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NCA Northern Ireland Performance

Q4 2018/19 (January – March 2019 inclusive)

Date: 12th September 2019

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This document reports on National Crime Agency (NCA) activity that has occurred in, or impacted upon, Northern Ireland during Q4 2018/19. The final section reports on activity that has a UK-wide impact.

1 Vulnerabilities

1.1 Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE)

- Operation SORAGE is an NCA investigation into a Belfast-based individual suspected of involvement in CSAE. Arrested in 2018, the suspect made a full and frank admission to the making of indecent images of children. In February 2019, he was sentenced at Laganside Crown Court to a three-year Probation Order, a five-year Sexual Offences Prevention Order, a destruction order for all items seized, barred from working with children and given notification requirements for five years.
- The NCA Child Sexual Exploitation Referrals Bureau – a central point for the receipt of industry referrals relating to online CSAE – made 47 disseminations to PSNI. These intelligence reports contain I.P. addresses, email addresses and telephone numbers from which PSNI can begin investigations.
- Q4 saw the launch of a Northern Ireland version of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCIS) document 'Sexting in Schools and Colleges: Responding to Incidents and Safeguarding Young People'. The CEOP Education Team played an advisory role and was the liaison between the SBNI e-Safety Forum and the UKCIS Education Working Group. The NCA has also provided feedback on the e-Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland and had input on a potential online safety conference for 2019.
- Three more schools signed up for the Parent Information Service during Q4. This service is part of ThinkuKnow, a programme developed by the CEOP Command that provides education about sex, relationships and the internet, with the aim of reducing the vulnerability of children and young people to sexual abuse and exploitation.
- To date, there are 206 trained CEOP Ambassadors in Northern Ireland, with a further training course scheduled for Belfast this autumn. These Ambassadors are typically individuals in schools and communities who cascade messages on how to protect children from online sexual exploitation.

1.2 Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT)

- The NCA UK Financial Intelligence Unit (UKFIU) identified 20 suspicious activity reports (SARs) relating to suspected vulnerable persons, four relating to suspected child exploitation and three relating to suspected human trafficking for fast-tracking to PSNI.
- As part of phase 15 of the NCA-led UK-wide intensification against MSHT (Project AIDANT), PSNI carried out several joint visits with HMRC to nail bars across Northern Ireland. This was only one part of a UK-wide effort

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against modern slavery - further details can be found on page seven.

1.3 Organised Immigration Crime (OIC)

- We are investigating a transport company suspected to be involved in smuggling people, drugs and tobacco/cigarettes into the UK using lorries. The principal subject and his haulage company are based in Northern Ireland. In March, an HGV was stopped at Dover port where a subsequent search identified 12 Albanian nationals in a purpose-built concealment. Two of the 12 remain under investigation.

2 Prosperity

2.1 Money Laundering

- Operation PUMPLESS is the NCA-led investigation into allegations of fraud, bribery and corruption arising from the sale of the Republic of Ireland's National Asset Management Agency's Northern Ireland loan book. To date, nine persons have been designated as suspects, numerous witness interviews have been conducted and a significant amount of evidential material has been collected, both on a voluntary basis via Production Order, or through searches under warrant. Two files of evidence have been submitted to the Northern Ireland Public Prosecution Service for their consideration. The first file reported two suspects and one of these has been informed of a no-prosecution decision. The second individual also features in the extensive second file and will be considered along with seven further suspects.
- Project PRINCEKIN is the NCA-led UK law enforcement response to a large-scale cash-based money laundering methodology exploiting bank accounts held mainly by overseas students studying in the UK. Working with a particular bank, we have identified patterns of suspicious cash-depositing activity at various branches, identifying Northern Ireland as a high risk area. Under PSNI Operation DIABASE, the knowledge of these cash-depositing patterns has been used to direct the deployment of surveillance, in turn resulting in cash seizures and opportunities for further investigation. The Project is already showing the benefit of the private sector relationships forged by the National Economic Crime Centre (NECC).
- The UK Financial Intelligence Unit (UKFIU) allocated 101 Defence Against Money Laundering (DAML) requests from banks to either PSNI or the NCA Civil Recovery and Tax (CRT) team in Northern Ireland.¹ For context, this represents less than one percent of the total volume of DAML requests handled by the UKFIU during Q4. The UKFIU exercised its power under POCA to grant 41 and refuse three DAMLs, allowing law enforcement to take action. From the above, over £43k was restrained and forfeited.
- The UKFIU disseminated 15 terrorist finance-related Suspicious Activity Reports (SAR) to PSNI in Q4.

¹ 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 POCA 2002.

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- Working in collaboration with the Law Society of Northern Ireland, the UKFIU led a series of presentations on 'Why Quality Suspicious Activity Reports Matter'. DAML and SAR good practice and guidance was shared throughout key venues in Northern Ireland including Enniskillen, Londonderry, Newry and Belfast. Early feedback suggests that the events were successful in raising awareness and the risks faced by solicitors.

2.2 Fraud and Other Economic Crime

- PSNI submitted 61 counterfeit currency seizures to our UK National Central Office for Counterfeit Currency (UKNCO) for processing and analysis. Witness statements were provided by the UKNCO to support police investigations or prosecutions for 14 counterfeit currency seizures.
- At a Crown Court hearing in February, seven defendants were sentenced for conspiracy offences involving counterfeit currency. The UKNCO provided substantial assistance to PSNI including advice, coordination of expert evidence, and analysis of counterfeits. The total loss was £561k plus €438k from the counterfeiting of Ulster Bank and Bank of Ireland notes. Sentences totalling seven years and nine months' imprisonment (some suspended) were passed down.
- The NCA Proceeds of Crime Centre (POCC) has provided PSNI with regulatory guidance on POCA matters arising from active operational and civil recovery cases, and advice on training and accreditation.

2.3 Cyber Crime

- Our National Cyber Crime Unit (NCCU) is supporting the PSNI investigation in response to the distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack in October 2016 which affected internet access for much of the US. The principal suspect of this investigation is a UK national resident in Northern Ireland.
- The NCCU is also working with the PSNI Cyber Team to investigate a number of DDoS attacks² against multiple websites worldwide, including attacks on several law enforcement websites. The investigation established the attacks were launched from a website associated to Webstresser, a now defunct site that sold software capable of causing major disruption using DDoS. In collaboration with the NCA, PSNI arrested a subject linked to the investigation.
- We are providing support to a PSNI investigation into a financial institution receiving phishing emails originating from the compromised email accounts of a local institution.

3 Commodities

3.1 Drugs

² A Distributed Denial of Service cyber-attack seeks to make a machine or network unavailable to its intended users by overloading it with internet traffic

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- Operation ITALICI is an investigation into the importation and manufacture of Anabolic Androgenic Steroids (AAS) triggered by the Border Force interception of a 632kg consignment of AAS at Heathrow Airport destined for Belfast. Our investigation to date has uncovered a crime group with a global supply network that had been operating for eight years and trafficked over 100 tonnes of AAS. NCA investigators uncovered a sophisticated illicit laboratory producing commercial quantities of Class C AAS. Linked seizures of AAS have taken place around Europe including Northern Ireland. The drugs featuring in this investigation have been valued at £90 million. Five defendants were charged and the investigation team are currently involved in two trials taking place at Central Criminal Court in London.
- In February a Portuguese national was sentenced to two years' imprisonment after he admitted swallowing 35 pellets of cocaine when stopped at inbound controls at Belfast City Airport in July 2018. The NCA conducted the criminal investigation and after liaison with Immigration Enforcement have ensured the individual will be deported following his custodial sentence.

4 Specialist Capabilities

- The NCA Anti-Kidnap and Extortion Unit (AKEU) is the national repository of sextortion (blackmail) complaints. The details of those suspected to be behind the sextortion are checked against reports from other forces and where possible linked and disseminated to the countries in which they reside. PSNI reported 21 sextortion cases to the AKEU during Q4.
- As part of the UK Protected Persons Service (UKPPS), we provide operational support to the PSNI Protected Persons Unit. In Q4, the UKPPS provided 357 new instances of support to protected persons on behalf of PSNI.
- Our UK International Crime Bureau processes European Arrest Warrants (EAWs) for law enforcement agencies within the UK and EU. During Q4 there were seven arrests and four surrenders made by PSNI for persons sought by EU partners on an EAW. Of particular note, a subject wanted in Poland for threatening to set his victims on fire was arrested and successfully extradited back to Poland in March. We received five new cases for persons wanted by PSNI, ultimately leading to ten arrests and five surrenders.
- NCA Major Crime Investigative Support (MCIS) provided advice and support to PSNI on 27 instances during Q4, deploying officers into force on five occasions. Cases included suspicious deaths, non-accidental injury, murder and sexual offences.
- The NCA UK Missing Persons Unit (UKMPU) offers support in locating missing individuals, particularly in trying to establish last movements and recent contacts. We received four missing person reports from PSNI during Q4. However, in all of the four cases the individuals have either returned safely or their remains have been located.

5 **Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF)**

- We continue to work in partnership with PSNI and HMRC as part of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force with the aim of tackling organised crime linked to paramilitary activity. Our civil recovery and tax capability plays an integral role in the work of the Taskforce, utilising the capability of the powers provided under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 to prevent serious and organised crime groups from benefiting financially or materially.
- As part of the PCTF investigation into the home of a suspected senior member of the South East Antrim UDA paramilitary group, we suspected that a property in Carrickfergus was originally acquired using the proceeds of mortgage fraud, tax evasion and money laundering before being placed into a partner's name. Subsequently we obtained a Recovery Order by Consent under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Following the initiation of proceedings in the High Court in Belfast, the defendants decided not to contest the case and agreed to the house being recovered.
- Additional civil recovery and tax investigations being carried out by officers attached to the PCTF remain ongoing.

6 **National Overview**

Our activity outside Northern Ireland targets organised crime groups whose activity has an impact that spreads beyond national boundaries, protecting communities across the entire UK and beyond.

- Our overall UK-wide activity during Q4 led to a total of 482 disruptions, 183 arrests and 90 convictions. During this period, 43 firearms were recovered and 641 children were safeguarded. Approximately 17 tonnes of cocaine and 14 tonnes of cannabis were seized. We also undertook 36 disruptions against the UK-wide cybercrime threat.

6.1 **Vulnerabilities**

- The NCA-coordinated Project AIDANT – which focuses on tackling modern slavery and human trafficking - has led to more than 660 arrests and over 1,040 potential victims of trafficking being identified across the UK over the past two years. The 15th and final phase of AIDANT's 'weeks of action' in January saw 35 arrests and over 100 victims safeguarded by police forces and law enforcement agencies. This week of coordinated activity allowed local forces to focus on specific types of modern slavery prevalent in their areas. As well as coordinating enforcement activity, NCA officers undertook a range of prevention and awareness-raising work.
- In Q1 we continued to provide UK police forces and international partners with intelligence packages on the users of CSAE web sites. The provision of over 35 packages have resulted in six separate arrests to date of individuals suspected to have viewed Indecent Images of Children (IIOC) as a minimum. As we examine their seized devices, we believe many of those arrested have committed more serious offences such as sharing images of family members and contact offending. The arrests include individuals that are in a position of trust. In addition, our intelligence

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development has uncovered a number of dark web CSAE sites, some of which we assess to be genuine, with the others likely to be scam sites (a scam site does not host any indecent images of children but will nevertheless offer access to them in exchange for bank details). Our next step is to identify the users and take executive action.

6.2 Prosperity

- In Q4 we undertook 36 disruptions against the UK-wide cybercrime threat. 15 of these disruptions were against malicious software designed to steal personal data, including financial details. Separately, we have coordinated activity targeting UK users of a 'DDoS-for-hire' service. This service provides customers with the opportunity to purchase software that when deployed will overload sites with web traffic (known as DDoS or Distributed Denial of Service) to effectively make the site unusable. Our coordination activity led to the execution of 10 warrants, 11 Cease & Desist notices and seized over 60 devices.

6.3 Commodities

- Q4 has seen nationwide activity led jointly by us and the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) into County Lines drug supply, tackling those who dominate communities through violence. A week of coordinated law enforcement activity across the UK resulted in the arrest of over 600 people. The operation spoke with over 400 vulnerable adults and 600 children, and made 40 referrals to the National Referral Mechanism to identify individuals as potential victims of human trafficking/modern slavery. There were significant seizures; over 140 weapons including 12 firearms, swords, machetes, axes, knives and significant amounts of heroin and cocaine.
- In January, three men who ran a dark web business selling the potentially lethal drugs fentanyl and carfentanyl to customers across the UK and worldwide were jailed for a total of 43-and-a-half years. They mixed fentanyl - which is up to 100 times stronger than morphine, and carfentanyl - which is 10,000 times stronger, with bulking agents at an industrial unit in Leeds. The drugs would then be sold over the dark web. Our investigators identified 172 UK customers and found that six individuals from the crime groups customer list have died from issues related to fentanyl consumption.