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NCA Performance in Northern Ireland

Q3 2020/21 (October – December 2020)

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. There are 4,772 known organised crime groups mapped in the UK, with over 350,000 individuals estimated to be involved in SOC¹. 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 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 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 20/21 Performance Ambitions

The NCA's Senior Team and Board are responsible for setting annual ambitions that are routinely tracked through operational and strategic governance forums. This year the NCA highlighted their work within the Devolved Administrations, setting an ambition to "Increase the volume of disruptions (both lead and support) in Northern Ireland and Scotland". This ambition will be pursued actively with PSNI, Police Scotland and other partners; and demonstrates the NCA's commitment to build even stronger relationships with counterparts in the Devolved Administrations.

About this report

The aim of this report is to summarise NCA performance and activity, primarily relating to Q3 2020/21 (October – December 2020 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 Paramilitary Crime Taskforce (PCTF). However, the "Official" classification of this report prevents the detailed inclusion of live operational activity and tactics.

¹ National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime, 2020

Our Impact in Northern Ireland

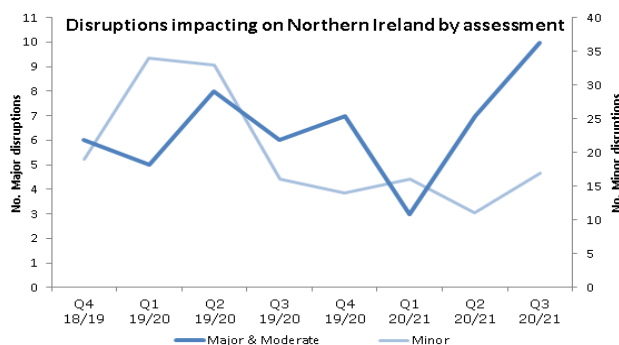
Disruptions impacting on Northern Ireland

Disruption Assessment	Jan 19 - Dec 19		R12	Jan 20 - Dec 20		R12	▲ ▼
	Lead	Support	Total	Lead	Support	Total	
Major	5	0	5	6	2	8	▲
Moderate	22	3	25	26	1	27	▲
Minor	95	7	102	47	11	58	▼
Grand Total	122	10	132	79	14	93	▼

Figure 3: NCA Disruptions with Impact in Northern Ireland, January to December 2018/19 and 2019/20

This period the number of disruptions assessed as having a Major and Moderate impact have both increased² (from 30 to 35) in line with our mission to tackle the top end of criminality. Of the 79 lead disruptions recorded for Jan-Dec 2020 **32% were against P1-P2 operations**, the Agency’s highest priorities. This is double that of the previous period and **8% higher** than total NCA disruptions against P1-P2’s strongly suggesting our NI outcomes are increasingly focused on the highest harm criminals. Quarter on quarter, there were 29 disruptions, up from 20, and compared with a quarterly average of 28 over the past two years. To note, the table above, which tracks outcomes over a rolling 12 month period, is skewed by a successful, high volume project during Q2 2019-20 (July – September 2019) in which the NCA achieved a high volume of cyber disruptions over a consolidated period of time.

As the graph to right demonstrates, the drop off experienced in minor disruptions (important disruptive activity assessed - in relation to other NCA outcomes - to have a shorter term impact), has coincided with a sharp increase in our higher impact activity.



During this period, Lead disruptions in Northern Ireland represent approximately 3% of all NCA-led disruptive activity. This figure is fairly consistent quarter on quarter, oscillating between 3-5% in line with the Agency’s priorities and collaborative efforts with law enforcement partners, and must be read in the context that NCA-dedicated Northern Ireland funding is less than 1% of the Agency’s total spend.

In addition to the disruptions where an impact on Northern Ireland has been specifically designated, there have been **an additional 63 disruptions** in 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 on Northern Ireland. One from Q3 related to an investigation by the agency’s National Cyber Crime Unit’s

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.

(NCCU) into Trickbot **banking Trojan malware**; compromising 55,939 financial credentials. The NCCU ensured that the details were shared with the relevant institutions through an alert to the Financial Fraud Bureau; allowing for mitigating actions to take place.

This report will now go on to 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 Quarter 3 relating to our ongoing efforts against **Drugs** and **Firearms** related criminality in or related to Northern Ireland:

- A 57-year-old man was sentenced to **15 years imprisonment** at Maidstone Crown Court for a **conspiracy to smuggle cocaine**. The cocaine was concealed in customised exhaust pipes which the NCA believe was destined for Northern Ireland. NCA investigators, supported by Border Force, stopped a lorry driver as he tried to pass border controls at Dover. The lorry had travelled from Rotterdam, via Calais, and was transporting a legitimate delivery of fruit. Officers searched the lorry and recovered 36kg cocaine concealed in two vertical exhaust chimneys at the rear of the vehicle. The drugs would have been street valued at **£2.8 million**. Prior to the seizure, NCA surveillance teams watched as he travelled to an industrial estate in Warwickshire and removed the exhaust pipes from another lorry. Investigators later confirmed that the lorry was registered to a Northern Ireland-based haulage company.
- In December, the final member of a prolific **anabolic steroid manufacture and distribution network** was **sentenced to imprisonment**. The 52-year-old male from Maidenhead was given a 17 month jail sentence and a Serious Crime Prevention Order; restricting his future business activities. Following a two month trial at the Old Bailey, he was found guilty of conspiring to manufacture steroids. The investigation into the male and his associates was led by the NCA in Northern Ireland. The male is also subject to an ongoing Proceeds of Crime Act investigation and **£1million assets have been restrained**.
- In November, NCA and PSNI officers, working as part of PCTF, conducted intelligence led searches of two parked cars and a drugs hide located within a nearby hedged-boundary in the Greenisland area. **Over 1kg of cocaine was seized**. This is part of an ongoing NCA-led investigation into criminal paramilitary activity and further updates will be provided as the investigation develops.
- As part of an ongoing investigation involving the NCA, PSNI and Border Force, **£6 million of cocaine was seized** at the Port of Holyhead. Officers from Border Force found a further 83kg cocaine concealed within a lorry load of refrigerated goods. Following the seizure, Border Force officers arrested

the lorry driver and conducted additional searches with the support of PSNI. NCA officers charged a 51-year-old male from County Londonderry with exporting Class A drugs.

- A truck driver from Northern Ireland, and a courier from West London, were **convicted for attempting to smuggle cannabis from the UK to Ireland**. A 27-year-old man from Armagh, was stopped by Border Force officers as he was about to board a ferry at Holyhead Port to the Republic of Ireland. The male, who worked for a Northern Irish Logistics firm, was found to be carrying **50kg skunk cannabis**; worth **£500,000** street value, amongst the load in his trailer. NCA investigators arrested a second man in Greenford, after linking him to the seizure. The two men pleaded guilty, at Southwark Crown Court, to conspiring to export Class B drugs and were given 22-month and 20-month jail sentences both suspended for two years.
- Two males were arrested in October as part of a NCA investigation into the attempted **importation of a firearm into Northern Ireland**. The pair were detained in Ballymoney following a joint operation involving PSNI and NCA officers. The arrests follow an NCA supported, linked Border Force seizure of a **functioning handgun, two magazines and more than 50 rounds of ammunition** at an international parcel hub in England. One male was charged with attempted importation of this weapon and ammunition, and was remanded into custody. Utilising the NCA's international network, investigation is ongoing in the United States, whereby the sender of the firearm has been identified and is currently in custody.

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

The below updates incorporate our most significant operational and partnership activity across **Economic** and **Cybercrime** types in or related to Northern Ireland:

- 21 people – including a 22 year old from County Tyrone - were arrested across the UK as part of an operation targeting customers of an **online criminal marketplace that advertised stolen personal credentials**. The operation, which ran over five weeks, was coordinated by the NCA and involved cybercrime teams from across the Team Cyber UK (TCUK) network. Those targeted were customers of WeLeakInfo - a site that hosted **12 billion stolen credentials** from over **10,000 data breaches** - before it was taken down following an NCA investigation. Cyber criminals paid for access to the site in order to download personal data for use in further criminality, including cyber-attacks and fraud offences that were widespread in nature; impacting victims across Great Britain and Northern Ireland. NCA investigators identified UK-based customers of the site and shared the intelligence with partners ahead of a coordinated period of activity. Of the 21, NCA officers conducted **11 of the arrests** and **seized over £41,000 in bitcoin**. As well as being customers of WeLeakInfo, evidence suggests that some had also purchased other cybercrime tools such as Remote Access Trojans (RATs) and crypters. In addition, three subjects have been found to be in possession of, or involved with, **indecent images of children**. A further 69 individuals, aged between 16 and 40, in England, Wales and

Northern Ireland were visited by Cyber Prevent officers, warning them of their potentially criminal activity; 60 of which were served with cease and desist notices.

- The NCA assisted the PSNI in relation to a significant **network intrusion/data breach**. Support was provided in handling the PROTECT & PREVENT aspects of the compromised data identified on suspect devices. The NCCU are currently engaged in the process of analysing the data and identifying a means of mitigating the impact of the compromised credentials.
- NCCU has been providing support to Israeli Law Enforcement as part of its international remit. Evidence was provided indicating that a male, based in the UK, had access to medical patients and intent to cause threat to life. The NCCU disseminated a package to PSNI who in turn conducted a visit to the suspect who were able to prevent further malicious activity.
- **Civil Recovery** and **Tax** powers are used widely by the NCA. In the last quarter, the NCA has progressed civil recovery and tax investigations relating to the proceeds of drugs criminality, extortion, illegal money lending, excise evasion, counterfeiting and other profits associated with participation in criminal behaviours. In November, an investigation culminated in the NCA being granted a Recovery Order (by consent) in respect of seven apartments, three retail units and two lock up garages, located in Belfast and valued **at £650,000**. The NCA presented to court that the properties had been purchased as a result of a long history of fraud and money laundering by the subject and their associates. This investigation was carried out by the NCA, as part of the PCTF, with assistance from our partners PSNI and HMRC.

Exploiting the vulnerable

The below updates incorporate our most significant operational and partnership activity this quarter relating **to Child Sexual Abuse** and **Human Trafficking** in Northern Ireland:

- In December, four men - including two from Northern Ireland - were found **guilty** of their involvement in a **people smuggling ring** which led to the deaths of 39 Vietnamese men, women and children in the trailer of a lorry in Grays, Essex. NCA officers worked alongside Essex Police to provide specialist support and assistance which included deploying investigative and intelligence assets both in the UK and overseas, as well as immigration crime and victim identification specialists. The Agency's international network also provided links to Vietnam, and other countries involved, as the investigation has broadened. In a separate development, a male wanted internationally, on suspicion of smuggling a number of the migrants, was arrested by NCA officers in Worcestershire, and has been remanded in custody until March 2021; awaiting extradition on a European Arrest Warrant. He is suspected of having been involved in transporting at least ten of the 39 victims; moving them from a safe house in Anderlecht to a location near the French/Belgian border, before they were placed onto the lorry.

- The Agency is carrying out an investigation into Child Sexual Abuse where an account was created on a cloud storage platform and subsequently used to transfer indecent images of children. In Belfast, an adult male was arrested, interviewed and released on police bail until February 2021; pending further examination of multiple electronic storage devices and updates will be provided in subsequent reports.

Our Impact across the UK

Total NCA Disruptions							
Disruption Assessment	Jan 19 - Dec 19		R12	Jan 20 - Dec 20		R12	▲ ▼
	Lead	Support	Total	Lead	Support	Total	
Major	72	23	95	115	46	161	▲
Moderate	376	123	499	488	189	677	▲
Minor	1360	527	1887	1784	981	2765	▲
Grand Total	1808	673	2481	2387	1216	3603	▲

Figure 1: Comparison of NCA Disruptions, January to December 2019 and 2020

During the last two 12 month periods (January to December 2019 and January to December 2020) there has been a **45% increase in the total number of disruptions achieved by the NCA**; whilst those in the **major category**, where the biggest impact has been achieved, are displaying a **greater increase at 69%**. 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 we target are sophisticated and work across geographical boundaries in the UK and internationally. Our 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. We assess that these 'UK wide' successes are making communities in Northern Ireland safer.

775 lead disruptions took place in Q3 and a quarter (24%) of these were against P1-P2 operations – the Agency's highest priorities. Our cases are graded using an objective methodology that takes into account threat, harm and risk. This proportion is similar to the previous quarter (26%) and shows that a significant proportion of our activity is closely aligned to investigations targeting the UK's most dangerous criminals.

The proportion was significantly higher in Q1 due to the high volume of executive action taking place in relation to **Operation VENETIC**, which targeted EncroChat and other encrypted criminal communication platforms, by sharing technical expertise and intelligence. This year, the UK's collaboration with international partners, resulted in authorities in France and the Netherlands infiltrating the platform which enabled the NCA to monitor EncroChat users activity leading to an upsurge in enforcement action. The operation has yielded huge intelligence dividends to date and the NCA continues

to work closely with colleagues across Law Enforcement to identify and pursue intelligence leads generated from Operation VENETIC data. The Agency is also playing a critical role in converting the arrests and seizures from earlier in the year to high impact judicial outcomes through the courts.

Another key driver for the uplift in overall disruption volumes 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 for some time, but this increase has steepened recently, with 25,800 received in Q3 compared with a quarterly average of 15,600 in FY 2019/20. Although these volumes do not correlate 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 potential victims.

Figure 2 shows the monthly NCA totals for lead disruptions in the last 12 months and illustrates the spikes caused by the initial Operation VENETIC activity and recent UKFIU increases.

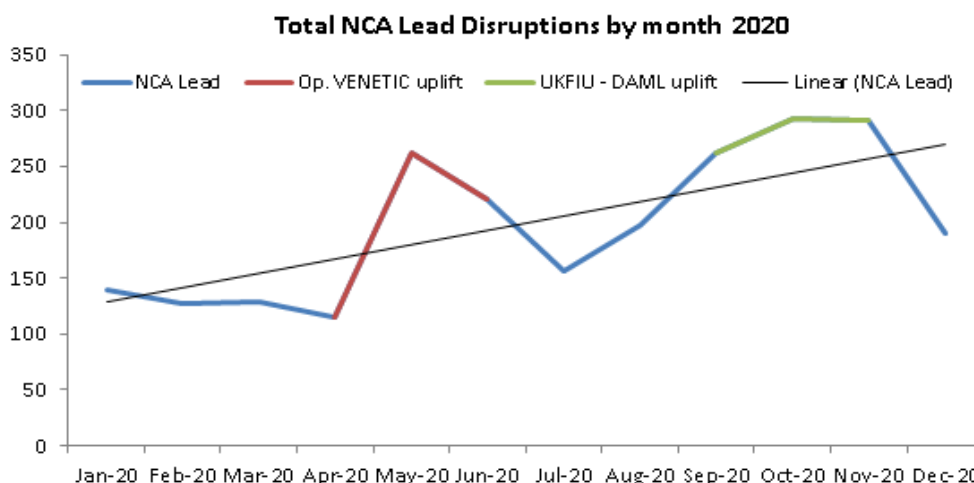


Figure 2: Monthly NCA Lead Disruption volumes January to December 2020

The relatively low current December total will likely increase in the near future due to a normal lag in reporting associated with certain outcomes.

Before concluding, we would like to share a selection of the NCA's operational successes in Q3 from across the UK that, given the individuals targeted and scale of criminality, will likely have an indirect impact on Northern Ireland:

- Since March 2020, the NCA has prioritised and increased activity against online Child Sexual Abuse having assessed that opportunities for offending would increase as a result of Covid-19. This work has been fully aligned to our high-harm disruption strategy and targets both open source and dark web offenders who are engaged in (or have the means to engage in) contact child abuse. In Q3 alone this operation generated 90 arrests across the UK

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.

with many more in the pipeline. Year-to-date the Agency has delivered a 123% increase in lead disruptions relating to **indecent images of children** and this momentum will be maintained as we go into a renewed period of national lockdown.

- The NCA's Complex Financial Crime Team arrested three members of an organised crime group in December involved in **high level money laundering and fraud** against in excess of 40 **victims** across the UK. The subjects were detained following raids at properties in London on suspicion of committing large scale identity theft and using numerous false bank accounts to disguise criminal funds. In some cases, individual losses are believed to run into the hundreds of thousands of pounds with the criminals using tactics such as **romance scams** and **unlawful claims for government bounce back loans** designed to support businesses through COVID to accrue funds. Several social media platforms and online dating sites are believed to have been exploited over a number of years to target the victims in the UK and other countries.
- Three men, two from Ukraine, and one from Latvia, were charged with **people smuggling offences** after a fishing boat was intercepted off the coast of East Anglia in November. As part of an intelligence-led operation involving the NCA, Essex Police, Immigration Enforcement and Border Force, the vessel was located after it had sailed from the Ostend area of Belgium and was accompanied into Harwich harbour by Border Force cutters. The other 69 people on board, all Albanian nationals, were arrested on suspicion of offences under the Immigration Act and were handed over to Immigration Enforcement officers.
- A haulage firm owner from Warrington was jailed in December for more than 14 years for **moving drugs and illicit cash across Europe**. The subject was targeted by the NCA as part of Operation VENETIC. Evidence showed that he operated a transportation network spanning Europe, moving drugs into the UK and Ireland and the profits in the other direction. Encrochat messages revealed in April 2020 he orchestrated the collection and delivery of at least 21kg cocaine from locations in the Netherlands. As well as drugs, he also helped to facilitate the movement of large sums of cash to be transported from Ireland to Holland on behalf of one of his associates, who he charged a commission for his involvement.

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 Q3 Updates
<p>Major Crime Investigation Support <i>The team provided advice and support to PSNI in 10 instances; deploying officers into force on five occasions. These cases included murder and non-accidental injuries to children.</i></p>	<p>One case related to the shooting of a 35-year-old male which occurred in Belfast. The murder and subsequent investigation centres around OCGs linked to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, respectively. At the time of reporting, the two males have been arrested, charged and currently remanded in custody. Further inquiries continue, in relation to other potential suspects. Support of MCIS has been requested specifically in relation to interviews of the suspects and post-charge interviews; and continued support is ongoing.</p> <p>Another case relates to a Public Protection Branch (PPB) investigation into the circumcision of two male babies. The suspect was brought to Northern Ireland to perform the circumcisions which resulted in substantial blood loss and an emergency hospital admission. The PPB sought support from MCIS in respect of this pseudo-medical procedure and virtual deployment of a National SIO Adviser (NSIOA), a Crime Investigation Support Officer (CISO) and National Injuries Database (NID) have taken place where strategic, operation and investigative support provided.</p>
<p>UK Financial Intelligence Unit</p>	<p>The UKFIU disseminated 24 terrorist finance-related Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) to PSNI. The UKFIU also referred 146 DAML requests to PSNI and NCA Civil Recovery Team Belfast for advice. This represents a 21% reduction from Q2's 186 requests. The UKFIU also issued seven international requests on behalf of PSNI, in relation to the importation of drugs, fraud, money laundering and counterfeit money. UKFIU further referred 36 SARs relating to suspected vulnerable persons; including six relating to suspected child exploitation and one relating to suspected human trafficking .</p>
<p>UK National Central Office for Counterfeit Currency <i>The team processed and analysed 45 seizures submitted by PSNI during Q3. The UKNCO further assisted with 15 witness statement requests to support</i></p>	<p>As part of an investigation between UKNCO and West Yorkshire Police, a commercial printers located near Huddersfield was searched after it was suspected an OCG were printing a variety of Scottish, Northern Irish and Bank of England counterfeit paper bank notes. During this search, and related searches, evidence was found confirming that the OCG were printing Bank of Scotland £20 and £50 notes, Clydesdale £20 notes, Royal Bank of Scotland £20 notes and £50 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 has also been recovered. Further investigations are ongoing.</p>

<i>prosecutions and investigations.</i>	Direct guidance and support to PSNI was provided in relation to postal shipments of counterfeit € bank notes seized by UK Border Force. The notes are being sent from the Netherlands and are believed to be obtained via the Dark Web.
CSA Referrals Bureau	The CSA RB is the central point within the NCA for receipt of industry referrals relating to online child sexual exploitation; predominantly via the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in the United States. NCMEC provides a centralised mechanism for public and electronic service providers to report suspected indecent images of children (IIOC). NCMEC sends all referrals relating to UK suspects to the CSA RB. During Q3 the CSA RB made 116 disseminations to PSNI, an increase from 77 in Q3.
Child Exploitation and Online Protection	In collaboration with NCA partners, CEOP made two disseminations to PSNI during Q3 as part of a project aimed at identifying real-word CSA offenders operating on the Dark Web. A total of 206 Thinkuknow ⁴ Ambassadors have been trained in Northern Ireland. 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. One school has signed up for the Parent Information Service during Q3; bringing the total in Northern Ireland to 87. This service enables school websites to directly host information provided by the NCA's Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) department which contains advice and guidance for parents and carers.
Anti-Kidnap & Extortion Unit	The AKEU is the national repository for kidnap, blackmail and sextortion complaints. Details of suspects are checked against reports from other forces and, where possible, disseminated to the jurisdictions in which they reside. In Q3, the AKEU provided these services to PSNI on 57 occasions; eight in relation to kidnap, nine blackmail and 40 concerning sextortion .
UK Protected Persons Service	The UKPPS - an NCA function that provides protection to people assessed as being at risk of serious harm - supported PSNI in 129 instances during Q3.
UK International Crime Bureau	The UKICB is the UK's competent authority when managing European Arrest Warrants (EAWs); acting as a conduit between law enforcement partners, both at a national and international level. During Q3, PSNI made eight arrests and three surrenders for persons sought on EAWs. Conversely, PSNI referred six cases to the NCA for onward dissemination; resulting in three arrests and three surrenders.
National Firearms Targeting Centre	The NFTC disseminated two intelligence packages to PSNI in Q3. One intelligence package was in relation to an identified individual concerned in armed criminality, and a second related to the acquisition of a blank firing handgun from a European supplier; alongside component parts from the United States.

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.