

OFFICIAL



NCA Performance in Northern Ireland

Q2 2021/22 (July – September 2021)

OFFICIAL

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 to identify and disrupt high-harm, high-impact criminals and organised crime groups, diminishing their capability, infrastructure and influence. In particular, we target 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:

1. *Maintain the volume of branch-led disruptions in Northern Ireland and Scotland in line with our achievements in 20/21.*
2. *Maximise the impact of our capability deployments in support of the SOC response in Northern Ireland & Scotland.* These ambitions will be actively pursued with PSNI, Police Scotland and other partners.

In September the NCA hosted members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) in London in order to brief them on key Agency capabilities. The delegation were briefed on cyber threat and capability, intelligence collection, data exploitation, the international network and the Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) threat and response. This visit aligns with the NCA's commitment to strengthening relationships with key partners in Northern Ireland.

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

About this report

The aim of this report is to summarise NCA performance and activities within Q2 2021/22 (July – September 2021 inclusive) 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 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 to the NIPB 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	Oct 19 - Sep 20		R12	Oct 20 - Sep 21		R12	▲ ▼
	Lead	Support	Total	Lead	Support	Total	
Major	7	2	9	6	1	7	▼
Moderate	20	2	22	36	2	38	▲
Minor	47	13	60	61	15	76	▲
Grand Total	74	17	91	103	18	121	▲

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

We are pleased to report disruption levels impacting upon Northern Ireland have risen in the last 12 months, driven by operational success in relation to exploitation of the vulnerable, with volumes for Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) and Organised Immigration Crime (OIC) all displaying substantial increases.²

Although more drugs disruptions took place in Q2 than Q1, the 12 month total is lower. This is as the result of surge activity relating to **Operation VENETIC**, involving the takedown of a bespoke encrypted global communication service used exclusively by criminals, which generated increased totals during the preceding period.

² See Annex B for disruptions by threat area

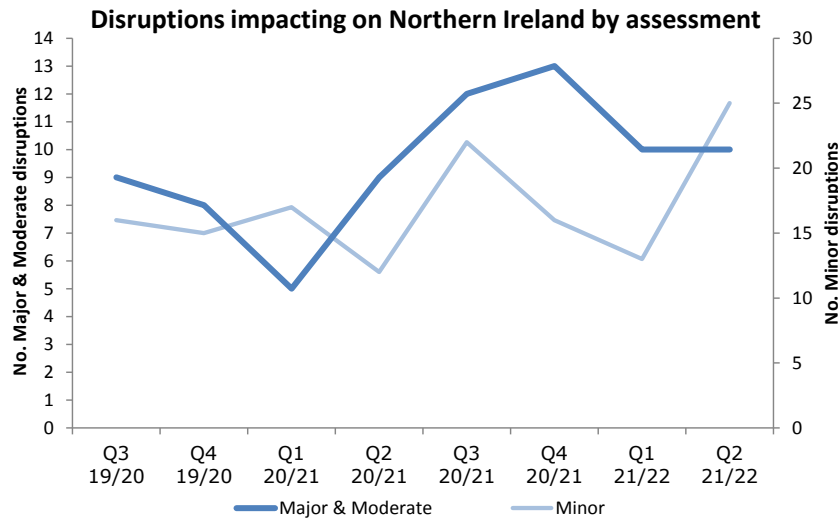


Figure 2: NCA Disruptions with Impact in Northern Ireland by Assessment Level over Time

Comparison of the last two 12 month periods show that the impact of NCA disruptions in Northern Ireland has been higher, with 37% (45) assessed as major or moderate (the highest level of impact), an increase of 34% (31). The proportion of majors and moderates in Q2 was 29%, down from 43% in Q1 although the number in both quarters was the same (10). The smaller proportion was a result of an uplift in minor disruptions relating to non-pursue activity (prepare, protect, prevent), particularly against the MSHT threat.

In addition to those disruptions where an impact on Northern Ireland has been specifically identified, there have been **a further 51 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. An example from Q2 was:

- The UK has now been confirmed as a dialogue partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with the NCA being front and centre in the broader campaign for achieving this milestone since 2019. Gaining access to ASEAN should put the NCA and wider HMG in a stronger position to lobby for change and action on any SOC matters in the region that may impact the UK. CSA, OIC and MSHT are the main threats that tend to emanate from this area.

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)**, **Organised Immigration Crime (OIC)** and **Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking (MSHT)** in Northern Ireland:

OFFICIAL

- Between July and September 2021, the NCA's CSA Referral Bureau (CSA RB) made **166 disseminations to PSNI** compared to 150 in Q1. Amongst those were a number of high priority referrals relating to self-generated indecent images of children (IIOC), which supports the on-going concerns around the rise of this content. PSNI reported that during Q2 2021/22, 11 arrests were made and nine suspects attended voluntarily for interview in relation to disseminations to them.
- Under a dedicated NCA project, in collaboration with partners, aimed at identifying real world CSA offenders operating on the dark web, PSNI provided feedback on two cases previously disseminated by NCA with two subjects being arrested in Q2. A 31 year old male in Belfast was arrested with devices containing approximately 1,300 IIOC. The case is awaiting final evidential reports before being progressed. A second man was arrested in Antrim and the case team are currently awaiting results from forensic analysis.
- A subject was cautioned in August 2021 for transferring files identified as indecent images of children (IIOC). He was placed on the Sexual Offender Register for five years and will remain subject to monitoring by PSNI Offender Management Team.
- PSNI continues to have active representation on the newly formed OIC Road Haulage Group which is jointly chaired by NCA and the NPCC Modern Slavery and OIC Unit. This group comprises representatives from key agencies and organisations to coordinate 4P responses and initiatives to the Inland Clandestine Threat. This follows the tragic death of 39 Vietnamese migrants in the back of a refrigerated HGV in October 2019. The NCA has taken forward the management of this group having reviewed and refreshed the membership to encompass the wider road haulage threat which continues to include refrigerated lorries.
- During Q2, the Agency's **Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU)** supported three requests for tactical advice from PSNI. This included, NCA Tactical Advisors identifying a suspect within exhibits of a trafficking case in the West Midlands with links to Belfast. The Tactical Advisors also assisted the PSNI Trafficking Unit regarding identification of evidence, and provided contact details of colleagues in Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) with prior experience.

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 Q2 relating to our ongoing efforts against **Firearms** and **Drugs** related criminality in or related to Northern Ireland:

- An NCA project commenced in December 2017 in response to Forward Venting Weapons being imported to the UK predominantly via fast parcel and post modes, which are prohibited under Sec 5 Firearms Act. Since the inception of the project, over 600 firearms have been seized through

OFFICIAL

operations conducted by the NCA and UK Law Enforcement partners. In Northern Ireland this financial year the NCA have seized five weapons (all within Q2) and arrested two suspects. **The latest operation carried out resulted in a search, arrest, seizure of a single front venting weapon and 32 rounds of ammunition from a premises in Belfast.** The suspect was interviewed and bailed and a file is to be submitted to the PPSNI.

- A house search carried out in July with the assistance of PSNI resulted in the seizure of four firearms, 37 combat weapons (combat knives, pepper sprays, crossbows and machetes) and 500g cannabis and the arrest of a male. This action followed receipt of intelligence indicating that in April 2021 a Northern Ireland resident ordered **nine FVBF handguns** from Spain and that this order had been fulfilled. The consignee had also made at least six previous purchases. The subject was released on bail until December 2021 to allow for further enquiries.
- Following this reporting period, **an inaugural PSNI/NCA Firearms Conference was held in Belfast** on 8 October 2021 attended by a range of partners to discuss issues relating to the firearms threat. Further details will be included in the Q3 report.
- A subject was arrested in September for firearms offences related to a PCTF investigation into the supply and distribution of controlled drugs in Northern Ireland through the fast parcel postal system. He was later released pending report to the Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland (PPSNI). Two further suspects are currently on bail with one released pending a report to the PPSNI.
- An investigation into the **importation of controlled drugs and organised immigration crime within the haulage industry** has led to a suspect being arrested in September for drug and money laundering offences linked to Northern Ireland. A further three subjects were arrested following the seizure of 600kg of cannabis from a HGV in June 2021. A file has been submitted to the PPSNI.
- The first confiscation hearing following convictions relating to the production, importation and distribution of illicit anabolic steroids in the UK is expected to take place in October 2021. The subject is currently serving a custodial sentence. Four other defendants are still subject to contested confiscation proceedings and it is anticipated that **Confiscation Orders will be finalised in November 2021 with the anticipated combined available amount for all five defendants being circa £5.3m**, which will be amongst the most significant confiscation sums ever achieved on an NCA operation. The operation began in 2015 when NCA identified a suspect who was using UK mailbox virtual addresses to facilitate the importation and exportation of anabolic steroids and other prescription drugs on a bulk scale originating from an Indian based healthcare provider. Research identified at least seven bulk shipments destined for Belfast, two of which were seized containing in excess of two tonnes of illicit pharmaceuticals including steroids.

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 Asset Denial team** is conducting three investigations with links to Northern Ireland. Two of these investigations are being conducted under the auspices of the Joint Agency Task Force (JATF) - a cross border task force created to bring a concerted and enhanced effort to tackle organised and cross-jurisdictional crime). In Q2, a Disclosure Order was granted at the High Court in relation to one of the JATF investigations, the subject of which is suspected of being engaged in fraud offences and money laundering. **The use of an Unexplained Wealth Order will be considered in the other JATF investigation**, following the recent commencement of the Criminal Finances Act 2017 in Northern Ireland. The subject of this investigation is suspected of being engaged in fraud offences, money laundering and the evasion of excise duty and is a case that is likely to attract a level of public attention.
- In Q2 the NCCU has continued to provide co-ordination and support to PSNI and businesses within NI. In September this included providing assistance to PSNI for a ransomware attack on a planning and landscape company. The NCCU supported PSNI by undertaking intelligence checks against databases in order to de-conflict where necessary.
- In the last quarter, a Disclosure Interview was conducted with a subject who is suspected of being associated with the West Belfast Ulster Defence Association (UDA). He is believed to be engaged in the distribution of controlled drugs and tax evasion. This investigation is ongoing and is being conducted under the auspices of PCTF, supported by the NCA's Civil Recovery Team.
- In another PCTF investigation, a **Recovery Order in the sum of £60,000** was granted on consent in relation to a subject with suspected links to the East Belfast Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The settlement figure comprises the proceeds from the sale of a motorhome (£45,000), plus an additional £15,000, all suspected of having been acquired through the proceeds of fraud and money laundering.

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 our work 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 and 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	Oct 19 - Sep 20		R12	Oct 20 - Sep 21		R12	▲▼
	Lead	Support	Total	Lead	Support	Total	
Major	112	46	158	97	59	156	▼
Moderate	432	185	617	611	368	979	▲
Minor	1497	932	2429	2050	1019	3069	▲
Grand Total	2041	1163	3204	2758	1446	4204	▲

Figure 3: Total NCA Disruptions, October to September 2019/20 and 2020/21

Total NCA disruptions between October 2020 and September 2021 were **31% (1,000) higher** than in the preceding 12 months. The number of disruptions categorised as major - where the biggest impact has been achieved - remains consistent (-1%, 2). This is despite the earlier period including the bulk of VENETIC disruptions (the 36 major disruptions achieved in Q1 2020/21 was 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 Q2 from across the UK that, given the individuals targeted and scale of criminality, will likely have an indirect impact on Northern Ireland:

- **Six men** – one Briton and five Nicaraguans – **were arrested** in September, 80 miles off the coast of Plymouth in an operation led by the National Crime Agency (NCA) and supported by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Border Force. The suspects were aboard a luxury Jamaican-flagged yacht sailing from the Caribbean. It was escorted back to the UK mainland where **more than two tonnes of cocaine, worth around £160m**, was discovered. This is the second largest seizure ever in the UK. All six men have been charged whilst a further five suspects have been arrested in connection with the seizure.
- **An Albanian people smuggling network suspected of bringing hundreds of people to the UK was dismantled** in July following a series of raids across England leading to seven people, including the alleged ringleader, being arrested. The group are alleged to have had contacts in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland and used lorries and hire vans to transport individuals from northern France. The operation involved around 100 officers and was supported by the Metropolitan Police and Immigration Enforcement. Approximately £30,000 cash was also detained. Our Financial investigators have identified numerous bank accounts alleged to belong to the network showing hundreds of thousands of pounds in turnover.
- In July, a Politically Exposed Person **agreed to pay back £4million** that was deemed recoverable property after NCA investigators uncovered how they transferred funds using a criminal money laundering system termed the

OFFICIAL

Azerbaijani Laundromat. Ten bank accounts were frozen when Account Freezing Orders (AFO) were granted in 2018 and 2019. The main subject has close links to the ruling elite in Azerbaijan where his father was deputy energy minister until his dismissal last year. His wife is an oligarch's daughter and cousin of the Azerbaijani president. Two NCA Financial Investigators, from within the Criminal Asset Denial Team (CADT), conducted the investigation and were able to trace funds totalling £6.4M through the Estonian and Latvian bank accounts of some 500 shell companies.

- There is an on-going NCA and NPCC coordinated project with Home Office Ministerial endorsement which targets cash-based money laundering (CBML). The project aims to disrupt CBML by UK Organised Criminal Groups by; increasing the number of arrests of key individuals, introducing friction by seizing more illicit cash and making it more difficult for illicit cash to be moved across the border or introduced in to the UK financial system. NPCC has established a network of coordinators across policing (including PSNI) to push the message that the response to CBML is a priority. Front line strategic communications - including response plans - are in development and are expected to generate additional arrests and seizures across the UK in the second half of the financial year.

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 Q2 Updates
<p>Major Crime Investigation Support (MCIS)</p> <p><i>The team provided advice and support to PSNI in 16 instances; deploying officers into force on 14 occasions. These cases included murder and sexual offences.</i></p>	<p>One case in Q2 relates to the continuing support to an investigation into serious sexual on-line abuse of thousands of young girls globally, including the manslaughter of a 12 year old female in USA. Significant NCA support has been provided during Q2, including attendance at strategic meetings addressing judicial process, investigative strategies and governance as well as victim/witness management. In addition NCA have recently conducted a review of PSNI capability around Child Exploitation on-line investigations and results reported separately.</p> <p>Another case involves the ongoing investigation in to the death of a female initially assessed to be suicide. Ongoing support and advice has been provided by MCIS resources including the facilitation of forensic pathology review. A murder investigation continues alongside a wider investigation in relation to sexual offences for which a suspect has been charged. Both MCIS and National Injuries Database (NID) resources continue to provide strategic and operational/tactical support.</p> <p>A third case of support to PSNI relates to twin infant boys which resulted in both being admitted to hospital and close to death. This complex and sensitive case has been supported by MCIS resources and NID specialists in relation to investigative advice and the facilitation of specialist evidence from a range of medical experts. The parents and non-medical practitioner have been arrested on suspicion of assault and neglect offences.</p>
<p>UK Financial Intelligence Unit (UKFIU)</p>	<p>During Q2, the UKFIU disseminated 20 terrorist-finance related Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) to PSNI. The UKFIU also referred 242 Defence Against Money Laundering (DAML) requests to PSNI and NCA Civil Recovery Team Belfast for advice. The Unit issued six international requests on behalf of PSNI in relation to money laundering, human trafficking, fraud and child sexual exploitation investigations. In addition, UKFIU made 24 fast-track SAR referrals to PSNI relating to suspected vulnerable</p>

OFFICIAL

	persons; including six relating to suspected child exploitation and three to suspected human trafficking.
Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP)	<p>A CEOP representative continues to sit on the virtual quarterly Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) E-Safety Forum. Involvement this quarter has focussed on supporting the development of the <i>'Sharing nudes and semi-nudes'</i> advice for education settings and sharing information and updates from the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCIS) Education Working Group.</p> <p>In Q2, the Education Team trained four new Thinkuknow³ ambassadors from organisations based in Northern Ireland.</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 Q2, the AKEU provided these services to PSNI on 118 occasions: four in relation to kidnap, nine blackmail and 105 concerning sexual extortion.</p>
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 one seizure submitted by PSNI during Q2. The UKNCO further assisted with one witness statement request to support a prosecution.</p> <p>The volume of submissions from Northern Ireland has fallen significantly this quarter, a reduction has also been seen in the quantities of counterfeit currency (Scottish & Northern Irish) submitted from cash centre processing in Northern Ireland to the UKNCO. This may be due to a number of factors including the decrease in the use of cash and the introduction of polymer notes. The three issuing banks in Northern Ireland: Bank of Ireland, Ulster Bank and First Trust are in the process of transitioning from paper to polymer notes.</p>

³ 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.

OFFICIAL

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 Q2, the UKPPS has provided 123 new instances of support on behalf of PSNI and 12 days of training to three officers.</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 Q2, PSNI made six arrests⁴ and two surrenders⁵ for persons sought on TaCAs. Conversely, PSNI referred four cases to the NCA for onward dissemination; these resulted in four arrests and seven surrenders.</p>
National Economic Crime Centre (NECC)	<p>The Proceeds of Crime Centre (PoCC) in partnership with the Organised Crime Task Force NI arranged a two day conference to educate Financial Investigators (FI) on the Criminal Finances Act 2017 (CFA) powers. These became active in Northern Ireland in June. The event was attended by over two thirds (100) of the FI community in NI.</p> <p>NCA CRT presented on Disclosure Orders under Part 8 PoCA and Unexplained Wealth Orders.</p>

⁴ When a subject wanted for extradition is arrested.

⁵ 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	Q1 2021/22				Q2 2021/22				R12 Total	R12 Total	Trend
		Major	Moderate	Minor	Total	Major	Moderate	Minor	Total	Oct 20 - Sep 21	Oct 19 - Sep 20	
Those who exploit the vulnerable	Child Sexual Abuse	0	6	0	6	1	4	0	5	24	12	▲
	Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking	0	0	5	5	0	0	9	9	22	10	▲
	Organised Immigration Crime	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	8	1	▲
Those who dominate communities and chase profits in the criminal marketplace	Drugs	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3	9	12	▼
	Firearms	1	0	1	2	0	1	2	3	8	7	▲
Those who undermine the UK's economy, integrity, infrastructure and institutions	Cyber	0	1	2	3	0	1	5	6	30	32	▼
	Fraud	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	6	5	▲
	Money Laundering	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	▼

Figure 4: Breakdown of NCA Disruptions impacting on Northern Ireland by SOC threat, October 2020 to September 2021⁶

⁶ Note that this reflects disruptions against the main SOC threats; there are additional disruptions not shown in this table, categorised as 'other'