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**NCA**

National Crime Agency

# **NCA Performance in Northern Ireland**

## **Q2 2019/20 (July – September)**

Date: 4 November 2019

OFFICIAL

The NCA leads the UK's fight to cut serious and organised crime, a chronic and corrosive threat which affects more UK citizens, more often, than any other national security threat. There are more than 4,500 serious and organised crime groups in the UK, costing the economy an estimated £37billion per year.

Our approach is the identification and disruption of high-harm or 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 market place, 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 indeed been formidable developments in SOC's complexity, scale and volume.

*The performance described in this report reflects NCA activity during Q2 2019/20 (July - September 2019 inclusive), including aspects specific to Northern Ireland. It encompasses the above three threat areas and organised crime at the border in particular, the work of the NCA's specialist capabilities and the Paramilitary Crime Taskforce. However, the "Official" classification of this report precludes details of some aspects of operational outcomes.*

## **THOSE WHO DOMINATE COMMUNITIES AND CHASE PROFITS IN THE CRIMINAL MARKET PLACE**

In Q2, we recovered 121 firearms across the UK and seized 25 tonnes of cocaine, over 4.5 tonnes of cannabis and 1.8 tonnes of heroin in the UK and overseas. By seizing these significant quantities of firearms and drugs, we have protected communities right across Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. Specific operational successes during the quarter included:

- In August we recovered the largest ever seizure of heroin in the UK, denying vast sums of money to organised crime groups. Nearly 1.3 tonnes of heroin, worth around £27 million at wholesale value and over £120 million at street value, was seized using our specialist capabilities abroad and in the UK. This seizure will have had an impact on the supply of heroin to communities throughout the UK, including Northern Ireland.
- In September, our joint operation with Merseyside Police and Bulgarian law enforcement resulted in the arrest of 13 people and the seizure of 56 firearms and 80 kilograms of heroin. We are investigating more than 30 previous illicit importations by this criminal enterprise.

- We seized a 751kg consignment of cocaine, with a potential street value of £60 million, from a yacht off the coast of Wales. Six UK nationals were arrested in connection with the seizure.

The sale of illegal blank-firing guns from vendors in continental Europe represents a significant criminal risk to the UK. We coordinated a national operation throughout the UK to target individuals who had purchased these weapons. At the time of writing, the operation has resulted in 37 arrests and the seizure of 161 firearms and over 1,000 rounds of ammunition. As part of this operation we, together with PSNI, searched a suspect's address in Belfast. No weapons were found and the suspect denied any involvement, however we are following new lines of investigation.

### **THOSE WHO UNDERMINE THE UK'S ECONOMY, INTEGRITY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND INSTITUTIONS**

We continue to investigate the highest-harm cyber offenders who target victims across the world, in criminality including the theft of banking credentials. We also strive to explore every opportunity to deny the assets of serious and organised criminals. Notable operational outcomes during Q2 2019/20 included:

- Twenty disruptions against UK cyber offenders. They included the identification of over 4.5 million compromised banking credentials, leading to mitigation activity and the alerting of over 28,000 potential victims.
- We obtained an Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO) against a wealthy businessman from the north of England with suspected links to serious organised criminals. This UWO compels him to reveal the source of funds used to start and develop his £10 million property empire. This is the first time that a UWO has been obtained solely based on an individual's alleged involvement in serious organised crime. It is believed that the businessman's property purchases were funded by criminal associates involved in drug trafficking, armed robberies and the supply of firearms.
- On 24 July, we obtained a UWO and an Interim Freezing Order at the High Court in London relating to six properties worth approximately £3.2 million - two in Northern Ireland and four in London. The subject of this civil recovery investigation is associated with a Northern Irish-based individual involved in cigarette smuggling who has numerous criminal and terrorism-related convictions.

Our National Cyber Crime Unit has supported a North West Regional Organised Crime Unit investigation into UK purchasers and users of remote access trojans<sup>1</sup>, which has provided intelligence packages to PSNI concerning a number of individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> Forms of malware often disguised as legitimate software and used to access personal information, collect passwords and credit card information.

We completed intelligence research and de-confliction checks for PSNI relating to a ransomware attack in July where the victim's server was encrypted with ransomware.

We are leading the UK law enforcement response to a large-scale cash-based Chinese underground banking method of money laundering. To date, up to £100 million of illicit cash has been identified, linked with some 14,000 beneficiary bank accounts across the UK. Under this operation we sent a full analytical pack to PSNI regarding third-party cash deposits at a bank branch in Belfast which led to PSNI arresting and charging 13 individuals and seizing £130,000 in July.

In total £15.9 million is suspected to have passed through the accounts of these individuals via 8,000 transactions. The NECC<sup>2</sup> Expert Laundering Evidence team is providing advice and investigative support regarding Chinese underground banking and was also involved in searches during days of action carried out by PSNI.

Our UK Financial Intelligence Unit allocated PSNI with 111 Defence Against Money Laundering requests during Q2. Following the Unit exercising its power under the Proceeds of Crime Act to refuse/grant these requests, PSNI was able to action and restrain £219,046 and deny £5,000. We also disseminated 13 terrorist finance-related Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) to PSNI and the UK FIU also issued 11 international requests relating to fraud.

We analysed 87 counterfeit currency seizures for PSNI to identify common currency printers and, ultimately, the crime groups responsible. We also supported eight PSNI prosecutions/investigations relating to counterfeit currency, checking forensic details and drafting witness statements before passing these and the exhibits to the expert witnesses at the note manufacturer.

## **THOSE WHO EXPLOIT THE VULNERABLE**

We continue to detect individuals committing sexual offences against children who are at the high end of high harm, including those operating on the dark web, and those whose offending is escalating from accessing indecent images of children to contact abuse, including offenders in positions of trust.

We also focus on people smugglers targeting the UK, who often employ high-risk methods of transporting and concealing migrants. Such criminal methods were reflected by the recent tragedy where 39 people died after being trafficked in a lorry container. We continue to work closely with our partners in Essex to support the investigation and, more broadly, to tackle the threat posed by organised criminal networks who employ such tactics.

Notable operational success during the quarter included:

- The safeguarding of 355 children in the UK.

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<sup>2</sup> The National Economic Crime Centre (NECC) is a collaborative, multi-agency centre, bringing together law enforcement agencies, government departments, regulatory bodies and the private sector with the shared objective of driving down serious and organised economic crime (SOEC).

- A 12-year prison sentence for a woman who sexually abused children online for paying customers. Her conviction was secured using legislation that allows for British nationals to be prosecuted in the UK for offences committed overseas.
- Nine arrests in the UK directly related to organised immigration crime through the use of small boats. This is a smuggling method where the risk to life is high; the vessels are often not seaworthy and piloted by unqualified sailors. We also continue to work with French partners in tackling this ongoing threat; during the quarter this led to four convictions in France with custodial sentences in excess of 10 years.

Our detection of individuals committing sexual offences against children at the high-end of high-harm includes using our niche capabilities to de-anonymise CSAE offenders on the dark web. In Q2, we made three intelligence disseminations to PSNI following de-anonymisation activity.

Our CSAE Referrals Bureau - the central point for the receipt of industry referrals relating to online CSAE - made 60 disseminations to PSNI. These intelligence reports contain detailed intelligence leads from which PSNI can initiate investigations. In this period, PSNI made 12 arrests and safeguarded 11 children in response to our referrals.

We are engaged in early discussion with PSNI to support the refresh of the "Virtual Reality" training programme used in Northern Ireland to train professionals (teachers, social workers, youth workers) in online safety education for children and young people.

The latest phase of NCA-led operational intensification activity against modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) focused on trafficking for sexual exploitation. Multi-agency operational activity took place at Belfast City Airport to screen targeted incoming flights for any potential victims of MSHT. In addition, the PSNI MSHT Unit conducted four intelligence-led safeguarding visits to sex industry premises identified to be at potential risk of exploitation/vulnerability over the course of the week of activity in September.

Our UK Financial Intelligence Unit (UK FIU) identified 27 financial Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) relating to suspected vulnerable persons, seven associated with suspected child exploitation and four relating to suspected human trafficking – all of which we fast-tracked to PSNI. Following dissemination of one of these SARs by our UK FIU vulnerable persons work-stream, PSNI launched an investigation into the activities of an individual suspected of stealing money from vulnerable individuals.

## **ORGANISED CRIME AT THE BORDER**

We are among a number of agencies staffing the Causeway Multi-Agency Hub opened in April, designed to tackle the full range of threats and risks on Republic of Ireland-UK-Crown Dependencies routes, including the Common Travel Area. During Q2, four referrals were made relating to Northern Irish ports/airports,

with two meeting the criteria for adoption by the NCA (dependent on the commodity, ability to take the intelligence/investigation further and identified links to serious and organised crime). Causeway continues to liaise with PSNI colleagues to identify a representative to be embedded in the Hub.

### **NCA SPECIALIST CAPABILITIES**

The UK Protected Persons Service, an NCA-led network of regional police units that provides protection to people judged to be at risk of serious harm, provided 355 instances of support on behalf of PSNI in this period.

Our Major Crime Investigative Support team provided advice and support to PSNI on 21 instances, and deployed officers into force on two occasions. The cases related to murder, sexual offences, suspicious deaths and missing persons.

One of these cases was the PSNI investigation into the systematic abuse of vulnerable adults with severe learning disabilities at Muckamore Abbey. We continue to provide niche support to this investigation, most recently through the deployment of the National Senior Investigating Officer Adviser and National Interview Adviser, who have assisted in arrest/interview strategy and management of the case as it progresses to the point of interviewing over 50 suspects in relation to 1,400 identified offences.

Our Anti-Kidnap and Extortion Unit is the national repository of sextortion complaints. The details of suspects are checked against reports from other forces and, where possible, linked and disseminated to the jurisdictions in which they reside. These services were provided to the PSNI in relation to eight sextortion cases and one case of blackmail.

Our UK Missing Persons Unit is the UK national and international point of contact for all missing person and unidentified body investigations. In Q2, the Unit assisted PSNI with four missing person reports and two currently remain open. Enquiries remain ongoing.

Our Serious Crime Analysis Section - which works to identify the potential emergence of serial killers and serial rapists at the earliest stage of their offending - analysed 17 cases of stranger rape for PSNI and provided 17 reports, although these did not generate any new lines of enquiry.

Our UK International Crime Bureau acts as a conduit between law enforcement partners both at a national and international level, managing European Arrest Warrants (EAWs) in its role as the UK's Competent Authority. PSNI sent six cases to the us for onward dissemination, resulting in three arrests and two surrenders. In the opposite direction, PSNI made ten arrests for persons sought on an EAW. One of these arrests was of a subject wanted in France for trafficking of adults as part of a violent criminal group.

**PARAMILITARY CRIME TASKFORCE**

Our officers in Northern Ireland work in partnership with PSNI and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs as part of a Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF), to tackle organised crime linked to paramilitary activity. Our focus within the PCTF is on activity delivering the most impactful results in terms of harm reduction, disruption and dislocation.

Our tax investigators attached to the PCTF issued tax assessments totalling £40,000 to an individual alleged to have close links to South-East Antrim UDA. The assessment relates to undeclared income received by this individual over a number of years and is believed to be linked to illegal money lending.

There are a further eight ongoing civil recovery and/or tax investigations, concerning individuals from three of the priority organised crime groups. The assets under investigation total approximately £3m with the underlying criminality constituting drug supply, money laundering and illegal money lending.

Several interviews under Disclosure Orders are scheduled to take place in the next month in relation to individuals connected to a Belfast-based loyalist organisation. Under a separate investigation, we will be filing applications to the High Court for Disclosure Orders with a view to conducting interviews. A further 10 cases are currently being assessed by the team and in the next month we will be determining their adoption for investigation.