding a UK lorry which had been stopped in France with 17 Vietnamese migrants**. The driver, an Irish passport holder, was sentenced to two years imprisonment in France. The Agency coordinated subsequent enquiries with our French International Liaison Officer (ILO), PSNI and INVIGOR partner agencies to ensure a collective response was in place and intelligence opportunities from the ongoing French investigation could be capitalised on. The NCA's ILO continues to engage with all relevant partners in the UK to ensure resources are sighted and aligned.
- In January 2021, **seven men – including two Northern Irish nationals - were sentenced to a total 92 years in prison** following a joint investigation between the NCA and Essex Police into the tragic deaths of 39 Vietnamese men, women and children in October 2019. The victims were found unresponsive in the trailer of a lorry in Grays, Essex. NCA officers worked alongside Essex Police throughout their investigation whilst also working collaboratively with PSNI. This included deploying investigative and intelligence assets overseas and in the UK, as well as immigration crime and victim identification specialists. The NCA's international network also provided links to Vietnam and other countries involved in the investigation.

- The NCA’s Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU) has significantly increased engagement to support PSNI with MSHT focussed activity. This is following recommendations in the Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland (CJINI) review into MSHT. This support has been both operational - with an uplift in dedicated Tactical Advisor support - and strategic where we have provided opportunity for PSNI to contribute to national SOC system disruption reporting.
- During Q4, MSHTU hosted a virtual event to provide officers with specific updates on the latest trends in labour exploitation, sexual exploitation and child trafficking; alongside enablers of MSHT, such as criminal finances and the internet. MSHTU also provided detailed advice to PSNI around Adult Service Websites (ASWs) and the use of open-source web scraper tools in the identification of victims of sexual exploitation; including the benefits and shortfalls, in order to support a business case for PSNI to obtain access to the tools.

Our Impact across the UK

Disruption Assessment	Apr 19 - Mar 20		R12	Apr 20 - Mar 21		R12	▲ ▼
	Lead	Support	Total	Lead	Support	Total	
Major	91	32	123	120	54	174	▲
Moderate	381	131	512	541	223	764	▲
Minor	1271	668	1939	2235	998	3233	▲
Grand Total	1743	831	2574	2896	1275	4171	▲

Figure 2: Total NCA Disruptions, April to March 2019/20 and 2020/21

During the last two 12 month periods (April 2019 to March 2020 and April 2020 to March 2021) there has been a **62% increase in the total number of disruptions achieved by the NCA**. Disruptions categorised as major - where the biggest impact has been achieved - are displaying a **41% increase**. These headline figures incorporate both NCA-led operations and those in support of our partners; working together to tackle SOC in communities across the UK and further afield.

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.

In Q4, 787 lead disruptions took place with 18% being against P1-P2 operations; the Agency’s highest priorities. This proportion is similar to the previous quarter (19%) and shows a close alignment to investigations targeting the UK’s most dangerous criminals.

In Q1, the proportion of P1-P2 operations was significantly higher (39%) due to high volume executive action taking place in relation to **Operation VENETIC**. Operation Venetic resulted in the arrests of more than 1,400 people across the UK following international partners' extraction of data from the encrypted communications platform EncroChat. The operation was a nationwide effort led by the NCA and involving the full range of partners, before, during and after arrest. The Operation increased law enforcement's understanding of the strong link between the drug trade, firearms and serious violence.

Another key driver for the uplift in overall disruption volumes at minor level is the work of the NCA's **UK Financial Intelligence Unit (UKFIU)**. Submissions to the Defence Against Money Laundering (DAML)³ regime have been steadily increasing with over 100,000 received in FY 2020/21 compared 62,000 in FY 2019/20. Although these volumes do not correlate to the disruptive impact achieved, the important work of being able to triage and develop them at scale has resulted in hundreds of tangible outcomes either leading to restraint, seizure of assets; or protection of monies fraudulently taken from victims.

Figure 3 shows the NCA monthly total for lead disruptions over the last 12 months, and illustrates peaks caused by these Operation VENETIC and UKFIU activities.

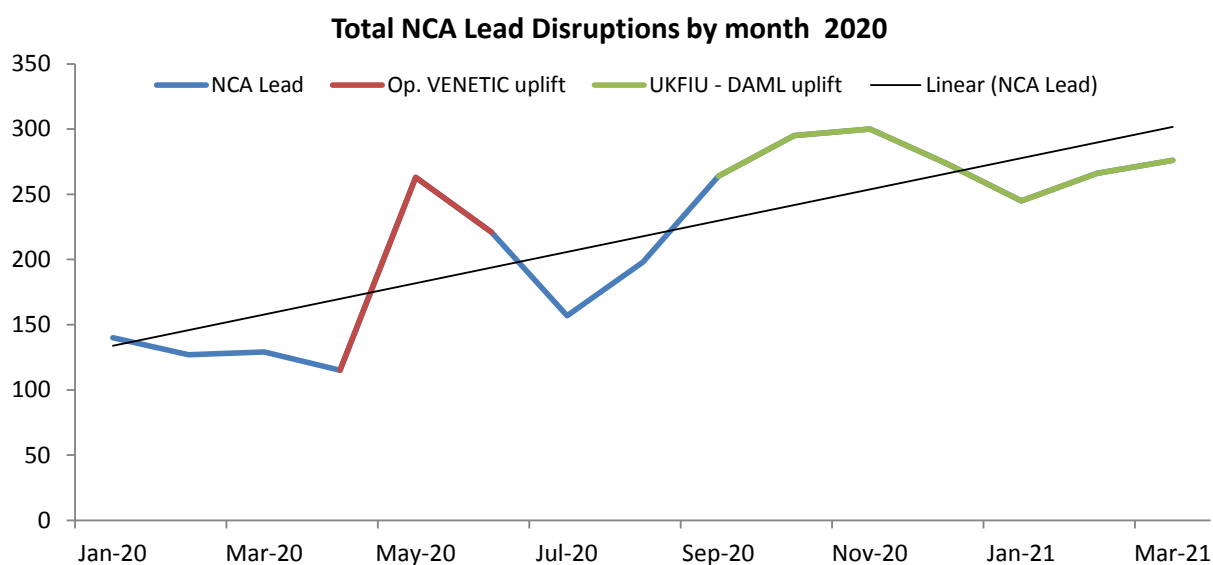


Figure 3: Monthly NCA Lead Disruption volumes January 2020 to March 2021

Moreover, it's worth noting that the Q4 total will likely increase in the near future due to a lag in reporting.

Before concluding, the Agency would like to share a selection of the NCA's operational successes throughout Q4 from across the UK that, given the individuals targeted and scale of criminality, will likely have an indirect impact on Northern Ireland:

³ A DAML can be requested from the NCA where a reporter has a suspicion that property they intend to deal with is in some way criminal and that by dealing with it they risk committing one of the principal money laundering offences under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

- In February 2021, an investigation by the NCA and Metropolitan Police Service's Organised Crime Partnership (OCP), led to the arrest of ten people in North London following the **seizure of 2.3 tonnes of cocaine**; imported to the UK in a consignment of bananas. The seizure, estimated to be **worth £184m**, is believed to be one of the largest ever made in the UK. The container arrived on a cargo ship from Colombia and was delivered to an industrial estate in North London where OCP officers – supported by armed units– moved in to arrest the five recipients. The other five males were arrested at a second industrial estate in Enfield. Three males have now been charged with drug importation offences.
- In February 2021, an Italian national who **attempted to extort £10m from the NHS by threatening to bomb a UK hospital** was convicted in a Berlin court and sentenced to three years in prison. **The subject was identified as the individual behind a series of threats made to the NHS via email last year following an investigation by the NCA** into a ransom demand for £10 million in Bitcoin in April 2020. The suspect sent the email via a Dark Web network; claiming to be from a far-right organisation Combat18. NCA officers, along with the NHS, Counter Terrorism specialists, staff responsible for Critical National Infrastructure and German authorities worked collaboratively to increase security and identify an address in Berlin and arrest the suspect. The male was charged with attempted extortion and remanded in custody. The NCA investigation continued until the point at which officers could be satisfied he was acting alone.
- **In March 2021, an Afghan criminal gang - suspected of planning to smuggle migrants to the UK in small boats - was dismantled** following a multi-agency operation involving NCA and French Law Enforcement. In November 2020, the Anglo-French Joint Intelligence Cell (JIC), launched an investigation into the network. Officers from the NCA-led Project INVIGOR organised immigration crime taskforce - which also includes Immigration Enforcement, Border Force and the CPS - worked with the JIC to share evidence and intelligence. French police conducted ten arrests; charging eight suspects with facilitating illegal immigration. The network are accused of procuring second-hand boats from classified adverts online. Each boat could carry between 10 and 15 migrants, who would be charged between 2,500 and 3,000 Euros. The group are suspected of having been involved in at least six attempts to cross the Channel; three of which were thwarted by the French authorities.

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 Q4 Updates
<p>Major Crime Investigation Support (MCIS)</p> <p><i>The team provided advice and support to PSNI in 19 instances; deploying officers into force on 30 occasions. These cases included murder, sexual offences, suspicious deaths and missing persons.</i></p>	<p>One case related to the murder of a female. In January 2021, MCIS supported PSNI - including the National SIO Adviser (NSIOA), Crime Investigation Support Officer (CISO), National Injuries Database (NID), National Family Liaison Adviser (NFLA) and National Interview Adviser (NIA) – to conduct this investigation. Following initial urgent advice, in relation to safeguarding, family liaison and interviews, a suspect has been arrested and interviewed and enquiries continue.</p>
<p>UK Financial Intelligence Unit</p>	<p>A second case relates to the murder of male in Belfast in 2020. The motive for the murder is unclear. MCIS continues to provide resources - NSIOA, CISO, NIA, Behavioural Investigative Adviser (BIA) and Crime Desk Manager - advising on areas such as Trace Interview Eliminate (TIE) and CCTV analysis.</p> <p>The UKFIU disseminated 20 terrorist finance-related Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) to PSNI. The UKFIU also referred 227 DAML requests to PSNI and NCA Civil Recovery Team Belfast for advice; a 55% increase from Q3's 146 requests. The UKFIU also issued eight international requests on behalf of PSNI in relation to drugs investigations. UKFIU further made 25 fast-track SAR referrals to PSNI relating to suspected vulnerable persons; including 14 relating to suspected child exploitation and six to suspected human trafficking.</p> <p>In February 2021, UKFIU delivered a presentation for the Northern Ireland Law Society Event; providing an overview of the money laundering problem and the risks faced by solicitors. It covered SAR volumes and quality levels; key information on UKFIU publications, digital content and future workshops.</p>

<p>UK National Central Office (UKNCO) for Counterfeit Currency</p> <p><i>The team processed and analysed 72 seizures submitted by PSNI during Q4. The UKNCO further assisted with 11 witness statement requests to support prosecutions and investigations.</i></p>	<p>Further to the update provided in Q3, an investigation between UKNCO and West Yorkshire Police continues following the search of a commercial printers near Huddersfield. Evidence was discovered which confirmed an OCG were printing Bank of Scotland £20 and £50 notes, Clydesdale £20 notes, Ulster Bank £20 notes, and Bank of England £50 notes. It has been established that over £400,000 Scottish and Northern Ireland counterfeit bank notes have already been recovered from circulation and in excess of £45,000 Bank of England £50 notes. Enquiries are continuing and both suspects have been released under investigation.</p>
<p>Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP)</p>	<p>A total of 207 Thinkuknow⁴ Ambassadors have been trained in Northern Ireland with one trained in Q4. Each Ambassador is a professional engaged in the education and wellbeing of young people; and is equipped to deliver key messages and training to increase resilience towards child abuse. No new schools signed up for the Parent Information Service during Q4; meaning the total in Northern Ireland remains at 87. This service enables school websites to directly host information provided by the NCA’s CEOP department which contains advice and guidance for parents and carers.</p>
<p>UK Missing Persons Unit (UKMPU)</p>	<p>The UKMPU is situated within the NCA and is the point of contact for all missing persons and unidentified bodies. In Q4, support was provided to PSNI in relation to a Polish male, believed to be suicidal, who was reported as missing after absconding from hospital. Extensive enquiries were made by UKMPU using open source and privileged access databases. The male was later located safe and well.</p>
<p>Anti-Kidnap & Extortion Unit (AKEU)</p>	<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 jurisdictions in which they reside. In Q4, the AKEU provided these services to PSNI on 118 occasions; two in relation to kidnap, 12 blackmail and 104 concerning sexual extortion.</p>
<p>UK Protected Persons Service (UKPPS)</p>	<p>The UKPPS - an NCA function that provides protection to people assessed as being at risk of serious harm - supported PSNI in 126 instances during Q4.</p>
<p>UK International Crime Bureau (UKICB)</p>	<p>The UKICB is the UK’s central authority for Part 1 and Part 3 of the 2003 Extradition Act, acting as a conduit between law enforcement partners, both at a national and international level. During Q4, PSNI made six arrests and four surrenders for persons sought on EAWs. Conversely, PSNI referred six cases to the NCA for onward dissemination; resulting in five arrests and three surrenders.</p>
<p>National Economic Crime Centre (NECC)</p>	<p>The NECC’s Expert Laundering Evidence (ELE) cadre provided support to PSNI on two occasions in Q4. In January 2021, the ELE provided an expert statement in connection with a money laundering investigation looking at multi-million pound laundering through Chinese Underground Banking. In March 2021, an ELE statement was further produced to assist investigators in an explanation of Trade Based Money Laundering and third payments to prosecutors illustrating some of the processes executed in this alleged money laundering network.</p>

⁴ 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.