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NCA

National Crime Agency

NCA Performance in Northern Ireland

Q3 2019/20 (October – December 2019)

Date: 30 January 2020

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 (SOC) 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 presented by the changing complexity, scale and volume of the SOC threat is a critical objective for the NCA and wider law enforcement community.

The performance described in this report reflects NCA activity during Q3 2019/20 (October – December 2019 inclusive), including aspects specific to Northern Ireland. It encompasses the above three threat areas and in particular organised crime at the border, the work of the NCA's specialist capabilities, and the Paramilitary Crime Taskforce. However, the "Official" classification of this report precludes the inclusion of some details relating to operational outcomes.

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

We continue to work with partners to tackle the threat to communities in the United Kingdom posed by the criminal use of firearms.

In Q3 the NCA seized 70 firearms across the UK. Specific operational successes during this quarter included:

- In December 2019, NCA intelligence led to our officers, working as part of the Paramilitary Crime Taskforce, arresting two individuals in Northern Ireland connected to the suspected importation and supply of illegal blank-firing guns (which can be easily converted) from a Spanish vendor. Working together with partners we seized 32 firearms in Northern Ireland along with a significant amount of cash.
- In November, NCA officers obtained a search warrant for an address in Newtownards which resulted in the seizure of over 20 firearms and thousands of rounds of ammunition. The investigation, initiated as the result of NCA intelligence, led to the interception of a semi-automatic rifle and two handguns destined for the same address by Border Force officers in the Midlands. A man was arrested and released under investigation.

In Q3 the NCA seized 9.9 tonnes of cocaine, 6.3 tonnes of cannabis and almost one tonne of heroin in the UK and overseas. Joint operational activity with PSNI on drugs-related operations in this quarter included:

- NCA officers evidenced the handover of a suspicious commodity in the Birmingham area and continued to monitor its transportation to Belfast. The intelligence was quickly shared with PSNI who stopped and searched the vehicle, uncovering 32kg of flowering head cannabis. The driver was arrested and charged.
- The NCA has continued to work alongside PSNI and other partners against organised crime groups engaged in cannabis importation. Some of these groups are assessed to be part of a network across the UK capable of importing quantities worth multi-million sums on a monthly basis. Our work has included providing strategic, analytical support as well as identifying crossovers between police investigations.

Additional activity has taken place in this quarter that has protected communities across Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England:

- In November, following an intelligence-led operation involving the NCA and our international partners, Spanish authorities interdicted a 20m-long semi-submersible submarine and recovered three tonnes of cocaine worth hundreds of millions of pounds on the UK market. Two Ecuadorian nationals were arrested and a search for the third crew member is ongoing. Officers from the NCA's international network, who shared intelligence and coordinated the deployment of law enforcement and military assets, worked closely with international partners including the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre in Lisbon, the Spanish Guardia Civil, National Police and Customs. Although the use of submarines is common in America, it is the first time this drug transport system has been detected in Europe. The investigation to determine the origin of the drugs and their intended recipients is ongoing.

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

We continue to investigate and disrupt criminals involved in cyber crime, money laundering and economic crime. During Q3 the NCA undertook the following activity which has had an impact in Northern Ireland:

- Our National Cyber Crime Unit (NCCU) supported a criminal investigation led by the North West Regional Organised Crime Unit into the criminal use of Remote Administration Tools.¹ As part of this operation, six purchasers were identified in Northern Ireland and intelligence has been shared with PSNI to develop disruption opportunities.

¹ A Remote Administration Tool (RAT) is a program that is used by hackers to connect to a computer via the internet or across a local network remotely and enables the hacker to receive full control of the targeted device.

- The NCCU investigates the purchasers of ancillary malware services.² An individual in Northern Ireland, who had purchased such services, was identified and intelligence disseminated to PSNI for appropriate action to be taken.
- In December, following an NCA investigation into an attempt to import almost half a million counterfeit pound coins into the UK, an individual from Newry was found guilty of conspiring to import fake currency and was sentenced to 50 months in prison. The same operation led to an investigation by the Dutch Fiscal Information and Investigation Service, which resulted in the identification of the factory making the coins, and those involved being prosecuted and convicted. The criminal group in the Netherlands was linked directly to the subject in Northern Ireland.
- Our Civil Recovery Team received a response in relation to an Unexplained Wealth Order previously granted by the High Court in London in July 2019. The respondent to this order, who owns properties in Northern Ireland and London, provided an explanation of the source of wealth. The response is currently being analysed along with additional material sought under Production Orders.
- The NECC's³ Joint Money Laundering Intelligence Taskforce (JMLIT) supported a PSNI operation relating to groups involved in trafficking women within Northern Ireland for sexual exploitation.
- The NECC's Expert Laundering Evidence team continues to provide advice and investigative support to a PSNI operation into underground banking.
- Our UK Financial Intelligence Unit (UKFIU) sent PSNI 87 Defence Against Money Laundering (DAML)⁴ requests and nine terrorist finance-related Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs). We also issued five international requests on behalf of PSNI investigations relating to fraud, drugs and money laundering.
- Our UK National Central Office (UKNCO) for Counterfeit Currency analysed 21 counterfeit currency seizures for PSNI to identify common currency printers and ultimately support investigations into the crime groups responsible.
- We supported seven PSNI prosecutions/investigations relating to counterfeit currency by checking forensic details and engaging expert witnesses.

² Sites on the Dark Web where malware or malicious code can be purchased that can cause harm to computers or enable the computer to be held to ransom.

³ The National Economic Crime Centre (NECC), based within the NCA, 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).

⁴ 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.

- We passed an intelligence report to PSNI regarding the distribution of counterfeit foreign currency, including the details of a suspect based in Northern Ireland.
- NCA financial investigators attached to the Paramilitary Crime Taskforce served a Disclosure Order on an individual alleged to have close links to East Belfast UVF, with further orders being served on associated businesses. The Order requires the individual to disclose information in relation to his acquisition of property, and compels his attendance at interview to discuss these acquisitions.

In Q3 we achieved operational outcomes against the highest-harm cyber offenders who target victims globally:

- Having identified almost 600,000 compromised banking credentials, we initiated mitigation activity and alerted over 100,000 potential victims, including victims from across the UK. It is likely that a proportion of these victims reside in Northern Ireland.
- In December, unprecedented collaboration between the NCA, the National Cyber Security Centre and US law enforcement partners resulted in the indictment of two Russian nationals, responsible for major cyber-crime offences, in the US. One was identified as being responsible for the international criminal cyber group known as "Evil Corp"; the other is the administrator who controls the "Dridex" malware. Moscow-based Evil Corp is considered the most significant cyber-crime threat in the world. It has created and deployed malware which has caused financial losses totalling hundreds of millions in the UK alone; it is likely to have affected businesses and residents in Northern Ireland. We began working with multiple international and domestic partners to investigate Dridex - one of the group's core malware strains - in 2014. Over several years, officers developed intelligence which has been instrumental in supporting the US Department of Justice indictments. Intelligence provided by the NCA has also been used to support sanctions brought by the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) against Evil Corp, the two individuals and 21 associated entities.

THOSE WHO EXPLOIT THE VULNERABLE

We continue to detect and take action against individuals committing sexual offences against children and in particular, those operating at the high end of high harm. This includes individuals operating on the dark web and those whose offending escalates from accessing indecent images of children to contact abuse, including offenders in positions of trust. During Q3, NCA activity led to the safeguarding of 260 children across the UK.

We also focus on people smugglers targeting the UK, who often employ high-risk methods of transporting and concealing migrants. Modern slavery cases are often complex, combining serious and organised crime investigation with victim safeguarding needs.

Activity against these threats and involving known impact in Northern Ireland during Q3 included:

- During October, NCA Belfast, supported by NCA teams in southern England and our International Liaison Officers in France and Belgium, conducted a major operation targeting a criminal gang involved in organised immigration crime. Following a request from the NCA, authorities in France stopped a lorry towing a cattle trailer with 13 illegal migrants on board. The driver from Northern Ireland was arrested by French Police. Simultaneously, NCA officers arrested four suspects in Essex who are suspected of organising the smuggling venture; all originate from Northern Ireland. The driver was sentenced to six months' imprisonment in France, whilst the other four suspects have been released under investigation. Two searches led to valuable evidential items being found, including approximately £100,000 cash. A Restraint Order has been obtained against one of the subjects relating to bank accounts and property valued at around £500,000.
- The NCA Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Unit's Tactical Advisors and NCA Vulnerable Persons Team are currently supporting an on-going PSNI investigation into an organised crime group exploiting vulnerable young females for the purposes of sexual exploitation. The investigation involves online enablers and seven potential victims of trafficking have been identified so far.
- Our UKFIU identified 21 financial SARs relating to suspected vulnerable persons, four associated with suspected child exploitation and one relating to suspected human trafficking. All have been fast-tracked to PSNI for investigation.
- Welcome To Video (W2V), a website that sold images of child sexual abuse, was previously taken down by an international taskforce set up by the NCA. The NCA identified users of the site and assisted in the takedown of the server and arrest of the subject running the site. Eighteen UK investigations have been developed as a result of intelligence gathered from the W2V site. Seven individuals have been convicted, including one from Belfast who was found to have downloaded 37 indecent images of children from the W2V website, many of which were in the most serious category (Category A). In February 2019, he was convicted at Belfast Magistrates Court of four counts of making indecent images of children and was sentenced to a Probation Order for three years. The Court also issued a five year Sexual Harm Prevention Order (SHPO) that included no unsupervised access to persons aged under 16.
- Under an NCA project which identifies CSAE (Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation) offenders operating on the Dark Web in collaboration with partners, we made seven disseminations to PSNI following de-anonymisation.
- Our CSAE Referrals Bureau - the central point for the receipt of industry referrals relating to online CSAE - made 124 disseminations to PSNI.

These intelligence reports contain detailed intelligence leads from which PSNI can initiate investigations.

Our CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection) Education team sits on the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) e-Safety forum. Two meetings took place in Q3 and the group has recently been working on the development of a repository for e-Safety resources for Government Departments.

The total number of Thinkuknow⁵ Ambassadors trained in Northern Ireland is 206. Six schools signed up for the Parent Info service during Q3, raising the total in Northern Ireland from 69 to 75. This service enables schools to host information that contains advice and guidance for parents and carers on their websites directly from CEOP.

PSNI continues to be fully engaged in the strategic governance arrangements to tackle CSAE, including regular submission of management information to the Online CSAE Pursue Threat Board. PSNI is also engaged in the NCA-chaired working group developing online CSAE risk assessment tools.

NCA SPECIALIST CAPABILITIES

The NCA-led UK Protected Persons Service (UKPPS) provided 119 new instances of support to PSNI during Q3 and continues to provide on-going assistance.

Our Major Crime Investigative Support (MCIS) team provided advice and support to PSNI on 16 instances, and deployed officers on two occasions. The cases related to murder, sexual offences, missing persons and suspicious deaths. One example being the support MCIS and the National Injuries Database (NID) Adviser provided to an investigation into the death of a five year old female. Her mother and stepfather have now been charged with murder and are currently remanded in custody.

Our Anti-Kidnap and Extortion Unit (AKEU) is the national repository for kidnap, blackmail and sextortion complaints. We check details of suspects against reports from other forces and where possible, link and disseminate them to the jurisdictions in which they reside. We continued to provide these services to PSNI during Q3.

Our UK International Crime Bureau acts as a conduit between law enforcement partners at both a national and international level, managing European Arrest Warrants (EAWs) in its role as the UK's Competent Authority. In Q3, PSNI sent three cases to the NCA for onward dissemination, one of which has resulted in a surrender of the subject back to Northern Ireland. PSNI also made four arrests of persons sought on an EAW and three surrenders took place.

⁵ 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.